



**Burning Br**

Or Not?

# So, When Can I Burn My Bridges Again?

Dealing With Toxic Relationships in Addiction Spaces

## So, When Can I Burn My Bridges Again?

The 'Don't Burn Your Bridges' Meme has quite an ancient origin. Commonly it is attributed to the era of Roman dominance, when [burning the boats after Roman troops](#) crossed rivers was a tactic to stop enemy escape. Of course, as more infrastructure developed, even in Roman times, bridges replaced boats for crossing waterways and the practice simply transferred to bridges

Now, even here, I want us to pause and note the important difference between the *boat* the and the *bridge*. Clearly, one has a limited capacity, but more flexible, the other – the bridge, is a more permanent causeway and with significantly greater capacity.

As mentioned, whilst the burning of the boat (or the bridge) was often used by the fearsome Roman legions to prevent an enemy escaping, if you like, trapping them in a small field of conflict, it also served, at times, as a mechanism to stop a fearful soldier from retreating.

I've read a great deal over the years where this entrenched cultural meme has been used ad nauseum in various contexts – everything from personal life coaching to business dealings, and of course to interpersonal relationships.

So, what about the addiction arena – specifically alcohol and other drugs?

This catch-cry phrase encompasses many scenarios in this space, and for several reasons. However, what I want to focus on in this short piece is when it really is okay to burn a bridge in the relational arena and perhaps, a little about keeping a 'boat'.

To torch, as it were, a major thoroughfare regardless of size, is a serious business and one very tough to come back from. We all know such conflagrations in the relational space can be near impossible to rectify.

It's also very important to remember that *bridges* are not constructed overnight, and the investment in that 'structure', whilst perhaps not as deliberate and intentional as one may have proposed, is significant. For the relational bridge to be a bridge, it must not only land in, but be easily accessible in at least two peoples worlds. The span, the pathway of that connection, even if a little shaky has been attached to a significant shared relational context – hopefully a healthy one, but not necessarily.

In healthy relationships, those attachments are anchored to caring supportive engagements where the best interest and well-being of the other is a high priority. Trust, nurture, mutual care and investment build an ever-stronger *bridge*.

However, bridges can also be built around and from much less than the short list of quality *materials* than we have just mentioned.

Some of the *components* that can build a relationally traversable structure are much less praiseworthy, as the following will outline.

- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Limited options
- Proximity
- Shared activity
- Shared experience (good, bad or ugly)
- Coercion
- Fear
- Co-dependency
- Addiction

It is when we begin to reflect on the above list in the specific light of exiting an addiction, that we begin to find a more workable context for the 'burning' protocol.

So, what do I mean?

Addictive behaviours, particularly the abuse of any substance, legal or illicit, are always found to be attached to some toxic relationship; either an overtly harmful connection or a *well-disguised socially acceptable one*.

I have watched over many years these connections and as non-user of substances can see very clearly, from the outside looking in (as well as walking with) the various components of these unhelpful *bridges*.

But I also have people in my orbit have lived personal experience in these toxic connections and the following commentary is from their journey.

*'From a very early age I tended to measure my self-worth by my ability to live up to or surpass the lifestyles and friendship groups of my older siblings and peers. I lived this limiting belief around self-worth during my 30 years in active addiction from age 14; a belief that I can still struggle with today almost 7 years into recovery.*

*I had a knack of being attracted to and attracting harmful connections, and in particular connections with other drug users and drug dealers, all of whom on the surface appeared to be mostly 'socially acceptable white-collar workers', including myself. Upon reflection I now know that not one of these relationships 'bridges' that I had constructed were built with integrity and would often collapse in a toxic set of circumstances'*

Certainly, toxic environments (without people) can lead to substance uptake for sure, but at some point, even at the first use, you need to engage with a person – an agent of delivery – regardless of the drug type or stage of development, someone is supplying something. However, it is the 'before that moment' scenario that is not only a prompt, but often a driver toward.

