

14 Fending off loneliness

Alcoholism has been described as “the lonely disease,” and very few recovered alcoholics argue the point. Looking back at the last years or months of our drinking, literally hundreds of thousands* of us remember feeling isolated even when we were among a lot of happy, celebrating people. We often felt a deep sense of not belonging, even when we cheerfully acted sociable.

Many of us have said we drank originally to be “a part of the crowd.” Many of us felt we had to drink to “get in,” and to feel that we fitted in with the rest of the human race.

It is an observable fact, of course, that our chief use of alcohol was egocentric—that is, we poured it into our *own* bodies, for the effect we felt within our *own* skin. Sometimes, that effect momentarily helped us to behave sociably, or temporarily assuaged our inner lonesomeness.

But when that effect of alcohol wore off, we were left feeling more set apart, more left out, more “different” than ever, and sadder.

If we felt guilty or ashamed of either our drunkenness itself or anything we did while drinking, that compounded our feeling of being an outcast. At times, we secretly feared or even believed that we deserved ostracism, because of the things we did. “Maybe,” many of us thought, “I really am an outsider.”

(Perhaps this feeling is familiar to you, when you think back to your last bad hangover or bad drunk.)

The lonely road ahead looked bleak, dark, and unending. It was too painful to talk about; and to avoid thinking about it, we soon drank again.

Although some of us were lone drinkers, it can hardly be said that we completely lacked companionship during our drinking days. People were all around us. We saw, heard, and touched them. But most of our important dialogues were entirely interior, held with ourselves. We were sure nobody else would understand. Besides, considering our opinion of ourselves, we were not sure that we *wanted* anybody to understand.

No wonder, then, that when we first listen to recovered alcoholics in A.A. talking freely and honestly about themselves, we are stunned. Their tales of their own drinking escapades, of their own secret fears and loneliness, jar us like a thunderbolt.

We discover—but can hardly dare to believe right at first—that *we are not alone*. We are *not* totally unlike *everybody*, after all.

The brittle shell of protective and fearful egocentricity we have dwelled in so long is cracked open by the honesty of other recovered

*The present worldwide membership of A.A. is estimated to be over two million.

alcoholics. We sense, almost before we can articulate it, that we do belong somewhere, and the loneliness starts rapidly leaking away.

Relief is too weak a word to convey our initial feeling. It is mixed with wonder, too, and almost a kind of terror. Is it real? Will this last?

Those of us sober in A.A. a few years can assure any newcomer at an A.A. meeting that it *is* real, very real indeed. And it does last. It is not just another false start, of the sort that most of us have experienced too often. It is not one more burst of gladness soon to be followed by hurt disappointment.

Instead, as the number of people now sober for decades in A.A. swells each year, we see before our eyes more and more hard proof that we can have a genuine and enduring recovery from the loneliness of alcoholism.

Still, getting over years-long, deeply ingrained habits of suspicion and other protective mechanisms can hardly be an overnight process. We have become thoroughly conditioned to feeling and acting misunderstood and unloved—whether we really were or not. We are accustomed to acting like loners. So, after we first stop drinking, some of us may need a little time and a little practice to break out of our customary solitude. Even though we begin to believe we are not alone any more, we sometimes act and feel in the old ways.

We're green at reaching out for friendship—or even accepting it when it is offered. We're not quite sure how to do it, or whether it will work. And that piled-up, superheavy burden of years of fear still can drag at us. Therefore, when we start to feel a bit lonely—whether we are actually, physically alone or not—the old routines and the balm of booze can easily entice us.

Now and then, some of us are even tempted just to give up, and go back to the old misery. At least, it is familiar, and we wouldn't have to work hard to recapture all the expertise we achieved at the drinking life.

Telling an A.A. group about himself, a fellow once said that being a drunk from his teen-age years to his forties was a full-time occupation, and he passed by most of the things North American males usually learn as they grow into young manhood.

So there he was in his forties, he said, sober. He knew how to drink and brawl, but he had never learned a vocational or professional skill, and he was ignorant of most social graces. "It was awful," he declared. "I didn't even know how to ask a girl for a date or what to do on one! And I found there aren't any classes on 'How to Date' for 40-year-old bachelors who never learned."

