The Last Holdout

A Journey Through Reservations in Recovery

Experience, Strength & Hope · The Recovery Files

A powerful exploration of reservations in recovery-the hidden flask in the drawer, the mental escape hatches.

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The small metal flask gleams in the dim light of my bedside drawer. I haven't opened it in sixteen months, haven't even touched it since I placed it there the night before entering treatment. My sponsor doesn't know about it. My therapist doesn't know about it. My partner, who has meticulously removed all other alcohol from our home to support my sobriety, has no idea this relic of my drinking life remains, hidden beneath a stack of old journals and charging cables.

> *I tell myself I keep it for practical reasons—in case of emergency, for guests, as a talisman of how far I've come. But in my most honest moments, I recognize it for what it truly is: a reservation. A small, shining monument to my unwillingness to fully commit to the path I claim to be walking.*

Recovery literature talks about reservations as if they're simple doubts or hesitations, easily identified and addressed through straightforward introspection. My experience has been messier, more complex—a tangled web of conscious and unconscious attachments, secret fears, and carefully constructed justifications. The flask in my drawer is merely the most tangible expression of a deeper ambivalence that has shaped my entire recovery journey.

In early sobriety, my reservations were loud and unapologetic. I would sit in treatment groups and silently catalog the ways in which I was different from others sharing their stories. "I never lost a job," I'd think. "I never had a DUI." "I never drank in the morning." Each perceived difference became evidence for my central reservation: that I wasn't "really" an alcoholic, at least not in the same way as others around me.

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> *My counselor called this "terminal uniqueness"—the belief that my relationship with alcohol was somehow exceptional, governed by different rules than those that applied to others in recovery. This belief allowed me to participate in treatment while maintaining a crucial psychological distance from full identification with addiction.*

As treatment progressed, these obvious reservations became less defensible. The similarities between my experiences and others' became harder to ignore. Yet even as I verbally accepted the diagnosis and the prescribed solution of abstinence, new, subtler reservations emerged to replace the obvious ones. These took the form of specific scenarios in which I imagined drinking might still be acceptable: "When I reach one year sober." "At my sister's wedding." "If I ever travel to France."

My sponsor recognized these scenario-based reservations before I could fully acknowledge them myself. During a fifth-step inventory, he noticed how often my sharing included phrases like "except when" or "unless" related to future sobriety. "You're still negotiating with alcohol," he observed. "You're in a relationship with it, bargaining for visitation rights."

> *The most insidious reservations, I've found, aren't about alcohol itself but about identity and belonging. Sixteen months into recovery, I still occasionally find myself hesitating before identifying as "an alcoholic" or "a person in recovery" in new social situations. Something in me resists full identification with this aspect of my experience.*

The most difficult reservations to identify have been those disguised as prudent caution or balanced thinking. Early in recovery, I prided myself on not adopting what I perceived as "extreme" positions about substances. I wasn't going to become "one of those recovery zealots." I would be different—more moderate, more integrated, more "normal" in my recovery. What I initially framed as balanced perspective, however, gradually revealed itself as another form of reservation.

Relationships have provided particularly fertile ground for reservations to take root. After achieving six months of sobriety, I began dating someone who drinks moderately. I told myself and others that this demonstrated my recovery strength—I could maintain sobriety while in close proximity to alcohol. What I didn't acknowledge was how this relationship choice reflected a reservation about removing alcohol entirely from my life sphere.

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> *The language of my reservations has evolved over time, becoming more sophisticated and harder to detect. In early recovery, I might have said bluntly, "I think I could drink on special occasions." Now, the same reservation emerges in more subtle forms: "Recovery is a personal journey, and different paths work for different people."*

Physical and emotional triggers have repeatedly exposed the presence of reservations I thought I had resolved. At a wedding six months into sobriety, the champagne toast triggered an unexpected surge of loss and longing that revealed my incomplete surrender. During a period of intense work stress at the one-year mark, fantasies of drinking emerged with surprising intensity, exposing the conditional nature of my commitment—strong when life was manageable, wavering when truly tested.

Perhaps most telling has been my inconsistent relationship with recovery community. I attend meetings sporadically rather than regularly, maintain loose rather than committed connections with recovery peers, engage with recovery principles selectively rather than comprehensively. This pattern reflects what my counselor identified as a core reservation: the belief that I need recovery support less than others do.

> *My therapist introduced a perspective that has helped me understand these patterns: reservations are ultimately about fear, not about alcohol itself. Each reservation represents a specific fear I haven't fully faced: fear of permanent change, fear of social rejection, fear of facing emotions without chemical management, fear of who I might be without the identity alcohol provided.*

This understanding has shifted my approach to addressing reservations. Rather than arguing with myself about whether moderate drinking might someday be possible (an ultimately unresolvable debate), I've begun exploring the fears underlying that persistent thought. When I touch the deeper fears with compassion rather than judgment, the surface reservations often lose their grip without direct confrontation.