*'I first drank alcohol and took drugs illegally when I was 14 years of age; my 'agents of delivery', an older sibling, their partner, and adult friends. "Go on try it, we do it all the time, it's fun, it will make you feel happy, it won't hurt you" they said. I blacked out that night and woke up in the morning in a stranger's bed, with no recollection of how I had come to be there.*

*Yes, I chose to drink alcohol and do drugs, but what uniformed and bad choices they were, prompted by people I looked up to and trusted'.*

## **Unhelpful material environments**

Loneliness, isolation and disconnection and other forms of relational poverty can lead to a desire to *feel* something different, or 'take the edge off' the loneliness. This relational poverty can lead to a first very unhealthy connection with a supplier of some aspect of the drug taking process. These people are **never** your friends. They care only for the transaction, and hope for the dependency to develop fast to ensure repeat business.

*'Feelings of loneliness, isolation and disconnection were all part of my perceived reality and using alcohol and other mind-altering substances to 'take the edge off' was more often, than not prompted by my ex-husband during our 14-year relationship and then by a person I made my best friend; both ex-husband and ex-best friend were drug users and dealers, I too was a drug dealer by association. These relationships were not only developed on the hope of drug dependency they also formed unhealthy emotional co-dependent connections'*

Poverty, homelessness and/or poor living conditions and the health issues that can emerge from poor nutrition, can most certainly be trigger points for drug seeking behaviour, but do most certainly *not* have to be.

*'Living in active addiction came with self-exposed financial debt and subsequent stressors which led to poor living conditions, disordered eating, malnutrition, and starvation. Starvation became one of my self-destructive behaviours leading to my own personal battle with anorexia. How did I deal with all of this...just like any problem I had, I would 'take the edge off' and use? The bigger the problem or problems, the more I would use, even though I knew that I was poisoning myself; addiction overrode any rational thinking'*

As we just read the disturbing irony of this misstep is that substance use of any kind will only exacerbate the already distressing environments the individual is in. But if the pro-drug propaganda is to be believed, then we are assured that the '*chemical time out will help alleviate the vicissitudes of life*'. (To quote one wealthy pro-drug advocate). Of course, any 'respite' is brief (and ever shortening), useless and most disturbingly, harm layering.

Mental Health self-medication can be a driver, but now that 'mental health issues' are a *broad church*, the label is quickly adopted by the laity and then often worn like a badge. Everything from mild melancholia to stress over a pending exam are collapsed into the diagnosis of depression or anxiety.

*'During my active addiction I was always trying to figure out... why I was not normal...after all it couldn't be the drugs I was using!!!! Most of my connections were drug users and they were 'normal.'*

*Some of the 'labels' I collected throughout my 30 years of addiction; mild depression, severe depression with mixed mood disorder, anxiety, ADHD spectrum and bipolar disorder. These labels allowed me to play the victim and take no responsibility or accountability for the lifestyle and lies I was living. I would often receive the welcoming validation from others that my behaviour or the consequences of my behaviour were not my fault, it was that of my mental health conditions!*

*I eventually started to misuse, abuse and self-medicate on prescription medication on top of daily drug use.'*

Whilst learning to manage the many and various episodes in life that can bring duress, perceived or real, mental health diagnosis, is not the first port of call for management, growth and/or change. Of course, if such issues persist and grow despite all healthy psychosocial resiliency building triage, then further investigation may be warranted, and the appropriate mental health care professional sought out. This is the correct and wise process.

However, the surrendering to the label, more often than not in recent years, doesn't lead to a healthy addressing – a moving forward and away – instead it often leads to a self-determined and unhelpful self-management.

Yes, often fear of the label or actually embracing it only to reinforce victimhood, or worse as we just read, a cover for underlining poor character, may lead to a self-medication process, but this should never be a plan, let alone 'plan A'.

