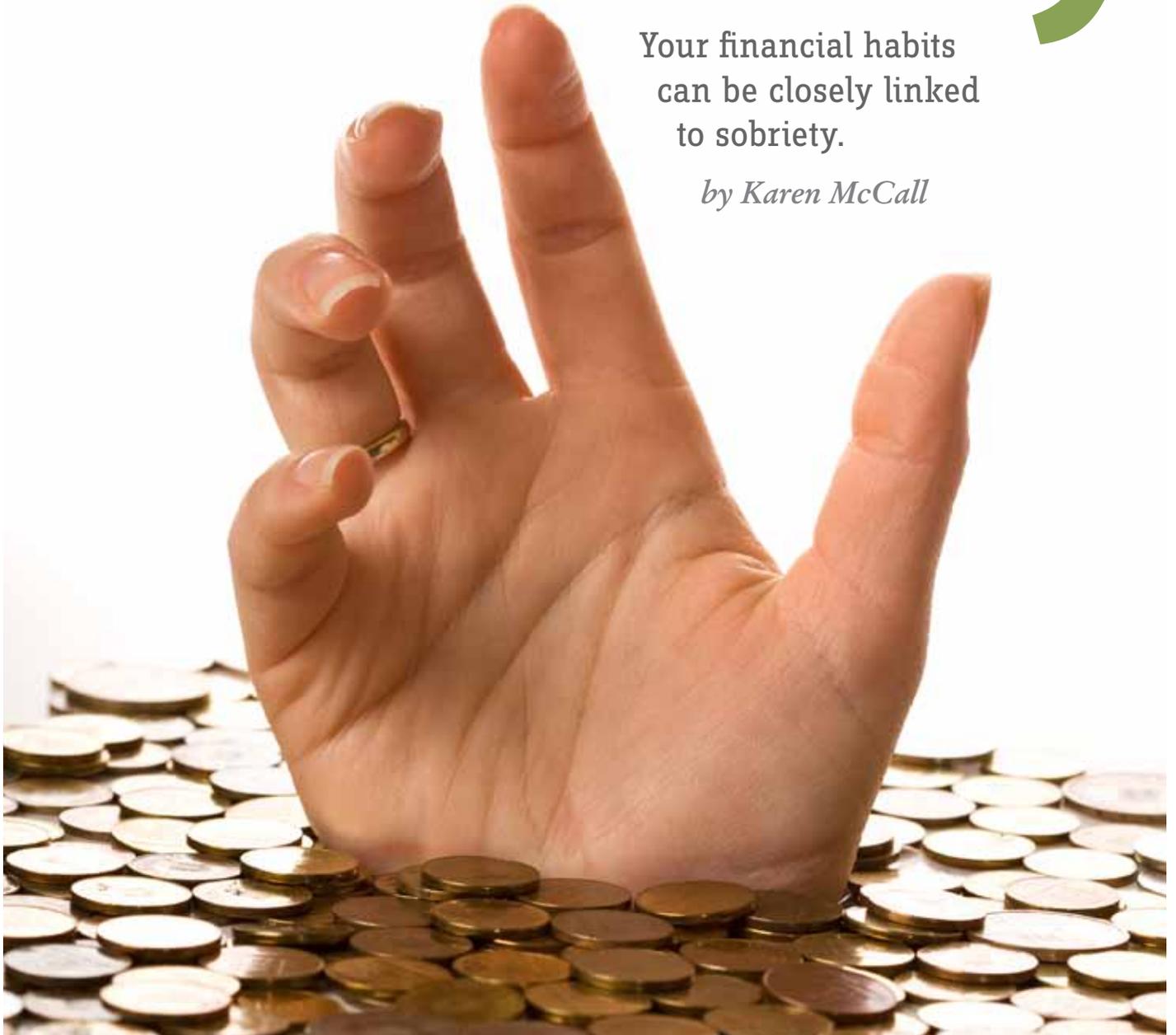


Financial Recovery

Your financial habits
can be closely linked
to sobriety.

by Karen McCall



There might be a silent saboteur on your recovery path. There was on mine. Two years after I got sober, it was not alcohol that brought me to my knees again. Alcohol had been a formidable foe, but it had a wicked, undercover ally in its siege against my serenity. That ally's name was money.

