

Over and over, we have found we cannot stay sober long just for the sake of wife, husband, children, lover, parents, other relative, or friend, nor for the sake of a job, nor to please a boss (or doctor or judge or creditor)—not for *anyone* other than ourselves.

Tying up our sobriety to *any* person (even another recovered alcoholic) or to *any* circumstance is foolish and dangerous. When we think, “I’ll stay sober *if*—” or “I won’t drink because of—” (fill in any circumstance other than our own desire to be well, for health’s own sake), we unwittingly set ourselves up to drink when the condition or person or circumstance changes. And any of these may change at any moment.

Independent, unaffiliated with anything else, our sobriety can grow strong enough to enable us to cope with anything—and everybody. And, as you’ll see, we start liking *that* feeling, too.

26 Being wary of drinking occasions

We have worked out many ways of handling occasions when other people are drinking, so that we may enjoy these occasions without drinking.

Back on page 21, we talked about whether to keep liquor or other alcoholic beverages in the house when we decide to stop drinking. In that discussion, we acknowledged that we live in a society where most people drink, and we cannot realistically expect that fact to change. Throughout the rest of our lives, there will be drinking occasions. Chances are, every day we will see people drinking, see drinking places, see and hear dozens of advertisements urging us to drink.

We cannot insulate ourselves against all such suggestions, and it is futile to bemoan that fact. Nor do we have any need or wish to deprive other people of drinking. We have also found that we do not have to forgo the pleasure of being with companions who drink. Although it makes sense to spend more time with nondrinkers than with drinkers when we *first* start staying sober, we have no wish to withdraw from the world forever just because so many people drink. Those who cannot eat fish or nuts or pork or strawberries don’t crawl into caves. Why should we?

Do we go into bars, or into restaurants or clubs where liquor is served?

Yes—after a few weeks or months, when we have a *legitimate* reason to be there. If we have time to kill while waiting for friends, we do not choose to spend it perched on a barstool, swilling a cola. But if a busi-

ness or social event occurs in such a place, we attend and participate in all but the drinking.

For the first nondrinking months, it's probably a healthy idea to stay away from our old drinking buddies and haunts, and to find reasonable excuses for skipping parties where drinking will be a major entertainment. It seems especially important to stay away from such affairs if we feel nervous about them.

But, sooner or later, there comes the time when a family or business obligation or a friendship makes us feel compelled to go—or perhaps we just want to go. We have developed a number of ways to render such occasions easy for us to take, even though we abstain. Now, we are talking primarily about the big cocktail party or the fairly large but informal dinner-with-drinks evening.

If the host or hostess is an old friend we can level with, sometimes it helps to tell him or her in advance that we are not drinking right now. We do not ask for any special treatment, of course. But it's reassuring to know there will be at least one person present who is completely sympathetic to our efforts to get over a drinking problem. Sometimes, we can take with us a more experienced nondrinker, or at least a companion who knows we are abstaining and realizes how important it is to us.

It is also beneficial, before you go, to talk with another recovered alcoholic or with someone else on your side, who is rooting for your health and fully understands the pressure you'll be under. Arrange to call back later and tell how it went. Another recovered alcoholic would appreciate such a call very much. Believe us! We A.A.'s get a thrill from every such message.

It is a very good idea to eat a sandwich or other snack before going to a party, even if you know food will be served later. Something nourishing in the stomach, as we've already said, takes the edge off many trying situations. (And you might carry along a small packet of your favorite mints or a dietetic substitute.) This is even more important when you are headed for a party at which there are likely to be some long heavy-drinking hours before food appears.

When you know that will be the schedule, you may prefer to skip the first hour or so of the drinking and arrive only shortly before dinner is served. Many of us do this. Then, if there is going to be a long drunk evening after eating, we have found it is also easy to leave early. The very few who do notice our slipping away, we have discovered, hardly mind our departure at all. They are too busy drinking, or whatever.

Upon arriving at such a party, it is usually best to head straight for the bar and get a glass of ginger ale or other soda. No one knows whether it is an alcoholic drink or not. Then we can walk about socializing, glass in hand, without feeling conspicuous.

This experience was quite revealing to many of us when we first had it. We discovered to our surprise that (1) other people's drinking is not what we thought it was, and (2) very few people observe, or care, whether or not we drink alcohol. (Some exceptions to the latter are likely to be loving friends or relatives, who are usually glad to see us doing something about our drinking.)

Many of us used to say, and believe, that "everybody" drinks, and we could argue that we did not drink a lot more than the other drinkers we knew. To tell the truth, as our drinking went on over the years, many of us tended to associate less and less with nondrinkers, so of course it seemed to us that "everybody"—certainly everybody we saw—drank.

