

## Situations

### Situations and Facts

A saying around AA is that our Higher Power won't give us more to cope with than we can handle, many silently add the word "barely". Alcoholism doesn't grant a pardon from the realities of life. Our loved ones sometimes get sick or die and circumstances that we want to go in our favour sometimes don't. Life in the real world means that we encounter real life problems and it can be disturbing.

A living problem can be either a situation or a fact. A situation is a "storm at sea", sometimes the correct action is to batten down the hatches and allow it to wash over us. Once it has passed, we can evaluate the damage and attempt to return to normal. A fact is more like finding that we have to live under the sea. There is no point complaining, no matter how often we try, we can't stroll outside without an oxygen tank. We survive by accepting changes.

Whether we are dealing with a situation or a fact, identifying the nature of the problem allows us to decide on how we can move from "living in the problem," through to "living in the solution". This is one of those glib phrases thrown at us when we feel like we are struggling to keep our head above water. It is easy to see that we are living in the problem, but it takes acceptance, planning and action to achieve living in the solution.

*My wife's mother became ill and needed support. The ringing of a telephone snatched time from us that we planned to have together. Strain affected every waking moment. She was certainly dying, but we had no idea if this would be over a period of weeks or years.*

*I confess to taking a long time to adjust from petulant sulking into being able to support my wife and I needed the support of friends who knew when to listen and when to push. One day it finally clicked, I had to change my role in the home. By taking more responsibility for cooking and shopping, I took some of the pressure off my wife. As I moved towards contributing, I felt useful and my wife gained the freedom to lean on me without fearing the backlash of a childish tantrum. From then on, we could live in the solution, it wasn't an easy time, but I know that we came through it a closer and stronger couple.*

### Be aware of our role

Although we sometimes upset other people, our new way of life should prove less damaging to those around us. Becoming a sober member of society means people recognise us as reliable. Through humility, we accept that we are not the centre of the universe, other people have rights and responsibilities and things go wrong that are nothing to do with us.

Allow somebody else to have a bad day. We can take it as rejection when somebody seems upset and preoccupied. We don't know if we are the cause of their problems, but we immediately assume that we are. Uncertain of what we have done wrong we either work harder on making them like us, or react badly towards them.

Learning to say no appropriately can be challenging to us. People are usually asking us to do something, give something, or go somewhere. If we decide not to go to a party, we think that people will want to know why we are not there, or if we attend, but leave early, they will want to know why we are leaving. They will rarely miss us as much as we imagine and if we feel that we are putting ourselves at risk - we should not attend.

It can be hard for us to accept that saying yes and helping somebody can be damaging for them. In the case of somebody who constantly demands support, possibly the best thing we can do for them is to make them sort out their own problems and learn how to cope.

Our confusion can often be a veiled encounter with either high or low self-esteem. "They are asking me because I am the only person who can help," is a sure sign of high self-esteem, whereas fear of rejection in thoughts like "if I say no, they won't forgive me for letting them down" highlights a low self-esteem. They are asking us to put aside what we feel is important in favour of what is important to them. Accepting that we are human is displaying humility and we should not be afraid of saying "no" when we have used sober thinking to decide that it is the correct answer.

## Relationships

We might claim to be “experts” at relationships, because we have had hundreds of them. When we look at this honestly, we often have to admit that we are emotionally immature and have a child-like understanding of what a relationship should be. Unrealistically, we imagine the passion of the first days of a love affair will last forever. Amidst the whirlwind of infatuation, we can pass off our immature intensity as love, but relationships change, some fail and others deepen. We sometimes misinterpret a maturing relationship as a failing one and give up on it. We need to learn how to exist successfully within a loving relationship. Discovering, and accepting this frees us to experience the true magic of love, but is possibly one of the most difficult changes we undergo.

Relationships are hard and require willingness to compromise on fundamental aspects of our life. Like recovery from alcoholism, the challenge is that we should be *willing to go to any lengths* to make it work. No matter how hard we try, we cannot make a bad relationship good and we have to acquire the wisdom to understand the dynamics of our situation. The key word is trust, if the relationship is honest and viable, we can have the confidence that our partner will not deliberately harm us, allowing us the freedom to “go to any lengths”. Our problem is that we either trust too quickly, or in spite of reassuring evidence, remain reticent. Trust is a decision. More than at any other time, we need to be honest and willing to learn from our past mistakes.

