

# Westside Notes



*A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step*

## **Self Care is Not Selfish**

**Maria Gray, M.A. M.Ed.**



Edward Khantzian, M.D. (2008), (psychiatrist, author and one of the founders of the American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry) describes addiction as consisting of problems of control (addicts have lost the power to choose) and psychological suffering in four areas. One of these four areas is “an inability to desire self-care for oneself.” Khantzian’s theory is that addicts self-medicate as a result of being unable to care for themselves.

Sometimes when I discuss self-care with my clients they respond by saying “that sounds selfish.” Adult Children of Alcoholics often grow up spending the majority of their time focusing on their parents; this can make shifting the focus to themselves feel awkward. One of the most practical 12 Step slogans is HALT, which is short for – Don’t get too Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired.

Let’s start with the H for Hungry. I am a snacker, I tend to get pretty hungry in between meals. If I forget to have my snack I start to get a little grouchy, so part of my self-care routine includes carrying some nuts or a protein bar with me. You might try experimenting with your meals to see what works best for you. Many years ago a friend told me a chocolate chip muffin is not a meal.

The next part of HALT is A for anger. If you are feeling angry it’s probably a good idea to make an outreach call or do some writing (a 10<sup>th</sup> Step for those in recovery) and share it with a sponsor or friend. Don’t forget to pause if you are feeling agitated or doubtful. Slowing down a little today may prevent having to make amends tomorrow.

Loneliness (L) can be addressed by going to a meeting or picking up the phone to schedule some time with friends; sometimes just leaving the house and heading to a café and being around other people can ease loneliness. The last one, T for tired was a challenge for me for quite some time. I liked getting up early to exercise and then tried to pack a lot into my days without leaving enough time for sleep. This wasn’t too detrimental in my 20s; however, when I carried that behavior into my 40s it left me feeling burnt out and suffering from frequent colds and sinus infections. Today in my 50s I need 8 hours of sleep to feel my best. I turn my phone off an hour before bed time and stay off my computer and tablet. Reading helps me fall asleep; see what works best for you. If you

are struggling with insomnia (as I did for many years) it may be helpful to go to bed at the same time every night and avoid using electronics one to two hours before bed time.

People in early recovery sometimes get so excited about meetings and fellowship that they find themselves out 5 or 6 nights a week at meetings with little or no down time. I am pro-meetings but I am also pro-self-care. One thing I enjoy is scheduling a “no plans” night during the week. It can be a time to prepare a healthy dinner, or relax with a book or your favorite television show. Maybe it’s a night to enjoy being with your partner or children; whatever feels good to you.

In addition to a “no-plans” night it is important to cultivate fun, by taking pleasure in hobbies or interests (as suggested in the Alanon Program). Children learn to play and explore at a young age; when I meet a new client, I usually ask “What do you do for fun?” An Alanon friend once asked me that question and I proudly answered “I go to the gym.” This did not count as it was something I felt compelled to do. I tried again and mentioned how much I enjoy the time I spend in my kitchen; I listen to music as I mindfully chop vegetables. I don’t feel compelled to cook the delicious, healthy meals I make, I do it for fun. That answer passed with flying colors. Consider taking some time this week to explore a new way to practice self-care.