

Tricks to help

The art of constructive removal

We often hear the word *Serenity* within AA and many meetings close using the “serenity prayer”.

*God grant me the
Serenity to accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And Wisdom to know the difference*

Most of us recognise that life will improve if we fulfil each line. The lines are also in the correct sequence. Without attaining serenity, our chances of achieving the remaining ideals are doubtful. Our courage is more likely to be bluster and our wisdom merely self-will.

Our first experiences of serenity flash like a fluorescent tube flickering in a dark tunnel, there and then gone. We cannot demand serenity, but we can achieve it by removing its opposites. Serenity is like a pathway through a desert; always present, but often covered by sand blown across it. To find the path we have to uncover it. To maintain it, we have to keep clearing away the sand that constantly tries to hide it again.

Western society drives us to acquire things to make us happy, a better house, more money, expensive clothes. The program encourages us to acquire positive virtues, we want to increase our humility, gain acceptance and rely upon a Higher Power. In the same way that we can get more serenity by removing things, we can increase humility, by reducing pride and increase acceptance by reducing expectation.

This is not a spiritual philosophy but a balance demonstrated in many ways. A motorcycle can go faster either by increasing the power of the engine, or by making the motorcycle lighter. A business becomes more profitable either by increasing sales, or by reducing costs - taking away is just as effective as adding to.

A common cliché is, “you can’t find God, because he isn’t lost”, a true, but useless statement. We find our keys by removing the coat that was on top of them, somebody helpfully telling us they were always there serves no purpose. Finding a Higher Power by removing obstacles is the same, it was always there, but obscured. More appropriate guidance would be that we shouldn’t *frantically search* for a Higher Power by desperately adopting different religions, sects or beliefs in the hope that we will become spiritual.

To improve our life, we might find that the answer is to stop doing something, rather than to start doing something.

Toolkit for normal living

Is one way to describe the program, but before a toolkit can be of any use, we have learn which tool to use for a specific task. We could use either a hammer or a screwdriver to dismantle a clock, but only a screwdriver is appropriate if we want it to work again.

When we realise that turmoil has replaced serenity and life has descended into chaos, we can use the program to help us identify the problem. A good way to do this is to work backwards through the steps to see if they contain a solution. It seems easier to challenge ourselves by working down, rather than up and it is more effective if we do this with a friend or sponsor. Once we have identified where our behaviour is awry we can work out a plan to correct it.

Have we put out our hand to anybody? Even when we don’t want to, getting involved with other people is an essential part of our recovery. We trick ourselves by thinking that we will do more harm than good in our “fragile” state, but this is exactly the time when we should have the humility to speak to other people.

Are we allowing enough time to improve our conscious contact? It is easy to allow normal life to eat away at our time and start to rely on our own inner, rather than outer resources.

Should we be acknowledging recent behaviour as part of our inventory? We can fall back into our old ways of dealing with people, especially when we become determined to achieve an important goal. We can also find that we are exhibiting entirely new forms of defective behaviour. The tricks we encounter are endless and without a regular review, old and new defects are certain to emerge.

Do we have unfulfilled amends that are causing a problem? Our life moves on and we drift in and out of contact with people. Somebody unexpectedly coming out of our past can uncover forgotten situations and reveal additional amends we owe.

Are we allowing our defects to drive our actions? We have to look and decide if pride, greed, envy etc. is the real reason behind decisions that we have recently made. Are we still living with a defect we actively sought to have removed? Are we coming to the point where a "second crop" defect is now becoming apparent?

Is self-will motivating our actions? Few manage to hand their will and their life over and not snatch it back. In normal life the fine line between could and should is a decision that we can get wrong. *Moral behaviour isn't necessarily what we do, but often what we refrain from doing.*

Is our current action insane? We can often look back and recognise insanity within actions that we have justified as sane an hour earlier.

Do we believe that a Higher Power could restore us to sanity? Do we really trust a Higher Power or merely pay lip service to the idea? It can be easy to put our heads down and continue with something even though we can see that we are acting irrationally. We know that we have a faith in a Higher Power, but we don't want to risk our HP getting it wrong and failing to make the correct decision.

Have we been trying to control things we have no control over? We can become frustrated with the taxman, the weather or anything that affects us. Our "right" to do what we want to do can blind us to the reality of the situation we are facing.

How much time have we spent around drink? Drinking situations damage our thinking on many subtle levels and although we can justify our actions, it is dangerous to spend too much time around drink.

We drift across a fine line, from acceptable into unacceptable. When the illness managed our life, we frequently and knowingly ignored the moral boundaries of society. We possibly enjoyed imagining the impression we created, although many say that they simply didn't recognise that rules applied to them.

If I needed to park my car, I parked, oblivious to the restriction sign. If I needed to be somewhere, I drove at the speed that would get me there, regardless of the limits. If I had been drinking, I would drive home. My car was essential to me, but I didn't recognise that flouting the law was risking my livelihood.

When I wanted "love", I picked somebody up. I didn't care about them or their life. When I needed cash, I took it from them. If they objected, I hit them – hard. I liked being different. I wasn't unfeeling - I just didn't see that I was wrong.

Living by the "rules" of society is living a "sober" life. We now recognise the existence of these boundaries, but when they constrict us, we need help adhering to them. Losing focus upon the principles embodied in the program means that Sobriety Lost Its Priority. A drink is the final confirmation of a "SLIP" not the first indication.

