

Step One

We all remember the choice that occurs in horror films. There is a fork in the road and there are two paths. One of them looks dark but manageable, while the other one looks too forbidding to contemplate. The party wants to take the easier path, all, except for the native guide “There are bad things down that path, you need to follow me!” As we watch, we want to shout at them to listen and take the advice. We know that in their situation we would have listened to the guide.

It would of course be a boring film if the party reached safety by the quickest and easiest way. Good films involve tension, suspense and sometimes monsters.

When we reach the first step, we can see two paths and our native guide is willing to show us the easiest and quickest way to safety. What choice is there? People promise that if we work through these steps our life will improve – dramatically! The choice is a good film ending, or a real and enjoyable life. Think about it before choosing.

Many of us talk of having a film playing inside our heads. It plays slightly out of step with reality giving us time to say what we would have wanted to say, or it replays in a loop repeatedly highlighting our failings. We hope that we are the stars and that everything will work out in the end, but we feel detached and sometimes blind to what is actually happening. Everybody else can see that we are in debt, emotional pain and destroying the lives of those around us, but we hang on to the idea that things are going to improve. It is in the small gap created by hitting “rock bottom” that we can look at both parts of step one, admitting that they are true for us and accept that the path the guide is suggesting is the best choice.

Every journey starts with the first step and the program is no different. The best way to do the program is in order, a step at a time.

And so the journey begins...

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step one is our first glimmer of self-honesty. Up until this point, we thought that we were in control and made the decisions regarding our lives. If we suffer from alcoholism, we have been unaware of how much the illness subtly influenced our behaviour. What we thought was our own self-will proves to be the “will” of the illness.

There is a saying: *when you find yourself in a hole – stop digging* and this step is that simple, this is the point when we decide to put down the shovel and assess how deep the hole really is.

In this part of the book, we are going to work through the program. As we work through it, we are going to progress and consider each step. In fact, we are going to do more than break the program down into each step, frequently we are going to break the step down into smaller chunks and tackle the step in the smallest sections we can. For example:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol

In this, we do not even look at the first step in its entirety, merely the first part of it. My experience was:

Towards the end of my drinking, every night followed the same pattern. I would leave work with good intentions, planning to go home, cook and maybe take a little exercise. Then as I started to cook, the thought of “just a little wine in the cooking,” would occur. I would then realise that it would be a waste not to have just one glass whilst cooking, followed by the obvious need to have a glass with the meal and finally the requirement to round the night off with a shot of something stronger.

When I honestly looked at this, it became my first example of being powerless. Even on nights when I had promised myself that I would start a new healthy regime, I still took that first drink. Having taken the first drink the others seemed to follow, I do not even recall questioning what occurred, it just happened.

The first drink does the damage

Up until the point of taking the first drink, we can usually hold our behaviour together. Having taken the first drink then the second and subsequent drinks are inevitable. This is why we need to maintain a commitment to not taking that first drink and why the illness appears so determined to get us to take it. Once alcohol has entered our system, we become powerless over where the alcohol takes us.

We use the self-honesty mentioned earlier and look at how many ways we allow ourselves to take the first drink. It is only in retrospect or when we try to stop drinking that we become aware of how powerless we are. Up until this point, we possibly claim that it is just a habit when we stop for a drink at a particular time. We may create “acceptable” reasons to drink such as claiming that it is a family tradition to close the day with a gin and tonic. It is common to attribute medicinal qualities to alcoholic drinks such as rum and blackcurrant for a sore throat, whisky or brandy for a bad chest.

Because other people don’t understand the feeling of a compulsion, they can’t see anything wrong in encouraging us to “have a small one.” The word *addiction* is another of those frightening words that triggers a response of denial. Nobody wants a label like addict and even those who have suffered because of our behaviour try to deny the truth of our illness.

A loving mother never encourages their heroin addict child into taking just a small fix to build up their strength, but many parents continue to make excuses for their alcoholic offspring. They will go to the shops to buy the drink that their child cannot get for themselves. Even members of the medical profession wax lyrically about the therapeutic benefits of a small glass of red wine and suggest that no possible harm could come from one.

