



EPIISODE #24

How to Change: Understanding Recovery Principles and Plans with Alex Theobold

[Breaking the Silence Podcast by Reach 10](#) with hosts **Creed Orme** and **Crishelle Simons**

We're all recovering from something on some level. Recovery is all about healing, growth, and change. It might be from a broken arm, a procrastination habit, or a pornography problem. Creed and Crishelle talk with Alex Theobold, a young therapist and PhD student at Texas Tech about using recovery principles to help us create the change we want. Alex encourages us to identify what we want in our life, what it looks like, and what actions will help us get there. Following recovery principles creates trust in ourselves and restores trust with others in our life. Learn from Alex as he shares examples from his own life. Building a plan based on principles rather than a checklist of things that might not connect with the right outcomes can help us create the life we want to live.

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Crishelle:

Welcome back listeners. We are so excited to be joining with Alex Theobald once again to be breaking the silence on what a recovery plan is and why a recovery plan can be helpful and what to do when things don't go according to your recovery plan. And I'm so excited

to have this conversation with Alex because Alex is an old friend. He and I started these conversations a long time ago, but also feels like two seconds ago on a couch in Vauna's living room and Vauna is our director that we sometimes talk about. She's the woman behind the magic that you're listening to right now. And so we are going to chat with Alex. Alex, tell us a little bit about yourself and yeah, go ahead.

Alex:

Yeah, thank you again. It's, yeah, I totally agree. It's so good to be back, chatting with you and Creed, being able to address some of these issues and I would not have imagined that I would be here, you know, the five or so years ago when we started all this. So it's an exciting time. For the listeners to kind of have an introduction to me. I'm currently a first year doctoral student at Texas Tech University studying marriage and family therapy. I've got my master's from Utah State in marriage and family therapy and I got my bachelor's at BYU in philosophy. I am currently married. I married my wife Ashley on May 12th and she married me too. We were all very happy. I felt weird saying it that way. It was, it was quite—she was excited. I was excited. It was a great day. We got married May 12th 2017 and so our anniversary is coming up. We have a little baby on the way coming in June. Some other things. I've done private practice therapy for about two years and I'm currently just doing therapy through my program at Texas Tech. So I think in total I've done therapy for about four years now between the two programs and then the time in between. So I still feel like a rookie in the field, always learning, but I've really enjoyed my work as a clinician and the clients I've learned from. Some interests, I know you guys wanted me to share a little bit about that as well. I like road biking. My wife and I ride road bikes together when she's not pregnant. And we are big Lord of The Rings fans and we enjoy a lot of different music as well. So we've listened to a lot of music and that's a big part of our relationship from the start. So, that's a little about us.

Creed:

So glad to have you again, Alex. Listeners, if you haven't heard our previous episode with Alex "Building Shame Resilience", please go listen to it. There's so much good there and I'm looking forward to getting some more great information from building a recovery plan and how that all works. So what are some of your initial thoughts, Alex, on what is recovery?

Alex:

Sure. So first thing is, let's talk about recovery in general. A lot of times that's used in the addiction world, right? But this can also apply to someone dealing with depression or anxiety or you know, other mental health concerns or disorders that you might be addressing. This also applies to maybe you find yourself with low grades or maybe you find yourself in the red financially or you know, maybe you're not where you want to be spiritually. In any way that you find yourself experiencing a deficit or some kind of problem in your life. You can create some kind of a plan to address it. So I want to be able to take the language of recovery plan and expand it beyond just the addiction world. So that's something to look at and consider.

Crishelle:

I really like that because we talk about recovery from like surgery and like, Oh, I'm recovering from surgery, totally normal. And we give ourselves grace and we're like, Oh, I can't go rock climbing because I'm recovering from shoulder surgery or whatever. And we have a plan. We go to physical therapy, we take the drugs that we need to take to get us back on track. And so there's physical recovery. There's definitely going to be mental and spiritual and financial and emotional and relational. Yeah. Other types of recovery. And so sometimes I think it's really important to remember I can recover physically, I can also recover in all the other wise.

