



## To Control or Not to Control...Is that the Question?

For most people who have been around the topic of substance use, abuse and addiction, the topic of “control” surely is nothing new. Looking at some of the issues surrounding the topic of control is worthwhile. A lot of attention in the substance use and addiction world is focused on identifying those things in life that we cannot control. It is helpful to realize our limitations when it comes to control and it is also important to learn to take an objective look at evidence in our lives that suggests we are not in control of something (such as substance use, for example) This internal battle surrounding coming to a personal conclusion about control vs. loss of control and substance use is at the heart of any discussion on addiction. Each individual has to learn for themselves based on their own combination of experience, open-mindedness, and wisdom in this area. Someone else telling you that you are not in control of your substance use, for example, has far less of an impact than coming to that conclusion honestly on your own. That in part is one of the goals of substance use treatment programs: to assist individuals attending those programs to come to their own conclusion about substance use and control (or lack of control)

Nevertheless, to just blindly just look at life from the perspective that there is nothing at all that can be controlled can be misleading. To approach life as if we are a leaf floating aimlessly down a stream involves surrendering our power over the things in life that we can and should try to control. Even when it comes to things in life that we seemingly have absolutely no control of in life, it can be extremely helpful to shift our perspective to the aspect of that issue that we can choose to **exert a positive influence** over. This may sound confusing at first but consider some examples below for evaluation and discussion as a group:

**We cannot control other people** – Efforts to control others almost always end up in failed relationships and can feel much like banging your own head against the wall –

Still – How can we **exert a positive influence** over others today? Are there things we can do today to increase the likelihood that others will treat us with respect and trust? Can respect be earned? (Think about attitude for example) –

**We cannot control the past** -Yes it is true that the past is gone and there is nothing we can do to change it. What’s done is done, as the saying goes.

Still – How can we **exert a positive influence** over our lives today *in spite of our past*? Are there things we can do to leave the past in the past instead of dragging the past along with us each day in our present? How can time and positive behavior change help influence putting the past behind us? (Consider example a man who was violent for the first part of his whole life who one day changes and becomes peaceful. Is he making it easier to put his violent past farther behind him?)

**We cannot control the fact that life often is not fair** – Sadly bad things happen even to good people in this world in spite of our best efforts to prevent these types of things from happening. Accidents, injuries, misfortune, victimization, injustice, poor health, losses and many other unfortunate or even hurtful things can happen even when someone is doing the right thing and it just is not always fair.

Still – How can we **exert a positive influence** over our *reaction* to unfair life events? – For example, consider a horrifying accident causing a man to lose both of his legs. That man can spend the rest of his life bitter and angry over the struggles that came with the loss of his ability to walk, thus preventing that man from moving forward with his life until the day he dies. Or, that man can decide to become the best person he can be in spite of his unfair loss by learning to adapt and move on and look for opportunities he can find and goals he can achieve even still as a man without legs. In your situation, how can you move forward in a positive direction in spite of unfair or even hurtful life events that you have personally experienced?