

Dr Harry Tiebout: The Alcoholic Ego

Why Study Tiebout?

Who Was Dr. Harry Tiebout?

Psychiatrist who began working with alcoholics in the 1930s.

Tiebout is in the big book p 569 the Medical View on AA and the book AA Comes of Age.

He wrote many papers about how AA works and the alcoholic ego.

Characteristic of the so-called typical alcoholic is a **narcissistic egocentric core**, dominated by **feelings of omnipotence**, intent on maintaining at all costs its inner integrity.

Inwardly the alcoholic **brooks no control from man or God**. He, the alcoholic, is and must be **master of his destiny**. He will fight to the end to preserve that position.

Religion by its demand that the individual **acknowledge the presence of a God challenges the very nature** of the alcoholic.

But, on the other hand, and this point is basic to my paper, if the alcoholic **can truly accept** the presence of a Power greater than himself, he, by that very step, **modifies** at least temporarily and possibly permanently **his deepest inner structure** and when he does so without resentment or struggle, then he is no longer typically alcoholic. And the strange thing is that **if the alcoholic can sustain that inner feeling of acceptance, he can and will remain sober for the rest of his life**. To his friends and family, he has gotten religion! To psychiatrists, he has gotten a form of self-hypnosis or what you will.

“Therapeutic Mechanisms of Alcoholics Anonymous” Dr. Harry Tiebout 1944.

The Alcoholic Ego

The Narcissistic, Egocentric Core

Narcissistic – not just "self-centered," but deeply focused on protecting the self

Egocentric – everything revolves around how things affect me.

Omnipotence – the belief that I have the power to handle anything by myself.

King Baby

“The unconscious ego of the alcoholic is extraordinarily **infantile**. He tends to live in **a world of his own** and to make his **personal needs paramount**. His wishes and demands are inordinately important and are to be gratified **at once**. He has a strong sense of **omnipotence** and is convinced that the **world should conform** to his desires.

He is at once grandiose and deeply dependent — a ‘**King Baby**’ — demanding to be cared for, but on his own terms. He is emotionally immature, and any frustration to his wishes is often met with rage, withdrawal, or manipulation.”

The Ego Factors in Surrender in Alcoholism” (1949)

King Baby

"**King Baby**" nickname for the alcoholic's grandiose self-image

- Self-centered: center of attention.
- Always in a hurry
- Meet their needs right now
- Throw tantrums when things don't go their way.
- Demand complete freedom and absolute control
- Extremely sensitive and dependent.
- Think they are all powerful - ruler of all they survey
- Stubborn and resistant to authority or limits

Defiance and Grandiosity

"**Defiance** may be defined as a quality that permits an individual to snap his fingers in the face of reality and live on unperturbed."

Ignore reality

Ignoring reality helps manage anxiety

But hurts when we don't see the consequences of our actions

Can make one feel invincible, nothing can hurt me

....defiance was a cloak of armor." And so it was a most trustworthy shield against the truth and all its pressures."

Defiance and Grandiosity

Grandiosity

There is nothing I cannot master and control.

Defiance and grandiosity

Create a huge resistance to change.

Operates in the subconscious

No Higher Power

"Inwardly the alcoholic **brooks no control from man or God**. He, the alcoholic, is and must be **master of his destiny**. He will fight to the end to preserve that position.

Religion by its demand that the individual **acknowledge the presence of a God challenges the very nature** of the alcoholic."

Inwardly = ego

So, no ability to accept a Higher Power

Which includes listening to the AA group, or a sponsor

Things the Ego might say to us

It's not that bad.

It's other people's fault.

I'm unique. I'm different, I have this figured out.

I can handle this. I don't need help.

I'm in charge. Their help is no good anyway.

I don't want to look bad or weak

I'm smarter than these people, after all I have a PhD.

I don't need a group. I'll do this on my own.

No one understands.

No one tells me what to do. I don't want to follow steps or rules.

Ego Misunderstood

The "reverse" or "inverted" ego

No one likes me (so I'll isolate)

I suck, look what I did (so I'll withdraw)

I always fail (so why try?)

I don't think much of myself, but I'm all I think about

Thoughts and feelings are still centered on "me," "myself," and "I"

Ego's Barriers to Recovery

- Operates in the subconscious
- Resists authority or help - any suggestion feels like a threat
- Defensive - Uses excuses and blame, self justification
- Defiance - Denial - avoids seeing reality even when consequences are great to avoid responsibility
- Isolation - withdraws, thinks no one understands
- No Self Searching - focus on others to avoid self, avoid accountability

Safe Havens

We rely on whatever works... until it doesn't
Beliefs about who we are = ego defenses

Examples: Ms Smarty Pants, the Charming One, the Rescuer, the Joker, the Belonger to Clicks, the Mama Bear, the Helpless One, the PhD Know-it-All, the Always-in-Crisis One, the Too Good or Too Bad for Anyone...