Now, sober, when we see "everybody," it is a revelation to find that not all of them do drink, and that many of the others drink much less than we had supposed.

Anticipating occasions like these, the newly sober alcoholic wonders what to answer if drinking friends and relatives say such things as:

"Come have a drink."

"What are you drinking?"

"Why, you *can't* be an alcoholic!"

"Don't you drink?"

"Just one won't hurt."

"Why aren't you drinking?"... and the like.

To our relief, we found that these questions come up less often than we expected, and our answers seem to have much less importance than we thought they would have. Our not drinking creates less of a stir than we feared it would.

There is one exception. Once in a while, a really heavy drinker will get pretty pushy about our not drinking. Most of us come to believe that such an attitude is very suspicious. Civilized, polite people simply do not carry on that much about what other people choose to drink or eat, or not to drink or eat, unless they have some hang-up of their own, do they? We find it curious that anyone should try to get a person to drink who does not care to; and we especially wonder why anybody wants a person with a record of drinking-related problems to try to drink again.

We learn to steer clear of such people. If they do indeed have their own hang-up to contend with, we wish them well. But we need not defend our choices to them or to anyone else. And we do not argue with them, or try to change their minds. Again, our attitude is "Live and Let Live."

But back to those questions asked politely and casually by well-meaning friends and relatives, and our answers to them. There are probably as many good ways to handle these situations as there are nondrink-

ers, and your own intelligence will lead you to the one that works best and is most comfortable for you.

However, the outlines of several different successful methods have emerged from the years of accumulated experience of Alcoholics Anonymous. The past has banked its wisdom, and it is foolish not to draw on it.

Great numbers of us (but not all) believe that the sooner we establish the truth with our acquaintances, the better it is for us. We do not have to keep up any pretenses, and most good people appreciate our honesty and encourage our efforts to stay free of our addiction. Saying aloud to other people that we do not drink helps greatly to strengthen our own determination to stay sober. And there may be a by-product: Occasionally, we find that making such a statement encourages someone else present who also needs or wants not to drink.

Therefore, many of us do not hesitate, when it is appropriate, to say, "I'm not drinking now."

"I'm not drinking today (or this week)" or simply "No, thanks" or a straightforward "I don't care for any" often satisfies the questioner.

If we feel the need to explain any further, we try to do it without lying, and in a way that other people can rapidly understand and accept. For instance, there are old standbys like "Health reasons," "I'm on a diet," and "Doctor's orders." Most of us, at one time or another, have been given or have read some such advice by a physician.

"I've had my share," "Had all I can handle," and "Found out it doesn't agree with me" are also truthful.

While we A.A.'s do not use, among ourselves, the expression "on the wagon," it is something most people certainly understand and respect, as long as we do not urge others to abstain.

Although we certainly cannot recommend untruthfulness, because of the way it makes *us* feel, occasionally some of us in desperation have resorted to the "little white lie," one of those small fibs believed to be harmless and sometimes described as necessary lubrication for the smooth operation of society.

When we have to fall back on manufactured, murmured excuses for not drinking, we try to reach for one that is not too far-fetched. "I have a mysterious disease" or "I'm on some medication" might shut people up, but more likely would evoke extra questions.

Usually, "I'm allergic to it" seems acceptable. Technically, in strictly scientific terms, alcoholism is not a true allergy, the experts now inform us. However, "allergy" is a pretty good figure of speech to describe our condition; if we imbibe the stuff, regrettable consequences certainly do follow.

When we do offer such a statement, it usually produces the desired response. That is, people accept the fact that we are not going to drink right now, and stop questioning us about it.

When we're asked what we'd like to drink, it seems courteous and sensible to ask for and promptly accept something nonalcoholic, whether or not it is our particular favorite. Most of us take any soft drink, fruit or vegetable juice, or other nontoxic beverage that is easily available. (We can pretend to sip it if we really are not fond of it or not thirsty.) This puts us more at ease, and also relieves the hospitable host or hostess who is a compulsive glass-filler and seems genuinely uncomfortable if a guest is not swallowing.

The formal seated banquet, with an array of wineglasses, is no particular problem. Simply turning a wineglass upside down is signal enough for a good waiter or wine steward, even in the wine-drinking countries of Europe. Some of us ask for seltzer or a sparkling mineral water. And when a toast is proposed, almost no one pays attention to us as long as we lift *some* glass, with something in it. After all, isn't it the symbolic pledge of friendship that makes a toast real, not the presence of a drug (ethyl alcohol) in the glass or loving cup?

