

# Free Will Rules

by

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You have asked, “Anne, how did you come up with the concept of addiction to misery or self sabotage?”

I spent the first years of my calling as a mental health counselor and psychotherapist with an incorrect idea. I believed that what people wanted most from their therapy sessions was to take their lives in a rewarding direction, one that brought them greater happiness.

Yet a portion of my clients, over and over, interrupted and even reversed their progress.

They would make a really excellent decision, then not follow through. Or they’d try a new skill, it would work, their lives would improve, and then they’d quit using it.

They’d be successful at abstinence from their addictive foods, feel better, have more energy, like themselves more, and then deliberately put themselves in a situation beyond their skill level where they couldn’t help but eat a damaging food.

Some clients would have a great session, rich in insight, and then, instead of coming back the next week to build on their momentum, cancel or even no-show.

(Not showing up looks like a lack of respect either for the therapist, the process, or one’s self. It can put a strain on the therapeutic relationship, especially if the therapist has to take the consequence. Insurance doesn’t cover missed sessions, so if the client doesn’t pay the full fee for the skipped session, the wrong person—the person who sat waiting—ends up with the consequence for someone else’s decision. More about this in a minute.)

We’d cross this ground again and again—clients with this pattern and me. It finally dawned. Whenever they felt better, they retreated to the old defeating behaviors.

**They would rather feel safe than happy.**

Something about progress was threatening. Happiness was, itself, a trigger. Joy, success, feeling better—these were all triggers that said, “Run! Hide! Something bad will happen.”

Invariably, these clients, deep in their histories, had experiences that taught them: **happiness leads to pain.**

These ancient lessons had soaked deep into their bones. The pain may have been physical but could also have been caused by humiliation, shaming, abandonment, emotional withdrawal, loss of something precious, or other emotional abuse.

Remember the therapist waiting for the client who didn’t arrive? She ended up with the consequences for someone else’s decision. That could well be a definition of trauma. When a child has to bear the consequence of an adult’s decision—to hit or shame or withdraw—and the child can’t do anything to stop it, that’s trauma.

So these clients had been traumatized at a time when they were particularly vulnerable, a time when they felt proud, successful, happy, or joyous.

And that **trauma was writ into their cells.**

Yes, the pattern was recorded in the connections in the brain and the vigilant brain noticed whenever the pattern showed up again. The brain noticed when the dangerous feelings of happiness, success, pride, or hope showed that danger was just ahead.

Instinctively, automatically, the brain initiated a behavior that would stop the forward progress. The brain, fulfilling one of its oldest mandates, chose survival.

Automatic Behaviors. One of the great gifts of therapy and recovery programs is that they offer us the opportunity to discover our automatic behaviors, those behaviors that kick in and run through their programs without us even thinking about it.

“Hi.” “Hello.” “How are you?” “Fine.” “Thank you.” “You’re welcome.” “Our Father, who art in ...”

Happy—>Run

Success—>Mess it up

Feel good—>Feel bad

In therapy and MAA/SSA, we get to catch on to these automatic behaviors and when we do, we can apply two more powerful energies.

**Free will**—the most powerful force on earth.

We can decide. We can choose. Once we catch on to our patterns, we can say, “It is my will to change. I will teach my brain a new pattern.”

And we teach our brains a new pattern by taking little tiny steps with lots of support.

- Tiny steps so that we don’t trigger ourselves.
- Tiny steps so that we don’t scare ourselves back into the cave of darkness.
- Lots of support so that we can see (and teach our brains) that not everyone acts like that hurtful adult did.

**Surrender** to a power greater than ourselves—the most powerful force in the universe.

To surrender means we let go of something. In this case, we stop holding on to the illusion that we have control over what our brain will do when it gets triggered into an addictive chain of events.

When we surrender, we can feel it throughout our bodies. However, it is important to choose who or what we are surrendering to. We surrender to a more powerful, benevolent being.

The great paradox that we addicts learn is this: Admitting powerlessness empowers us—because it makes way for the help of more powerful beings.

Powerful Beings:

- The health-giving community
- The support community
- The spiritual community
- The Great Spirit or that by which you call the Deity’s name.

We are powerless over the addictive chain reaction that lives in our brains, but with free will we can set a new goal and surrender to our more powerful community to help us travel to it.

Will we be unafraid? Of course not. Change, even positive change, is scary. Change brings us to the brink of the unknown. A simple tool can help. Just turn on your curiosity.

And you are curious, aren't you? To see what you can make of your life by activating those two powerful energies?

Yes, by taking tiny steps, turning on curiosity, and surrendering to the reality of our powerlessness over our own mental wiring—demonstrating that surrender by turning to our experienced community—fear becomes manageable.

Free Will. Surrender to a benevolent Higher Power. The keystone of recovery and the path to happiness and success without (too much) fear.

Affectionately submitted for all with the courage to try,

*Anne Katherine*

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