

Dr. Harry Tiebout:

The Alcoholic Ego

Workshop presented by EBL
ABC Newcomers, Jun 8, 2025

OUTLINE

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Why Study Tiebout?

We get to AA because we have a drinking problem, and our efforts to solve it haven't worked. At AA we find out we are alcoholics and have the phenomenon of craving set off by the first drink and many of us cannot stop on our own.

We also learn that even sober, we have a condition of the mind and the way we react to life that drives us to seek relief.

Through the 12 steps we learn more about that reaction to life, and how to change it so we can stay sober but also content and peaceful.

Who Was Dr. Harry Tiebout?

Dr. Harry Tiebout was a psychiatrist who began working with alcoholics in the 1930s. Tiebout is in the big book Medical Appendix and one of his papers is in the book AA Comes of Age.

In 1939, he got involved with AA and noticed things about how it worked... primarily he wrote about the alcoholic ego and the need for surrender of that ego for an alcoholic to remain sober.

Let's Look at a quote from his paper "Therapeutic Mechanisms of Alcoholics Anonymous" published in 1944.

Mind you, his writing was often for other psychiatrists so first I'm going to read the quote and throughout the talk I will go into what it means.

Slide 1

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**.

Slide 2

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.

So if an alcoholic must surrender to the idea of a higher power in order to get recovery, we've got a big problem. Part of the purpose of studying Tiebout is so that we can identify this ego that prevents surrender.

Let's see what else he says about the Ego.

The Alcoholic Ego

Tiebout's definition of ego is not what we commonly think of in the sense of being full of yourself or arrogant - it's the part of us that desperately wants to be in control.

The Narcissistic, Egocentric Core

Tiebout described many alcoholics as having a "narcissistic, egocentric core."

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

Let me point out that we hear this word tossed around a lot. Note this is being used as an adjective about the ego here, not a diagnostic label..

Egocentric – everything revolves around how things affect me.

Like: "Why is this happening to me?" or "I shouldn't have to go through this."

Omnipotence – the belief that you have the power to handle anything by yourself.

This shows up as: "I can stop drinking anytime I want. I just haven't chosen to yet." "I don't need a sponsor or to work steps, I can do things my way."

King Baby

Tiebout wrote about the infantile ego and cites Sigmund Freud's term "His Majesty the Baby" where Freud compares Ego to an infant.

"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)

So the "**King Baby**" can be a nickname for the alcoholic's grandiose self-image which includes:

- Being self-centered: They want to be the center of attention.
- They are always in a hurry and expect the world to meet their needs right now.
- They throw tantrums when things don't go their way.
- They both demand complete freedom and absolute control, while also being extremely sensitive and dependent.
- They think they are all powerful - ruler of all they survey
- Stubborn and resistant to authority or limits

All like traits of a small child.

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."

In Tiebout's paper "The Act of Surrender in the Therapeutic Process With Special Reference to Alcoholism," he says that Defiance has actually helped us -- ignoring reality is a great way to manage anxiety. But it hurts us when we keep drinking and ignore the reality of the consequences.

Ignoring reality can make one feel invincible - "Nothing can happen to me because I can and do defy [reality]"

The paper quotes someone who said ""My defiance was a cloak of armor." And so it was a most trustworthy shield against the truth and all its pressures."

Grandiosity springs from the persisting infantile ego and says there is nothing I cannot master and control.

Defiance and grandiosity

Defiance and grandiosity allow the alcoholic to ignore reality, and even if some reality is acknowledged, they think they can control it. The unconscious overrides the conscious mind.

These patterns create a false sense of control and a huge resistance to change. And they are sneaky—they often don't feel like ego, they feel like "being strong" or "being independent."

Operates in the Subconscious

It is clear the alcoholic must deflate this ego to be open to help, but the ego exists in the subconscious mind, and has many protections to avoid being exposed.

So, "the individual is frightened by his or her drinking and at the same time is prevented from doing anything about it by the unconscious activity that can and does ignore or override the conscious mind."

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."

The ego must stay in charge
will fight to the end to preserve its position
Alcoholics must be master of his destiny
So, no ability to accept a higher power
which includes listening to the AA group, or a sponsor

So as the big book tells us over and over - lack of power, that is our dilemma and we must find a power by which we can live, and the ego will not accept a higher power, then the ego must be deflated.

Things the ego might say to us
that prevents us getting help

- 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

Some people say, but I don't have an ego. I am insecure and don't think highly of myself. The "reverse" or "inverted" ego some call it, is still looking for a way to keep a person isolated and avoid giving up control:

- 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" in terms of how they measure up or are perceived by others.