However, if one were engaged in the self-medication of self-diagnosed, say anxiety. then more often than not the first port of call (according to the data) is to the toxic world of 'medicinal' *Weed*. The 'bud tender' quickly spruiks the virtues of this utterly destructive product and you believe you will manage your current emotional malaise with the occasional sedative... hmmm?

There is no room in this article to pursue the fallacious and erroneous claims of this industry, suffice it to say, check out [Cannabis Conundrum](#) and [Cannabis as Medicine?](#)

Clearly, many of these above environments can be very difficult to extricate oneself from, but substance use in any of these scenarios that only exacerbates the dysfunction, despair and damage. And whilst one would desperately want to 'cross the bridge' from these environs and burn it to the waterline, this is not what we are focusing on in this article.

So, we venture into the relational arena to address the *bridge and boat* use/misuse/disuse.

## Stop building that bridge – or burn it now!

When should one stop building and how do you know?

The answer to that question is an essay on its own, but the first thing one must realize, is that every choice you make when it comes to what you put into your body and mind is completely in your hands as an adult. I understand both Agency and Capacity can vary wildly, and limited information can in turn limit understanding and interfere with choice, but that too is in your hands.

So, first thing we need to realize then is that *'You are not the fount of universal knowledge, and your 'emotions' are not your 'life coach'!*

As Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones, once quipped... "The problem with many of us is that we listen to our souls, instead of speaking to them!"

Once you've landed that you can then do the first important step, and that is, **get informed**; and not by the people who are trying to 'sell you something' – especially the *fun peddlers*.

*'I only wish now that during my teenage years there was the amount of scientific research-based evidence and information around the dangers of alcohol and other drug use and misuse. I was ignorant, and maybe wilfully so, but I did make a conscious choice to do it; however, I did not plan or choose to become an addict'.*

It still blows my mind that people don't get that 'fun' and 'pleasure', whilst enjoyable don't teach us a thing and add no long-term value to us at all. They do not grow us as human beings in this space. And whilst difficulties and duress may be painful teachers, they can be very good ones – again, if you're looking beyond your myopic and very small *comfort zone*.

*'The warning signs were clear from my first drink and drug that it was poison, however; I ignored the consequences of drinking and drugging and was overtaken by the delusion of fun and pleasure I received by using. Alcohol and other drugs were my relief from self-inflicted stress, anxiety, and emotional pain. An attempted escape from my feelings of social awkwardness, not being good enough, not feeling a part of, being a failure and not worthy of love. And the 'fun' didn't help, all it could do, and for ever shortening times, was distract from that ever returning grief.'*

If you even just follow the basic observation of Confucius you will see that growth and learning have three sources, and drug use and listening to the peddlers of poison isn't one of them.

*"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."*

To repeat; learning, thinking, getting knowledge is first. Imitation is the other key source. To imitate you must watch and engage with. Again, it is vital you engage with the best-practice health and well-being practice and practitioners, which never includes psychotropic toxins or their *handlers*.

Then the questions come...

- Where and from whom are you getting your knowledge, wisdom and information?
- Is this resource true, factual and/or right?
- Is the person telling you, someone you want to imitate to achieve health and wholeness?

If you answered NO to all these, or even the least one, then that is a bridge you *do not* want to start building. If you have built that bridge, then in this place of renewed understanding, to achieve the best-practice well-being and health, you need to burn that bridge, and the boat you may have tethered to it.

Remember, at our commencement, burning the bridge, is not a 'in part' thing, or even a thorough disconnect, it is a merciless demolition that ensures there is zero way to return to that relationship.

It's not just stopping bad habits/practices. It's not just deleting all contact. It's also, more importantly building new bridges into new healthy arenas, because if you don't, you're dysfunctional default mode will have you looking to reconnect, even with the toxic, because we are designed to connect.

### **What About the Relationships I Really Like?**

Okay, so what about those relationships that are not just activity based or co-dependant or worse, coercive?

