

The Four Horsemen of Addiction

Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration & Despair

Thinking Patterns & Progression

Topic Studies · The Recovery Files

In this workbook: key ideas, worksheet.

The topic's scored self-assessment is in the app.

KEY IDEAS

The Four Horsemen of Addiction

Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration & Despair

From the Big Book - Page 151

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous refers to four emotional states as the "four horsemen"—a metaphorical allusion to the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, underscoring their devastating impact on individuals struggling with alcoholism.

Terror

Bewilderment

Frustration

Despair

Understanding these emotional states is crucial for breaking denial and beginning recovery

Terror

Profound and Paralyzing Dread

Terror extends beyond mere fear, embodying a profound and often paralyzing dread that creates a paradoxical effect in addiction—while it may momentarily motivate sobriety attempts, it can also drive individuals deeper into addiction as they seek to numb this overwhelming emotion.

Manifestations of Terror:

- Fear of consequences of continued drinking
- Anxiety about prospect of living without alcohol
- Panic regarding unaddressed responsibilities or damaged relationships
- Existential dread about loss of control over one's life
- Physiological stress response creating self-perpetuating cycle

The Paradox: Terror can both motivate attempts at sobriety and drive deeper into addiction as a numbing mechanism

Bewilderment

Profound Confusion and Disorientation

Bewilderment represents a state of profound confusion and disorientation that often leads to helplessness. This state can impede recognition of addiction as a problem, hindering the first step towards recovery.

Characteristics of Bewilderment:

- Inability to understand or control one's own behavior
- Confusion about how life has unraveled despite intentions
- Disorientation regarding personal identity and values
- Perplexity about the nature of addiction itself
- Sense of helplessness in making sense of experiences

Recognition Challenge: Bewilderment can prevent acknowledging addiction as a problem, blocking the path to recovery

Frustration

Repeated Failures and Growing Gaps

Frustration stems from repeated failures and the growing gap between desires and reality. This emotional state often leads to demoralization, potentially fueling both continued drinking and resistance to seeking help.

Key Aspects of Frustration:

- Anger at oneself for failing to control drinking
- Irritation with others who express concern or attempt to help
- Exasperation at consequences of drinking behavior
- Aggravation at perceived inability to enjoy life without alcohol
- Demoralization fueling continued use and isolation

Relationship Impact: Frustration strains relationships, further isolating the individual in their addiction

Despair

The Nadir of the Emotional Spectrum

Despair represents the lowest point of the emotional spectrum in addiction, characterized by hopelessness and belief that positive change is impossible. It often marks the point where an individual feels they have nothing left to lose.

Elements of Despair:

- Belief that situation is beyond redemption
- Loss of faith in personal agency or ability to change
- Abandonment of future goals or aspirations
- Pervasive sense of worthlessness and self-loathing
- Most dangerous consequences including suicidal ideation

Critical Point: Despair can lead to escalated drinking or complete abandonment of self-care—intervention is crucial

The Cyclical Nature

How the Four Horsemen Interconnect

These four emotional states do not exist in isolation but interact and reinforce each other in a cyclical, self-perpetuating manner:

1

Terror → Bewilderment: Struggling to understand overwhelming fears

2

Bewilderment → Frustration: Inability to make sense of life

3

Frustration → Despair: Chronic efforts to change seem futile

4

Despair → Terror: Contemplating life trapped in addiction

Each emotional state exacerbates the others, deepening the addiction in a self-perpetuating cycle

The Eight Bedevilments

Common Challenges in Addiction (Page 52)

The Big Book also identifies eight "bedevilments" on page 52—common challenges faced by individuals struggling with addiction that compound the experience of the four horsemen.

1

Trouble with Personal Relationships

2

Inability to Control Emotional Nature

3

Prey to Misery and Depression

4

Difficulty Making a Living

5

Feeling of Uselessness

6

Full of Fear

7

Unhappiness

8

Inability to Be of Real Help to Others

Significance in Recovery

Breaking the Cycle

Recognition of the four horsemen and eight bedevilments is crucial in the recovery process:

□ **Acknowledgment**

Recognizing these emotions is the first step in breaking denial and understanding the common humanity with other addicts

□ **Transformation**

Addressing each emotional state becomes a key part of the recovery journey, marking significant milestones

□ **Connection**

Understanding these states helps recognize shared experiences and build meaningful recovery relationships

□ **Empowerment**

Naming and exploring these states provides language and context to understand experiences and begin healing

Path Forward

From Awareness to Action

The four horsemen represent a powerful conceptual framework for understanding the emotional landscape of addiction. By naming and exploring these states, Alcoholics Anonymous provides language and context for individuals to understand their experiences and begin the process of recovery.

Understanding and addressing these emotional states remains crucial for addiction recovery, both within and beyond the context of Alcoholics Anonymous.



Study the Big Book

Deep dive into pages 52 and 151



Share with Others

Discuss experiences in meetings or with sponsor



Journal Your Journey

Track how these emotions manifest in your life



Develop Strategies

Create action plans for each emotional state



Practice Self-Compassion

These emotions are part of the human experience

WORKSHEET

Four Horsemen Reflection Worksheet

Part 1: Terror

On a scale of 1-10, how often do you experience feelings of terror in your daily life?

What specific situations, thoughts, or events trigger feelings of terror for you?

How does this terror affect your decision making, relationships, and recovery efforts?

Describe a recent instance where you felt terrified. What thoughts were going through your mind?

What coping mechanisms have you used in the past to deal with terror? Were they healthy or unhealthy?

What is one healthy way you could respond to terror in the future?

Part 2: Bewilderment

On a scale of 1-10, how often do you feel bewildered or confused about your life and actions?

In what areas of your life do you feel most bewildered?

How does this bewilderment affect your self-esteem, ability to set goals, and relationships?

Describe a situation where you felt completely bewildered by your own actions or circumstances:

What questions do you find yourself asking most often when you feel bewildered?

How might working a program of recovery help to reduce your sense of bewilderment?

Part 3: Frustration

On a scale of 1-10, how often do you experience intense frustration?

What are the top three sources of frustration in your life right now?

How does your frustration typically manifest? (anger outbursts, withdrawal, self-blame, etc.)

Describe a recent situation where you felt intensely frustrated. How did you handle it?

How has frustration impacted your attempts at recovery in the past?

What is one healthy way you could channel your frustration into positive action?

Part 4: Despair

On a scale of 1-10, how often do you experience feelings of despair?

What thoughts typically accompany your feelings of despair?

How does despair affect your motivation for recovery, relationships, and view of the future?

Describe a time when you overcame feelings of despair, even if only temporarily. What helped?

What aspects of your life give you hope, even in small amounts?

How might connecting with others in recovery help combat your feelings of despair?

Part 5: The Eight Bedevilments

Rate each bedevilment (1-10) and reflect on how it affects your life:

Trouble with Personal Relationships - Rating & reflection:

Inability to Control Emotional Nature - Rating & reflection:

Prey to Misery and Depression - Rating & reflection:

Difficulty Making a Living - Rating & reflection:

Feeling of Uselessness - Rating & reflection:

Full of Fear - Rating & reflection:

Unhappiness - Rating & reflection:

Inability to Be of Real Help to Others - Rating & reflection:

Part 6: Reflection and Action Plan

Which of the four horsemen impacts your life the most right now?

How do you see these four emotional states interconnecting or influencing each other in your life?

What patterns do you notice in how you typically respond to these emotional states?

How do you think working a program of recovery might help address these emotional challenges?

For each horseman, write down one specific action you can take this week to begin addressing it:

Who can you reach out to for support when you're struggling with these emotions?

Save Responses