The laughter in the A.A. meeting room that night was particularly hearty and affectionate. So many there empathized, had gone through the same type of unease. When we feel such awkwardness, incongru-

ous at 40 (or even at 20, these days), we might think we were pathetic, even grotesque—were it not for the many rooms full of understanding A.A. people who have known that very type of fear, and can now help us see the humor in it. So we can smile as we try again, until we get it right. We do not have to give up in secret shame any more; we do not have to renew our old, hopeless attempts to find social confidence in the bottle, where we found loneliness instead.

That is just one extreme example of the kind of all-arms-and-legs feeling some of us get when we first set sail on sobriety. It illustrates how dangerously lost we might be if we tried to go it alone. There might be one chance in millions that we'd make the voyage somehow.

But we know now that we do not have to proceed all on our own. It is far more sensible, safer, and surer to do it in the company of the whole happy fleet going in the same direction. And none of us need feel any shame at all at using help, since we all help each other.

It is no more cowardly to use help in recovering from a drinking problem than it is to use a crutch if you have a broken leg. A crutch is a beautiful thing to those who need it, and to those who see its usefulness.

Is there really anything heroic in a sightless person's stumbling and groping—just because he or she refuses to use easily obtained assistance? Foolish risk-taking—even when it is not at all necessary—sometimes does get undeserved praise. But mutual helpfulness—since it always works better—really should be more prized and admired.

Our own experience at staying sober overwhelmingly reflects the wisdom of using whatever good help is available in recovery from a drinking problem. Despite our great need and desire, none of us recovered from alcoholism solely on our own. If we had, of course, we would have had no need to approach A.A., a psychiatrist, or anyone else for aid.

Since no one can live totally alone, since all of us are dependent to some degree on our fellow human beings for at least some goods and services, we have found it sensible to accept that particular reality, and to work within it in the highly important venture of getting over our active alcoholism.

Thoughts of a drink seem to sneak into our minds much more smoothly and slyly when we are alone. And when we feel lonesome, and an urge for a drink strikes, it seems to have special speed and strength.

Such ideas and desires are much less likely to occur when we are with other people, especially other nondrinkers. If they do occur, they seem less potent and more easily put aside while we are in touch with fellow A.A. members.

We are not forgetting that almost everyone occasionally needs some

time to himself, or herself, to collect thoughts, take stock, get some thing done, work out a private situation, or just vacation from the stress of the usual day. But we have found it dangerous to become too indulgent about this, especially when our mood becomes a bit morose or self-pitying. Almost any company is better than a bitter privacy.

Of course, even at an A.A. meeting, it is possible to want to drink, just as people can feel lonely in a crowd. But the odds against taking the drink are much better in the company of other A.A.'s than they are when we are alone in our room, or in a hidden corner of a quiet, deserted barroom.

When we have only ourselves to talk to, the conversation gets kind of circular. More and more, it excludes the sort of sensible input other people can supply. Trying to argue yourself out of a drink is rather like attempting self-hypnosis. Often, it is about as effective as trying to persuade a pregnant mare not to foal when her term has come.

For these reasons, then, when we suggest avoiding fatigue and hunger, we often tie in a mention of one more hazard to make it a triple play: "Don't let yourself get too tired, too hungry, or too lonely."

Check it out.

If the notion of taking a drink crosses your mind any time soon, pause to consider. As often as not, you are likely to find you are in one or more of those three high-risk conditions.

Tell somebody, fast. That at least starts to relieve the loneliness.

15 Watching out for anger and resentments

Anger has already been touched on in this booklet, but some rough experiences have convinced us it is so important it deserves special attention from anyone wanting to get over a drinking problem.

Hostility, resentment, anger—whatever word you use to describe this feeling—seems to have a close tie-up with intoxication and maybe even a deeper one with alcoholism.

For instance, some scientists once asked a large number of alcoholic men why they got drunk, and found an important answer was "So I can tell somebody off." In other words, they felt the power and freedom while drunk to express anger they could not comfortably display when sober.

Someone has suggested there may be a subtle, undetermined bio-

chemical relationship between alcohol and the kind of body changes that accompany anger. One experimental study of alcoholics suggested that resentments may create in the blood of alcoholics a certain uncomfortable condition that is cleared up by a binge. A top psychologist has recently suggested that drinkers may enjoy the feelings of power over others that the influence of alcohol can bring.

Facts have been reported about the close correlation between drinking and assaults and homicides. It seems a large proportion of these in some countries happen when either the victim or the perpetrator (or both) is under the influence of alcohol. Rapes, domestic squabbles leading to divorce, child abuse, and armed robbery are also frequently laid at the doorstep of excessive drinking.