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
- 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

In AA we get sober, and often we try other things and as long as they work, we don't change. Sometimes these things are beliefs about who we are; Safe havens that we can count on to stay self-reliant and not trust a God.

For example, 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... These are places we get stuck because they are safe and work temporarily and I don't have to grow further.

But staying in those places prevents true honesty - especially self honesty - humility or growth.

Need for Surrender

Tiebout states that the infantile ego is "incapable of the adjustments necessary for successful living." He says "Surrender is essential because it breaks down the infantile ego. Without that surrender, the alcoholic cannot open up to outside help, to reality, or to a Power greater than himself. It is not a matter of giving up drinking alone, but of giving up the delusion of omnipotence, the demand to be King Baby forever."

The Act of Surrender in the Therapeutic Process 1949

Hitting Bottom

When AA was founded, alcoholics were literally desperate for a solution. Low bottom drunks had lost everything and tried everything already. They hit a bottom.

Tiebout recognized that something happened when an alcoholic hit bottom... He was now teachable and open to help, including from a Higher Power.

So he recognized the need to help an alcoholic hit bottom.

He saw how the bottom created a reduced ego.

Total Surrender

A true surrender wasn't intellectual or partial — it had to be emotional, total, almost a collapse of the ego, allowing a higher power (or reality itself) to finally enter. It wasn't

just 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... that we must give up our old ideas and that half measures avail us nothing -- not even half.

Compliance vs Surrender

It is important to recognize the difference between compliance and surrender... Compliance is just going through the motions, but deep down I still won't fully accept the reality that I need help.

Compliance

Many alcoholics arrive to AA because they have lots of consequences or threats of them... losing a job, family or freedom. So while the threat is there, they submit and seem like they are doing recovery. But when the external pressure is removed, the factors showing that ego was in charge all along, come back into view. (I can do it my way, I don't need their help, I got this)

So Compliance looks like the person

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

But deep down, the person is still holding on to control. The voice inside is saying:

- "I don't really need this—I'm just doing it for now."
- "I'll play along until I can drink again."
- "I don't actually believe this stuff, but I'll do it to keep people off my back."

Tiebout says: Compliance is surface-level. There's no real inner change. The ego is still running the show.

Surrender

"When an individual surrenders, the **ability to accept reality functions on the unconscious level**, and there is no residual of battle; relaxation with freedom from strain and conflict ensues. In fact, it is perfectly possible to ascertain how much acceptance of reality is on the unconscious level by the **degree of relaxation** that develops. The greater the relaxation, the greater the **inner acceptance of reality**.

When [the unconscious forces of defiance and grandiosity actually cease to function effectively] the individual is wide open to reality; he or she **can listen and learn without conflict and fighting back.**"

The Act of Surrender in the Therapeutic Process With Special Reference to Alcoholism

There is no more fight... full acceptance of reality is possible. Including the reality of needing help.

New ways of thinking and living are now possible.

Surrender produces a stopping of the ego... "I quit. I give up my headstrong ways. I've learned my lesson." Very often for the first time in that individual's adult life he has surrendered and truly feels, "Thy will, not mine, be done." When that is true we have become, in fact, obedient servants of God. The spiritual life, at that point, is a reality. We have become members of the human race.

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 Ego is Reduced

After surrender, and acceptance of recovery, Tiebout says people went through what he called a Conversion Switch:.

"... the person who has achieved the positive frame of mind has lost his or her tense, aggressive, demanding, conscience-ridden self that feels isolated and at odds with the world and has become 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 of these people is very real and represents, I believe, a fundamental psychic occurrence."

Single Surrender Not Enough

Tiebout and AA literature both emphasize that a single surrender is not enough. That continued humility, and thus sobriety, requires continued work. It is a disciplinary practice.

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

Even after surrender, the ego can reassert itself, leading to potential relapse. What this looks like:

Gradual Return of Control

After a period of surrender, the alcoholic may begin to feel more confident and in control. They have a renewed desire to manage life on their own terms. They are no longer open and teachable, they begin to think, "I've got this now."

Shift from Surrender to Compliance

The person may appear to still be cooperative, but instead of truly surrendering their will, they begin to comply outwardly while inwardly taking back control.

Resurfacing of Defiance and Grandiosity

Subtle defiance may come back—questioning authority, resisting suggestions, feeling above others. They may also start to feel grandiose, thinking they're doing better than others, or that they no longer need meetings, sponsorship, or spiritual maintenance.