The fact that we look for excuses to continue to drink should be a warning in itself. If we didn’t have an addiction, stopping wouldn’t be a problem. If we suspected that green beans were the cause of our life problems most of us could happily walk away from them without searching for an excuse to have just the one. Of course, we could argue that this is too simple an analogy and that there are wide ranging social reasons to drink not encountered in green bean consumption.

Honesty comes in as we knock over our excuses to drink.

I need a drink to face... This is a fallacy created by film and television – drink does not calm the nerves of a normal person. By drinking ourselves into oblivion, we don’t increase our ability to cope, but we can lower our inhibitions so that the unacceptable becomes acceptable and by having lowered our standards, we create the illusion of coping.

When we start to face situations, we realise that we function better with a clear mind and come to see that we can’t improve any life situation by approaching it with our faculties handicapped.

I need to drink with my clients. Even people who work in the hospitality industry discover that their clients are just as happy dealing with somebody who is sober. Certainly, clients are usually happier with this than dealing with somebody who sometimes goes over the top and becomes unpredictable.

My family would think I was being awkward if I stopped. We often feel that we know what other people will think or say and make decisions based upon this “mind reading trick”. We might think that we are making a decision that will please them, but is this really what we are doing. Are we really only drinking to please somebody else?

When we make the decision to stop drinking then all of the reasons are simply excuses. When we are honest, we can see that we don’t really drive better with a few drinks, we don’t become more entertaining and we don’t think more clearly.

...That our lives had become unmanageable.

Once the monkey drinks, it takes control and we become the audience of a slapstick comedy.

Just before I stopped drinking, I went to the mayor’s dinner. It was a grand social occasion and I dressed to kill. During the evening I drank and laughed, I felt it was my responsibility to flirt with all of the men and leave the other women envious of my charm. It was after midnight when I spotted her. A middle-aged woman in an over-tight dress, her hair was partly free and her lipstick smudged. I remember thinking that somebody should tell her to go home. I then realised that I wasn’t looking across the room, but staring into a huge mirror...

Another friend told how the hospital had brought him back to life from alcohol poisoning three times. He didn’t believe he had a serious drink problem, because he only drank to be with his friends. The need to be sociable led him back into drinking situations time after time. He laughed and said he had no problem stopping drinking, but staying stopped eluded him. He loved his wife and children claiming that they were the most important people in his life. He was horrified at the suggestion that he would abandon them to be with his mates in the pub. He thought the idea that drink would take priority over them was laughable. The fourth resuscitation failed, he remained dead on the table after popping in for a quick drink and a chat.

Although these examples of a life being unmanageable involve drinking, not all of the examples we encounter do. Such as, our partner and our lover find out that each other exist. This type of situation creates intolerable pressure and we crave the release from worry that we believe drink provides. We try to resolve the issue so

that we are not to blame. If only that interfering busybody hadn't told our partner, then everything would have been all right. We don't question our right to have a partner and a lover, but being found out annoys us.

Our landlord suddenly stops listening to the excuses and finally demands that we pay what we owe them. We feel that they are being unreasonable, because we may have spent the money on food. We possibly sacrificed our income to pay for somebody else to do something. We feel righteous indignation at somebody suggesting that we are the type that will not pay the bill, we just need a little more time and understanding to get around to it.

As well as specific situations, we can simply experience intangible feelings. It is common to contemplate running away. We start to hope that we won't wake up in the morning, or consider self-harm. The self-harm we plan might only be sufficient to gain sympathy and avoid something or it can be as serious as thinking of crashing a car secretly hoping that we won't survive.

This chaos feels like walking in treacle. We feel that every way we turn we encounter obstacles and difficulties. People and situations seem to be blocking our progress. We want to enjoy life, but how can we when so many things keep going wrong. In our path is everything from rabbit snares to bear traps and we are tired of it all.

At first, it can be difficult to accept that these problems are alcohol related. However, Alcoholism as an illness goes much deeper than being unable to stop drinking. The problems and feelings described above come from the "ISM" of alcoholism, (I, Self, Me). When we examine the situations that we have blamed on others, a common factor starts to emerge; our actions and desires created them.

Identification – The first weapon in our armoury

Identify means we recognise our behaviour in the behaviour of others. It is as simple as saying "Yes, I did that" or "Yes, I felt that."

When we identify we can see that other people were the same as we are and that they improved their lives by changing. We might also see that we could improve our life by simply accepting that they have a solution to the problem we have been trying to ignore.

