Sometimes our thoughts, values, and beliefs are in harmony with each other. And sometimes they are at complete odds, competing with each other. Ambivalence is that place where contradictory thoughts and feelings pull in opposite directions and leave no middle ground. And while it is not uncommon to hold competing beliefs and strong convictions, the tension, when forced to choose between them, can be paralyzing. This lesson will explore conflicting feelings and move you forward. It will help you avoid being stuck in old behaviors, increase your motivation to change and strengthen your recovery.

This lesson is available at journeytorecovery.com

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UNDERSTANDING AMBIVALENCE TO CHANGE

WRESTLING WITH AMBIVALENCE

Sometimes our thoughts, values, and beliefs are in harmony with each other. And sometimes they are at complete odds, competing with each other. Ambivalence is that place where contradictory thoughts and feelings pull in opposite directions and leave no middle ground. And while it is not uncommon to hold competing beliefs and strong convictions, the tension, when forced to choose between them, can be paralyzing. Hopelessness and despair often set in. For example, when someone is drinking, using, or engaging in some other problematic behavior, they may recognize the cost and risks of the behavior, but also enjoy the experience and not be interested in quitting. They may feel pulled to stop, and also pulled to continue using. They may recognize the need to choose, feel overwhelmed by the decision, and end up doing nothing. Change is difficult and takes time, energy, and money, which are all usually in short supply.

CHANGE IS IMPORTANT

You have the ability to make lifestyle changes and good choices that will establish your recovery and help you to feel in control of your life again. Change is possible as you make decisions in your best interest, both in the present and long-term. Examining both the positive reasons for making changes, and the negative reasons for not making those changes, will help determine the best course of action.

BE WILLING

Most people resist when they are commanded to do something and have no choice in the matter. If someone is forcing you to make changes, conflict is likely and your incentive to make the changes they want will be small. When change is your own choice, you will put forth greater effort and accomplish more. For you to achieve long-term recovery, it is important for you to decide to be involved and willingly engage in the process.
When feeling forced to do something, I am:

- □ Resistant
- □ Rebellious
- □ Oppositional
- □ Argumentative
- □ Angry
- □ Disinterested
- □ Uninvolved
- □ Cynical
- □ Reserved
- □ Frustrated
- □ Rude
- □ Arrogant
- □ Defiant
- □ Passive
- □ Sarcastic
- □ Hesitant
- □ Apathetic
- □ Uncooperative
- □ Critical
- □ Reactive
- □ Aggressive

**PARALYZED**

Being unable to choose between two competing positions can cause you to feel stuck and paralyzed. This paralysis often comes with strong feelings of helplessness and despair. While getting unstuck can be swift and sudden, it is most often a slow process. The shift may be so gradual it does not even register in your mind.

Recent studies have found substance use disorders often begin when people experience mental health difficulties and use substances to self-medicate against the uncomfortable symptoms they are experiencing. Those dealing with anxiety are most likely to use alcohol or other substances in an attempt to find relief, although it is common for anyone with a mental health difficulty to seek respite in a similar manner.

Motivation to change is harder when substances have helped you manage life and its struggles, or when you believe alcohol and drug use has a positive effect on your life. Therefore, having strong motivation in opposite directions, or not having motivation at all, can leave you feeling trapped.

**RECOGNIZING AMBIVALENCE**

We all have places in life full of uncertainty. The following examples describe common tensions those in treatment for co-occurring disorders face. As you consider each, and if it applies to you, place an X along the dashed line to best describe where you fall.

```
I want to drink                                                              I’m tired of the trouble alcohol causes
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Don’t tell me what to do                                                         I need somebody to guide me
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

I have to take care of myself                                                             I can’t make it on my own
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

I can’t deal with my family                                                        I have to deal with my family
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
```
I have to change

I haven't hurt anyone so I don't need to change

I'm willing to live without drinking or using

I don't know how to live without drinking or using

I'm really trying

I can't do it

I really need to change

I don't want to change

Don't control me

I need help

I can't do this alone

I can do this on my own

I'm not equipped to quit

I need to quit

I can't live like this anymore

I can't stop living like this
People often experience internal conflict when they want two competing things at the same time. Consider some difficulties you face concerning your substance use and mental health disorders. List a few examples where you want several different, yet competing things at the same time.

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

What feelings go along with the examples you listed?
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

GETTING UNSTUCK
For complete recovery, it is not enough to just quit drinking or using drugs. Attitudes, beliefs, and thought patterns must be adjusted and lifestyle changes have to be made. Having a sense of ownership in your recovery journey will help you explore the connections between your actions and the pain they caused. You will have a more realistic view of your attitudes and accomplishments.

When forced into something, we become resistant, defiant, and stubborn. When we want something and it is our decision, we tap into a wide array of resources and internal strengths. It is so much better if you choose, on your own, and decide for yourself, to be different and commit to your own self-determined goals.

When I make my own decisions, I feel:

☐ Cooperative
☐ Energized
☐ Enthusiastic
☐ Willing
☐ Passionate
☐ Collaborative
☐ Agreeable
☐ Diligent
☐ Courteous
☐ Eager
☐ Strong
☐ Empowered

WEIGHING THE COSTS AND BENEFITS
Consider the following questions:

What difficulties have you had with your drinking, substance use, or mental health?
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

I can choose, agree, and decide to live a LIFE OF RECOVERY.
Describe several worries you have about your drinking, substance use, or mental health.

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

List two or three reasons for making changes now.

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

What makes you think it would be okay to keep drinking or using substances?

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Describe some of the advantages to making changes.

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

If you decided to make changes in your life, what would give you the strength to do so? How do you know you would be able to make them?

_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

(Taken in part from Miller and Rollnick, ch. 13)

**ACTION**
always beats intention!
### MAKING PROGRESS

It is important to sort out your conflicted feelings and move away from any rigid position holding you trapped and feeling ambivalent. Developing the necessary skills will guide you now and in the future, as well as help you avoid being caught in the middle and feeling stuck.

As you solidify your treatment and recovery decisions, your motivation will increase dramatically. Difficult decisions are easier to make as you clarify your reasons for making changes. Keep those reasons in front of you and remember that you have the strength and boldness to make new choices and change your life.

### NOTES

Difficult decisions are easier to make as you **clarify your reasons** for making changes.

**SOURCE**