

Confusion

Regardless of how long we have been sober, we can confuse ourselves by comparing our life against how we imagine other people live. At times, everybody seems to be enjoying life more than we do and we become disenchanted with our sobriety.

Is there a better way? Private Clinics and Counselling

Nobody can get another person sober. If they could, our families and partners would have succeeded. We need to reach the point where we take responsibility for our own recovery, because until we recognise our excuses for what they are, we believe the problem is everybody else's.

A person sent to a private clinic often thinks that somebody else is going to do the hard work. They might stop drinking by remaining in a restrictive environment and even start out with an honest desire to get well, but at some point this switches into "I got away with it again" and the rest of the treatment becomes a game. Group sessions become an opportunity to be melodramatic and counsellors are there to bait. The alcoholic delights in leading the counsellor smugly towards the answers they choose to expose, possibly believing that it gives a display of superior intellect and cunning. It is common to feel that a counsellor who cannot see through our obvious deceptions is useless. Whatever the reason, until we accept defeat, there seems little permanent value in expensive treatment.

Many people who have been to private clinics do now lead successful lives within AA. Nobody has to pay to adopt the program, but sometimes we value something more if we do. Undeniably, attending a private clinic *can* give a person a flying start, rather like taking an intensive driving course to learn how to drive. Exactly like the driving course, we gain the basic skills, but the wider experience required to survive can only come with time.

Our chance of success doesn't seem dependent upon starting in a clinic or at AA. When we come out of the clinic we must practice the program exactly the same way as the person who started by making a call to the AA helpline and attending meetings.

Opinions

Opinions – Giving ours

In the bar room people are willing to offer their opinion on just about any topic and they require little genuine knowledge of the subject. This isn't just alcoholics, most people try to offer helpful suggestions and the temptation to give opinions is extremely strong.

Within AA, we encounter people at various stages of alcoholism, all capable of coping with different things. We don't recover at the same rate and we don't have the same resilience. Our well-meaning opinion has the power to kill another alcoholic and we should only offer it sparingly. Thoughtless remarks can cause problems, even when we think the topic isn't part of their alcoholism. We might make a "helpful" comment regarding their choice of car, place they live or the people they live with. We usually offer little but disharmony when we comment on other people's way of life and we need to learn to keep our opinion to ourselves.

Opinions – listening to others

I had been coming to meetings for a few months when my husband left. I felt that my world had ended and although I didn't want to drink, the pressure was becoming too great to handle.

I went to the doctor and he prescribed some tablets that calmed me down and allowed me to get on with life. I was much better and I shared this at my home group. After the meeting a woman came up to me and aggressively told me that I should flush them down the toilet because I was simply taking my booze in a solid form and that I would drink again if I continued to use them.

Each week this woman came up to me, narrowed her eyes and scornfully asked if I was still taking them. I felt belittled and undermined, I started to believe that I would only be able to achieve sobriety once I was not taking anything.

Thankfully, my sponsor told me that I should take medical advice from a doctor and rarely from other alcoholics. After a short time, my doctor took me off the tablets in a controlled way and I was able to live my life without them.

It is amazing how many people have dangerous opinions. We will encounter people with forceful advice about "the correct route". Somebody who feels they know best can challenge any facet of our life, religion, drugs, relationships, work etc. A correct decision is to listen to what these people have to say and then to take their comments to somebody who knows us to see if the "suggestion" was appropriate.

Outside AA, we will encounter complete strangers who will dismissively question our decision to stop drinking. By allowing others to voice their negative opinion, we are opening our minds to the possibility that we were wrong. Suddenly, it seems likely that we had only been "going through a bad patch" and now that our life is settled, we no longer need to continue. Sometimes people want us to start drinking again because our abstinence emphasises their drinking. Others think that they are being helpful, or showing off their intellect. Some people just need to sneer at what others consider important.

The program can seem too simple and we yearn for something more substantial to fix our problems. Paradoxically, the program can seem too difficult and we don't want to follow it. At times of doubt, the monkey seems able to guide us towards people brimming over with good advice and confusing opinions. It is important to recognise these situations and evaluate what has given this person such an insight into our condition that they can diagnose and correct what others cannot.

Opinions – of the stars

The worst kind of distraction is possibly the celebrity drunk. The problem with celebrities is that they have access to the media. They go on television and give interviews that appear worldwide in magazines and newspapers. How many people justify continuing to drink by comparing their behaviour to that of a celebrity drunk?

I recall watching Oliver Reed in a drunken state on a chat show and thinking "yes! That's the lifestyle I want, I want to behave wild and unfettered." There were some things missing that prevented me from fully adopting his way of life, such as money, fame, acting talent etc. However, I had managed to become bloated and unacceptably loud and this seemed a good start.

Many of us are bursting with enthusiasm when we realise that life is not ending and that we are going to recover. We can be over-zealous for a time, having "found AA", we want to evangelise and recruit others into our new way of life. Luckily, most of us can only reach a relatively low number of people. This is not true for the celebrity in early recovery and many of them choose to shout from the rooftops, "I'm in AA". Doing this they are holding themselves up to scrutiny. If they don't stay sober, their marriage fails, or indeed, they do anything, people judge them and AA. The monkey on our shoulder is waiting to whisper its own judgement, "That AA thing doesn't work, look at them, with their money and fame they failed, what is the point in trying?"