Alex:

Absolutely. Yeah. So I'm glad that that we've had some insight already, just kind of experiencing it. Yeah. Recovery applies to lots of parts of life. So for those of us in this conversation, and also listeners, maybe just have, you know, all of us kind of consider, you know, where we'd like to you know, where we'd like to recover so that as we talk through these skills or these steps to developing a plan, you can kind of have some context to apply to it. So the other thing I wanted to talk about, you said, let's talk about initial reactions to plans. So I have personally a reaction of sorts to the idea of plans. Especially as it relates to mental health. I can't tell you how many of my clients just, you know, the first session or second session, they come in and they're like, all right, give me A to B, how to get out of this so that I can just get it done and be done with this. At least when it comes to mental health, it's not always so cut and dry. And my clients where we've engaged in that type of

activity where we have a really clear plan a lot of times I've seen limited success for clients who really stick to a rigid plan. What I found more success in doing is helping clients find and discover their principles that they want to live by and then how they might apply those principles on a daily basis or on a regular basis. So instead of having this action plan of I'm going to do this at 8:00 AM and by 7:00 PM, I'm going to have all this accomplished. Like those types of plans have not typically been super productive. Instead being like, I want to be someone who's healthy. Okay, what does that look like? Well, it looks like getting up before 11:00 AM and attending my classes and maybe exercising and eating well in the morning, right? Like when principals lead us to behavior change when we start applying that to these different aspects of our life. So I think for me the first step of a recovery plan is identifying the principles you want to live by. So anyway, I think that might be a good starting point.

Creed:

That makes sense. Yeah. So based off of what you've said so far, it's helpful for us to recognize what our principles are initially. Then make plans based off of that and work towards fulfilling those principles and with regard to someone who's struggling with pornography, for example it's not simply just stopping the pornography, it's more of I want to be a healthy person. Obviously this is, people need to come up with their own principles. I don't want to put anything in anybody's mouth, but having a healthy sexuality, lifestyle, healthy relationships, one of those ways to have that is to not use pornography. So what are other ways additionally, can I have healthy relationships and healthy sexuality?

Alex:

Right. I love this. Yeah. I love this context. So let's use the honesty principle, right? So like let's say someone who's working through recovery. The principle, the plan is to be more honest. And one way there's, I mean, there's millions of ways that you can improve your honesty. And that's why I try to avoid like rigid plans because we want access to all of those options. In order to be honest. So one way that a client or a listener, you and I can become more honest in our recovery from pornography use might sound something like, okay, when I start to experience a trigger and I notice I'm want to look at porn, I'm going to be honest with someone about that. And my starts there, right? I'm going to be honest about my experience. I'm going to call up a support member or a support group member, or I'm

going to call up a friend that I know is in my corner or a family member or even praying out loud to God or engaging spiritual practices, reaching out to an ecclesiastical leader. All of those things can, you know, promote honesty, right? We're being honest with ourselves. We're being honest with others and we're going to be able to receive some support through that experience. So that's how a plan might play up. So we have that foundation of principles in I want to be honest. I want to be, you know, you used the word healthy, right? I want to be healthy. Well, what does that look like in terms of your recovery? And man, that could be a variety of different things to someone. What's important is that they communicate this plan to themselves, to the therapist, to the people in their lives that are wanting to support them. And I think that that's, those are things that we can, you know, we can really benefit from.

Creed:

I really like that first step, that first step to everything is honesty with ourselves, with other people. And one way to, to improve our lives based off of our principles is to be honest on where we stand with those things with ourselves. So why, what is it, would it be important? Why does it matter to have these plans? How does it benefit?

Alex:

That's a great question. I get that. So there, yeah, let's take a step back because this is where I get a little passionate and I have to be careful here, but a lot of people want to control their problem, right? And so plans we've been accustomed to when we have a problem, we create a plan and then we execute the plan and then the problem's gone. The issue I have with that when it comes to mental health is that what if the problem is chronic and it's pervasive even, right? Like I'm depressed in my relationship with my wife, I'm depressed at work, I'm depressed at church, I'm depressed with my kids, I'm depressed all over the place. Are you going to have a plan for every one of those areas and are you going to know your plan and remember your plan perfectly? In every one of those situations, like that's makes me depressed just thinking about that or anxious, right? It's like there's no way I can manage all that. Instead, a principle is equally pervasive. And so why is it important to have a plan? Well, we do need some type of structure or some type of vision into how we're going to cope with or manage these types of issues. It also gives a basis for building trust with those intimate relationships that matter to us. So I'll slow both of those