Even those of us who have had no experience in such behavior can easily understand the kind of fierce rage which might lead some people to think of such violence when they are drunk enough. So we recognize the potential danger in anger.

There seems little doubt that it is a natural state to occur in the human animal from time to time. Like fear, it may well have some survival value for all members of species *homo sapiens*. Anger toward abstractions such as poverty, hunger, illness, and injustice have no doubt produced changes for the better in various cultures.

But there is also no denying that mayhem and even verbal assaults committed in excesses of anger are deplorable and do damage to society as a whole, as well as to individuals. Therefore, many religions and philosophies urge us to get rid of anger in order to find a happier life.

Yet a great number of people are certain that bottling up anger is very bad for emotional health, that we should get our hostility out in some way, or it will "poison" our insides by turning inward toward ourselves, thus leading to deep depression.

Anger in all its aspects is a universal human problem. But it poses a special threat to alcoholics: Our own anger can kill us. Recovered alcoholics almost unanimously agree that hostility, grudges, or resentments often make us want to drink, so we need to be vigilant against such feelings. We have found much more satisfying ways than drinking for dealing with them.

But we'll get to those later. First, here is a look at some of the shapes and colors anger seems at times to arrive in:

intolerance	snobbishness	tension	distrust
contempt	rigidity	sarcasm	anxiety
envy	cynicism	self-pity	suspicion
hatred	discontent	malice	jealousy

Various A.A. members have, when sober, been able to trace all those feelings to some underlying anger. During our drinking days, many of us spent little time thinking such things out. We were more likely to brood about them, or to overreact, especially after we heightened such feelings by taking another drink.

Perhaps fear should be on that list, too, because many of us believe anger is frequently an outgrowth of fear. We're not always sure *what* we're afraid of; sometimes, it is just a vague, generalized, nameless fear. And it can give rise to an equally generalized anger, which may suddenly focus on something or someone.

Feelings of frustration might give birth to anger. As a class, problem drinkers are not famous for a high tolerance level when faced with frustration, real or imaginary. A drink used to be our favorite solvent for such an indigestible emotion.

Perhaps "justifiable" resentment is the trickiest of all to handle. It's the end product of "righteous" anger, after long cherishing, and if it is allowed to continue, it will slowly undermine our defenses against taking a drink.

Even if we actually have been treated shabbily or unjustly, resentment is a luxury that, as alcoholics, we cannot afford. For us, *all* anger is self-destructive, because it can lead us back to drinking.

(Learning to deal with resentments is discussed in more detail in the books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.)

We cannot pretend to be experts at understanding depth psychology, so we have to concentrate at first, not on searching for the causes of uncomfortable feelings of anger, but on coping with the feelings themselves, whether or not we think they are justified. We zero in on how to keep such feelings from fooling us into taking a drink.

Interestingly, several of the methods already discussed for avoiding a drink have also worked splendidly for getting over the inner discomfort we suffer when angry. For instance, when we begin to simmer inside, it sometimes helps a great deal to take a few bites of something good to eat, or a glass of a nonalcoholic beverage.

It's also remarkably effective, when we begin to get teed off at something, to pick up the phone and talk about it to our sponsor or to other recovered alcoholics. And it pays to pause and consider whether or not we may be overtired. If so, we've found that some rest often dissipates rage.

Repeatedly, simply pondering "Live and Let Live" cools our temper.

Or we may shift quickly to an activity that has nothing to do with the source of our anger—work it off with some lively exercise—lose it in listening to our favorite music.

For many of us, contemplating the ideas of the Serenity Prayer

blows away our hostility. Often, whatever we are mad about turns out to be something we cannot possibly control or change (traffic jams, the weather, long supermarket lines, for example), so the sensible, mature thing to do is just accept it, rather than boil inside fruitlessly or turn to alcohol.

Of course, at times we are resentful of a circumstance in our life that can, and should, be changed. Maybe we *should* quit a job and get a better one, or get a divorce, or move the family to a different neighborhood. If so, such a decision needs to be made carefully, not in haste or anger. So we still should cool down first. Then maybe we can give some calm, constructive thought to figuring out whether our resentment is directed at something we can change. To double-check this, see the section on the Serenity Prayer, page 18.