Some celebrities have recovered using a twelve-step program, but now publicly disparage what it can do. These belittling comments tend to take the form of "I went whilst I had a problem, but don't go any more because..." citing religion, God or other commitments. This can damage other people in two ways. Firstly, it may encourage somebody who is struggling into drinking again. Secondly, our family can think that if "Mr. X" has recovered and no longer needs to go to meetings, then we shouldn't either.

Whilst others may try to tempt us from our path to recovery, the celebrity knows how to deliver a line. Whether we like it or not they have a lot of power over our thinking and avoiding the distraction created by celebrities is an important lesson to learn.

We can quietly admire those celebrities where it is common knowledge that they are members, but who do not publicly discuss it. We should feel compassion for those who appear on the chat show proclaiming a cure after a couple of meetings. If they fail, they will fall harder than the normal person will. Finally, remember that celebrity status rarely requires intelligence and humility. Who should we trust, the quiet chap at the meeting with thirty years sobriety, or a fading star?

A new set of emotions

Alcoholics are often emotionally immature. We behave as if we “stalled” our emotional growth at the age that we started to drink. Whilst we are drinking, we rarely question our reactions. Like a petulant adolescent, our behaviour, beliefs, and feelings are unquestionably correct. When we stop drinking, our emotions start to come back to life and we find ourselves plagued by strange feelings that we have never acknowledged before.

Some emotions share the names of the defects that we are trying to avoid like, pride, anger and envy or the positive virtues like charity and compassion. These are primitive and powerful forces within our lives. Other emotions such as, confused, melancholy, cheated and lonely can be more difficult to identify. All of these feelings combine to motivate us in some way.

I feel that when I was drinking I didn't actually have any emotions. I faked them to get an effect. I would say, “I love you” to get somebody to say it back to me, or I would scream and rage to make somebody do what I wanted. Even many years into sobriety I envy people who can move through a whole range of appropriate emotions where I find myself hampered by anger and insecurities with an on/ off switch.

Not on the list of defects

Sometimes we drift away from sober thinking, but we don't see the behaviour as defective because our specific problem doesn't appear to be on the “standard list” of defects.

I noticed that I wasn't going to be able to pay off my credit card, it had been an expensive month and I had treated myself to a new computer. The next month my car needed some work and I had to buy a new printer. Then the washing machine broke down and I needed a new one. I realised I was getting deeper in trouble and I was feeling uneasy. I checked my behaviour, pride, greed, envy, etc. All of my expenditure was necessary, I hadn't wanted to show off my washing machine and I certainly hadn't bought things to compete with next door.

The snowball of moving debt between credit cards bounced out of control as increasingly threatening letters started to arrive from debt collection services. All I had wanted was a comfortable, peaceful sobriety, but I was now living in a misery of confusion that seemed to be pushing me towards drinking.

A defect is behaviour that damages anybody - including us. When we recognise our behaviour as harmful, our first efforts should go into changing. Possibly, somebody else could interpret our actions within a framework of “named defects”, but we are not playing “swords and sorcery” riddles and learning the name of the demon doesn't necessarily reduce its strength. Part of deciding how to change is to describe how we are feeling to somebody else. The important part is clearly identifying what we are doing wrong and it doesn't matter if it takes one or one hundred words to describe the feelings.

Making up for lost time

Initially, we are comfortable with the idea that we need to be good to ourselves. We are willing to accept that we aren't “materially wealthy,” but we are happy that we are becoming “spiritually wealthy”. As time passes, the lustre wears off our spiritual wealth and we become tempted into rejoining the rat race. When the phrase “I didn't get sober to...” is used, we are usually justifying something that isn't in our best interest.

Regardless of the warnings, the monkey tricks us into taking inventories again. We gaze enviously at the house or car our friend has acquired, feeling that we deserve similar luxuries. Resentment drives us into trying to achieve more than is sensible, creating the conditions where sobriety loses its priority.

We abandon our spiritual development by focusing upon material desires. If we look at this style of thinking and then refer back to the major defects we discussed earlier, pride, envy, greed, lust and anger, we will find that we are experiencing most, if not all of these defects. There is nothing wrong with aspiring to improve our future situation, providing we don't compromise our sobriety trying to achieve it.

~O~

ANY COMMERCIAL USE OR PUBLICATION OF ALL OR PART OF DOCUMENTS ON THIS SITE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED, WITHOUT PRIOR WRITTEN AUTHORISATION FROM:

WWW.MONKEYONMYSHOULDER.CO.UK. (MONKEY@MONKEYONMYSHOULDER.CO.UK)

THE COPYRIGHT REMAINS WITH THE AUTHOR UNDER ALL CONDITIONS.

THIS DOCUMENT IS PROVIDED "AS IS," AND COPYRIGHT HOLDERS MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY, FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE, NON-INFRINGEMENT, OR TITLE; THAT THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT ARE SUITABLE FOR ANY PURPOSE; NOR THAT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SUCH CONTENTS WILL NOT INFRINGE ANY THIRD PARTY PATENTS, COPYRIGHTS, TRADEMARKS OR OTHER RIGHTS.

COPYRIGHT HOLDERS WILL NOT BE LIABLE FOR ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, SPECIAL OR CONSEQUENTIAL DAMAGES ARISING OUT OF ANY USE OF THE DOCUMENT OR THE PERFORMANCE OR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONTENTS THEREOF.