They are people we do know well; we have shared experience with, we connect at least on some healthy level. 'Like, they do help me out, they seem to care about how I feel or are going. They are there for me most of the time, and... I like them and need them and don't want to lose that contact.'

These connections are tougher to deal with for sure, we are not going to sugar coat this.

These are the relationships that tick many boxes but still allow, even invite toxic elements into your world, not least substance use.

These are the relationships we negotiate with. The ones where, even though we know aspects are unhelpful, the longing is that net benefit will be worth the harms this connection brings. (See [Talking to Rattlesnakes](#))

I'll put this right up front, not to put you off, but it's these relationships that you must walk back from, burn that bridge, and set your boat of connection on your side of the river for potential return.

Everything I wrote previously about 'Blitzkrieg' your bridge still holds, but you have control over strategic connection vehicle if that person changes or definitely seeks and takes steps toward changing those toxic elements of their lives – again, not least substance use.

You see, whilst self-preservation is an imperative, that cannot be the only goal. Becoming healthy, whole, and stronger is something that can benefit others in the right season and context, and that option should be in the tool kit of the Recovery Alumni.

*'On 21 May 2015, after 30 years of addiction my life was turned upside down in one moment when I was in a near fatal car crash, a crash that I caused whilst in an alcoholic blackout. I also had copious amounts of other illegal drugs in my system, and I had been abusing prescription medication.*

*After the crash, I knew that this close call was a final warning that something had to change, I had to change, or I was going to die. Although extremely difficult; I chose to burn all bridges with my 'agents of delivery'; drug dealers and drug using friendship groups, leaving me with not one friend. Thankfully, I had the loving support of close members of my family; namely my father who not once left my side in my times of need.*

*I initially sought help through drug and alcohol support organisations and 12 step self-help groups. Now approaching 7 years into recovery; I have managed to construct mostly healthy connections with other recovering addicts both inside and outside of 12 step groups, my community church, local community garden, and professional work colleagues.*

*I can still find myself at times unconsciously building relationships 'bridges' with unhealthy and harmful connections; mostly due to 'people pleasing' or 'people saving'. Once aware, I withdraw and 'burn the bridge'. Self-preservation has become a critical part of my recovery'.*

When you are healthy, strong, self-aware, and have no 'need' of a connection, then your lived experience and earned resiliency can be an asset to those previous relationships that too, want to become as you now are.

In these contexts, you can untether you boat, sail to the other side, and ask if your contact wants to sail back with you. This is a safe option for you, as you don't have to get out of the *boat*, you simply invite them to travel with you back. Yes, they may 'mutiny', but in this new context, they will not hijack your boat, they can't, you are way too strong. They may however, sadly, jump ship and swim back to their *bank of dysfunction*, but perhaps again they will soon reach out and you can use your *rescue vehicle* to engage.

*Almost 7 years on and into recovery and I have mentored several women, all ex-alcohol and drug users, by sharing on a very personal level my lived experience and hard earned resiliency, which, in turn enables these women to become self-aware and build healthy connections and to support and share their lived experience with others.*

*Aside from my part-time paid employment, I am also an unpaid worker for a not-for-profit organisation with over 150 years' experience with alcohol and other drug issues, with a key focus of "Minimising Harm, by Maximising Prevention". My passion is to*



*work with and educate youth around the dangers of alcohol and other drugs and share my lived experience in the hope that they will not chose to lead the life I did.*

Building a new bridge into territory of trouble, ruled by the tyrants of addiction should never be a solo effort, especially for the single recovering addict. However, a diverse team of healthy, functioning, strategically caring rescuers can construct a bridge into that space and traverse it with safety. Opening up a genuine and more permanent pathway to wholeness, health and the freedom that only comes from your agency and capacity being unfettered from the humanity diminishing world of humanity diminishing substance use, not just dependency.

Now, what bridges are you going to burn and what boats are you going to build?

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