

Introduction

You are probably reading this book because either you or a loved one has a drink problem. Life has reached the stage where you need an answer, but the answers seem frightening.

Alcoholism is an illness and Alcoholics Anonymous has meetings and a “program” to help people recover from it. Whilst the very name *Alcoholics Anonymous* seems shrouded in mystery, there isn’t anything suspicious or veiled about them. At every meeting, they start by reading out the “pre-amble” the complete explanation of what AA is:

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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The statement: *The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking* is the first hurdle. If we knew how to stop, we wouldn’t need help and we often scream out - HOW? Our answer is in the acronym, providing we can achieve three conditions - Honest, Open Minded, Willing, we can recover:

Honest, when we have a drink problem, we feel exposed and unwilling to acknowledge the full depth of our problems (even to ourselves).

Open minded, some of what we will encounter will seem alien to us and this can cause us to reject an idea before we have fully appreciated its relevance.

Willing, rather than allowing ourselves to be crippled by secrecy or a closed mind we need to be able to say – “Ok, I give up, tell me how to do it and I will try my best”.

If this is the first time that you have looked for help, you are almost certainly unhappy with the way your life has unfolded. Isolated, you see others are enjoying life, but you don’t seem to be able to join them. You are not alone in this feeling. In fact, we have all felt this way. Drinking is certainly a part of your life and somebody might have suggested it could be getting out of hand. You may not agree, but you are now at the stage where you are willing to look for a solution.

If you have been trying to work through the AA program for some time you have probably been going to meetings and have managed to stop drinking. You have looked at the program and don’t understand it. Because you have been around for a while, you are scared to ask what you think are basic questions, because people will laugh at your lack of knowledge. Although you don’t know it, you are not alone and we have all felt like this as well.

Please allow me to introduce...

...Myself.

I am just a bloke who got in a mess with booze. I arrived at the doors of AA without a hope in the world and found a worthwhile life. I don’t claim to be anything special, but I do have a good memory. As part of my own recovery, I have discussed the program with many people and I am certain that there is only one obstacle – our own thinking. It is a cycle. We struggle, we become willing to acknowledge our problem, we honestly discuss it and when we are open to learn, a light suddenly comes on. We look back and cannot believe how we made our recovery so difficult.

I have compiled the “light bulb” moments and common pitfalls I have encountered over the years to pass on to other people.

AA does not currently endorse this book, but I hope you find that it contains helpful ideas and suggestions if you try to adopt the program into your life.

...The Monkey!

The illness is “awoken” when I drink and a symptom of the illness is that I have a compulsion to drink more. It can actually feel like the illness has a voice and intelligence and is trying to manipulate me into taking a drink.

I have an image of my illness as a monkey. Not a cute little fur ball of fun, but a devious, clever and tenacious monkey (who happens to talk as well). This image came to me when I used to get home, open the door and “wham” a feeling of dread and hopelessness would drop from the door jamb and land on the back of my neck. It was an empty home and as I entered, feelings of despair and darkness seemed to wreath about me. In this emptiness, whispered thoughts crept into my mind, “you won’t make it through the night”. It was too much to bear. Within seconds, I changed from happy and safe into lonely and scared. Clearly, there was an invisible talking monkey waiting to drop on my shoulder when I got home.

A more clinical view would be that I have an addiction that triggers a subconscious craving, but I find it easier to imagine the image of a monkey trying to trick me into feeding it.

Here are some of the ways the monkey messes up our lives:

It whispers constantly “Go on, nobody will know, you deserve a long cool drink after the day you had...” or “Take a drink. That will teach them to treat you this way...”

It covers our eyes to stop us seeing what is really happening. At a party, it can turn a troll into the most attractive person in the room and we end up in a relationship that is doomed to fail.

It covers our ears, we become deaf to the pleas of our families and we won’t listen when we get our final warnings from jobs.

That is the monkey, it constantly whispers insinuations, it schemes and swings around our heads covering our eyes and ears. Where did the monkey come from and how did we acquire such a spiteful companion?

For some of us it first shows up when we hit a low patch. We are sitting feeling sorry for ourselves and it wanders up and seems to be helping us through our problems. For others who feel restrained and shy, it arrives with the promise of confidence. For those who already enjoy the bright lights, it promises even brighter lights.

Through promises or by stealth it becomes a part of our life. We become fond of our new friend and ask it to move in. The guest settles down and makes its home within us. It rides on our shoulder whispering new ways to enjoy life, sometimes it pushes a bit too far, but as with any good friend, we forgive and make up. As time passes, the whisperings become darker and it no longer has to provide the gifts it once did. It can demand whatever it wants and we are now unable to evict it.

