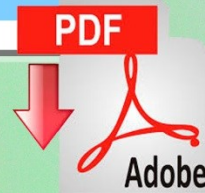


The Three Circles



Faithful & True

The Three Circles is a tool for anyone to use to change unwanted behaviors in their life. While it was originally created to help addicts stop unhealthy addictive behaviors, or use of substances we find that it can be useful for anyone to work on stopping any unhealthy coping. When we are in pain, we all find ways to cope or medicate feelings or thoughts. These can become so automatic that we don't even realize we are using them - we just react to life. Using the Three Circles can lead to intentional, healthy choices.

by
Mark Laaser, M.Div., Ph.D.
& Debbie Laaser, MA, LMFT

The Three Circles



The Three Circles is a tool for anyone to use to change unwanted behaviors in their life. While it was originally created to help addicts stop unhealthy addictive behaviors or use of substances, we find that it can be useful for anyone to work on stopping any unhealthy coping. When we are in pain, we all find ways to cope or medicate feelings or thoughts. These can become so automatic that we don't even realize we are using them – we just react to life. Using the Three Circles can lead to intentional, healthy choices.



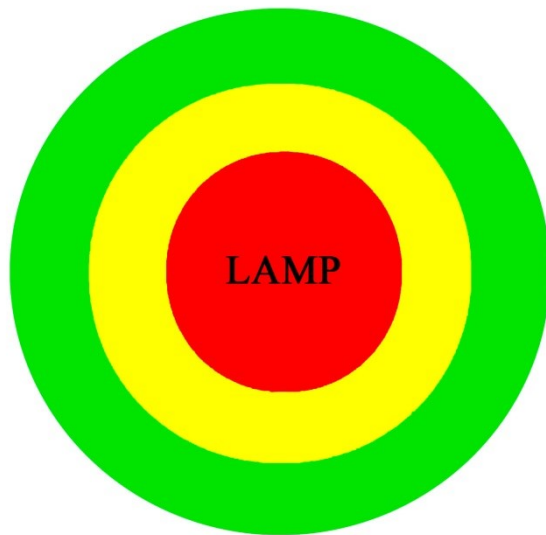
The Three Circles

At Faithful & True we use a tool called ‘The Three Circles’ to help our men healing from sexual addiction conceptualize their plan for recovery. It is a very proactive way to help them be accountable to their groups and, if they are married, to their spouse. We have included a very basic diagram of what these circles look like and will explain below what work is contained in each of the circles. We find that this tool can also be useful in helping anyone working to stop any unhealthy, coping behavior.

This was originally created by Dr. Patrick Carnes, the founder of the field of sexual addiction, who has been using ‘The Three Circles’ for many years. We are also aware that the 12 Step Group, Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), has been using it and has included it in their ‘Green Book’ which is like the Alcoholics Anonymous ‘Big Book’ – a basic manual for recovery.

One of our basic beliefs is that this tool is not only helpful to our population of men who are recovering from sexual addiction, but it is also helpful to their wives. We find that trust is slowly regained when a husband offers his wife information about his recovery plan. It is a very vulnerable thing to do because when he offers information about his recovery plan, there can be a temptation for his wife to control it. These are dynamics we work on in couple’s counseling and in her individual counseling.

The Inner Circle/Red Circle



The smallest circle, the inner circle, is most commonly referred to as the Red Circle. As with a stop-light, it describes the behaviors that an addict has agreed to stop. As such, it forms the definitions of sobriety. Most 12 Step groups allow each individual to define sobriety for himself. At Faithful & True, we provide our definition of what behaviors it should include as a guide to men. We use an acronym to ‘keep it simple’— **LAMP**.

L = Lying. We have found that lying is the foundation of an addict’s secret life. They have told thousands of lies beginning in

childhood. This early development of lying is not unique to addicts, but it is a skill they have learned to avoid criticism and to seek to control the reaction and presence of important people in their lives. Wives have been lied to repeatedly and we know that it creates a great deal of confusion in their minds. They have an internal sense of reality based on intuition and a perceived sense of reality based on observation. What the addict tells them about reality does not match up with this and can lead wives to feel crazy. There are many possible consequences to this including emotional and physical symptoms. Many of the wives ask countless questions and some become private detectives in their ongoing attempt to find reality. It is, therefore, incredibly important for the addict to become a truth-teller and to offer truth without having to be asked.

