

Broken by Addiction

Blessed by God

*A Woman's Path
to Sustained Recovery*

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Liguori
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

*To Joe, who continues to open my eyes, my ears,
and my life to the promises of God.*



Imprimi Potest:
Thomas D. Picton, C.Ss.R.
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057
To order, call 800-325-9521
www.liguori.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hauser, Penny Mary.

Broken by addiction, blessed by God / Penny Mary Hauser. — 1st ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7648-1893-6

1. Addicts—Religious life. 2. Christian women—Substance use. 3.
Substance abuse—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4596.A24H38 2010
248.8'629082—dc22

2009048266

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America
14 13 12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1
First edition

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Introduction

For twenty years I have had the privilege of working with women who have been moving within recovery—recovery from substance abuse and many other demons. And over the years I have seen so many women, just as I have seen myself, struggling with relapse. What are we missing? What makes this so difficult? Why are there so many of us who don't seem to “get it” but keep on wanting “it” and working toward “it”? Is the “it” just abstaining from drinking or drugging or shopping or sex or bingeing? Or is “it” something more?

Though the process of recovery from addiction is never easy, some women seem to move through the journey with less pain than others. Why? What makes the difference? The chapters of this book explore some of the concerns and issues that women in recovery tell us are unique to them as women. It also looks at ways to approach these issues using perspectives that touch the truth of who we are.

Women share their stories, because that's what we women do best. Doing so helps us make sense of the chaos surrounding our lives. You'll hear many women's stories here, as well as my own. These stories talk about how we identified that we had an addiction, how we began to work on staying away from our drug of choice or addictive behaviors, how we explored the life issues that kept tripping us up in our recovery, and how we began to explore a relationship with God as central to sustained recovery. This is the process of recovery. The stories help us move together in re-

covery. Some of the stories are painful, horrific, and tragic. Some are humorous. All “tell it like it was” for these women, before they named the addiction, how they figured “it” out, and how they, as women, stumbled or danced in recovery. It is also about how “happily ever after” is working out—or not.

AN EPIDEMIC OF ADDICTION—THE DISEASE

Researchers and therapists have examined many different treatment programs and different therapeutic approaches in an attempt to find out what “works.” However, the epidemic of addiction continues to rage for women of all ages, races, and socioeconomic levels. The Cleveland Clinic’s recent statistics report that more than four million U.S. women abuse drugs or alcohol (see References). That’s a lot of us!

What is going on?

Because most of the past research has been done in men, could it be that we are missing some of the unique aspects the disease of addiction has for women? Unique aspects of how we enter the disease of addiction and unique aspects of how we recover? One of the more useful variables in women’s recovery, which has been recognized by some health professionals over the past fifteen to twenty years, is the need for a specialized, gender-specific approach. In this book we explore the “what” and the “why” of gender-focused recovery. Addiction and recovery issues may be similar for men and women, but the ways women experience, talk, and think about them are quite different. Therefore, significant perspectives of recovery related to women need to be approached in different ways—a beginning point is to clarify our language, and another is to look at the most frequently cited barrier to entering recovery: the stigma.

CLARIFYING OUR LANGUAGE

Because the focus of this book is on addiction, we need to attempt to define that somewhat elusive term. The Harvard Health Publications' (see References) clinical definition of addiction is frequently used in the health care field. Their definition includes the "four C's" and can be helpful for starters:

- We engage in destructive behaviors that are stimulated by sensations that range from Craving to Compulsion.
- We continue to use drugs/alcohol even when there are very negative Consequences.
- And, ultimately, we lose Control.

Women understand these C's very clearly when thinking about behaviors that need to change.

Three areas to think about that make the four C's personal:

1. *Can I no longer predict what will happen when I use, drink, drug, gamble, or whatever?* (On a given occasion does the craving lead me to use more/drink more [compulsion] than I told myself I would?)
2. *Is it getting in the way of who I want to be and how I want to lead my life?* (Have I lost important things in my life because of my addiction? Am I at risk of losing important things? Have I behaved in ways that embarrass me when I think of them?)
3. *Does it cause me to pull away from God?* (Are there times I get scared? Do I tell myself I don't care? Do I tell myself God is not important to the way I want to live?)

