

What form do these insanities take?

In the second step it is “suggested” that we have been (or are) insane. The word *insanity* is emotive and we usually think of it in terms of asylums and straight jackets. By having our attention drawn to the extreme we are allowing the illness to deceive us into comparing – “I haven’t done that, so I can’t be.”

There are various reasons why we end up in asylums, some receive treatment to assist rehabilitation or for depression. Another option is a condition termed “Wet brain” (a layman’s term for alcohol-induced dementia) where our short-term memory is destroyed and our brain becomes too damaged to function correctly. Whilst this could be where we end up, it doesn’t start here and most die before reaching such extremes.

A definition of Insanity is, “something that is not sensible and is likely to have damaging results.” Many an alcoholic will immediately argue with this definition asking who has the right to say what is sensible and go on to rant about “political correctness” trying to stop people having fun.

But surely, this is just me...

We sometimes experience disturbing aberrations like hallucinations or paranoia, but most of us justify our insanities as, “this is me” and sometimes go further – “...they have to accept me as I am”. We rarely acknowledge that we could change from our behaviour if we chose to. It would be unusual if a single person exhibited all of the following examples of “odd behaviour”, but most of us can identify with the motivation behind them.

Other people, in relationships, we expect “eccentricities” that we wouldn’t tolerate to be accepted. We can demand attention, or paradoxically, yearn for people to realise that we need consideration, but remain unwilling to ask for it. Our self-centred approach to others shows up in convoluted ways. Our demands leave a trail of confusion and hurt amongst those who care for us.

Obsession, when we feel we “need” something and cannot readily obtain it, our bull terrier tenacity can drive us to extremes. We can ignore all normal moral behaviour to achieve our goal and feel proud of our ability to do so.

Isolation often becomes part of our lives. Sometimes, we no longer trust ourselves in public, not knowing what we are going to do or say once we have had a drink. At other times, we feel threatened by something we cannot identify that is frightening and waiting for us. We can be isolated because we feel superior, or isolated because we feel inferior. The effect is the same – in our isolation it is easy for our thoughts to drift into dark and sinister places.

Suicide, our thinking drifts towards desire for suicide or death. We can switch instantly from being happy with life into hating every waking moment and seeking escape.

Seeing things, our insanities can eventually manifest themselves as seeing things that don’t exist, not the fabled pink elephant, but possibly mice, insects and little people.

Being pursued, either by human or supernatural forces is quite common, we imagine that the car parked across the road is there to observe us, or notice that we keep seeing the woman with the green jacket. We believe that there are demons or ghosts trying to possess us.

I was nearly asleep when I noticed the rasping breathing close to the bed. I held my breath, hoping I was imagining it. The sound went on and I knew there was something in the room. I fearfully reached for the light switch and clicked it on. There wasn’t anything there.

I armed myself with an iron bar and searched the house before finally accepting that I was alone. I clicked off the light and the breathing started again. I knew that it was evil and that it had come for me. I realised that possession explained many of the strange feelings I had been having over the last few months. I lay in the darkness cradling an iron bar, helpless and frightened, waiting for the final assault.

A more clinical view...

There is a psychological theory that proposes life is made up of small cycles (Gestalt Theory).

- The person is at rest
- The disturbing factor, which may be (a) internal or (b) external
- Creation of image or reality
- The answer to the situation, aiming at
- A decrease of tension, resulting in
- Return of balance

The common example used to explain the cycle is:

A person is sitting comfortably, they realise that they are hungry and this hunger moves to become the focus of their attention. They decide that making a sandwich is a good idea. Making and eating the sandwich addresses their disturbing factor and they can return to a state of balance until the next cycle occurs.

The theory proposes that an interrupted cycle leaves behind “unfinished business” and that we have a need to return to finish it. In the example, if the telephone rings whilst we are making the sandwich we handle the interruption by creating a new cycle and then once that is complete we return and finish making the sandwich.

The failure to return to finish a cycle causes feelings of stress and dis-ease.