Sometimes, it isn't long resentment we must deal with, but a sudden, consuming rage. The 24-hour plan (page 5) and "First Things First" (page 31) have helped many of us cope with such a rage, although we didn't see how they possibly could until we actually tried them—and got surprisingly good results.

Another effective remedy for anger is the "as if" idea. We decide how a mature, truly well-balanced person would ideally handle a resentment like ours, then act *as if* we were that person. Have a go at it a few times. It works, too.

And for many of us, so does the professional guidance of a good counselor of some sort, a psychiatrist or other physician, or a clergyman.

We can also find an outlet in harmless physical action. The exercise already mentioned, deep breathing, a hot soak, and (in private) pounding a chair or a cushion and yelling have all relieved anger for lots of people.

Simply repressing, glossing over, or damming up anger rarely seems advisable. Instead, we try to learn not to act *on* it, but to do something *about* it. If we don't, we increase enormously our chances of drinking.

As laymen who know simply our own experience, we recovered alcoholics have no laboratory knowledge or scientific theories about these matters. But few people who have ever had a hangover could forget how unreasonably irritable it makes you feel. Sometimes, we took it out on family members, fellow workers, friends, or strangers who certainly had not earned our displeasure. That tendency can hang around awhile after we start staying sober, the way wraiths of stale smoke do in a closed-up barroom, reminding us of drinking days—until we do a good mental housecleaning.

16 Being good to yourself

When a loved one or a dear friend of ours is recuperating from a serious illness, we generally try to give what good nurses call T.L.C. (Tender Loving Care). We pamper a sick child, providing favorite foods and some fun to help in recovery.

Convalescence from the illness of active alcoholism takes some time, and anyone going through it deserves consideration and a measure of T.L.C.

In times past, people often believed that those recovering from certain ailments just deserved to suffer, since it was thought they had deliberately, selfishly inflicted the sickness on themselves.

Because of the guilt and stigma still laid on alcoholism by people who are ignorant of the nature of the disease (including ourselves before we learned better), many of us were not very kind to ourselves in the throes of a hangover. We just suffered and thought of ourselves as “paying the piper” in necessary penance for our misdeeds.

Now that we know alcoholism is not immoral behavior, we have found it essential to readjust our attitudes. We have learned that one of the persons *least* likely to treat the alcoholic like a sick person is, somewhat surprisingly, the alcoholic herself (or himself). Once again, our old thinking habits are cropping up.

It’s often said that problem drinkers are perfectionists, impatient about any shortcomings, especially our own. Setting impossible goals for ourselves, we nevertheless struggle fiercely to reach these unattainable ideals.

Then, since no human being could possibly maintain the extremely high standards we often demand, we find ourselves falling short, as all people must whose aims are unrealistic. And discouragement and depression set in. We angrily punish ourselves for being less than super-perfect.

That is precisely where we can start being good—at least fair—to ourselves. We would not demand of a child or of any handicapped person more than is reasonable. It seems to us we have no right to expect such miracles of ourselves as recovering alcoholics, either.

Impatient to get completely well by Tuesday, we find ourselves still convalescing on Wednesday, and start blaming ourselves. That’s a good time to back off, mentally, and look at ourselves in as detached, objective a way as we can. What would we do if a sick loved one or friend got discouraged about slow recuperation progress, and began to refuse medicine?

It helps to remember that heavy drinking is highly damaging to the

body, producing conditions which can take months or years to get over. No one becomes an alcoholic in just a few weeks (well, *almost* no one). We cannot expect to recover in a magic instant, either.

When feelings of discouragement come, we then need to encourage ourselves. More than one of us have found it good medicine to give ourselves a pat on the back, to salute the progress already made—without being smug or dangerously egotistical about it, of course.

Take stock. Have we refrained from taking a drink this 24 hours? That deserves honest self-commendation. Have we made ourselves eat properly today? Have we tried to fulfill our obligations today? Have we, in short, done about the best we could, and all we could, today? If so, that's all it is fair to expect.

Maybe we can't answer yes to all those questions. Maybe we have fallen short somehow, backslid a bit in our thinking or actions, despite knowing better. So what? We are not perfect creatures. We should settle for small progress, rather than bemoan any lack of perfection.

What can we do right now to cheer ourselves up? We can do something *other* than take a drink. Every section of this booklet makes suggestions of that sort.

