

## Challenges

Life goes on and continues to put obstacles in our way. Challenges are how we learn. If survival had been too easy, the human race wouldn't have evolved. Presented with a challenge, we try to use our reasoning capacity to decide upon a correct solution. Quick fixes are rarely the answer and we should always question our "good ideas", is it the monkey or us?

## Drugs

The protective cocoon of alcohol means that we rarely have to face the realities of life and the thought of living without any form of support frightens us. Alcohol changes our mood on demand and we become unable to manage our feelings naturally. Scared, we look for other chemicals to help us, ignoring the fact that these are as destructive and addictive as the drink we are trying to avoid.

There is nothing wrong with using medicine as prescribed, but any form of drug can be abused, Recreational, Prescription or Patent. Possibly as many alcoholics have damaged their sobriety with cough medicine as have with cannabis. At three in the morning, a small dose of cough syrup can seem similar to a shot of rum and the thought that they are really the same can lead us back into drinking.

As well as those of us tempted to use drugs after stopping drinking, there are also many alcoholics with the dual problem of drug and alcohol abuse. In virtually every case, they decide to carry on using drugs whilst giving up drinking. Some manage to do so successfully, but in most cases, they say that they didn't experience a good sobriety until they gave up using drugs as well.

We trigger old behaviour by revisiting old situations. Acquiring recreational drugs possibly means coming into contact with people that we would be better off avoiding. We are not trying to become saints, but the monkey is always waiting for the opportunity to tempt us. Chemically changing our emotions creates a fertile situation for temptation to occur. When we deliberately lower our inhibitions, we invite the monkey to lead us gradually away from sobriety and it isn't long before the suggestion of a drink starts to occur.

## Perfection – Surely, that is what is expected!

It is hard to imagine somebody walking past the house of a drinking alcoholic saying, "That's the house of a perfectionist!" In the later stages of our drinking, the lawn remains uncut for months, the window frames need to be painted and we rarely open the curtains. We think that we are perfectionists, but we are blind to the incongruous realities around us.

Perfectionism cripples us. When we realise that we cannot be the best at something, we give up. If we take an exam with an eighty percent pass mark, we think anything less than one hundred percent is a failure and we become disheartened. For some reason our best is never good enough. We imagine that we are on a pedestal and always expected to succeed, torturing ourselves with a fear of failure and the thought of people seeing us fail. Nobody expects total infallibility from other people and if they do, it is highlighting their problems rather than ours.

Step One is the only thing we have to get completely right. We have to be convinced that we are powerless over alcohol – and that our lives had become unmanageable. Any time we stray from the fundamental starting point, the monkey awakens and life descends into chaos.

## Suffering from minor ailments

Colds and flu often raise the accusation that men are pathetic when they are suffering, whereas women soldier on. Regardless of gender, alcoholics act irrationally when they are ill. Our thinking seems affected in direct relationship to our rising temperature, and we suddenly feel the need to make major changes to our lives. If we can bring ourselves to talk to somebody, they will listen and laugh, telling us that we are ill and shouldn't make any decisions. Although this seems simple and logical when we feel healthy, it is surprisingly difficult to accept when we have streaming eyes and realise that we MUST address a major life problem.

## **Dieting and Smoking**

It is dangerous to try to address problems like weight and smoking in the first couple of years. The cravings triggered by either of these can easily be mistaken for a need to drink and distract us from our primary focus – to stay sober.

We rarely have the patience to follow a slow, sensible diet. We want quick solutions such as pills that magically make weight drop away. These pills work by increasing our metabolism and producing a “high”. Whilst other people cope with this, we should view any chemical that changes how we feel with caution. We can misread the mood swings as something more sinister, or if we are bursting with energy, we are tempted to double the dose to feel even better.

Smoking is an addiction and although some people manage to stop by using the twelve-step program, many don't. Discovering how difficult it is to stop smoking shocks us, we believed that our toughest battle had been to stop drinking and that anything else would be easy. The mental upheavals created by stopping smoking are different to those we experience when we stop drinking. Dramatic emotional swings and physical craving can plague us for many months, but we fail to recognise them for what they are. We can feel angry, depressed, or lethargic and the monkey uses these feelings to push us off the path of recovery.

If we try to diet or stop smoking, we are usually far more successful if we take advice and instruction, rather than deciding to invent our own way. Changing our behaviour always awakens the monkey and we open the door to the major character defects we thought we had addressed.

Pride can make us look for attention and compliments. If they don't come, we are disappointed and if they do, we can become “intoxicated” by the fuss somebody makes of us.

Intolerance creeps in as we sneer piously when others fail to achieve what we have been able to do.

Low self-esteem can emerge if we fail to achieve the goal we set for ourselves.

## **Getting honest about our illness with other people**

When we stop drinking, we change. If we live with a partner, we are hurt when they don't “read our minds”. Instead of knowing what we expect of them, they carry on, apparently showing little concern regarding our sobriety. If we don't acknowledge our illness, our partners will expect us to live the same life we always have done. If we don't tell them, they won't know that we are uncomfortable around drunks and drink, after all, it never used to bother us.