My relationship with money nearly did me in. It almost robbed me of sobriety and brought me to think of ending my life in a way that even alcohol had not.

I got sober more than 25 years ago, found a great Twelve Step community, a sponsor and the support and encouragement of my adult children and closest loved ones. As I embraced my recovery, to the outside observer it seemed my life was fine. I lived at a prestigious San Francisco address, wore stylish suits and worked in an elegant high rise in the heart of the financial district. Looks can be deceiving.

A healthy relationship with money can be a cornerstone of your solid recovery program.

The truth was, I had a dirty little secret. I was broke—more than broke.

Each day I left my office and drove to Pacific Heights, known for opulent mansions and wealthy residents. I parked among the luxury cars and found my way to a tiny, modest maids' quarters at the back of the house, changed out of my suit and into an apron. To keep myself from homelessness, I'd taken a job as a cook for a wealthy couple in exchange for room and board. I told no one. The secrecy of my double life formed a noxious mix, an acid that ate at the core of me until I found myself at the edge feeling utterly alone and ashamed. In that moment, I got it. I had to change my relationship with money.

I tried to go on a strict money diet, vowing I'd purchase nothing but the bare essentials while paying down my debt.

When I couldn't stick to it, I felt like a double failure. I had no real understanding of how to meet my physical, emotional and spiritual needs without doing what I'd always done—overdoing. Black and white thinking told me that if I couldn't overdo, my only option was just to do without. The deprivation and hopelessness I felt posed a new kind of risk to my sobriety.

I needed peace of mind, stability, compassion toward myself and a sense of financial integrity. I began to gather information and devise tools to help me be mindful about money. I started learning ways to meet my essential needs and build a healthy financial future. Soon I started sharing the tools I'd developed with others until eventually it became the program I named Financial Recovery.

In my two decades of working as a financial recovery counselor, I have observed that so many of my clients don't address money issues until years into their sobriety. Sometimes they even develop overspending as a substitute for substance use, which brings a host of new challenges.

A healthy relationship with money can be a cornerstone of your solid recovery program. Here are some tips for looking at your relationship with money.

Start Now

Whatever your stage of recovery, now is the time to look at how you're spending, saving and taking care of your finances.

Recognize Money as a Relapse Risk

Money stress and shame about your financial circumstances can, and do, trigger relapse.

Get Support

Sponsors, therapists and qualified financial counselors can be part of your Financial Recovery Pit Crew. Don't try to manage this on your own. Debtors' Anonymous, a free resource, can help and makes a great companion to your sobriety program.

Take Care of Your Real Needs

Even if you are paying back debt, it's okay to have needs for care and comfort. Neglecting yourself is not a good sobriety strategy.

Be Creative

Your need doesn't give you license to overdo it. Look deeper. Sharing a movie night at home with a good friend can meet a need for companionship without spending on an expensive dinner out. Meet the real needs not the superficial ones.

Take a Fearless Financial Inventory

If you're in financial trouble, ignoring it only makes it worse. Dig into those unopened bills. Look at your statements. Add up your expenses. Knowing is better than not knowing.

Embrace Financial Integrity

Beginning to tell the truth about money to yourself and others can be a cornerstone to your recovery program.

Practice Progress, Not Perfection

Recovery, including financial recovery, doesn't take place in a day. Resist feeling you have to be perfect, or you'll slip into overdoing.

Resist the Myth of Magical More

More money might fix some problems—but only some. Whether you have a lot or a little, a healthy relationship with money will improve the quality of your life.

Reject Hopelessness

Whether you've had a lot and lost it, or whether you've never had enough, there is hope. Many have come back from financial crisis and gone on to live financially stable, even prosperous lives. You can, too.

I unmasked that secret saboteur to my sobriety and recognized that for me, money is my slipperiest slope. Today I enjoy a serenity that comes from knowing that I am living with integrity, even in my financial life. And I've been privileged to witness it in hundreds of clients over the decades. ■

Karen McCall is the founder and owner of the Financial Recovery Institutes, www.financialrecovery.com, an international financial counseling training resource. Her newest book, Financial Recovery: Developing a Healthy Relationship With Money, will be published in early 2011. Contact Karen at karen@financialrecovery.com.