...how to use this book

It is a guidebook. A good guidebook offers simple suggestions and guidance to you as you visit a new place. It suggests places to go and a good way to get there. It explains basic problems you may encounter such as taxis, local holidays and customs.

We don’t normally read a travel guide from cover to cover with the same intensity we would read a novel. We normally use it in three ways:

- Beforehand we flip through the pages and make a plan of what we are going to do during our trip.
- Whilst we travel, we use the maps and tour suggestions as a guide.
- When we are in trouble, we flick through the pages remembering that we saw a page of surgery opening hours somewhere near the back.

I suggest that you try to use this book in the same way.

The book is deliberately broken into three sections:

Getting Started- I suggest you read this section before embarking. It is only short and I hope that it will cover the essentials for the journey.

The Program- This section is a practical guide towards doing each step. It focuses upon common pitfalls and makes suggestions of how we can address them. We don’t “do the program” merely by sitting and reading, it is a way to change our lives. A typical goal might be to work through a step a month. The timescale isn’t that important and you can set your own goals based upon how quickly you want a good life. Move through these

steps in sequence, read and fully understand the implications of what they propose. Take time to discuss them. The more we put in to this phase, the more we get out of it.

Living It- From today forwards you can start to live a new life free from drink and on the road to recovery. Dip into this section to see if the fears and problems you encounter are similar to those others have experienced.

Getting Started

What is Alcoholism?

A classic first issue is the word *alcoholic*. The word carries such a stigma that we could accept anything but – that word. Although it conjures images of park-benches, and old coats tied with rope - this is not the truth. It describes a person with a sickness that nobody asks to have (it is not self-inflicted). It afflicts people from all lifestyles. Those who treat it go on to lead perfectly normal lives.

Alcoholism is a killer illness. Worldwide, thousands die of it each year. It does not go away because we stop drinking; it waits and progressively gets stronger. During the period when we refuse to accept that we have it, we try a vast number of ways to remove the symptomatic problems. We change the style of our drinks, the time that we drink, the people we drink with and the places that we drink. We move house, change our partners and our jobs. We try religion, witchcraft, debauchery and piety. No matter what we change, the problems can decrease for a time, but they always come back.

Symptoms

Friends, family and doctors can tell us, but self-diagnosis is the only way that a person accepts that they have a problem and becomes willing to recover. Whilst there are a large number of symptoms exhibited by people who suffer from this illness, the following are extremely common ones. (This section has no medical basis).

Unpredictable mood changes, we swing from being happy, amusing and agreeable through to aggressive and depressed. The aggression can manifest physically, although it is more usually verbal and mental in nature.

Isolation, we have intense feelings of loneliness and feel cut off from the world. Even in a crowded place, we can feel alone.

Self absorbed, we will frequently become “turned in” upon ourselves. We feel that we have problems that nobody else understands or can help with. At times, we will place excessive demands on those around for understanding or compliance.

Secrecy, we hide the quantity of alcohol we are drinking. If asked how much, we reduce the amount to what we feel is acceptable. We end up hiding empty bottles. We have feelings of guilt and shame, but we cover these from normal view by shows of bravado or aggression.

Consumption of alcohol, the quantity we consume varies from person to person, therefore as a means of diagnosis this is a poor indicator. A better indicator is the vehemence and indignation we display defending and justifying why drink is necessary. “Binge drinking”, or life issues such as pregnancy or close medical supervision can mean that we go for many months without a drink. These interludes confuse and blur the issue for family and friends. People who love us cannot understand why, when we are dry, we are still exhibiting all of the other behavioural symptoms.

Prognosis

Without treatment, the sufferer will die of alcohol abuse, although the stated cause of death is often something else. Many verdicts of accidental death mask alcoholism. Walking in front of a car, or falling down stairs whilst drunk are common deaths for alcoholics.

Side Effects

The illness is contagious and spreads a secondary form to close family and friends. Even though they might not have joined us in our destructive drinking, they will exhibit confusion, anger, guilt and tiredness. The people closest to the sufferer carry a great burden of guilt and frequently require long periods of counselling and support for them to recognise and recover from the condition.

Treatment

There appears to be no cure for the illness of alcoholism. Once affected, the best we can hope for is to arrest it. This is what the twelve-step program does. The good news is that it works. A person who adopts and uses the program removes all of the visible signs of the illness and appears cured. The only person who needs to know that we are not cured is US.