Also consider...

If it damages your sobriety give it up has to be one of the greatest double-edged swords handed to a newcomer. Whilst true, it provides a dangerously convenient excuse. We can construe just about any activity as damaging to our sobriety. Getting out of bed and going to work interrupts our quiet time for contemplation. Going to the supermarket for food can be stressful and potentially disturbing. Tolerating a partner who seems to be constantly demanding attention is surely damaging our serenity.

We should be willing to give up anything that is damaging our sobriety, but we are not always the correct person to judge a situation. Before we act, it is better to check these decisions with somebody we trust. They sometimes spot a significant flaw in our plan and keep us from harming ourselves or other people.

Letting go of the concrete lifebelt is a useful illustration how fixed opinions often prove to be a liability. The image is that life is like swimming across a lake and we are desperately hanging on to what we mistake as a lifebelt. Our lifebelt is actually made out of concrete and if we stopped to examine it, we would see that life would become easier if we could just let go.

Willing to go to any lengths to achieve sobriety is a statement we come across in early days. We nod our heads and say, "of course we are willing," then we realise that we have to change fundamental aspects of our life. We suddenly whittle down our professed willingness to go to any lengths into doing what the monkey suggests we can accept.

Our concrete life belts or unacceptable changes can be many things, such as no longer being a member of the darts team, or throwing away the booze sitting in the kitchen. We are horrified and claim that life will stop if we don't continue doing... The benefits of our new way of life will remain out of reach whilst we insist on keeping one foot in the past. Learn to let go and watch the concrete lifebelt sink down into the depths.

Write to ourselves

Sometimes when we carry too many things in our heads, we become confused and get them out of perspective. Communicating with another alcoholic is a good way to solve problems, but there are times when we can clear our thinking by putting things down on paper. Making lists is a good habit to develop, but like many good habits, it takes time to become part of us. When we are under pressure, the last thing we want to do is to stop and make a list. In reality, it is the first thing that we should do. Lists remove some of the stress from our lives by allowing us to become more organised. Once we get in the habit, we realise that we can work through far more than we anticipate and we stop forgetting important tasks.

List of things we want to do, we sometimes need to fill a few spare hours. We know that wasting them leaves us feeling that we have slipped back into old ways. If we have a handy list of things we want to do, we can give ourselves a surprise treat and feel much better about the way we have spent the time.

List of things we don't want to do, we all have tasks that we don't want to do but have to achieve. We cheer ourselves up and feel relieved when we get something done from this list.

Lists of tasks, by keeping our daily tasks under control we achieve more and avoid having last minute panics when we realise that we have not done something that we intended to do.

Lists of fears when we are feeling threatened and uneasy, it is good to put our fears down on paper. In our head, they surface like monsters from the deep, we see each of them clearly for a short time, but as one fades, another pushes forward to replace it. By taking them out of our head, we can see that they are not as overwhelming or numerous as we had thought and we can start to think about solutions rather than problems.

Check your meeting count.

How many meetings should we be doing after one year, two years or ten years? The simple answer is – sufficient. A good piece of advice is to get to as many as we possibly can. It is easy to drop meetings out of our weekly schedule, but it is difficult to squeeze them back in. If we drop a meeting, it is important to take careful stock as time passes. Are we really feeling ok and functioning as well as we had been doing? Alcoholism is a cunning, patient illness and pride can stand in the way of going back to meetings we have dropped.

Try a God Can

The first time I heard this idea, I was repulsed, resentful and seething. The woman was sharing from the "top table" and in a singsong voice she twittered, "I know I can't, but God Can". I judged her to be a sanctimonious, religion-preaching, idiot, and wanted to slap her. I swore I would never do anything that she suggested.

Time passed and life got tougher. My problems pressed in upon me and I felt like I was drowning. I sat on the end of the bed, fearful and unable to face life. I had thought my rock bottom had been the worst I could feel, but I was wrong. I looked up at the ceiling and said, "Who can help me?" and the thought was immediate, "God Can". I don't go to church, I don't believe in any conventional religion, but I know that when I can't....

It is easy to reject this as a strange idea until we fully understood what it achieves. A God Can is a can or a box that we use to hand over a problem. The activity of making the God Can is an exercise in humility in itself. Put a big label on it – GOD CAN. By writing what the problem is on a piece of paper, we are forcing ourselves to accept that we cannot handle the situation. Once the letter has been “posted”, it is no longer ours to worry about. After a time we can go back and have a look at some of the things that were causing us problems, many of them will be long gone and forgotten about. Others did happen, but weren’t as frightening as we had expected.

Start a meeting

Starting a new meeting is a great experience and if sobriety seems flat, it is often worth considering setting one up. The involvement it requires is not great, but it destroys complacency.

Everybody involved in a start-up is usually eager to take on any task, from putting out the chairs through to secretarial functions. Most meetings start quite small and this allows time for the people involved to get to know each other. They often allow themselves to share in more depth than they were doing at other meetings. As the meeting expands, these people become the “core” members of the group. It grows and quickly develops a personality. We can watch as our “child” takes its place in the world. There is a pleasant satisfaction in knowing that the group we helped to set up will continue to flourish and help people to find sobriety.

~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.