The Return of the "Infantile Ego"

The infantile ego comes back - wanting what it wants when it wants it, and reacting to frustration with anger or withdrawal.

Even after a spiritual experience, that ego can resurface, often camouflaged as adult reasoning: "I've been sober for six months; I deserve this," or "No one understands me."

What It Sounds Like:

Here are some things the reasserted ego might say:

- "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.”
- “I’ve learned to control my drinking.”
- Each of these is a rationalization born of ego reclaiming control.

Staying Humble / Staying Surrendered

Tiebout saw humility as a natural result of surrender.

Since a single surrender is not enough, the ego can return, and staying surrendered is a disciplinary practice, we heed the suggestions of the AA program by staying in action.

Surrender is a disciplinary experience.

Tiebout talks about the "miracle" of AA being the first surrender and the pink cloud that often follows. But after that, it is a disciplinary experience to maintain the surrendered state.

"" that ego will return unless the individual learns to accept a disciplined way of life, which means the tendency for ego comeback is permanently checked."

Why therapy isn't enough

Tiebout, AA literature, and modern psychology agree on something important:

For many alcoholics, therapy alone—talking and insight—isn’t enough. Real change requires action.

- Alcoholics often intellectualize their problems
- They may understand why they drink, but still can’t stop
- Therapy can be used to reinforce ego: "I understand this, so I can control it now"

The Ego is too strong. Tiebout said alcoholics tend to intellectualize and resist emotional surrender. Therapy can give them more language to talk around their problems, without really changing.

Tiebout believed therapy is most useful after surrender has occurred. Once the ego has been softened and humility is present, therapy can help with trauma, relationship repair, and emotional healing. But surrender and action must come first.

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*

Honesty & Working the Steps

Rigorous honesty is emphasized throughout AA literature for a reason. Staying honest with ourselves and others helps keep the ego in check.

"The Twelve Steps urge repeated inventory, not just one. "

Steps 1 Through 9 help us understand not only how our alcoholism shows up and keeps us blocked from a spiritual experience, but it teaches us how to become humble. Step 10 tells us to continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear which are easily linked to components of the ego wanting to be in charge.

For me, selfishness is about remembering that my first reflex is to think about how I'm being affected. I've had a life of that so to learn to watch for it is watching for that ego.

Step 11 is another big statement about humility - that I'm not to pray for my own will or my own wants - I'm to pray for God's will and the power to carry that out.

Step 12 of course is to practice the principles in all my affairs and to help others.

WHY --- Step 1

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.

Service & the 12 Traditions

Being accountable to service jobs in AA, to my AA group, and to upholding the 12 traditions as an AA member reminds me that I am part of something bigger and it's not about me.

Conclusion

Tiebout believed that successful recovery from alcoholism depends on a deep psychological and spiritual shift—especially the surrender of the ego...

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.

So, I hope this has been a positive learning experience for all. This talk and supporting documents will be available at ABCNewcomers.org. If you are interested in learning more, sources to read Tiebout's papers are included in the document and will be posted in chat.

Sources & To Learn More

Ego Factors in Surrender to Alcoholism

<https://www.thejaywalker.com/pages/tiebout/egofactors.html>

The Act of Surrender in the Therapeutic Process

<https://www.thejaywalker.com/pages/tiebout/actofsurrender.html>

Harry Tiebout Study Guide at Primetime is Now AA Group

<https://primetimeisnow.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Tiebout-Study-Guide-2nd-Edition.pdf>

What Does 'Surrender' Mean? – Grapevine April 1963 Dr. Harry Tiebout

<https://gugogs.org/2020/08/10/what-does-surrender-mean-grapevine-april-1963-dr-harry-tiebout/>

ENTER HONESTY – Grapevine Article September 1953 Dr. Harry Tiebout

<https://gugogs.org/2020/08/10/enter-honesty-grapevine-article-september-1953-dr-harry-tiebout/>

Thursday Tiebout Papers Study

Thursdays 3pm ET - 8pm UK - 12pm PT

Primetime Tiebout Papers Study

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<https://primetimeisnow.zoom.us/j/687009947?pwd=TIhYMFd5cU9iTzk4bVhscit1R0Exdz09>

Studies papers written by Dr. Harry Tiebout about alcoholism; PDF provided at

<https://primetimeisnow.com/wordpress/index.php/tiebout-4/> recorded

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