But there is more, perhaps. Have we been enjoying life lately? Or have we been so concerned about getting better, kept our nose so earnestly near the grindstone of self-improvement, that we have failed to enjoy a sunset? A new moon? A good meal? A needed holiday from care? A good joke? Some affection?

Since the body seeks to normalize itself, maybe yours will welcome opportunities for needed rest. Enjoy deliciously drowsy naps, or good, long nights of peaceful slumber. Or perhaps you have left-over energy you can use in pure fun and enjoyment. As much as other aspects of life, these seem necessary for fulfilling our entire human potential.

Now is the time, the only time there is. And if we are not kind to ourselves right now, we certainly cannot rightfully expect respect or consideration from others.

We have found we can enjoy, sober, every good thing we enjoyed while drinking—and many, many more. It takes a little practice, but the rewards more than make up for the effort. To do so is not selfish, but self-protective. Unless we cherish our own recovery, we cannot survive to become unselfish, ethical, and socially responsible people.

17 Looking out for overelation

A great many drinkers (whether alcoholics or not) change an internal state of discomfort to one of enjoyment by the single act of taking a drink. This method of fleeing from pain to pleasure has been described as “escape drinking.”

But thousands and thousands of us know that often we were already in a happy frame of mind when we took a drink. In fact, when we review our drinking records carefully, large numbers of us can see that we often drank in order to intensify an already jubilant mood.

This experience gives rise to our next suggestion, which is: Be especially cautious during moments of celebration or times of just feeling extraordinarily good.

When things are going great, so well you feel almost on a nonalcoholic high—look out! At such times (even after several years of sobriety), the thought of a drink may seem quite natural, and the misery of our old drinking days temporarily dims. Just one drink begins to seem less threatening, and we start thinking that it wouldn’t be fatal, or even harmful.

Sure enough, *one* would not be—for the average person. But our experience with a drinking problem shows us what that one supposedly harmless, fateful drink would do to us *unaverage* people. Sooner or later, it would persuade us that one more could do no damage, either. Then how about a couple more?...

Ceremonial, celebratory drinking seems particularly tempting to some of us when we have valid cause for exhilaration among jovial drinking relatives or friends who can drink safely. Their imbibing seems to exert social pressure on us to try to do likewise.

Perhaps this is because taking a shot of ethanol (ethyl alcohol) has so long been closely associated in our culture with fun and good times (as well as some mournful events). The connections in our mind can persist even long after we have learned we do not *have* to drink any more.

We know now that there are many ways we can fend off this social pressure to drink, as described on page 66. Briefly, let us just be reminded that no situation gives us a “dispensation” from our alcoholism, the illness that is activated as soon as we start ingesting alcohol at any time, for any reason, or for no reason.

For some of us, the impulse to take a joyful drink when we are feeling particularly good is even more insidious when there is no particular event to celebrate, and no particular social pressure to drink. It can occur at the most unexpected times, and we may never understand the reasons for it.

We have learned now not to panic when the thought of a drink comes into the mind. After all, it is a natural thought for anyone to have in modern times, and especially understandable for those of us who have had extensive practice in the art.

But the *thought* of a drink is not necessarily the same thing as the *desire* for one, and neither need plunge us into gloom or fear. Both can be viewed simply as warning bells to remind us of the perils of alcoholism. The perils are forever, even when we feel so fine that we wonder whether it's really all right for anyone to feel as good as we do, now.

18 'Easy Does It'

Have you just this minute finished reading the previous section, and are you now rushing right into this one? Why? It may be that you need to put into practice the slogan "Easy Does It."

As alcoholics, we often tended to gulp drinks faster than other people did. And we were seldom likely to overlook the last few drops in the cocktail glass, or the last few slugs in the bottle.

Many of us have been amused at our seeming inability, even after many years of sobriety, to walk away from a half-finished cup of coffee or glass of soda. We sometimes find ourselves gulping the last swallow of a nonalcoholic drink, as if . . .

Perhaps most readers already get the point: It is not always easy for us to put down an unfinished page, chapter, or book we are reading. There seems to be almost a compulsion to go on to the end, instead of taking only a page or a chapter or two a day and leaving the rest for another session. Not that this tendency is altogether bad. In getting over a destructive obsession such as drinking, it's sensible to replace it with a benign one, such as a compulsion to seek more and more knowledge and help for a drinking problem.

So read on, if you like. It's a whole lot healthier than boozing.