No one is under any obligation to answer rude or personal questions; so, in the rare event that one is raised, we ignore it or finesse it or change the subject. If that happens to you, remember there are hundreds of thousands of us now recovered from alcoholism who are on your side and understand perfectly what you are undergoing and why you do it, even if no one else seems to. Even if we are not present, in our hearts we are with you, and you can assure yourself that you have our very good wishes.

One other kind of incident has happened to some of us. It is not especially serious or dangerous, but maybe our telling about it will help prevent your being upset if it comes up in your life. Once in a while, a good-hearted, well-intentioned friend or family member inadvertently overdoes the concern about our recovery and, meaning only to help us, may embarrass us if we are not poised enough to handle the situation.

For instance, the nonalcoholic spouse, understandably fearing that we may drink again and trying too hard to protect us, will blurt out, "So-and-so has stopped drinking." Or a solicitous friend may thoughtlessly call attention to our not drinking by pointing to the one glass of tomato juice on a tray of drinks and saying, "That's for you."

It is good of them to want to help us, and we try to concentrate on their desire to be kind. In all fairness, they cannot be expected to understand instantly how we feel. Some of us can't even sort out how we actually do feel until we have some nondrinking time and the self-conscious phase has passed.

Naturally, we prefer to be allowed to make our own choices, discreetly and privately, without a public show. But getting touchy about what other people say or do hurts no one but ourselves. It is better to try to grin and bear it, getting past the moment somehow. It is usually over in less than five minutes. Maybe later, when we feel calm, we can quietly explain that we genuinely appreciate the concern, but would feel better if allowed to make our own “excuses.” We might add that we’d like to practice protecting ourselves in social situations, so that the other person need not worry when we’re on our own.

After even more time has passed, many of us reach a stage of real comfort about ourselves and drinking; we are relaxed enough to tell the exact truth—that we are “recovered alcoholics,” or that we are in A.A.

This face-to-face, confidential revelation about ourselves in no way conflicts with A.A.’s tradition of anonymity, which suggests that we not reveal those facts about anyone *except* ourselves, and that we not make such announcements for publication or on broadcasts.

When we can tell this, with ease, about ourselves, it shows that we have nothing to hide, and that we are not ashamed to be recovering from an illness. It helps to increase our self-respect. Such statements chip away at the cruel old stigma unfairly placed by ignorant people on victims of our malady, and help to replace old, stereotyped notions of “an alcoholic” with more accurate perceptions.

Incidentally, such a statement very often induces someone else who wants to get over a drinking problem to try to seek aid, too.

Just one more thing about this matter of drinking occasions. Many of us have had the guts, if pressure to drink really got unpleasantly strong, simply to make an excuse and leave, no matter what other people may think. After all, our life is at stake. We simply have to take whatever steps are necessary to preserve our own health. Other people’s reactions are *their* problem, not ours.

27 Letting go of old ideas

The ideas that got so deeply embedded in our lives during drinking do not all disappear quickly, as if by magic, the moment we start keeping the plug in the jug. Our days of wine and “Sweet Adeline” may be gone, but the malady lingers on.

So we have found it therapeutic to nip off many old ideas that start to sprout up again. And they do, over and over.

What we try to achieve is a feeling of being relaxed and freed from the bonds of our old thinking. Many of our former habits of thought, and the ideas they produced, limit our freedom. They just weigh us down and are of no use—so it turns out when we look them over with a fresh eye. We don't *have* to hang on to them any longer unless, upon examination, they prove valid and still truly fruitful.

We can now measure the present-day usefulness and truthfulness of a thought against a highly specific standard. We can say to ourselves, "Now, that is exactly what I used to think, in the drinking days. Does that kind of thinking help me stay sober? Is it good enough for me *today*?"

Many of our old ideas—especially those about alcohol, about drinking, about getting drunk, and about alcoholism (or problem drinking, if you prefer that term)—prove either worthless or actually self-destructive for us, and it is a great relief to get rid of them. Maybe a few examples will suffice to illustrate our willingness to throw out our old, useless ideas.

For many of us as teen-agers, drinking was a way of proving that we were no longer children, or that we were manly, or sophisticated and wise, or tough enough to defy parents and other authorities. In many minds, drinking is closely tied in with romance, sex, and music, or with business success, wine snobbery, and jet-set luxury. If one is taught anything about drinking at school, it is often about dangers to health and the likelihood of losing a driver's license—not much else. And many people are still convinced that any drinking at all is immoral, leading straight to crime, suffering, disgrace, and death. Whatever our feelings may have been about drinking, positive or negative, they were often strong and more emotional than rational.