In fact, it gets better than that. It is not just a return to life as we knew it, but a way to find a much more fulfilling one. All that we have to be aware of is that the monkey is always going to be there. The little rascal will

whisper and manoeuvre in subtle ways to get us to take a drink. If we weaken and drink, we feed the monkey and give it the strength to take control again.

The Big Book and the Program.

The central book of AA is the "Big Book," it was from this book that the fellowship of AA took its name (the actual title being Alcoholics Anonymous). This book has helped many thousands of people rebuild their lives.

The founders set out to document *exactly what they did to recover*. This means that this book is like a workshop manual not a spiritual text. There are no hidden depths and meanings known only to the initiated. A workshop manual explains clearly how to do a job. For example, to remove the cylinder head from an engine it might read:

First, remove the air-filter by removing bolt "A" and bolt "B" and lifting the air-filter clear. Then remove the rocker cover by removing the four retaining bolts...

To some, the section above would be clear instruction on how to perform the task, but to others it is a meaningless string of words. If somebody explained it to us, we could do the job. The Big Book and the program are exactly this. They are clear instructions on how to return to an enjoyable and happy life. It is just that we sometimes need help to understand them.

What does hitting a rock bottom mean?

Is this the only form of illness where the patient has to get as sick as they can before they are willing to recover? This strange phenomenon is actually a symptom of addiction. Most people would rather get rid of a problem when they first notice it. If we have a stone in our shoe, would we walk on and hope it would get better by itself, or hope that nobody would notice us limping? Of course we wouldn't, we would fix it as soon as possible. However, for a much more serious problem, such as our life falling apart, it seems we live in hope that things will get better without us having to do anything drastic, certainly not stop drinking.

Every so often, we experience so much pain that we briefly gain an insight into what our life is actually like. This point is a "rock bottom". We often feel we have reached rock bottom when something dramatic happens and shatters our illusions. It is the point where for a moment we question if things are really going to be all right. Usually, it is losing something, a partner finally walking out and leaving us or losing our job.

There appear to be two styles of rock bottom; the first is a plummet, like a skydiver without a parachute. It is possible to descend from a point of feeling life is good, to not being able to face it in an incredibly short period, a matter of two to three months. The pain of such a descent is intense and we swear to ourselves that we will do anything to make sure that we will never feel this way again.

The other style of rock bottom appears to be more like a "trawler net" where the victim settles onto the rock bottom and then drags along in a state of pain and discomfort for a long time. Each rock and obstacle tears a small part of us away, whilst each new wound is painful, it remains justifiable and insufficient for us to stop and see how battered we have become. There are probably many reasons why people end up taking this route, certainly getting love and support beyond the point of deserving must be one of them. Yet another irony is that most illness responds when the patient receives attention and care, but apparently, the insanity of alcoholism doesn't.

The result of either path is a short window of opportunity where we reach a point of being desperate, the pain is too great and we are willing to do something about it. Too early, and we can still justify our behaviour and will not listen. Too late, and we are dead and cannot listen. It is always surprising how small this window is, but when it occurs, we might just listen.

Let's try to get the initial arguments out of the way...

People scouring this book searching for proof that they don't need to stop, will be able to find it. Paradoxically, only somebody with a drink problem looks for such proof. If the monkey can get us to accept that everybody else has it wrong then we remain under its control.

Nobody except ourselves can diagnose that we are alcoholic. This is something we have to do for ourselves. A good definition to help with this is:

If alcohol is causing a problem in any area of your life and you continue to drink you are probably an alcoholic.

Examples of these problems would be arguments with a partner, work problems, getting into debt. If it "costs" more than money, it is a problem that we would be better off getting rid of.

People raise a number of initial objections when they look at the program. The monkeys on our shoulders use exactly the same arguments and the symptoms are the same. This means that we have two internal voices raising queries and fears, our own and the illness. Our own fears are the natural concerns of somebody considering moving outside their comfort zone, but the suggestions placed by the illness are trying to stop us getting better.

Typical arguments

The main weapons that the illness uses to keep control of our lives fall into three main categories, Intellectual snobbery, Pride and Fear. It actually doesn't matter if the argument is real or imagined, the decision to get better means that we have to face these arguments and press ahead with recovery anyway.

