

Horizontal Growth: A Concept For Recovery

By Wendy Cope, MA

As a new staff member of Southdown, I have been asked to share some of my first impressions. Although they are numerous, one of the predominant images is that of a community dedicated to a holistic approach to healing. This reminded me of a concept of "horizontal growth" which I have used as a guiding principle of recovery with alcoholics and addicts. Let me explain.

Today's society has long been oriented toward a system of "vertical growth" whereby we are encouraged, perhaps programmed, to achieve success by virtue of increased specialization in a particular area. This is most apparent in vocational goals which are traditionally set by developing a specific body of knowledge and skills, followed by the pursuit of increased responsibility and recognition of this knowledge. We are rewarded for developing ourselves in a vertical manner through power, social recognition and money. Often the "successful" individual has had to narrow the scope of other domains of his/her life in order to achieve in the vocational area. Decreases typically occur in the amount of time spent on leisure, athletic, creative and social activities. Should a major problem occur in one's work, the individual feels that his life has collapsed for the supportive structure has been lost in pursuit of the vocational "dream".

A similar dynamic occurs with the alcoholic or addict. As a chemical dependency (or behavioral dependency such as sexual addiction) develops, the individual will spend increasing amounts of time, energy and money in the continual pursuit of the substance. They become "specialists" in their addiction such that they develop an increasingly specific knowledge of the substance — how much, when and how to maximize the effects. The addict is becoming oriented to a vertical growth "pattern" in an extremely self-destructive area. Other domains of the individual's life become relatively unimportant when juxtaposed against the cravings for the substance. Family and social relationships deteriorate, hobbies and athletic activities stop and, in the latter stages of addictions, even the basic human needs for food and sleep are ignored. When an individual reaches this stage, the tower of vertical growth collapses and the individual is left with few resources to cope.

By the examples given of a vertical tower of work or addiction, one can see that putting "all the eggs in one basket" can lead to a shaky foundation for coping. Let's now look at the concept of "horizontal growth" as a healthier and more stable means of approaching our lives. By "horizontal growth" I am referring to developing a well-balanced, broad-based approach to life. Although we all strive to better ourselves in specific areas, perhaps our "vertical towers" need not be so high. Instead, continuing involvement in a variety of areas and with a variety of people can enrich us and act as an insurance policy against difficulties. For example, if our work is becoming a problem, we can seek support from our friends or family and release in athletic or creative activities. Within ourselves and our "horizontal" lifestyle we can find the resources to cope with difficult times. We need not feel that our life is collapsing.

It has been my experience thus far at Southdown to meet many individuals upon admission who have indeed felt that their life was collapsing. Many of the problems presented seem related to having narrowed their life destructively by focusing themselves entirely upon their work — at tremendous personal cost. The addicted individuals have similarly lost a perspective on a full life as the addiction has distorted their world. Recovery can come through renewal of one's physical, emotional and spiritual self. Perhaps rethinking and restructuring oneself to a working principle of "horizontal growth" will further enhance the quality of that precious life.

Although my exposure to members of the religious community is new, I'd like to comment more specifically on what "horizontal growth" in religious life could mean. Too often devotion to God and one's chosen vocation becomes translated into service to others at the expense of personal needs. The priest or sister feels uncomfortable or perhaps even guilty in spending time with friends or leisure activities. The self-imposed narrowness in lifestyle contributes to a strong feeling of loneliness and detachment from the world. Yet, involvement with others and in a variety of activities is critical to recovery.

The approach to health at Southdown is clearly a holistic one whereby introduction to new activities, new concepts and new people open the door to new life. The principle of "horizontal growth" is embedded in the program as the residents explore themselves through the often "foreign" activities of yoga, aquacize, art and dancing. Through these activities, coupled with individual and group therapy, a discovery of the potential richness of one's life can occur. Permission with oneself to laugh and reach out to others in honesty can begin. The destructive towers of "vertical growth" can be bull-dozed and replaced by a balanced, stable recovery approach which embraces the concept of "horizontal growth".