A = Adultery. This is a very broad category. It includes sexual contact with another person. This could be a one-time sexual encounter that does or does not contain any emotional connection. It is often referred to as “crossing the flesh line.” It can range from a ‘one-night stand’ with a stranger that might even remain anonymous in that each other’s names are not known. It could include sexual contact with an acquaintance that is or is not repeated, such as a ‘friend with benefits.’ We most often think of it as an affair that is both emotional and sexual in nature. These affairs can be short, from days or weeks to months and years. Adultery can involve having sex with prostitutes, including in massage parlors, with escorts or street walkers. It also can include encounters in strip clubs in which private dances with some level of touching takes place.

We believe that emotional adultery is equally if not more hurtful than sexual infidelity to the spouse. These are relationships in which significant emotional feelings and experiences are being shared with another person, information that is not being shared with a spouse. It is choosing another to be more intimate with at a very deep level. This could also include sharing deep spiritual thoughts or ministry with another person at the exclusion of your spouse. The addict usually justifies these emotional and/or spiritual relationships because they do not include physical contact and it appears that they are just friends. The ‘soulmate’ quality of it—sharing passion and purpose with someone else—is profoundly dangerous to the marriage relationship.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus teaches us that anyone who looks lustfully at another woman in his heart, so much commits adultery. This would include lusting after or objectifying women in general, scanning women in public, and also includes viewing pornography. It is a strong definition, but it is an important one as men in recovery seek to heal their thought life.

M = Masturbation. This is the most controversial inclusion in the Red Circle. There is an article Mark wrote for a national magazine which is on our website, faithfulandtrue.com, “The Secret that Ruins Great Sex,” in which he explains in great detail why we think masturbation should be included in a definition of what we’re not going to do. One basic thought is that it is an act that involves thought life or fantasy and those are rarely consistent with a definition of healthy sexuality. According to Jesus’ teaching, they would be adulterous. Some men would say, “I only think about my wife,” and Mark always asks, “How old is she and what is she doing (that maybe she’s never wanted to do)?” Secondly, regular masturbation trains the body to react to a certain kind of stimulation and duration that is inconsistent with regular genital intercourse with a wife. Finally, masturbation is the portal or doorway to other sinful sexual activities. It can be the accelerator to addiction.

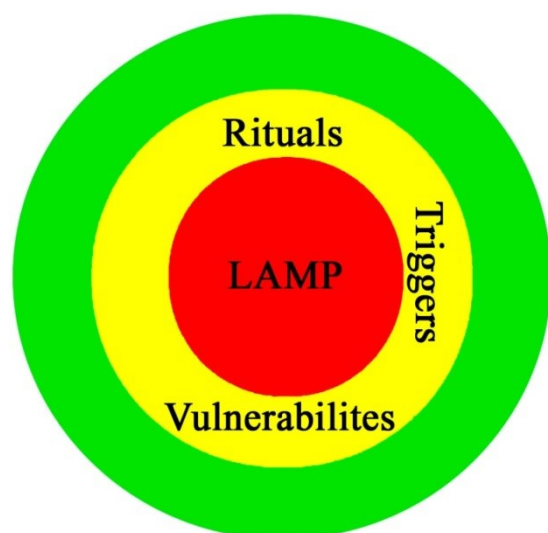
The greatest challenge to this inclusion is all those single men who claim that it is the only way of dealing with their normal sexual desires. We are never judgmental of this population for not including masturbation in their definition of sobriety. We simply ask them to consider that if their vision is to be married one day, is this consistent with good preparation for being satisfied with one woman for the rest of your life? The fact remains that masturbation is terrible training because so many images and acts get locked in the archives of your brain. It will be hard to focus on a wife if this has been a regular habit. Again, please check out Mark’s article for a more detailed explanation of all of this.