We are scared that we will have too much to face, the illness has provided us with a buffer from reality and we have built up a bow wave of problems. Relationships lie in tatters. We know that we have creditors, both financial and emotional. The thought of facing these problems can seem frightening and too much to handle. We have all been through this. It takes time to put all of our affairs in order, but the mess is rarely as great as we anticipate. What the program offers is a way to put these issues into perspective and to resolve them as part of our recovery. We learn to stay away from drinking one day at a time and also to grow, recover, and repair our lives one day at a time.

We are scared that our family and friends will ridicule us, we believe we have a certain standing amongst our peer group. If we expose a weakness such as not being able to drink, or even worse, appear to be mixing with a strange religious cult, they are going to laugh at us. It is true that we do lose some of our friends, but we rarely lose anybody who matters. Anybody who thinks that it is shameful not to drink is probably not a good friend. Rather than base our future on what we imagine others will say, we could try the new way of life for size and then see how we feel.

We reject the ideas out of hand because they are old fashioned, It would be a lot more exciting if we could claim that this was an exciting new scientific discovery, or if it had been found written on papyrus scrolls, but we can't. There is a psychology that demands that we fix our problems using "new" techniques. This is why there is always a new diet, a new exercise regime or a new method of reaching our inner selves. We would feel silly if the answer to our problem had been there all along.

The principle of the AA program is an example of timeless resilience. Without a glitzy marketing campaign, it continues to grow and to save lives. Just like hands on a watch, it is a principle that works. We are dealing with a life threatening illness - OUR life. Put in these terms which should we trust, the latest "Fix your life in thirty days" scheme or a proven technique with over sixty years of success?

We reject the ideas out of hand because they are male oriented, Women frequently have difficulty with this and are defensive about their right to be recognised. Nothing in the program infers that either gender is inferior. The program merely comes from an age when the obvious alcoholics were men. Naturally, women drank and died back in the thirties and it was far more socially unacceptable for them. We all suffer equally from the illness and it is important to remain focused on recovery. Can we improve anything by changing every gender related statement so that he/ she are used? Don't let gender snobbery get in the way.

We reject the ideas out of hand because they talk about God and Higher-Powers, few people adhere to a conventional religious faith and these can be challenging subjects for us to discuss. Recovery requires no religious affiliations whatsoever and it is certainly not a religious cult. We look at this subject in depth in step three. The program is spiritual in the purest and simplest sense, it is a way of being and fitting in. All that is required is to accept that we are not at the centre of the universe. Rather than abandon trying the program based upon a suspicion, it is better to continue, but remain cautious.

We sneer and reject it because it is a silly American idea, The objection could be as noble as "why is it the AA program? They can't even spell programme!" By tricking us into adopting a lofty intellectual principle, we slam the door on any chance of listening. If the illness can generate a pitying sneer from us, it has won. We reject the chance of recovery in the hope that we will impress somebody with our integrity.

We sneer and reject it because – (no reason, but we always sneer and reject) we often strongly believe that our own opinion is "right". Because the people at the meetings don't seem to adhere to our opinion, we judge them as wrong. These objections could be, "They don't have decaffeinated coffee", "they smoke", "they swear". By becoming critical of the defects, we become blind to the benefits.

They won't understand, I am a special case, We use initial knee jerk statements such as "I can't be an alcoholic, I don't drink as much as..." or "I have to drink as part of my job, I need to entertain customers". The illness wins if it can get us to justify the way we are acting.

And the point is?

If we have ever had to defend how much we drink, there could be a problem. People don't make these suggestions out of spite. If somebody close to us has challenged our behaviour, it was almost certainly because they don't want to see us destroy ourselves. We probably refuted it, creating fatuous reasons why they want us to stop. We think they are jealous or want to control us. We refuse to accept the need to change and wrap ourselves in righteous indignation at such a suggestion. We quickly move the focus from looking at our drinking into a discussion of their shortcomings. We can even pursue it further and turn such discussions around into trying to solve their problem and get them to see how flawed their thinking has been.

Even when we suspect that there is a problem, if the illness can convince us that we are the only ones to feel this way then it wins. One of the tricks the monkey plays is to isolate us. By keeping us isolated, we cannot find a way out. We never become aware that there are people who actually do care about us and can help us to get well. By making us feel alone we can justify our self-destruction. We long to cease to exist and dream of a solitary death, hoping to go to sleep, never to awaken.