Regardless of whether our partner lived with us through our dark times or has come along later, we need to discuss our problems concerning drink and drinking situations with them. Without doing so, we are allowing the monkey to confuse us with the sayings that we hear at meetings, “We cannot change anybody but ourselves” or “Strong sobriety can be maintained under any conditions”. Both of which are true when placed in context, but are not particularly relevant to this aspect of our lives.

We can be tempted into trying to adopt a double life and behave differently when we are amongst our old friends to the way we behave when we are with other alcoholics. There are a few reasons why we would do this:

Leaving a doorway back is one of the common reasons. If we don't tell people that we are trying to change, they won't criticise us if we fail or interfere if we decide to drink.

The idea of anonymity can confuse us. We know that “what we hear in the room – stays in the room”, but we take this suggestion too far. This should be true about the detail of who, where and what, but not the underlying principles.

Making up for past behaviour seems attractive. We trick ourselves into staying quiet and we can pretend that we are starting working on our ninth step.

Avoiding confrontation can mean that we don't speak out when we should do. We can be frightened of confrontation, or scared of the emotional backlash we feel when we do confront a difficult problem.

What actually happens is that instead of calmly discussing our problem, we unexpectedly explode. We unleash a verbal tirade at our loved one. We tell them that they are lacking in consideration and how much support we expect from them. These irrational explosions confuse our family and damage the trust that we have been building up. Honesty means that we don't use our alcoholism like a club to bully our partners, but we don't surrender our rights either, ending up resentful about doing so.

### **Becoming the convenient driver**

We don't usually mind being the driver, we know that we are going to be with people who have been drinking, but we rationalise that because we are sober and working our program, we will be able to cope. Part of our defence strategy for drinking situations is that we should have an escape route planned, but agreeing to drive traps us. We will have to wait until people are ready to leave or abandon them. Either decision can be the cause of conflict and stress.

Drunks are unpredictable and unconcerned with our discomfort. Any time drink is involved, we should question our motives. Are we being sensible and helpful, or are we putting ourselves at risk? Are we "fishing" for compliments from the other people, hoping to draw attention to our sobriety? Driving a car full of drunks can be stressful and we can feel isolated. Possibly, we are thoughtlessly allowing Hungry, Angry, Lonely, and Tired (HALT) into our life. When we are honest about our motives and think things through, we can make a decision and act appropriately. We can agree to drive, but we should not allow others to assume that we will always do so. By discussing the situation, we are humbly accepting our vulnerability, rather than testing our sobriety.

### **Drink around the home**

One of the first trials we encounter when we stop drinking is getting rid of the booze around us. We usually arranged things so that we had easy access to drink, ranging from a pack of beer in the corner through to prominently displayed crystal decanters. We think that it is essential to our home and feel that our partner would object if we removed them from view.

*A recovering alcoholic has no valid excuse to have alcohol in the house, our partner does, but failing to discuss the fact that it make us uneasy is "testing our sobriety". We could take the view that tipping their bottle of twenty five year old brandy down the sink will teach them, or we could be less confrontational and simply ask them to keep it out of sight.*

Why would somebody refuse a reasonable request?

*Unwilling to listen, when we first try to stop drinking, they might no longer be the "loving partner" that we thought they were. Our behaviour as a practicing alcoholic damages people and they may be unable to listen to our pleas. If this is the case, only time will regain their trust and we merely harden their resolve against us if we try to demand support.*

*Losing their "drinking buddy", if our relationship started when our drinking wasn't an apparent problem, they can be frightened that we will change too much and no longer be a part of their life.*

*Saving us from another crazy obsession often motivates our partners into failing to support us. They have lived through us chasing various "cures" and they are scared that we will become lost in "happy clappy" behaviour.*

*Simply not understanding is the most common reason for other people not helping us. We openly discuss our feelings with people outside our home, but fail to do so with the people who live with us.*

*When I first got sober, my daughter would have friends around for the evening. They would leave a half-empty bottle of wine in the fridge and unwashed glasses around in the lounge. I didn't complain because I felt that my "motherly" behaviour in the past had been non-existent and I thought I was establishing a Mother / Daughter relationship.*

*One night when I couldn't sleep, I opened the fridge door looking for milk and found a bottle of wine. My mind instantly ran through all of the facts. It was late and nobody would know if I drank it. Excuses flooded in, "It wasn't my fault I had been taken by surprise", "I was half asleep – virtually sleep walking". I immediately started working out how I would be able to get another bottle - did I have the money and where could I buy it. I had changed from justifying an accidental drink into planning the next one in less than a second.*

*I didn't drink, but the next day I had a long discussion with my daughter. She hadn't even thought about what she was doing because she had grown up with bottles of wine in the fridge. I still find the odd glass lurking where a friend has put it down by the side of a chair, but things have improved dramatically.*

Like any change, there will be times when it slips from the other person's attention. We shouldn't be discouraged and give up the first time somebody forgets. This isn't just an "early days" problem, our families grow up and our partners change. The bottom line is that it is *our responsibility to keep ourselves safe* and failing to be honest can easily evolve into an "at my time in sobriety" trap.

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