down, right? But first it gives us clarity, vision. When someone's dealing with something very overwhelming, right? So let's say they finally, like someone's come to therapy or they approached one of you and said, Hey, I'm really struggling with pornography and I just can't seem to stop, though I want to, it's affecting my marriage. It's affecting my health, it's affecting my spirituality, all these areas. I really want to stop doing porn, but I can't seem to stop, you know, for someone to say, well, "don't plan" like don't have any idea what you're going to do different. That's like the worst idea. We have to get some ground work to do. And so we have to help facilitate change in some way. So to help this person have clarity, right? We explore, well, what matters to you? Why do you want to stop? Well, I want to have a better relationship. Well, let's start building a better relationship then. What would a better relationship look like for you? Well, a better relationship would look like. You know, more time together, more authenticity or vulnerability in the relationship, more connecting experiences. I don't know. I mean there's a lot of things that people can say and then we start taking action in those areas. To revisit that, you know, that idea of, what do I want out of this? Right? Most of the time I've found success with clients as they pursue things they want to build on as opposed to making a plan to avoid or stop a certain thing. And these principles help to do that most of the time.

Crishelle:

I really love this. I keep picturing my garden or even my house plants a little bit with this. And I'm just a big analogy person. But like my garden currently it's a bunch of weeds because I haven't planted anything and I haven't started that yet. And it will continue to be weeds. Even if I go and pick all those weeds, more weeds grow until I grow something intentionally in that place. And then weeds will still come unless I intentionally give the attention to the plants I want to grow and like take away from the plants I don't want to grow, if that makes sense. And I think that's so beautiful because so often, and even that's what's shifted Reach 10 even. For a long time, we just focused on overcoming pornography and getting rid of pornography and developing all of these plans and ways to talk about pornography, which is so important and so good. We gotta get rid of all the weeds and what are we building? We want to build lives of healthy sexuality. We want to build full and rich relationships. We want to build healthy people who will be healthy parents for kids in the future that are going to be raised in a crazy world. Right?

Alex:

Sure. Yeah exactly. So to have a perspective or a vision of what you're building towards I think is the first part to a recovery plan and then you know, what you might do to affect those things or how to grow those things. To use your plant analogy, right? That might look different for every single person, but I think for anybody trying to create a recovery plan, I would first identify the principles we want to live by and then how that applies to your life so that you can build the life you want to live. And I think that, I mean that can apply to a variety of different things we've talked about. The second thing I want to get back to what I said earlier, a thing that is really important. A lot of the pressure I received as a therapist to create a recovery plan for my clients was from the partner, right? It was from this client spouse, especially as it related to problematic sexual behaviors. There's a lot of spouses who want clarity into how do I know if my partner is safe enough to trust again, right? If there's been infidelity or if there's been, you know, chronic sexual behaviors that are problematic in the relationship, pornography use you know, even flirting online, chats or you know, DMing your ex, I don't know, there's lots of types of betrayal that might occur for different people and the partners often want to know what is my partner going to do different. And so they feel this pressure to elaborate exactly what they're going to do to change. And there's some credibility to this, right? And building trust, we want to be able to know what, how are we going to measure that? How are we going to know that this person is trustworthy? What I would challenge the partner and the client, I would say the, you know, the couple, right? Both of them to look at is what will demonstrate that this person is trustworthy, right? Go back to that principle language. So you want to be trustworthy, you want to be able to trust him and you know, he wants to be able to be trustworthy or you want to be able to trust her. And she wants to be trustworthy. So that's the principle, we want to have trust in our marriage. We want to have a trusting marriage. How do we build that? What does that look like for them? And that's where they can create this plan of theirs. And that's going to look different for every couple. For some couples that's texting me when you get home or when you're leaving work. So I know when to expect you when you get home. Always communicate to me where you're going to be. For some people it's, let's re-work our house. I don't want computers in any more closed, you know, behind closed doors. We want computers all out in the open. We're limiting screen time after certain hours. You know, that's a conversation to have within a couple. And that's why it's hard for me to sit here and tell all the listeners who I don't know or even you guys who I'm friends with but still don't

know totally intimately in that regard, exactly what your plan should entail other than it should include some heartfelt principles that inform a plan of action.