P = Pornography. This activity should be more obvious. Pornography should be excluded in any definition of sobriety. It is something for all to avoid. The only controversy in this area is the question, “What is considered porn?” We all know about it in its most blatant forms. What is harder is when it is subtle. Our definition of pornography is that it is any visual, auditory, or written material that creates sinful and lustful sexual thoughts. What creates those thoughts for one person may not do so for another. We agree with the definition of the Supreme Court justice who said, “I don’t know how to define pornography, but I know it when I see it.” Our definition explains the age-old controversy about works of art that contain nudity such as in museums. For example, Botticelli’s painting of Eve contains nudity and for some creates a feeling of awe and reverence. For others it creates lustful thoughts. In reality, pornography is in the mind of the beholder.

Many of our men got their start in porn looking at underwear ads in catalogues or even the Sunday newspaper. For them, while they have moved on to more graphic material, there may still be the need to avoid such things in their current program. Likewise, there can be a wide difference for some in what they watch on television or in movies. Our key definition applies: Whatever visual, auditory, or written material that causes one to have lustful thoughts needs to be avoided. It is good for the addict to have a good awareness of what that is and, if married, to let the spouse know. Letting them know is very important as we find that when this doesn’t happen, the spouse will want to “help” with the definition.

The Middle Circle/Yellow Circle

Like our stoplight, what is most often called the Yellow Circle is the circle of caution or the need to slow down. Activity in this circle will signal that there is danger present and



preventive action needs to be taken. We know that if the temptations of this Yellow Circle are present and we are not *intentional* about how we will handle them, we will *react* and often end up back in the Red Circle. Apostle Paul describes this pattern of living in Romans 7:15 when he said: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” We find it helpful to think of three categories of caution that can lead to danger and behaviors we hate.

Rituals: Rituals describe the time a person first has a sexual thought about some type of sexual behavior to the point at which that behavior is carried out. This can include planning, preparation, material used, excuses or rationalizations, and any action steps involved. Rituals can be short or long. A common short ritual involves a man who first thinks the thought of masturbating. He waits for his wife to go to bed and is sure she is asleep. He then turns on the computer and surfs for porn. Eventually he masturbates. The whole ritual is simple and takes an hour or two. A common long ritual involves a man who first has the thought about having sex with another woman. He strikes up a conversation with her at work or a bar or even at church. He navigates the conversation eventually to including some sexual humor. Depending on how the woman responds he takes it to the next level. He invites her to have coffee or lunch. After several of these meetings the suggestion is made to meet more privately. That meeting, of course, leads to a sexual encounter. This whole process will take weeks, months, and even years.

We encourage the men we work with to analyze their rituals. One way to do this is to back up in time. We tell them to take one of their acting out experiences and retrace the thoughts, steps, and preparations it took to get to acting out. The importance of doing this is that it outlines the unconscious process that was going on and makes it conscious. When that information is available, appropriate boundaries can then be adopted. The man who waits for his wife to go to bed will have a boundary of not staying up later than her. The man who has an affair will have a boundary of not meeting women in public places and striking up conversations with them. For those who use the computer as part of their ritual, they may need to have boundaries about using computers, smart phones, and other technology.

Rituals are unique to every person and can be analyzed with the help of that person's accountability group or counselor. The group or counselor can then also help establish and monitor the necessary boundaries required to prevent the ritual and thereby prevent the acting out behavior.

Triggers: There are visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory stimuli that can trigger sexual thoughts. For example, a man seeks an attractive woman out in public and begins fantasizing about her. Maybe she talks to him in soft and kind tones. Perhaps she is wearing a nice perfume. She touches him on the arm as they talk. Do you get the idea? Triggers don't have to involve other people directly. A man walks through the perfume department of a store and the smell of perfume reminds him of a previous sexual encounter. The taste of a certain food takes him back to a dinner with an affair partner.

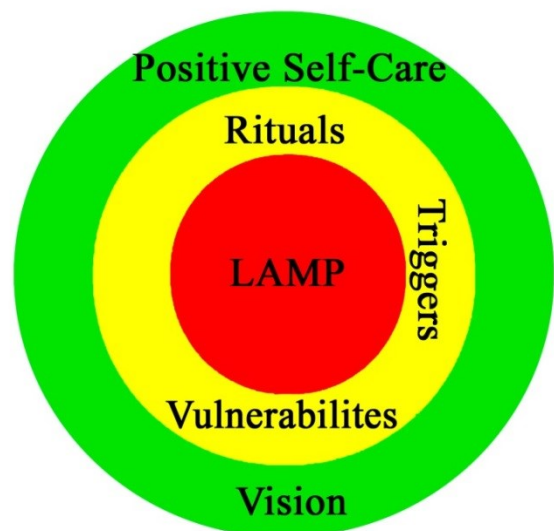
Images and sounds on television or in movies elicit sexual thoughts. The list of possibilities is endless.