The principle of this cycle is irrefutable, it is a well-respected foundation of psychology, but when we attempt to apply it to the life of an alcoholic, it becomes strangely disjointed. An alcoholic is rarely to be found “at rest”, because we tend to be always doing something. Even when we appear to be sitting peacefully, constant internal turmoil occupies our thinking.

When we move on to creating the idea of what will satisfy our “disturbance”, it can obviously be a drink, but it can also be something unattainable. Possibly a wonderful night out which ends with us meeting the person of our dreams, who will then sweep us away into a world of riches and pleasure. There is actually nothing more guaranteed to fail than aiming for the unattainable and so we guarantee ourselves a frustrated cycle that we are unable to complete.

This style of thinking seems designed to create a whole series of unfinished cycles and consequently we continually increase our stress and dis-ease.

What can I do?

The answer is DO NOTHING.

At an early stage in recovery, actively looking to make changes can be dangerous. If we do, we tend to focus on one specific factor and believe that if we correct it, life will become normal again, we are usually wrong. We look back and think that at some point in the past we could have made the decision not to become alcoholic. If only we hadn't suffered the trauma of a specific event then we would have been fine. This is one of the common misapprehensions about drinking. That there is a single cause which, once eliminated, will allow everything to return to normal. We find it difficult to accept the true single cause of our problems – Alcoholism.

This means that the search amongst the other life events is a distracting waste of time. If we suffer from alcoholism, we are probably incapable of making a truly honest appraisal of how our life has progressed. If we could be honest, we would probably see that there was no clear point where life changed over, there was no single traumatic event to blame, we had drifted gradually through being “mildly eccentric” into totally unstable, drink had been a constant part of things along the way, but actually quite a silent and stealthy companion.

Alcoholism is a threefold illness:

Physical – When we take a drink, it triggers a physical craving for more. *The first drink does the damage.* If we don't take the first, we cannot take the second etc.

Mental – We are certain that drink is the only thing helping us get through our problems, the mess gets progressively worse, but we won't give it up.

Spiritual –When we understand the term spiritual as used within the program then we understand how the alcohol renders us “spiritually bankrupt”. We became withdrawn from life, obsessed with our own struggles and sorrows. If we gave time to others, we did so for reasons of self-gratification.

But if I just change...

It is normal to feel lost. We are challenging our basic principles of life. Even though people tell us not to make dramatic and instant changes, the monkey tells us that we have to do something immediately. If we can't get the advice we want to hear from AA we often turn to old and trusted friends. Although very few people actually know anything about alcoholism it rarely prevents them from having an opinion about what we need to do to tackle our problem.

For most people their understanding of alcoholism comes from films and television. Some of these fictional representations can be quite realistic, but they become distorted if reality doesn't match the time slot or the story line the writers wish to achieve. Nobody believes that watching hospital dramas enables them to perform operations. The same is true of trying to treat alcoholism based upon knowledge gained this way. Even so it is surprising that we do listen to the advice they offer – "accepting that you have a problem is the first step to recovery", "Self knowledge is the key to it...", "what you need is a holiday", "what you need is..."

If we were dealing with a minor ailment then it might be acceptable to try a few "home spun" remedies, but we are tackling a life threatening problem. Although people mean well and want to provide an easy answer, it is actually more productive to accept that we have a difficult problem and that we have to work hard to solve it.

The fact that we have the "symptoms" of a killer illness and yet we hope to cure it through ill-informed platitudes surely proves our insanity. There isn't a quick fix and it much more responsible to accept that we are going to have to learn how to handle alcoholism— one day at a time.

Surely, I will get better now I have stopped drinking.

If we return to our examples from the first step, we can see that we were powerless over alcohol and that life had become unmanageable. If we evaluate our behaviour the way an outsider would, we can see that they are likely to judge our behaviour as insane.

Once we have worked through the program and gained experience in living our life in a new way the damaging behaviour will diminish and seem to vanish for most of the time. We never entirely remove it and often the first indication that the monkey is planning a new assault on our sobriety is realising that our old thinking is back.

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