But when you reach the end of this section, you might want to try something. Put this book aside and review your day. See how many times you could have slowed down a bit or taken things a little easier if you had thought of it.

The slogan "Easy Does It" is one way we A.A.'s remind each other that many of us have tendencies at times to overdo things, to rush

heedlessly along, impatient with anything that slows us down. We find it hard to relax and savor life.

When one of us is in a dither to get something done or get somewhere in a hurry, a friend may gently remonstrate, “‘Easy Does It,’ remember?” Then there’s often a flash of annoyance at the adviser. And that indicates the advice must have hit home, wouldn’t you say?

Yes, we know that impatience today is by no means limited to alcoholics. As the rate of change in our civilization accelerates, more and more people feel pressed for time and harried to hurry up and catch up with... With what? With whom?

Such pressure does not push most drinkers into alcoholism, as anyone can see. Only a small percentage of drinkers develop our problem. But those of us who did often find we share a need to learn how to relax, how to pace ourselves in a healthy way, how to enjoy small gains and even the simple pleasures along the way—in short, how to enjoy the journey, instead of just fretting until we reach our destination. The horizon stays there. Sometimes, it pays to stand still and gaze at it, for the refreshment of the long look.

Some of us repeatedly find, too, that we have bitten off more than even a hippo could chew. We keep taking on more commitments than any one person could handle.

Probably, we could learn a great deal about this from certain recovered cardiac patients. Many of them manage to be vigorously and productively active in a measured way which avoids harassment, overexertion, and frantic enslavement to the clock.

Some of us work out routines to help us keep our goals realistically within the realm of possibility. We may make up a list of things we’d like to get done today, then deliberately discard half or more of it. Another day, another list.

Or we intentionally schedule things pretty far in advance, teaching ourselves to neglect them, just as deliberately, until their time comes.

Others of us find that lists and schedules can become tyrants, driving us to finish every item, no matter how much time and effort it takes. So we swear off lists for a while. No longer pushed by their dictatorship, we can learn to move at a more spontaneous, leisurely pace.

For a great many of us, sitting quietly alone for 15 or 20 minutes before starting each day’s activities helps us set out in a relaxed, orderly frame of mind. Some of us use specific methods of prayer or meditation which we have found particularly well suited to this purpose. And maybe several times during a hectic day, we manage to sit undisturbed, with eyes closed, for a five-minute break, then resume work refreshed.

For some of us, it is easier to slow ourselves down if we have the

help of another person. We may be unable to generate our own peace, but sometimes we can make ourselves sit quietly and listen to a friend who has achieved a measure of serenity. Full attention to someone else helps restore our equilibrium and gives us a new perspective on our own lives, so we may see that they don't *have* to be a rat race.

More formal, institutionalized sessions of peace in the company of others (such as religious services, retreats, and the like) are particularly rewarding for certain people.

Or we may simply decide to set out earlier in the day than we used to, so we can move with less hurry. With a little thought, we may be able to work out personal timetables that are less jammed, more flexible, and thus less grinding and goading.

When we do find ourselves up-tight and even frantic, we can ask ourselves occasionally, "Am I really that indispensable?" or "Is this hurry really necessary?" What a relief to find the honest answer is frequently no! And such devices actually serve, in the long run, not only to help us get over our drinking problem and its old ways; they also enable us to become far more productive, because we conserve and channel our energy better. We arrange priorities more sensibly. We learn that many actions once considered vital can be eliminated if they are thoughtfully reexamined. "How much does it really matter?" is a very good question.

Of course, "Easy Does It" gives us no license for procrastination or being late for appointments. There are things that should *not* be put off until tomorrow (and tomorrow and tomorrow)—such as stopping drinking. But there are other things better delayed beyond this 24 hours, to be tackled when we are better equipped to handle them.

Once, an extremely sick and agitated alcoholic called an A.A. office and said she had to have instant help! She was asked whether she could hold on 20 to 30 minutes until someone could reach her.

"Oh no!" she said. "My doctor told me I had to have help right away, immediately, and there isn't a moment to lose."

Then she went on, "And that was day before yesterday!"

Our heart goes out to anyone in that dire condition. We know all too well how it feels. Help did arrive for the excited caller, within the hour, and now she tells the story on herself as an example of what she used to be like. It is almost incredible, when you see how composed yet energetic, how calm but alert she is now.