Our struggles as women are not limited just to the demons of substance abuse. We struggle with depression, anxiety disorders,

eating disorders, obesity, shopping, smoking, gambling, and sexual behavior. Sometimes we couple these demons with mood-altering substances, and sometimes they appear without the substance. If you are in search of ways to think differently about any demon and wish to expand your thinking about recovery to include your relationships and spiritual growth, we are delighted you are here.

WHAT IS STIGMA?

Earlier we said the greatest barrier to entering recovery is the stigma of being an addict. When a woman speaks of being an alcoholic or addict, she experiences a deep *stigma*—a stain, a shame. *Stigma* makes a mark and stains our good reputation. *Disgraceful*. We are branded with “shame” and “embarrassment.” It’s difficult to admit we are addicts. Friends, family, and society look down on a woman who has a disease of addiction. A man who uses drugs or gets drunk is often seen as “one of the guys.” A woman who is an addict is “coarse, a weak slut, a tramp.” This stigma is the greatest barrier to a woman acknowledging the disease and entering recovery.

In this book we expand the use of the word *stigma*. Using the first letters of particular words as the issues of recovery, we form the acronym of STIGMA. These particular words identify and explore issues of recovery embedded in the stories of recovering women. Exploring these issues helps name the pain and deal with the shame.

The particular words that name the issues of women’s recovery and the chapter titles are as follows:

- S** identifies our negative Self-image.
- T** stands for the Traditional roles we see as limiting our choices.
- I** points out how Ineffective our communication usually is.
- G** represents our intense Grief and loss and our guilt and shame.
- M** means all the Medical issues surrounding addiction.
- A** is for the Anger and abuse that particularly surrounds women caught in an addiction and recovery cycle.

STIGMA

Each of these STIGMA issues is explored in a separate chapter, and each is examined in a framework of three interacting themes that guide the progressive stages of recovery:

1. The identification of the issues from our personal and cultural experiences.
2. The work of recovery in which we change some of our ways of doing and thinking. We explore the unique impact and power of women's *relational development* on those issues.
3. The peace that comes in placing the issues and work within one's *relationship with God*.

In this framework, you are encouraged to examine your own story, to identify areas of pain and of healing in your own life, and to imagine openly how things might be different. In each chapter these themes are developed in progressive stages. You will be encouraged to *name* your story and issues, *transform* your story using the power of relationships, and *sustain* the peace of recovery.

What does all this mean? *It means we work on the STIGMA issues of recovery using the three themes to guide our thinking, and we develop that work within the recovery process.*

A bit more about the three interacting themes:

1. Issues of recovery

During my early years of clinical practice I listened to numerous women's stories related to addiction, recovery, and other mental health and life challenges. Consistent subjects, the STIGMA issues, began to emerge. These six broad subjects or issues form the skeletal structure and chapter titles of this book. Each will explore the power we give the issues, their impact on addiction, our vulnerability to relapse, and our recovery.

You will hear how various women identified issues that led to and kept them trapped in their addictions. Later in each chapter, their voices reveal how they moved through those issues into making recovery decisions and into a sustained recovery. These ideas are not meant to be a prescription for treatment and recovery. Rather, they are offered as a guide to help you discover ways the issues of STIGMA might have an impact on you in your journey into recovery.

2. Healthy relationships strengthen recovery

Once we acknowledge we have this disease of addiction, learning to live in connection, acceptance, and peace comes in reframing some of our patterns of thinking and some of our patterns of behavior. We learn to live in relationship—relationship with ourselves, with our families and friends, and with God. A discussion of relationships supports every part of this book.

The Stone Center at Wellesley College in Boston has done a great deal of research in “self-in-relation” or “women's relational theory.” Its work states that as women we measure our growth and well-being through relationships that are mutually strengthening and valued. Its model of women's growth says involvement in healthy relationships creates a sense of energy, an understanding of oneself and others, a sense of self-worth, and an interest in further connection. These connections also profoundly affect a woman's

conflicts and crises. We will make use of the Stone Center's findings to consider the personal growth needed in recovery—the growth connected with our feelings, challenges, and decisions as we approach and work through the issues and tasks of recovery.