Or our attitudes toward drinking may have been merely automatic, an unthinking acceptance of other people's opinions. To many, drinking is an essential part of social occasions—a harmless, convivial pastime done in certain places among friends at specific times. Others view drinking as a necessary accompaniment to eating. But now we ask ourselves: *Is it actually impossible to enjoy friendship or food without drinking? Did our own way of drinking improve our social relationships? Did it heighten our appreciation of good food?*

The idea of getting drunk produces reactions even more extreme, pro or con. Getting "wasted" is likely to be seen only as fun, or only as disgraceful. The very idea is repugnant to many people, on various grounds. To some of us, it was a desirable state, not only because it was expected of us by others and we liked the feeling, but also because it was a condition made light of by glamorous celebrities. Some people

are intolerant of those who never get drunk at all; others are scornful of those who get *too* drunk. Modern-day health findings so far have had little influence on such attitudes.

When we first heard the word “alcoholic,” most of us associated it exclusively with older, unkempt, shaky, or unpleasant men we saw panhandling or passed out on skid rows. Well-informed people are now aware that such an idea is rubbish.

Nevertheless, a residue of our ancient, muddy notions clung to many of us during our first attempts at sobriety. They blurred our vision and made it difficult to see the truth. But we finally became willing to entertain the thought that—just possibly—some of those ideas could be a bit erroneous, or at least no longer reflected accurately our own personal experience.

When we could persuade ourselves to look at that experience honestly and to listen to ideas other than our own, we became open to a big array of information we had not examined carefully before.

For instance, we could look at the scientific description: Alcohol is a drug that alters consciousness, not just a tasty thirst-quencher. The drug is found, we learned, not only in beverages, but also in some foods and medicines. And now, almost everyday, we read or hear of a discovery that this particular drug does one more kind of physical damage (to the heart, the blood, the stomach, the liver, the mouth, the brain, etc.) not suspected before.

Pharmacologists and other addictions experts now say that alcohol is not to be considered totally safe and harmless, whether used as beverage, stimulant, sedative, tonic, or tranquilizer. But it does not, of itself, necessarily lead straight to physical harm or mental degradation in every single case. Apparently, most people who use it can do so gracefully, without injury to themselves or others.

Drinking, we found, can be viewed medically as ingestion of a drug; drunkenness, as overdosing. The misuse of this drug can, directly and indirectly, lead to problems of all sorts—physical, psychological, domestic, social, financial, vocational. Instead of thinking mostly about what drinking did *for* us, we began to see what it does *to* some people.

We have found out that *anybody* who has trouble of any sort related to drinking may have the condition called “alcoholism.” This illness strikes without regard for age, creed, sex, intelligence, ethnic background, emotional health, occupation, family situation, strong constitution, eating habits, social or economic status, or general character. It is not a question of how much or how you drink, or when, or why, but of how your drinking affects your life—what happens when you drink.

Before we could recognize the illness in ourselves, we had to unload this tired old myth: It would be a sign of shameful weakness to admit that we couldn't handle the sauce any more (if we ever could).

Weakness? Actually, it takes considerable courage to stare unblinkingly at the hard truth, sparing nothing, without glossing over anything, without excuses, and without kidding ourselves. (It is unseemly to brag, but frankly, many of us think that at kidding ourselves we were world champions.)

The process of recovery from alcoholism also has been clouded with misconceptions. Like millions of others who have watched a person drinking himself or herself to death, we have wondered why the drinker did not use willpower to stop drinking. That is another outdated idea, but it sticks because many of us have been exposed early in life to some model of superwillpower. Maybe there was the family or neighborhood legend of good old Uncle John. Known as a rake and a heller for years, he suddenly gave up wine, women, and song at age 50 and became a model of propriety and moral soundness who never touched another drop.

The childish notion that we can do likewise when we get ready is a dangerous delusion. We are not anybody else. We are only ourselves. (We are not Grandpa, who drank a fifth a day until he was 90, either.)

It is now well established that willpower all by itself is about as effective a cure for alcohol addiction as it is for cancer. Our own experience has verified that repeatedly. Most of us tried going it alone, hoping either to control our drinking or to stop, and we had no lasting success in either endeavor. Even so, it wasn't easy to admit we needed help. That, too, looked like a sign of weakness. Yes, we were being taken in by another myth.

But we finally asked ourselves: Wouldn't it be more intelligent to seek out and tap a strength greater than our own than to persist in our futile solo efforts, after they had time and again been proved ineffective? We still don't think it is very smart to keep trying to see in the dark if you can simply switch on a lamp and use its light. We didn't get sober entirely on our own. That isn't the way we learned to stay sober. And the full enjoyment of living sober isn't a one-person job, either.

When we could look, even temporarily, at just a few new ideas different from our old ones, we had already begun to make a sturdy start toward a happy, healthier new life. It happened just that way to thousands and thousands of us who deeply believed it never could.