Things other than drinking problems render people incapable of a genuine relationship. The problems are numerous, but for simplicity, it is possible to describe their behaviour as ranging from predator through to victim.

These people don't wear a uniform or carry a badge to identify them and not all predators are male and all victims female. Viewed from the outside the behaviour of both ends of the spectrum seems similar. They progress through relationships in the belief they are looking for “love”. The differences are subtle and lie in how they attract their partners and in whom the apparent damage occurs. The predator seems to escape unscathed, leaving an injured partner, whilst the victim appears to receive all of the harm. This isn't true.

*I look at my past behaviour and cannot recognise the person who behaved that way. I had no boundaries. I needed love and my need allowed me to justify all of my actions. The wife sitting at home waiting for her husband didn't exist. If I thought of her at all, it was in a disparaging way, if she couldn't satisfy her man then he was bound to stray. I lived without guilt or compassion, statements like, “we are both adults”, “he can make his own decisions”, defended my right to continue.*

*I think I frequently had reality upside down. I thought dating a procession of married men was evidence of my feminine superiority, proof that no man could resist my deadly beauty. I now see that they were using me, stroking their ego, allowing them to boast at how they had hung me upon their arm.*

*If I failed to dictate the break-up, I always ended up being hurt. I justified it, hid the anguish and swore “never again”. I moved through relationships like a blind prospector. I went through the motions of panning, but never found gold.*

## AA Relationships

Some of the romantic relationships formed within AA turn out to be good, but many don't. Nobody is naive enough to embark knowingly on a damaging relationship. It is only with hindsight that we can see that we ignored the truth and allowed our desires to overrule our brain.

Whilst people will recognise that they used to be a predator, they will rarely acknowledge that they still are. To do so is an admission that we are unwilling to address our defects. People who are serial victims can also be alcoholics. The program addresses their alcoholism, not their other issues. Until they gain the confidence to look for ways to tackle them, they will remain in danger. The victim's apparent inability to identify predators means that they will almost certainly attract unhealthy attention within the rooms. When the relationship turns sour, the victim usually develops a strong resentment. They complain that the people at the meeting should have protected them. They feel betrayed and turn their back on the meeting forgetting why they came in the first place.

*“T” was an attractive girl who laughingly confessed that her answer to any problem was to find a man to help her. Although many of the women tried to talk to her, she ignored their advice. She would visit the meetings, attract men with as little sobriety as she had and then vanish for months. Her looks faded as she took a series of emotional and physical beatings. She told of waking up in a graveyard with a black eye and a missing tooth,*

*but still sought salvation through a relationship. She became pregnant and had a child damaged by pre-natal alcohol syndrome. She abandoned her daughter when she hit the streets for the last time – still searching for the man who would save her.*

Not all AA relationships are of a predatory / victim nature. They can occur between two consenting adults and still prove to be damaging and result in one or both of them drinking. The claim that an affair “just happened” is a fiction from storybooks. An affair requires two factors *Urge* and *Opportunity*. Either can occur spontaneously, but for them to coincide requires planning. Having decided to embark upon a path of lies and deceit, we should not expect our sobriety to survive.

Even when both parties are free, alcoholism adds an extra dimension of complexity. We are constantly in a state of recovery or relapse. When arguments occur, our knowledge of the program provides a ready supply of barbed weapons for us to throw. Sniping shots such as, “go and see your sponsor”, or “you’re not on the program”, might be accurate, but they are usually inappropriate between partners. People in successful AA relationships say that it is essential to keep recovery separate. They respect each other’s need to attend their own chosen meetings. When they discuss recovery, they discuss it the same way as an alcoholic and non-alcoholic would, resisting any temptation towards “tough love sponsorship”, but offering loving support.

### **Non-AA Relationships**

Although we possibly arrived in AA with a partner, it is rare for such a relationship to survive unchanged. Our partner will be responding to the person they knew, but recovery changes us more than they anticipate. Our love affair often needs to start afresh and allow both partners to discover who the other really is. When this occurs, our relationship doesn’t usually just survive, but flourishes. The suggestion that we don’t make any major decisions in the first two years of recovery has preserved many marriages, but just as in the rest of society, some fail and some succeed.

