

## Symbols of Abstinence in Psychotherapy of Addictive Diseases

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### Summary

We present some common symbols of abstinence. They can be used in the psychotherapy of addictive diseases to increase motivation, for grounding, as autosuggestions, and as a part of therapeutic rites. Some symbols are used for a long time (for example amethysts, camels, and the logo of Alcoholic Anonymous). Other symbols are rather contemporary (for example, a clever fish avoiding hooks or a cactus).

**Key words:** Sobriety – Symbols – Motivation – Psychotherapy – Rites

The word „symbol“ originated from the combination of Greek Words „together“ a „throw“. A symbol is a tangible object, which represents some abstract idea. In the modern word of business, media, and politics symbols have powerful role. Many symbols are also associated with alcohol and other drugs and their danger is obvious. They can trigger craving for addictive substances beside other things. That is why these symbols are abused in marketing of alcohol (Jackson et al., 2000).

However, in this paper we focus on the symbols of abstinence. They are useful for several reasons:

- They can increase motivation and remind important values, which are associated with abstinence.
- They help to cope with cravings. Touching some symbols, for example an amethyst, can serve as grounding and draw attention to safe direction.
- They may have suggestive impact.
- They are used in healthy rites (e.g. when celebrating the anniversary of abstinence).
- Some symbols carry a spiritual character, and spirituality is useful in the prevention and treatment of addictive diseases (Nespore and Csémy, 2006).
- Appropriate symbols are related to the positive changes in one's hierarchy of values (health, family life, control, etc.).

The following text overviews some symbols of abstinence with the explanation of their meaning. The use of symbols in psychotherapy can be easily integrated with other techniques including cognitive-behavioral or family therapy.

### Some symbols of abstinence

#### Amethyst

Amethyst is considered as sobriety symbol since ancient times. Additionally, it is said, it represents purity, positive change, internal harmony and spiritual love. According to Indian tradition, it enhances clear thinking and is protective.

**Practical use:** Small polished stones are inexpensive. Additionally, there are many pendants available on the market. Beautiful clusters of amethyst crystals can be used as the part of group or therapeutic community rites.

Picture 1. Amethyst crystals



#### Triangle within a circle– the logo of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

The sides of triangle represent unity, recover and service. Another explanation is the healing of the body, mind and soul. The circle represents wholeness and unity and protects against evil. A triangle within the circle resembles Indian yantras such as Tara Yantra of Raj Yantra (Satyananda, 2004). According to Indian tradition, the triangle pointing upwards symbolizes the Highest Consciousness and the circle infinity. The symbol of triangle is also known in Christianity - its sides represent the Holy Trinity.

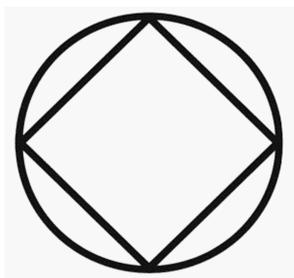
**Practical Use:** It is commonly used symbol decorating special coins, pendants or bracelets.

Picture 2. The logo of Alcoholic Anonymous. It is often seen without any inscriptions and the triangle sometimes touches the circle.



**A square with the corners pointing to the four compass points inside the circle - the logo of Narcotics Anonymous (NA)**  
Narcotics Anonymous is a younger organization compared with AA, and their logo was perhaps inspired by the logo of AA. NA symbol may mean the way to freedom, new beginning or new opportunity.

Picture 3. Narcotics Anonymous logo



### **Phoenix rising from the ashes**

This symbol represents internal renewal or rebirth. The old disappears and the new and better begins. The name of phoenix is used by one of the largest chain of therapeutic communities for drug addicts in the USA (Phoenix House).

**Practical Use:** Pictures of phoenix can be easily found in books or downloaded from the internet.

### **Clever fish**

Clever fish recognizes hooks inside food and avoids them. Similarly, one is able to recognize pain in certain pleasures and to avoid them.

This rather new symbol of abstinence we adopted from Swami Satyananda Saraswati. However, the symbol of the fish has long tradition. The fish is the acronym of Greek words of “Jesus Christ, Son of God, our Savior”, and was used by ancient Christians. This symbol appears also in Hinduism where the fish was the first avatar of Vishnu.