What's the point, I saw that rock star xxx is back on the booze; publicity and the public downfall of high profile advocates allow the illness the freedom to mock and ridicule these failures. The monkey draws our attention to them in the press or on television. We justify that if they cannot manage to stop drinking after spending vast amounts of money on private clinics why should we even start the attempt. These public failures are extremely destructive and we discuss this later in the section on opinions. Once we know more about the program we are equipped to see how these celebrities have been tricked into relapse by the illness and how there really is a way to a new life that costs us nothing except a little of our pride. Remember that for every high profile failure there will also be a number of unmentioned successes. Many public and famous figures recover and keep the fact outside of the media spotlight.

Whilst we claim to be willing to look at things with an open mind, we usually look at the program with a closed one. We approach the investigation from a position of strong opinion and prejudice. By starting from a point of contempt, it is difficult to move on to a point of acceptance regardless of the facts placed before us. This is because we have the illness chattering in our ears, working to make us reject any concept of recovery.

Pride and fear interlink making it frightening to contemplate labelling ourselves as alcoholic. We are worried about what people will say and how they will react to us. Is this pride or fear?

We need to become confident that it is all right to investigate further because we can turn back at any time. There is no secret enforcer going to appear on the doorstep and demand that we attend meetings and get back on the program. The only commitment is the one that we make to ourselves. This is a commitment not to drink and to try to put the program into our life – just for today.

Why should I bother?

This is the thought of many as they approach the idea of adopting the program. To the rational mind, the promise of staying alive would seem sufficient. To those in need of the program this prospect can frequently seem abhorrent. We think that remaining alive means facing the demons that threaten us. We feel too frightened to consider facing life without drink.

If we approach this with unrealistic expectations or goals, we are setting ourselves up to fail. It is common to hold onto ideas like "I will do the program if it stops my Wife/ Husband from leaving me" or "I will do it if I can keep my job". The only thing guaranteed by working the program and adopting a new way of life is stopping drinking. It does not carry the promise of eternal youth or boundless riches. By staying alive, not drinking and adopting this way of living, many experience much more, but it is no defence against life. It cannot mend a broken leg or cure cancer. Life deals the cards and we have to work with them, but at least we know what game we are playing and can see the correct number of spots on them.

Most of us actually benefit by far more than simply staying sober for one day at a time. In the Big Book there is a short section known as the promises.

We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.

(Big Book Alcoholics Anonymous)

These promises don't come true as soon as we commit to doing the program. We earn them by progressing through it and they should begin to show up when we reach step ten.

What can we do?

If it were as simple as telling somebody to *stop drinking*, we would not need an organisation like Alcoholics Anonymous. Later in this book, we go into more detail about the meetings and support that contribute to our recovery. To recover we need to follow what AA suggests. Stop drinking, go to and take part in meetings, get a sponsor and work through the program.

Stopping drinking is extremely important – the program cannot work if we don't. We don't make a promise to stop forever we do it *one day at a time*. If one day seems too long, then stop for one hour. By going to meetings, we gain support and understanding. A sponsor is simply somebody to help us work through the program.

So without further introduction let's look at the beast. A warning before we do, it contains words that offend or affront. We will see potentially frightening words like God, Humility, and Change. Don't be afraid of them, they will all be explained as we proceed.

The 12 Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous

(Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous)

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

For some this is goodbye...

For many of us this is as far as we get. The illness is always present and is constantly twisting and manipulating our thoughts away from anything that will give us the strength to control it. Insidious thoughts seem to justify why following this path is not right for us.

If it is goodbye, I hope that you do not have the problem of alcoholism. Once afflicted, this illness does not get better. Regardless of whether we drink, it gets progressively worse. It is possible for people to put the drink down for long periods by will power or circumstance, but when they pick it up again they find themselves almost immediately at the point they left off and continue to descend farther extremely rapidly.

By accepting the possibility that the addiction works this way, we accept the first part of step one and have started on the path to recovery.

The Honeymoon period

Once we make the decision to try to sort our lives out using the program some of us experience a feeling of euphoria. We think life is going to be great and it can be, for a short period. Some talk about floating on a “pink fluffy cloud” for the first few weeks. Whilst there is nothing wrong with getting a feeling of well being, there are two pitfalls to watch for. It can trick us into believing that we have solved the problem and there is no need to progress any further. Secondly, when the high feeling evaporates we shouldn't allow the subsequent low feeling to convince us that the program is not working for us. If we proceed with the program, our life will improve and we recognise that the pink fluffy cloud was merely a superficial glimpse of the contentment that is to come.

Simple Checklist:

Am I willing to try to improve my life?

Am I willing to try to change?

If we can answer yes to both of these then let's journey a little further together.

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