We can emerge into recovery having lost, or having never had a partner, but it is quite normal to hope to find a stable relationship. The partner from within AA comes with a guarantee of instability. Outside it remains a lottery. There is more sickness in the world than alcoholism and the more sinister forms can be hard to identify. If we feel that everybody we get involved with is unstable, we possibly ought to look at the common factor – us. The new love of our life could start out as the most stable person we had ever met, but become worn down by our intensity. We can be unpredictable, dependent and jealous and many people are not willing to tolerate this. We have to be willing to accept their criticism and decide if we want to make the effort to change.

We all have rights. We have the right to go to meetings and to continue to grow. They have the right to continue to go into drinking situations and pursue their life without carrying the burden of our alcoholism.

### **Drinking Situations**

We can’t have a social life based in the tavern, but we can attend the special occasions that occur. Although alcohol will be present, it isn’t the main reason for the function. These events are important to the people we care about and they will expect us to attend. Recovery means that we are able to go without drinking or feeling threatened. To do so successfully, it is vital to adopt a protective attitude and remain vigilant when we are around alcohol. The thought of a drink can seem distant, but once the monkey is aroused, it moves up a gear in the attempt to take control. The best advice is never to go into a situation where drink is available without taking a quick check on our sobriety, using questions like:

- “Should I be going?”
- “Why am I going?”
- “Am I irrationally bad tempered before going?”
- “Do I feel the need to prove a point here?”

If we have doubt about any of these points or feel uncertain for some reason then we would be far safer to decide that it is foolish to go. Emotion runs high at weddings, christenings and funerals. Parties and gatherings of old friends can unexpectedly throw up resentment, jealousy and anger, providing the monkey with a vast

array of insidious thoughts to use. These thoughts can come upon us at any time, but when they occur and there is drink available, we have a serious problem. We should always take steps to protect ourselves, such as making sure that there isn't a wine glass positioned close to our hand. Many of us have been surprised to find our glasses switched whilst we weren't looking, waiters and other guests are not responsible for our drink – we are.

We can usually spot the people who will become drunk as the party progresses. In the past, we would have been part of or even the centre of this group, but it is much safer to stay away. Until we have adjusted our thinking to recognise that this group is not the “real” party they are a threat. They will drag us into enthusiastic reflection on past exploits. We might possibly gaze upon them with contempt, seeing them as “amateur” drinkers and want to show them how to do it properly. Amongst this group is the person who resents or is contemptuous of our efforts to remain sober and they are capable of deliberately swapping our glass.

By anticipating the situations and feelings we may encounter, we can enjoy rather than endure the party. If we feel uneasy, there is no substitute for speaking to another sober alcoholic and carrying a few contact numbers can save our life. Failing this, we should always have an “escape route” planned and the humility to use it.

### **Dinner with friends**

When ordering drinks from a waiter, it is a good idea to order last. It is then easy to choose a drink that looks different from the rest of the order. If the rest of the party is having gin and tonic, we can order a cola rather than a tonic. Thoughts like *why should I be the one to change, or I want tonic water* occasionally arise, but learning to think defensively around drink is an exercise in humility and a small price to pay to enjoy the rest of the evening. Why have little bits of stress we don't need?

### **Avoid - handling drink**

*For many years after I got sober, I happily handled drinks. I would go to the bar and serve wine at the dinner table. If we had visitors, we would open a bottle of wine and leave it in the kitchen. I would act as host, refilling glasses as required. One evening I stood in the kitchen pouring a glass of wine and the thought “taste it” hit me like a brick on a rope. The voice suggesting that, “nobody will know” was almost irresistibly. The urge to take a drink was overwhelming and frightening.*

*Of course, I didn't mention this feeling to anybody, not wishing to make a fuss “at my time in sobriety”. Within the week I sat at a meeting listening to somebody recount how with seven years sobriety, he had done exactly what I had considered. For him, it had meant a couple of years of secret drinking and a downward spiral before achieving a second rock bottom.*

If possible, it is sensible to avoid handling drink. We are not “being a wimp”, but exhibiting humility by recognising that there are things we should not do. If we have to handle bottles, a useful suggestion is to imagine that we can see a bright red skull and cross bones with the word, POISON printed on the label. Whilst suggestions like this can seem childish, we should use any trick that works.

### **Avoid - Booze in food**

When we obviously avoid a dish with alcohol in it, it is surprising how often people feel obliged to explain that cooking burns it off. The person might be somebody influential and important to our lives, creating an unexpected dilemma. Do we have the strength of character to stick with our conviction? In doing so, we are effectively saying they are wrong and risking offending them.