3. Exploring recovery in a relationship with God.

Remember, only a clear head can really examine the issues, complete the tasks, and begin to understand that recovery hinges in large part on another vital relationship—our relationship with God. The joy begins when we understand that God is always in the struggle with us, holding us—no matter what! Isn't that an incredible feeling? Emmanuel—God with us! Not just at Christmas, but every minute of every day—days we spend in joyous recovery and especially days when the challenge is painful.

PROCESS OF RECOVERY

"I am in the process of recovery." This is a key sentence. Say it again: "I am in the process of recovery." It may be long and painful, and you may likely have some stumbles, but you are on the path.

Generally accepted definitions of *recovery* seem extremely benign when applied to women and addiction. Dictionary definitions imply recovery as a return to some "normal" condition after an illness. This hardly speaks to the struggles, pain, and joy that accompany the recovery we are talking about here. Professional and self-help definitions generally equate recovery with abstinence. Often a professional definition of recovery includes the premise of a *total abolition* of drinking (drug) problems.

However, I have come to believe that a definition of recovery from addiction needs to acknowledge the *process of recovery*. Recovery takes a long time, is not a straight line, and usually has many starts and stops.

Addiction is really like a tiger creeping along in the tall grass next to us. We get into trouble if we ignore it, pretend it's tamed, act as if it's on a leash, or maybe even pet it. Then when we least expect it, the addiction-tiger rises up and bites us "on the ass," as a good friend puts it. For a lot of us in the process of recovery, we believe we are making progress. We acknowledge our issues, and we think it's all working fine. It's safe to walk through tall grass (risky people, places, things). But then it growls. If we ignore it, the tiger leaps!

Once that tiger leaps, we are in the throes of relapse. *Relapse* feels like such a failure. We get discouraged. We think, "I can't start again....It's useless....I have to pick up a new chip....I can't walk into that meeting." This is all part of the stigma of addiction, as well as part of the creative challenge of recovery. But other people with chronic illnesses don't feel that they are a failure when their disease recurs. People with diabetes don't hang their heads when their sugar levels rise or fall. They look at their diets, or stress, or exercise, and they make adjustments. They consult with health experts and may decide to attend an educational support group. They know recovery means continually learning how to live daily with their disease.

We, too, need to learn to live with the disease. And once we acknowledge that our addiction keeps us from being who we want to be, we are in recovery. If we use addictive substances or addictive behaviors again, we have not *failed*. We definitely need to examine the issues (STIGMA), consult with experts (counselors/medical), and get self-help (sponsors). We learn to live with our disease. We *can* make changes in how we think and what we do. And, perhaps most important, we will learn to live with our recovery through connection, acceptance, and peace.

As we talk about the process of recovery in this book, the individual chapters examine how each of these STIGMA issues make

themselves known and felt (*name*), how we address the issues in recovery particularly with the support of healthy relationships (*transform*), and how we move into the peace of long-term recovery (*sustain*). These terms point toward the movement, the courage, the creativity, and the joy that are recovery.

FROM BROKEN BY ADDICTION TO BLESSED BY GOD

There are no specific time frames for these stages, and I believe each of us works on the STIGMA issues again and again. They spiral through our lives over and over. Each time that we examine these various issues and stages, we encounter them with expanding depth and breadth. This is how the journey of recovery progresses. Each time that we consider the issues and work on the tasks, we diminish the hold the negative stigma has on us. In each stage we will think about where we are in our spiritual growth and in our relationship with God and his divine power. We become both more delicate and more forceful as we gain a trust in ourselves, a trust in others, and a trust in his promises. At the beginning of this journey there is often a glimpse of joy and peace.

How do we make that initial joy last? Where does the peace of long-term recovery come from? If we, as women, can risk an exploration of our spiritual core, of God, and of how God fits into our recovery, then maybe we can begin to find that sense of peace and joy that leads to lasting recovery. Just maybe we will begin to recognize ourselves as deeply forgiven, loved, and blessed.