If a strong inner core of peace, patience, and contentment looks at all desirable to you, it can be had.

Remind yourself once in a while that maybe "Easy Does It" is this day's ideal speed. The change can start right now, remember?

19 Being grateful

One A.A. member recalls that, even during the worst of her drinking career, she never lost her faith. “I had a firm, unshakable belief—in disaster,” she explains. “Every morning, almost my first conscious thought was ‘Oh, my God, I wonder what new troubles are going to hit me today!’”

When someone knocked at the door, she was sure it was for an unpleasant reason. She confidently expected only bills and other bad news in the mail. And if the telephone rang, she sighed in anticipation of dreary tidings.

Such an enormous expenditure of energy in negative speculations is familiar to many of us; we remember the dark cast of mind that prevailed during the active stage of our own alcoholism. Some of it, to be sure, may have been simply a pharmacological effect of alcohol, which is a depressant drug. When we get the last molecules of alcohol out of the system, a lot of the gloom disappears along with it.

But the habit of thinking in such neurotically depressed ways can stay with some of us, we have found, until we learn to spot it and carefully root it out.

This is no prescription for mindless Pollyanna-ism. We do not pretend that hardships are meaningless, nor deny that everyone has mountains to climb from time to time. Grief really hurts, and so do other kinds of pain.

However, now that we are free of alcohol, we have much more control over our thinking. We have a broader range of thoughts, in minds that are no longer so blurred. The thoughts we choose to spend time on in any given 24 hours can strongly influence the complexion of our feeling for that day—bright and healthy, or murky and disheartened.

Since so much of our thinking used to be intricately associated with our drinking life-style, we have found it worthwhile to look closely at our thinking habits and find different and better ways of using our minds.

The following illustrations may not be an exact fit for you, but even if the words are new, perhaps your emotions will be moved to recognize familiar emotional tunes accompanying them. Some are intentionally exaggerated, to make the point unmistakably clear. Others may, at first glance, look trivial. Scores of us have found, though, that easy little changes are a good starting point for a big strong recovery.

When our favorite toddler falls, bumps her head, and squalls, it’s fairly simple to see whether she is seriously hurt or just frightened. Then we have a choice: We can either shriek hysterically because

the child got hurt or frightened, and carry on over what could have happened; or we can keep our cool and be comforting, grateful that no serious harm occurred.

When our 90-year-old grandfather, long ill and unhappy, finally dies, we again have a choice. We can insist that the only thing to do is rage in grief and anger at the surprise of it, or wallow in guilt—and perhaps drink in either case. Or we can, besides being sad, remember that he did have a long, often good and happy life; that we did try to be good to him and assure him of our continuing love; and that his suffering and unhappiness are now over. It is doubtful that he would appreciate our using his passing as an excuse to get drunk and endanger our health.

When we finally get to visit a place long dreamed of, we can concentrate on the inconveniences of our lodging and the weather, the passing of the good old days, and the fact that we have only a few days or weeks to spare. Or we can be grateful that we finally got there at all, and keep adding to a mental list of the delights we can find if we look for them.

We can watch out for a tendency to say, “Yes, but—” in response to any optimistic, complimentary, or positive statement. A friend’s good luck or his youthful appearance, or a celebrity’s plug for a charity may tempt us to say sourly, “Yes, but—” But . . . does this thinking habit help anyone—including ourselves? Can’t we let something good simply be? Can’t we just be pleased about it, rather than trying to downgrade it?

Those who try to quit smoking realize a number of possibilities are open: complaining *ad infinitum* about how hard it is to quit; or searching out a smoking cessation program, talking to a doctor about what kinds of treatment might be available, or simply enjoying a deep smoke-free breath when we think of it, being grateful an hour has passed without a drag, and, even if we do light up unconsciously, congratulating ourselves for putting it out without smoking it down to a stub.

If one of us wins only \$500 in a sweepstakes that has a \$50,000 top prize, the sensible mood is easy to pick out. It is *not* bitterness at losing the biggest pot.

We continually find opportunities to make similar considered choices, and our experience convinces us that feeling gratitude is far more wholesome, makes staying sober much easier. It will come as a pleasant surprise to discover that it is not difficult to develop the habit of gratitude if we just make some effort.