If we choose to order food with alcohol, we create an opening for the monkey. The illness can point out how we “got away with it” and how much better the dish had tasted, but it also opens other dangers. Amongst the people at the table, we are no longer a person who doesn't have alcohol. Now, without a firm line drawn, they will feel obliged to offer a small glass of wine or liqueur with the meal. These friends may have always felt we were slightly “cranky” in our decision to give up drinking and hoping that our resolve has weakened, may try to help us get over our silly obsession.

Our partner is sitting close by, is possibly seeing the doorway to hell open up before them. In silent anguish, they wonder if this is the start of a slide back into full-blown alcoholic behaviour. Under these circumstances,

they might not be the sparkling companion we had expected, detecting their coldness, we react badly and escalate the situation into an argument.

All we did was simply choose a dish off the menu, just like any other person in the restaurant. Why should we feel guilty about that? We all know that science says that alcohol burns off during cooking, but few are educated to the level required to explain the atomic structure of the alcohol. Nobody has yet identified the part of the molecule that triggers the illness, or proved that heat destroys this specific part of the atomic combination. If it is destroyed, how long does it take and at what temperature?

These are the complicated and pseudo-scientific arguments. The simple fact is that an alcoholic should avoid knowingly consuming alcohol. If we start to justify it, what is the next step in our thinking?

## **Christmas**

There is a joke about a turkey that was all excited and looking forward to Christmas and the irony of it applies equally well to an alcoholic. It is natural to want to enjoy ourselves and we can, on condition that we monitor our feelings and are prepared to take rapid action to address them.

This is one of the most emotionally charged times of the year and people feel they deserve a good time. Corporations spend huge advertising budgets to convince us that if we drink their brand of alcohol, we will join a happy party world of log fires and elegant people laughing in merry delight. If the only place our drinking had taken us had been amongst people with perfect smiles, drinking from delicate glasses – we wouldn't have a problem.

At any meeting, a "wise sage" will explain that there are 24 hours in Christmas day and we live through them the same way as we do any other day. This is true, but whilst this single day is the focus, the holiday of Christmas extends to several days and planning how to get through each of these "extra stressful" 24-hour days is essential.

It can be easy for us to become so busy with the festivities that we feel unable to attend our regular meetings. If it seems laughable when somebody suggests that we should be attending extra ones, it is time to stop and review reality. *We are busy because of sobriety, not in spite of it* and missing meetings because they are inconvenient is complacency. Regardless of how well we are feeling there are reasons why we should try to attend more meetings than normal.

Working our twelfth step, we will almost certainly meet people who are not enjoying the holiday. Our first Christmas is usually difficult to live through. It is a time when morbid reflection on our past can become attractive. In this mood, we magnify the virtue of what we lost and the stupidity of how we lost it. Being amongst other people who have passed through similar darkness into a happy way of life is vital to help us survive.

Recognising our own stress levels, we are likely to find that the meeting highlights how we have been running at a higher stress level than we normally do and brings us back down to earth. Meetings leave us better equipped to take part in the festivities. By allowing ourselves the time to go to them, we are not selfishly spoiling Christmas for the rest of our family, but trying to ensure that we don't spoil it.

If we attend meetings and make sure we keep in touch with other alcoholics, we can enjoy ourselves. As we progress, there is always one Christmas that gives us a lot of trouble and so even though we handled the last one without a problem we should not drift into the coming one without fully preparing ourselves.

## **Holidays**

For most people, their holiday is the most expensive regular purchase they make and it is easy to expect too much from it. Our emotions simmer and we cry "why me, why now!" as we hear news of disruption on the roads or airlines. The monkey brings them to the boil when it disrupts our thinking with ideas like, "I deserve to be treated better than this", or "all I want is two weeks relaxation". We think that we are alone in our feelings, but more people experience stress related headaches and back pain during their holiday than at any other time of the year. Providing we plan appropriately, they are an opportunity to relax and unwind, but they are not worth risking our sobriety over.

Can we afford it? Companies design holiday brochures to tempt us into spending more than we can afford. We can justify to ourselves that we deserve the holiday, but if we are creating stress by spending too much money, we will almost certainly experience a backlash from it when we get home.

Where are we going? A part of the planning needs to include deciding on the holiday destination. Most of us don't cope well with rowdy drunks and so even if it is a "bargain", certain resorts are probably not a wise choice.