Triggers are impossible to avoid unless we plan on becoming hermits. They are the ‘gift that keeps on giving’. Therefore, the recovery plan will need to involve fire drills, action steps that will happen automatically when triggers happen. Firefighters practice constantly. Every day they practice getting into their gear as fast as they can, jumping on their trucks, keeping their trucks and equipment in the best possible shape, and so forth. When there is an actual fire, their response has been trained into them. They don’t need to think about it.

The same is true in recovery. Every day we practice making phone calls and sending texts to members of our accountability group. We go to meetings and we schedule coffees with our recovery partners. Reaching out to our community therefore becomes automatic. When triggers happen, a ‘fire bell’ goes off in our head and we do automatic things. The other day one of our men said that even just making a call and getting a voicemail was enough to break the power of the trigger.

Vulnerabilities: Years ago Alcoholics Anonymous described four emotions that make it harder for an alcoholic to avoid drinking. They are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired, HALT for short. Hungry is not about hunger for food. It is about a longing for support and nurture. Lonely, Angry, and Tired we all get. To this basic list we add two more feelings that we find very difficult in recovery, Anxious and Bored. The presence of anxiety in our population is quite prevalent. Since over half of our men deal with ADHD, boredom is a huge challenge as well. The main idea to understand is that addicts for years have medicated these feelings with the neurochemistry their addictive activity produces. Someone who is bored, for example, will do something exciting to create adrenaline in the brain.

It is an addict’s responsibility to monitor his emotional state, and when he recognizes his feelings are more vulnerable, he should exercise his fire drills just like he does when he is triggered. Understanding the elements and challenges of the Yellow Circle will lead to effective boundaries and fire drills that are preventive. We are preventing sexual acting out behavior before it can get to that unmanageable



place in which a person feels out of control and on automatic pilot.

The Outer Circle/Green Circle

Green means go. The Outer Circle or Green Circle contains all those healthy behaviors that are a part of the healing journey. Notice that it is the biggest circle in terms of size and represents a growing number of self-care activities. This is the circle in which we turn from selfish forms of coping to positive self-care. We often think in terms of general categories of self-care and then the specific activities that are a part of that category.

Having an accountability group is primary. Many men in the early months - even up to the first year—will have several groups that they attend. The men in these groups will be the ones who remind us about what we are stopping, our boundaries, and our fire drills. Just as important, they will be the encouragers to do the positive self-care activities that we have committed to.

Some form of counseling will be in the Green Circle, both individual and relational (for those who are married). Spiritual disciplines, prayer, Bible study, and meditation should be in the Green. Exercise, nutrition, and all matters of physical health should be included. The pursuit of our calling or vocation is a part of intentional living. Financial responsibility is essential. Time with our families and friends is definitely a Green Circle activity. How we manage the care of our environment, our homes and even our cars can be an indication of how well we are taking care of ourselves. For example, Mark knows that when he allows his office or his car to get really messy, it could indicate or symbolize the mess or stress in some other area of his life.

One of the most neglected areas of the Green Circle is recreation. By this we mean, what do we do to have fun? Recovery is not just drudgery. We need to find joy and passion. We need to laugh. Recreation might involve hobbies, sports activities, and time with our spouse or significant friendships. We, for example, have a recreation goal of playing golf together. We have even been to golf school and regularly use at least parts of our vacation time together to play golf courses around the country. We have discovered in this and other ways that we can have fun together. Debbie has a friend that she recently enjoyed going kayaking with on one of our local lakes. This is a category in which to be creative and create passion.

Speaking of passion, the Green Circle will also include finding purpose and passion in your life. What gives you meaning in your days? How does God want you to use your unique gifts and talents and also your story to glorify him?

Gradually, the very size and amount of positive behaviors in the Green Circle will crowd out the negative and selfish behaviors that we have done historically. Our energy levels will increase. Our depression and anxieties will lift. We will find our joy and passion.