Creed:

Wonderful. So from what I'm understanding, recovery plans help build trust as we're following them, help us build trust and connection between our relationships, but also with ourselves. Would you say that it's a way of measuring how we're improving? Is that right?

Alex:

Creed, that's a great insight. You know, to be able to speak to this, I've dealt with a lot of clients that were not in relationships, right? So the people that were just trying to improve their life in a variety of different ways and they don't trust themselves to improve or they don't trust themselves to execute on commitments they've made or to... Yeah, their hope for change is very limited. Give it, you know, giving yourself, and I would say ourselves, I think we're all in some level of recovering from something, right? Giving ourselves space to explore what is it that I could do today to strengthen that trust with me? Right. Well, how can I demonstrate that to myself? I know for me as an undergrad, I really struggled to get up early. And I struggled to get things in on time 'cause I'd procrastinate and I always felt like my trust improved when I got up more than 30 minutes before my class started. Right. And I wasn't rushing out of the door with a granola bar and like some scanty meal to make it through the next three hours. Like I trusted myself more to take care of myself by getting up earlier. And I did not get better at that until after I got married to be honest. But so all of my roommates that might be listening to this when we were undergrads, they know that I was not expert at getting up at a decent hour. But over time I've learned that that's one way I can demonstrate trust in myself and that that's not even associated with a mental illness rather than it is just productivity in the workspace. I don't know if that made sense, but...

Crishelle:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I think another word that I like to use here is self efficacy. Is your belief in your ability to accomplish things? I think we have really low self-efficacy when we're not acting towards our values and when we're not doing things, how we want to be doing them or we're not having success in different areas. And how we build that is by

having small moments of efficacy, building the efficacy, whether that's waking up when the alarm goes off and instead of pushing snooze 10 times or I know that's one for me. I can totally relate to what you were saying Alex and marriage also helped me. I now care that the other person doesn't have to deal with my snoozes. Yeah, but I, it is so interesting how just little things can make a big difference.

Alex:

Yeah, and I actually love that you brought this up Crishelle, this idea of little things. I think one common pitfall for people making recovery plans is that they start to create ideas aplenty and they have all these areas where they can improve. And all of a sudden their recovery plan is a 10 page document that covers every aspect of their life. Well guess what, they're probably going to fail a lot of that more than they'll succeed at doing all of it at once. We're very limited as to how much progress we can make in a day. I would say humans are pretty limited in terms of transformations, right? We're not caterpillars that jumped into cocoons and come out as butterflies within 24 hours. Like that just doesn't happen. Even caterpillars take, you know, I don't know. I don't know my Caterpillar facts. So some animal person will have to, or insect person will be an expert on this, but it takes time, more than 24 hours to become a butterfly. Well, so it is with our recoveries, right? A lot. I would try to stick to two or three principles until you feel like you trust yourself with those principles. One, I'll put some flesh on this, some context to it. For me, I was really struggling with my spirituality at one point during my undergrad at BYU and I was working through depression and I was working through some really hard things in my personal life in the dating realm. It was just a hard time for me and I noticed myself becoming resentful to God because I was writing in my journal, I was reading my scriptures, I was saying my prayers, I was fasting every fourth Sunday. I was going to church. I was doing all these things that warranted quote unquote all of these blessings that I wanted to not feel so crappy, but I wasn't finding any success in that. It wasn't until I started reprioritizing some of my spiritual activities and like maybe some pastor or preacher out there might disagree with what I'm about to say. But I had to stop trying to be perfect spiritually in order to improve mentally, I had to stop saying the same prayer every morning without any heart and learn how to just pray sincerely, which maybe was one time a day. I had to slow down my journal writing for the sake of journal writing. And I had to just document those things that were most important. Instead of reading the scriptures every single day, I had to think about maybe

today is a hymn day and I just have to listen to some hymns that lift me up and that will be my spiritual experience. So again, going back to this principle, the principle was I wanted to connect with God. The principal wasn't, here's my to do list of all these things I need to do in order to connect with God. And as I slowed that down for me, I became a lot less depressed because my perfectionism was dropping right? And I was actually able to connect with God in a more authentic way because I was paying attention to what I needed spiritually. Even though from the outside looking in, I wasn't obeying every single thing every single day. I wasn't doing it all. But for me, that helped slow it down to really reach the principle of I want to connect with God every day. How do I do that? Well, some days it looks like not writing in my journal, right? And listening to a few hymns before I go to bed. Right? Some days it's saying a really heartfelt prayer and paying attention to that. So I hope that gives some example as to what that might look like, but I think that's what principles and action look like and I think that's ultimately how we, you know, effect change in our lives.