The monkey fights back against identification in three ways, deception, justification and comparing. It is possible to read the experience of drinking each evening and say "yes I do that, isn't it a great way to spend an evening". Possibly, not the anticipated effect, but it could be the reaction.

Justification, with phrases like, "working the way I do I need to unwind when I get in." or "I need to forget the day and enjoy the evening." Justification arrives in our mind literally at the speed of thought. As soon as we question what we are doing, the answer is there - instantly.

Comparing, when we listen to somebody's story and the monkey places the thought, "I cannot have the same problem because I haven't done that." The incident itself is irrelevant. It might be going to prison, driving whilst drunk, waking up in strange beds, but the reaction is "I can't be because..." nearly every one of us reacts this way until we run out of excuses.

Deception, with thoughts such as, "Alcoholics are homeless and drink from bottles wrapped in brown paper", and then we list through our material assets and wealth, we have a car, nice clothes and we only drink the best we can possibly afford.

When we compare we look for excuses not to change, when we identify we find proof that change is acceptable. We have to change, but won't until we break through the deception that the illness has used to disguise itself.

Breaking through to honesty

Discussion with somebody who has done the program is an excellent way to force ourselves to look at our motives and evaluate them honestly. If we take one of the examples given above, *our landlord is demanding their money*. Under these circumstances, we tend to be angry about how unreasonable they are. We might not have the money because we have had to cover some unexpected expense. If we took this problem to a friend in the pub, they would agree the landlord was being unreasonable and should be willing to wait.

If we take this to somebody who is actually listening impartially to us, the response could become a little more delving. How many times have we not paid in the past? When did we realise that we could not pay? Did we discuss this with them? We are not always in the wrong, but we tend to make decisions more in line with what we believe "should" happen, rather than considering other people. Unable to achieve our own agenda, we can become nervous and uncomfortable.

By having our behaviour challenged, we can see that the other person is reacting to a perceived wrong. Within AA we meet people who have done and thought the same as we have. When we give them the opportunity to listen to what we have been doing, they smile and recognise our veneer of justification for what it is. They know what we are thinking, sometimes before we do and can encourage us to take responsibility for the real motivation behind our actions.

Writing things down can also help. We can do this by making simple lists of situations that we have tried to control. Having made the list we can then look at them and work through noting what the result has been, for example:

I need love in my life.

My partner got fed up of the lies and kicked me out

I went to singles clubs, but each one was worse than the last

I had an affair at work and now the boss is angry

I think I am going to lose my job

By looking at the example honestly, we can see a progression through from deciding what is best for us and trying our hardest to achieve it. We originally see our “head down” determination to achieve goals as an asset. Whilst there is nothing wrong with ambition and goals, our attempt to impose our will upon other people often proves to be a liability.

There is no “right” way to break through to honesty. Both methods help us look at how we try to manage situations and how they seem to become more complicated. Sometimes talking with somebody else who is willing to challenge our motives works for us, sometimes, sitting and looking at the facts written down on a piece of paper is the only way we will accept that we have failings.

It is time to choose.

We started this chapter discussing the choice made in an old horror film. There are two paths. Both of the paths ahead may look forbidding, our current life is becoming darker and more frightening, but it is hard to imagine taking another route. The other path appears too strewn with obstacles for us to overcome. The guide assures us that we will be safe and that in reality it is the only path to where we need to go.

The experience of a rock bottom is fleeting and transient. For a single instant, we see that our way of life is not wonderful and that somebody else can show us a better way. If we let it pass, the monkey wins again, we soon laugh at the ridiculous idea that we would want to stop drinking.

What started the day as too horrific to contemplate facing again becomes another anecdote in our library of near misses. We appear to go around in a circle, but the circle is actually a descending spiral. On each spin we leave behind the good aspects of our life, as we descend, the unacceptable becomes acceptable. The person that claimed to have never woken up in a strange bed finds that it happens, then it becomes what they expect, eventually progressing to the point where they stop waking up in beds, but in bushes and public toilets.

By accepting the ideas in Step One, we are starting on the road to recovery. If we can answer yes to the questions, “am I powerless over alcohol?” and “is my life unmanageable?” then we are ready for a journey through the steps.

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