If we are attracted to a rowdy resort, we should check our motives. The lure of toned bodies and balmy nights can seem extremely appealing, especially if this coincides with our recovery feeling a little flat. Are we really planning to have a relaxing time, or are we planning to indulge ourselves, claiming that the atmosphere of the place overwhelmed us? The plan may not include drinking, but it can often result in it.

Who will go with us? We need to be amongst people we can trust to support us if we need them to. It is often wrong for us to plan to be on our own. It is also wrong to go with somebody who is resentful or ignorant of our alcoholism. We don't need the stress created by worrying that somebody could "treat us" to a shot of booze in our soft drink.

How are we going to stay sober? We need to think about this before we travel rather than realise that we are in danger when we get there. Whether we use it or not, it is always worth spending the time to get the local AA telephone number and find out when and where the meetings will be. Few holiday destinations are "hundreds of miles" from AA and a visit to the local meeting can be part of the holiday. Obviously, it is more difficult as a single parent with young children, but we should not travel without a plan.

It is sensible to take some AA literature to read. The beach is a great place to read up on the steps and traditions and if we feel self-conscious, we can always put it into the cover from another book. It is not difficult to stay in touch with people by telephone and spending part of our old drinking budget on calls would allow most of us to plan a daily chat with an AA friend from home.

## **Moving House**

We sometimes have to move away from the area where we originally got sober. We know that it is not difficult to find a meeting anywhere in the world, but whilst visiting a new meeting is often worthwhile, they are rarely as fulfilling as our home group.

*I have moved area twice during my sobriety. The first time was a temporary re-location about sixty miles north of my home group. I found that the local meetings were not what I expected and I preferred to have a long drive back to enjoy a "real" meeting rather than to try to fit in locally. This was difficult when the winter came and I missed quite a few meetings because of bad weather, but I soon returned home and settled back into my comfortable meetings.*

*I changed my job and the new company asked me to move much further North. This time, I knew that it was too far and that I had to settle in to the local meetings. The first one seemed like a bunch of misfits trying to avoid reality and the second was full of people twittering about serenity and prayer. I think of myself as down to earth and I want meetings that talk about the twelve steps and drinking. I judged all of the local meetings based upon my first two and decided that I would attend as few of them as possible and try self-sponsorship.*

*My new employer fell into difficulties, made me redundant and I suddenly found myself in emotional free fall. I knew that I had to either change or drink. I decided to attempt ninety meetings in ninety days to re-engage myself with AA. With this new burst of activity, I found some groups that I enjoyed and people to support me. A new sponsor emerged and I survived what I can see was an extremely dangerous time.*

When a new face appears at a meeting, they are usually warmly welcomed and it is easy to fall into a trap of "assumed" sobriety. The people at the meeting may be deceived into believing that we are coping and our pride won't let us confess to these strangers that we need help.

Regardless of length of sobriety, we will immediately benefit from throwing ourselves into meetings and getting to know as many local alcoholics as possible. By doing this, we quickly establish a good support network. We should also make a conscious effort to find a new sponsor and identify people that we can talk to on a one to one basis.

When we make this renewed effort, we often see that we had fallen into a rut at our old meetings, that we were guilty of attending in body, but not in mind. Our move becomes a positive re-introduction into sobriety and we start to grow again.

### **Removing Resentment**

Our toughest obstacle can be removing a strongly held resentment against another person. The Big Book contains a method guaranteed to work. However, when we first encounter it, we almost certainly recoil with horror at the suggestion. It works and thousands of us have improved our lives by using it.

*My wife had left me for a mutual friend and I was devastated. I wanted both of them to die a miserable, slow, painful death and the thought of them enjoying life constantly gnawed at my thoughts. My sponsor suggested praying for them to have everything I would wish for myself. I thought he was joking and I emphatically refused to contemplate it. The suffering continued, but my sponsor wouldn't offer any other solution, he simply repeated the suggestion. I finally gave in and tried it. Every day for two weeks, twice a day (and sometimes more frequently), I prayed for them. I didn't notice when I changed from belligerently following instructions into meaning it, but it happened. I then realised that I felt better, my repetitive fixation vanished and my life blossomed.*

The Big Book explains that we are not doing this for their benefit, but for us. We are the beneficiaries of this activity and so to hold back from it is to remain in pain pointlessly. The willingness to try to succeed with this exercise shows that we have finally started to grow into a spiritual way of living beyond anything we could have conceived for ourselves.