Many of us were reluctant to try. But the results, we have to admit, did speak for themselves. It may sting at first to bite the cynical comment from the tip of our tongue. We may have to swallow twice before getting out a mildly positive remark of the type we called saccharine

during our drinking life. But it soon comes easier, and can become a strong and comfortable force in our recovery. Life was meant to be enjoyed, and we mean to enjoy it.

Riffling back through the memories of our drinking past, some of us spot another manifestation of negativism. But it, too, is a type of behavior many have learned to change, and the change in our actions has also brought better attitudes and an improvement in our feelings.

For some reason, we spent a lot of time thinking or noting or talking about how wrong or mistaken so many *other* people persistently were. (Whether they really were or not is irrelevant to the welcome change in our own feelings now.) For some, the change begins with a tentative willingness to wait and see, to accept for a moment the hypothesis that the other person just possibly might be right. Before rushing to judgment, we suspend our own argument, listen carefully, and watch for the outcome.

It may, or may not, prove us to be in the wrong. That is not the important issue here. Whichever way the chips fall, we have at least temporarily freed ourselves from our driving need to be always right, or one-up. We have found that a sincere “I don’t know” can be rejuvenating. Saying, “I’m wrong, you’re right” is invigorating when we are sufficiently at ease with ourselves not to be bothered about actually being in the wrong. We are left feeling relaxed and thankful that we can be open to new ideas. The finest scientists are always alert to new evidence which may prove their own theories wrong, so they can discard any false notions and move closer to the ultimate truth they are seeking.

When we achieve a similar openness, we find our instant negativism has begun to evaporate. Perhaps an illustration can clarify the relationship between the desire to be always right (the negativism of seeing almost everyone else as wrong), and the freedom to be wrong ourselves—to grasp and use new ideas and other help for staying sober.

Many of us, when drinking, were deeply sure for years that our own drinking was harmless. We were not necessarily smart-alecky about it, but when we heard a clergyman, a psychiatrist, or an A.A. member talk about alcoholism, we were quick to observe that *our* drinking was different, that *we* did not need to do any of the things those people suggested. Or even if we could admit that we were having a bit of trouble with our drinking, we were sure we could lick it on our own. Thus we shut the door against new information and help. And behind that door our drinking went on, of course.

Our troubles had to be pretty dire, and we had to begin to feel pretty hopeless before we could open up a little bit and let in some fresh light and help.

For thousands of us, one of the clearest memories which incorporate the wisdom of “being grateful” is our recollection of what we originally thought and said about Alcoholics Anonymous when it first came to our attention:

“It’s fine for them, but I’m not that bad, so it isn’t for me.”

“I’ve met a couple of former A.A.’s drunk in barrooms. From what they say, I can tell it wouldn’t work for me, either.”

“I knew a fellow who joined A.A. He turned into a rigid, fanatic, dull, intolerant teetotaler.”

“All that God stuff and going to meetings turn me off. Anyhow, I’ve never been a joiner.”

Now, honesty makes us admit that we spent more time concentrating on those negative opinions, and reinforcing our own reasons for drinking, than we spent actually looking into A.A. with an open mind. Our investigation of it was hardly scientific. Rather, it was superficial and pessimistic—a search for things not to like.

We neither talked with many of the sober members, nor read at depth the quantities of literature by and about A.A. If we did not like a few things or people we first encountered in A.A., we gave up. We had tried it, hadn’t we? (Remember the man who said he didn’t like reading? He had already read a book and didn’t like it!)

It is clear now that we could have acted differently. We could have invested some time in searching out things we did like in A.A., ways we could go along with it, statements and ideas we did agree with. We could have been thankful that A.A. welcomes casual visitors, and that we were not required to jump in headlong. We could have been grateful that A.A. has no dues or fees and demands no adherence to any doctrine, rules, or rituals. If some talkative A.A.’s weren’t to our taste, we could have been pleased that so many others kept quiet, or spoke more to our liking. We could have kept trying to find out why so many eminent professional experts have endorsed A.A. over and over for many years. It must be doing something right!

Staying sober can boil down to just such a choice, we have learned. We can spend hours thinking of reasons that we want or need or intend to take a drink. Or we can spend the same time listing reasons that drinking is not good for us and abstaining is more healthful, and listing things we can do instead of drinking.

Each of us makes that choice in his or her own way. We are pleased when anyone else chooses to make a decision like ours. But whether you are interested in A.A. or not, we offer good wishes to anyone starting out to stay sober in any way. We keep being grateful that we are free to do it in the ways described here.