Creed:

Thank you. Thank you. we just love hearing that. I mean me especially I, I too have been going through a similar process of evaluating what my principles are and how can I achieve those principals, perhaps not on someone else's timeline or in a specific way that somebody else tells me how it's supposed to be. But I figured that out for myself and make it authentic, like you said. And really the way that it needs to work for me 'cause we're all different and we all need different things. So thank you so much for sharing that because I think so many of our listeners are experiencing that we all need to take times in our lives. When we take a moment of pause, figure out our principles, figure out what's working, what's not working and live, you know, more true to what we actually want to get done instead of just living these dry repetitious, heartless actions. And I think that's what God wants too. If we believe in God, he wants something that we have heart in and not just something that we're not doing without heart. So thank you for sharing that. This whole recovery principles thing applies to all aspects of life. I love it.

Alex:

Yeah. Thank you. I something you said Creed, just brought to mind one other thing I kind of feel is important to include here. I know we're coming up on time, so I'll just keep this brief.

I look back on my life and I noticed there was a season of my life where I was connecting behaviors, the wrong behaviors to the wrong outcomes. So, like in my example, I wanted to marry somebody. Marriage is a really important part of my, you know, my belief systems. It's a big part of my faith. That's a big part of what I dreamed of. I always wanted to be a husband and a father and to have a family and that was a big part of what I wanted in life. But I was falsely connecting my scripture study, my journal writing, my prayers to being a good candidate for marriage. Now, those things are good, right? If you're looking to marry a spiritual person or someone that values those things, that's good for that. But did it make me a better date? I had to actually learn some good skills to actually be a good dater, right? I came across as too intense. A lot of the feedback I got was like, it's too much. Or a lot of feedback I got was like, Alex, you feel more like a brother or a mentor or you know, someone like I was not a romantic sexual partner to these people in their minds. Like, I just wasn't, that was not the direction they wanted to go with our friendship. And for me I had to learn how to, if I can be, it's an embarrassing word, but like sizzle a little bit like I had to become attractive and a way of doing that was to decrease that intensity, become a little more jovial, be a little more lighthearted. I had to learn how to be vulnerable and connect with someone in an emotional way, but not too much, right. To hold back a little bit at times and give space for the relationship to develop healthily. And like those were the things that ultimately led to me being, I think, an eligible candidate for marriage, my wife so graciously approved of and wanted to marry. I think that ultimately those, you know, those types of experiences led to that. Did scripture reading and all those things helped me develop my spirituality and maturity in those senses? Absolutely. But I think we have to be careful when we're creating these plans to make sure that the actions are connected to a true principle and we're not crossing wires here where if I read scriptures every day, then I will receive, then I will get a spouse or find my partner, right? So, but like, you know, if we could find a way to connect the right action to the right behavior or the right outcome, right? So if my scripture reading it was, I want to have a better connection with God, and that was that. That's why I read my scriptures was for no other reason.

Crishelle:

And what I'm hearing you say is that our actions should be tied to principles instead of actions being tied to rewards, which is really interesting and so profound that so often, I think I've definitely been in these shoes where I'm like pissed off at God. I shouldn't say

that. I'm ticked off at God. You can edit that one Vauna that's gonna require some editing. I'm ticked off at God because I'm doing XYZ and Q and why isn't this happening? And then recognizing that I was doing those things to become this person. Rather than get some like reward. And that has totally shifted my behavior as I've looked at things from more of a principle based rather than action and reward.

Alex:

Yeah. Well said.

Crishelle:

So, so spot on. Thank you so much Alex. Thank you for your wisdom, your stories, your experiences, and just thank you for sharing you.

Alex:

Thank you for inviting me on and thank you listeners. I really hope that this is a benefit to some somebody out there and I appreciate all the work you guys are doing at Reach 10 and breaking the silence. I think this is, this is critical work.

Creed:

Great job guys. Such good. Thank you, Alex. That was so good.