The Circles for Spouses

In this chapter, we have focused on the addict. It is true that stopping addictive activity is the focus of what we do. It is the immediate problem that brings people to us. When we are working with couples and the addict has achieved initial sobriety and is working his circles, we will expect him to be proactive about informing his spouse about the nature of the work he is doing. It is essential that the spouse knows the definition of sobriety, like LAMP, in the Red Circle. It is equally important for her to know the boundaries and fire drills that are a part of the Yellow Circle. A great deal of trust will be built also when the addict is demonstrating positive and healthy behaviors in the Green Circle. We can't emphasize enough how important it is for the addict to initiate the telling of this information to the spouse. Offering information to your spouse is one of the most effective ways to build trust. While it is true that your recovery program is *your* recovery program, we believe that including your spouse is essential to becoming companions on this journey.

We find that a spouse may also want to take on her own commitment to some behavior she is trying to stop or start. This doesn't have to rise to the level of addiction, but it may be something that she really wants to work on or change so as to become the woman God calls her to be. We, therefore, also encourage women we counsel to create a Three Circle Plan for themselves.

The Red Circle for a wife might include any ways she has identified as coping behaviors or substances. Coping, as you may recall, is anything we use to medicate or escape emotions we do not want to feel or situations we want to avoid. Some common examples are emotional eating, shopping, excessive cleaning, out-of-control anger, sarcasm, over-parenting, volunteering, work, technology, busyness, withdrawing, caring for others, blaming, romance novels, exercising, sleep, sex, television and alcohol. Of course, the list is endless, and the important thing to remember is that *anything* can be used in an unhealthy way to cope and avoid emotions.

It is also true that something that is used in an unhealthy way to cope can also be identified as healthy self-care when used intentionally as a Green Circle choice. An example is shopping: There are times when shopping is necessary to purchase things for living or for enjoyment with a spouse or friends, which would be considered healthy.

There are other times, however, when shopping might be avoiding loneliness because your spouse is traveling or you feel inadequate so you continue to look for new clothes to feel better about yourself. We define the latter as coping and believe it is not a healthy choice, especially when used regularly to avoid your feelings. One young wife admitted to shopping regularly to avoid boredom and loneliness and spent nearly \$10,000 a month on things she didn't really need. She and her husband couldn't afford this kind of spending which then created stress in their relationship. You can see that this out-of-control behavior is one that could easily be a Red Circle behavior. You can determine whether a behavior or substance is *coping* or *self-care* by the outcome of its use: *Self-care* is life-giving and *coping* is isolating and life-avoidant.

Identifying something to put in the Red Circle, then, is owning that you want to work on changing something. The process of identifying Yellow Circle rituals, triggers, and vulnerabilities will be the same as for the husband. It is often necessary for the wife to find accountability with other women to help her stay on track with her plan. Some women have several other women who know her desire to stop some unhealthy behavior or substance and they establish regular check-ins to discuss how it is going. One woman had seven different women from her therapy group who agreed to help her with her out-of-control rage. Each day of the week was assigned to one of the seven women, and the wife working on eliminating these hurtful behaviors to her husband and children made a call each evening. With the accountability and encouragement of these women, this wife was able to break her cycle of raging. Today she reports regularly her "sobriety" to her husband in regard to her raging behaviors—and she is proud of the new woman she is becoming.

Finally, working on creating intentional Green Circle behaviors is the process for developing vision and healthier life choices, replacing Red Circle ones. The wife described above has added daily running to her schedule, frequent calls and coffee breaks with friends, counseling to work on healthier ways to express the needs her anger was crying out for, meditation to slow down her reactions and Bible studies to connect to her faith journey. Rather than *reacting* to the stresses of life, women working on their Green Circle will be *intentional* about creating the life and person they long to be.

As both men and women work the Three Circle Plan, they will find that the Red Circle with undesirable coping behaviors and substances will grow to be smaller and smaller. When temptations of the Yellow Circle are identified and healthy boundaries are established to manage them, it too, will become smaller. The Green Circle, then, is the one that will grow immeasurably larger with each new healthy choice that is made. Life will get richer as each person finds the passion and purpose of healthy living. And

character will grow as well, glowing with the fruit of the spirit as in Galatians 5:22—
“Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”.

The Three Circles