Will you be open to this kind of exploration and conversation? I invite you to stop and think and feel as we talk. It's your path. You make your own choices. And you are not alone!

CHAPTER • 1

S: Self-image

 What makes you think you need to change something in your life?

You've tried this before. What's going to be different this time?

Are you willing to look at this from a new angle?

Many women asked these questions, told their own stories, and identified the themes and recovery stages that form the outline of this book. We talked, we laughed, and we cried. We had “umm’s” and “aha’s.” We shared our hopes, our dreams, and our various successes and setbacks. Each story you read here is rich with the courage of wanting life to be different.

Although these are the stories of many women, one woman illuminates many of the STIGMA issues that we identified in the Introduction and that we will discuss as the focus of each chapter. We will call her Nancy, and her story will lead our way.

Nancy's life story, including her addictions and her journey of recovery, has it all—all the STIGMA issues with her Self-image, Traditional roles, Ineffective communication, Grief/loss: guilt/shame, Medical aspects, and Anger/abuse. Nancy's story takes shape within her relationships of family and friends. And miraculously, her long-term, ongoing recovery is ultimately about her relationship with God.

NANCY'S STORY

As Nancy remembers it, her childhood was a nightmare. It was filled with memories of endless abuse. She was physically abused by both parents, sexually abused by her father and brother, and deprived of any demonstration of love or warmth or tenderness.

To escape from an unsafe home and a destructive family, she married at sixteen. And as so often happens, Nancy's nightmare continued because she married a man who beat her as her sons hid in their bedrooms. Nancy became a plumber. She worked by herself. It was a dirty job. It was hard work. She worked for low wages, and she was abused by her employer. Then her favorite son committed suicide.

Nancy began drinking when she was eight and started smoking marijuana at fourteen. A few years ago she responded to the call of crack cocaine. She said the chemicals numbed her deep pain.

One day Nancy went on a drinking binge and lost her van. "The whole f*****g van," she said, "I lost the whole f*****g van. That's when I knew it was time to do something."

Nancy was admitted to treatment for chemical dependency—first to inpatient, then intensive outpatient, then longer-term outpatient. I'd like to say that Nancy's recovery has been possible through a dynamic women's program. It has not. Her individual work, group work, and counseling relationships have held her safely and honored her gender-specific issues. She has had a long-term relationship with a pastoral counselor. They have both been willing to share their conversations with me.

Nancy's recovery was a core piece of the development of this work. Her honesty and effort showed me how many of these pieces fit together. Her recovery has had its share of stumbles. But each time, Nancy has been willing to go back to the issues and look at where the pain still holds her. Each time, she has been willing to

push a little further, dig a bit deeper, and risk a bit more. Nancy has taught me how these STIGMA issues affected her addiction and her recovery and how her addiction and her recovery were for her as a woman.

You may feel that some struggles and successes in Nancy's story are identical with your experience. Other issues may have little to do with your story of addiction or recovery or demons. I simply encourage you to be open to Nancy's shared experience. Let it roll around a little in your mind and in your heart and see whether anything happens. Let's first look at Nancy's self-image.

Self-image

Self-image, self-esteem, self-concept, and self-worth are all terms to define how we feel about ourselves. Most psychological theories claim that we develop this sense of self in our earliest years from parents, teachers, and adults close to us. What these important people say we are often becomes who we believe we really are. We hear their voices ringing in our minds every day for the rest of our lives.

Generation after generation the things adults around us say, their attitudes and beliefs, imprint our souls. We inherit their viewpoints and use them to make choices. We also take note of their actions and often mirror them in our own adult lives. From those choices and actions we witness, we live the consequences we call our lives.

As we closely watch and absorb the beliefs and actions of the adults close to us, we learn how to deal with the world. For example, if our relationship with our parents is nurturing and predictable, we tend to see the world as trustworthy. If our parents see the world as fair, we see the world as fair. Was the message you heard at home something like, "Life can be hard but if we love one another we can make it more meaningful"?

On the other hand, if our parents see the world as a threat or