Practical strategies have emerged that help me navigate when reservations resurface. Rather than getting caught in mental debates about hypothetical future scenarios, I've learned to bring my focus back to today's sobriety only. The temporary commitment to just 24 hours without substances bypasses many reservations that emerge when contemplating "forever."

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> *Some reservations have proven particularly persistent, returning in new forms even after I believe I've addressed them. The specific content changes—from "I could drink on vacation" to "I could drink after five years sober" to "I could switch to a substance I was never addicted to"—but the underlying dynamic remains: an unwillingness to fully close the door on chemically altered consciousness.*

The concept of surrender has taken on new meaning through this ongoing process. Initially, I understood surrender as a one-time decision made upon entering recovery. Experience has taught me that surrender is actually a daily, sometimes hourly practice of releasing reservations as they arise, of choosing again and again to fully commit to the recovery path without mental asterisks or footnotes.

The flask still sits in my drawer as I write this, sixteen months into a recovery journey marked by significant healing alongside persistent reservations. Tomorrow, I plan to give it to my sponsor—not as a dramatic gesture of newfound perfect commitment, but as a simple acknowledgment that my recovery deserves better than half-measures. My experience suggests that reservations may never be completely eliminated, but their power diminishes as they're acknowledged rather than denied. Each recognized reservation becomes an opportunity for deeper surrender, each surrender an opening for more authentic recovery. The journey continues, one day and one reservation at a time, toward a freedom that requires no escape hatches because it is sufficient and complete in itself.

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THE MATCHED SELF-ASSESSMENT

The Last Holdout: Reservations in Recovery

This self-assessment is designed to help individuals in recovery identify and understand their reservations—those thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that indicate incomplete surrender to the recovery process. The assessment explores both obvious and subtle forms of reservation that may impact recovery, from concrete physical reminders of addiction to complex beliefs about identity and future possibilities.

Instructions

For each statement, rate how often it applies to you using the scale:

- 1 - Never: This doesn't apply to you
- 2 - Rarely: This occasionally applies
- 3 - Sometimes: This sometimes applies
- 4 - Often: This frequently applies
- 5 - Always: This consistently applies

Part 1: Obvious Reservations

1. I keep items related to my addiction (bottles, paraphernalia, mementos) "just in case"
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
2. I think about specific future scenarios where using might be acceptable
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
3. I believe my addiction was less severe than others in recovery
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
4. I consider myself different from "typical" people with addiction
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
5. I think about moderation as a possible future goal
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
6. I avoid fully identifying as "an addict" or "a person in recovery" to others
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
7. I maintain relationships primarily centered around substance use
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
8. I put myself in situations where substances are present to "test" my recovery
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
9. I explain my non-use as a health choice or temporary decision rather than recovery
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
10. I believe some substances or behaviors are acceptable while avoiding others
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

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Part 2: Subtle Reservations

11. I engage with recovery support sporadically rather than consistently
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

12. I approach recovery principles selectively, taking what I like and leaving the rest
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

13. I resist suggestions that require significant lifestyle changes beyond abstinence
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

14. I intellectualize recovery rather than engaging emotionally with the process
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

15. I view my recovery as primarily self-directed rather than community-supported
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

16. I resist identifying with recovery "culture" or what I perceive as recovery extremism
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

17. I prioritize appearing "normal" over being rigorously honest about recovery needs
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

18. I frame my recovery as temporary or conditional rather than a lifelong commitment
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

19. I negotiate boundaries around recovery based on others' comfort rather than my needs
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

20. I use abstract concepts like "different paths" to justify partial commitment to recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

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Reflection Questions

Understanding Your Reservations

1. What physical items or environmental factors related to your addiction do you still maintain in your life, and what purpose do they serve?

2. What specific future scenarios do you imagine where using might be acceptable or justified?

3. How do you see yourself as different from "typical" people with addiction?

4. What fears might underlie your difficulty in fully identifying as a person in recovery?

The Nature of Your Reservations

5. How has the language of your reservations evolved or become more sophisticated over time?

6. When do your reservations intensify (stress, social situations, achievements, etc.)?

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7. What "intellectual" positions about recovery might actually be serving as reservations?

8. How might your approach to recovery support (meetings, sponsorship, therapy) reflect reservations?

Identity and Belonging

9. What aspects of your pre-recovery identity do you find most difficult to release?

10. How does concern about others' perceptions influence your recovery choices?

11. What fears arise when you consider fully embracing a recovery identity?

12. How do your current relationships support or undermine complete surrender to recovery?

Fear and Surrender

13. What specific fears might underlie your reservations about complete surrender?

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14. When have you experienced periods of greater surrender, and what made those possible?

15. What would complete acceptance of recovery without reservations look like in your life?

16. What benefits have you experienced during times of more complete surrender?

Moving Forward

17. What practical steps could help you address your most significant reservation?

18. What recovery supports could help you navigate the fears underlying your reservations?

19. How might bringing hidden reservations into the open diminish their power?

20. What daily practices could help you cultivate progressive surrender over time?

Your scores, and what they mean, are in the app.

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