Who we think we are... but it prevents true honesty, humility or growth

Need for Surrender

Infantile ego is "incapable of the adjustments necessary for successful living."

Surrender is essential

It breaks down the infantile ego.

Without that surrender

Alcoholic cannot open up to outside help, to reality, or to a Power greater than himself.

Must give up delusion of omnipotence

Need for Surrender

Hitting Bottom

Ego reduced

Now teachable and open to help, including from a Higher Power.

Tiebout recognized the need for an alcoholic to hit bottom.

He saw how the bottom created a reduced ego.

Need for Surrender

Total Surrender

Not intellectual or partial
emotional, total, almost a **collapse** of the ego
allowing a higher power (or reality itself) to finally enter.

Not an intellectual decision like "I guess I should quit drinking,"
but an experience of **true defeat**, often painful but life-saving.

AA literature totally supports this idea...

Give up our old ideas - Half measures avail us nothing -- not even half.

Compliance vs Surrender

Compliance

Consequences & External Pressures force action temporarily

Surface Level; Ego still in charge

Going through the motions:

- Going to meetings
- Saying the right things
- Not drinking

But deep down:

- “I don’t really need this—I’m just doing it for now.”
- “I’ll play along until I can drink again.”
- “I jut want to keep people off my back.”

No real inner change. The ego is still running the show.

Surrender

- Ability to accept reality on the unconscious level
- No more fight
- Defiance and grandiosity stop
- Can listen and learn without argument
- Can accept needing help - Thy will, not mine, be done.
- New ways of thinking and living are possible

The spiritual life, at that point, is a reality.

What does surrender sound like?

I don't know what to do. Please help me.

I can't do this alone.

I don't have the answers.

Recovery - Conversion

The "conversion switch"

People lost:

Tense, aggressive, demanding, conscience-ridden self
that feels isolated and at odds with the world

and became:

a relaxed, natural, more realistic individual
who can dwell in the world on a Live and Let Live basis.

The difference in the before and after state..., a fundamental psychic occurrence.

Single Surrender Not Enough

Continued humility, and thus sobriety, requires continued work.

Hitting Bottom produces the **first** surrender

But Ego has "marvelous recuperative powers."

Surrender is an essentially disciplinary function and experience.

"Years of sobriety are no insurance against its resurgence. No AA, regardless of his veteran status, can ever relax his guard against the encroachment of a reviving ego."

The Ego Returns

Gradual Return of Control (Self Will, Management)

Shift from Surrender to Compliance

Resurfacing of Defiance and Grandiosity

The Return of the "Infantile Ego"

What It Sounds Like:

"I think I've worked the Steps enough."

"I don't really need meetings anymore."

"I can handle just one drink now."

"My situation is different."

"People in AA are too negative."

"My sponsor doesn't get me."

Staying Humble / Staying Surrendered

Staying surrendered is a **disciplinary practice**, so we **stay in action**.

"Miracle" of AA = the first surrender and the pink cloud

After that, it is a disciplinary experience to maintain the surrendered state.

Why therapy isn't enough

- Alcoholics often intellectualize their problems
- Resist emotional surrender
- Therapy can be used to reinforce ego: "I understand this, so I can control it now"

Therapy most useful after surrender has occurred.

How AA Helps

Being part of a group

“In the group the individual discovers that **he is not unique**. His problems are not peculiar to him. He finds that **he can help and be helped**. He finds sympathy and understanding...”

— The Therapeutic Mechanism of Alcoholics Anonymous (Dr. Tiebout)

“**Humility** is a **constant and realistic awareness of one's position as a human being** in relation to others and to God. The truly humble individual achieves the positive capacity for **self-forgetfulness and a more realistic relationship to life.**”

— The Ego Factors in Surrender

How AA Helps

Honesty & Working the Steps

Rigorous honesty with ourselves and others helps keep the ego in check.
The Twelve Steps urge repeated inventory, not just one.

Step 10 Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear ---
THIS IS WATCHING FOR EGO RETURN!!

Step 11 pray for God's will NOT MINE

Step 12 Practice the principles in all my affairs and HELP OTHERS.

WHY --- Step 1

How AA Helps

Helping Others - Faith with Works

Shifts focus away from the self

"The Twelfth Step itself is a routine reminder that one must work at preserving sobriety. Moreover, it is referred to as Twelfth Step work, which is exactly what it is. By that time, the miracle is for the other fellow"

Helping others shifts focus away from oneself, combating the self-centeredness that fuels addiction.

How AA Helps

Service & the 12 Traditions

Being accountable to

Service jobs in AA

My AA group

Upholding the 12 traditions

I am part of something bigger and it's not about me.

My friend had emphasized the **absolute necessity** of demonstrating these principles in all my affairs. Particularly was it **imperative to work with others** as he had worked with me. **Faith without works was dead**, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! For **if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead**. If he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that.

Alcoholics Anonymous 4th edition, pages 14-15.

Q&A

