Behaving Well vs. Feeling Good

By John Boren, Ph.D.

People who problematically drink or drug often use alcohol and other drugs to feel good, to stop feeling bad, or both. They do this even when drinking or drugging interferes with their work, taking care of their family, and handling important responsibilities.

Although these people might agree in the abstract that work and family are far more important than drinking or drugging, their actual day-to-day behavior appears to put an extravagantly high value on feeling good. A thoughtful effort to change the belief systems supporting this value can yield dividends. The focus is to value behaving well and to devalue feeling good. The following paragraphs suggest how to begin.

A rational thought: Focus on doing your work, relating appropriately with your spouse and your family, and in general, conducting your life well. Worry about feeling good later. If you conduct your life well, the good feelings will come—and are likely to remain. Over time you will begin to feel better simply because you are living the life you believe in.

A wise thought: It is not essential to control your feelings in order to manage your life well. Your life will continue on course very nicely without addictive behaviors to relieve boredom, anger, depression, etc. As a basic life priority, it works better to focus on behaving effectively than on feeling good. Effective functioning can pay big dividends long term.

An unwise thought: Be guided by your feelings and do whatever it takes to feel better. If you're feeling bad, go for a quick solution: take a drink or try a drug.

An irrational trap: There is really no point in trying to do anything constructive about your life until you feel better. If life is a mess right now, why not wait until you feel better. Then you can turn things around. In the meantime, a drink or two might help.

What to learn: Learn to tolerate bad feelings. Actively do something else. When you successfully get past a period of bad feelings without alcohol or drugs, congratulate yourself. Note that it wasn't all that hard. Learn to see a distressing feeling as just a feeling—rather than a terrible state of affairs. Where is it written that you have to feel good? Where is it written that a little anxiety or depression is awful—and therefore must be relieved with alcohol or drugs?