**Practical Use:** Pendant and other items with fish symbols are widely available, because it is also the zodiac symbol.

### **Special coins and banknotes**

Special coins with the symbols of abstinence are popular especially among AA members. It is also possible to draw one’s own motivation picture the size of a banknote and place it into a wallet.

**Practical Use:** The drawing of “Abstinence Banknotes” can be included in art therapy session and it is related to motivation enhancement.

### **Camel**

Camels survive without drinking for a long time. They represent 24-hors abstinence for AA members. Beside this, camels are hardy, resistant, unpretentious, and useful. For the sake of interest, it can be mentioned that John the Baptist used the camel skin.

**Practical Use:** This symbol is used especially by AA members on coins, pendants, statuettes, pictures, etc.

### Scales

This symbol is often associated with the Greek goddess of justice, Themis. In Christianity, it is one of the symbols of Saint Michael. We use it as the symbol of weighing the results of maintaining or not maintaining of abstinence. The decision is made only after proper consideration of consequences. The scales are also the symbol of balance in life (work versus relaxation, mental activity versus physical, career versus family).

**Practical Use:** Scales are one of the zodiac signs, and this symbol is easily available. One of the authors uses the following technique to increase motivation. The picture of scales with two dishes is drawn on a blackboard. Participants then rate from one to ten how much happiness and direct or indirect suffering they received because of their addiction. Then they guess as how much happiness and suffering they could expect in the future, if they continued in their addictive behavior. The numbers are then added up and the sum is written above the dishes. Suffering outweighs, and it is especially true with the estimate for the future.

### Serenity prayer

The prayer goes like this:

God grant me the serenity

to accept the things I cannot change;

courage to change the things I can;

and wisdom to know the difference.

Reinhold Niebuhr, former pastor from Detroit, is credited with creating this prayer. It is thought to have originated around the years 1920 but it is possible that it is much, much older. AA started to use this prayer in 1942 shortly after the founding of their organization.

This prayer is often recited at AA meetings, and it appears on a variety of objects, such as coins, bracelets, pendants, crosses or cards. One of the authors has even a small mirror with the text of this prayer. This text can be easily copied into one's diary or a piece of paper and be carried anywhere.

### Water

Water symbolizes purity, rejuvenation, and rebirth. Drinking water also helps to cope with craving for alcohol

**Practical Use:** Alcohol dependent people have decreased levels of antidiuretic hormone (Vasopressin) which causes lack of fluids and thirst. Thirst may cause craving for alcohol. We recommend carrying at least a half of liter of water against thirst and craving. This practical aspect gives this symbol even greater importance.

### Hero

One of the authors says that recovering addicts are triple heroes – first the admitted their addiction, second they work to overcome it, and third they endure. In popular culture, the helix has become the symbol of heroes. This symbol appeared in the US television series "Heroes" in 2006.

**Practical Use:** So far, this symbol has not been widely used in this country. It should probably be suggested by the therapist on an individual basis according to specific need of a person.

Picture 4. Hero symbol



### Cactus

One day a person addicted to alcohol went to see M. H. Erickson, and complained to him, that everyone they knew drank alcohol. The famous therapist suggested that the person often visit botanical garden and observe cacti. Many of these plants went without "drinking" for a very long time. We have used this symbol of abstinence, and it became quite popular among our patients.

**Practical Use:** It is unlikely that anyone is going to carry a cactus around; a picture a photograph is handier.

### **Addition individually relevant symbols**

In addition to the fore mentioned rather universal symbols, there are individualized symbols having specific motivational properties. Here we can find such things as photographs of loved ones, religious symbols, diaries, letters, quotes, keepsakes, etc.

**Practical Use:** These individualized symbols can be very powerful, but it may be useful to consult their use with a therapist.

Picture 5. An artist abstaining from alcohol created this logo with the inscription “Cheers” to abstinence.



### **Conclusion**

We overviewed some of the abstinence symbols. Their use can enrich and brighten the psychotherapy of addictive diseases, increase motivation, and overcome craving. We mention some of these symbols also in self-help manuals (Nespor, 2006) which are available in Czech at [www.dnespor.eu](http://www.dnespor.eu) free of charge.

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