

Pulling it together

Cookery is a good analogy for how we learn to live a sober life, not the precise art of bread making, but the more flexible dishes such as stew, curry or chow mein. With these dishes, we can adjust the basic ingredients as we go along to end up with an acceptable dish. The same is true of living a sober life. Provided we have the basic ingredients, we can adjust the quantities as we go.

If all that was required was an understanding of the program of AA we could recover by simply reading it in the comfort of our own home, but the basic ingredients of a sober life are the program, meetings and people. In the first part of the book, we discussed the program. In this next section, we will discuss meetings and people.

Meetings

A person would have to have lived a cut off existence never to have seen a representation of AA in film or on television. We often have preconceptions of what occurs at an AA meeting and virtually all of them are wrong. We picture a room full of slightly down at heel eccentric characters all waiting for the opportunity to speak whilst being lectured from the front of the room. Secretly, we might hope that amongst these oddball characters we will find the hidden gem of a person who will offer the romantic relationship that has so far eluded us.

When we attend our first AA meetings, we come across people who proclaim that they have not had a drink for over twenty years and yet attend meetings every week. We probably anticipated attending once a week for a few months and then we would be free to get on with our life. We may well hope to arrange for "private sessions" rather than attending a public group, but they tell us that this is not how AA works. It is vitally important that we deflate our ego and quickly change from thinking how special we are into accepting that we are "just another drunk" in the room.

The analogy of the dialysis machine explains a good attitude towards going to meetings:

Somebody who needs dialysis accepts regular connection to a machine. They can argue if they like and refuse to go, but they will die a horrible and unnecessary death. An AA meeting is not as traumatic as dialysis, it doesn't require surgery to "plumb" in the fittings, but without meetings, we risk dying a horrible and unnecessary death.

The illness often convinces us that this is being overdramatic and that we are not risking death at all. We cite the example of old "Uncle Albert" who drank a bottle of whisky every day until his death at the age of ninety-nine and convince ourselves that we are from "strong stock" and perfectly capable of carrying on the family tradition.

I had tried and given up on AA many years before I stopped drinking for the final time. This time I had been hospitalised and upon release, told to get back to AA. I rebelled for a short period, but I knew that I was getting close to drinking again, this would be the final straw for my family and so I went. After the meeting, somebody told me to get to ninety meetings in ninety days if I wanted to get sober. My answer was "Oh, now I am sober my wife likes to have me around the house and she would be upset if I went out so frequently."

I have no idea where this came from, my wife despised me and my daughters had disowned me, my time was my own to do what I liked with. Strangely, the next day I did go to another meeting, then another and another. I didn't achieve ninety in ninety, but I did make over seventy. A few years on, I still attend five a week, not because I have to, but because I want to.

It took a long time for my family to start to accept me again, but it happened. At the christening of my first grandchild, I cried with happiness at what the guidance of the meetings had given to me, not just freedom from drinking, but a completely new chance at life.

Why people feel unable to go to meetings.

At first, the idea of going to meetings on a regular basis seems ridiculous and these are some of the common objections raised when people are justifying why they cannot go to meetings:

Too busy, "I'm too busy to go to meetings," springs into our mind. Some of us are working hard to prove how valuable we are, others just feel pressure from our daily chaos. For many of us there is just not enough time in the day and the idea of sacrificing more of it by going to meetings seems too much to ask.

We solve the claim of being too busy by continuing to drink after the point that we should stop. Alcohol makes an ideal cleaning fluid and eventually we use it to scrub away the important job, family, friends and social activities. The absurdity of this excuse is that we rarely appreciate how close to death we really are. If we did, we would see that the things making us busy aren't worth sacrificing our lives over.

Pride, “I don’t want strangers knowing about my life”, although we frequently unfold our tale of woe to the stranger on the next bar stool, it seems too degrading to formalise this process. This statement shows just how important we feel we are. Do we truly believe that strangers are waiting to hear our story so that they can besmirch our good name? Thoughts like, “people with nothing better to do than sit around gossiping...” sometimes occur, but secretly, we are probably clinging to the hope that we will repair the damage and cover it up before anybody knows about it.

Shame, occurs when we feel people can see what we don’t like about ourselves. Our defensive shell is penetrated and finding ourselves unexpectedly exposed we become self-conscious. We think that we have been clever in concealing the depths of our problems, but do we genuinely believe that nobody knows that we have a drink problem? Family, friends, work colleagues and strangers are all painfully aware of our plight. In fact, we are usually the last person to acknowledge it.

Self Deception, “My problems are different from theirs so they won’t be able to help me.” We feel that we are the only ones facing our specific problems such as, lost jobs, lost wives and lost families. Alone, our lives seem destroyed and thinking that we drink for different reasons than anybody else, we convince ourselves to remain isolated in the darkness of our imagined uniqueness.

Fear, we can be scared of attending meetings in our own area because we don’t want people to see us. Thankfully, there are so many venues that we don’t have to go to the one closest to home if we don’t want to. Our fears may prove foolish, but it is better to travel, than not to go at all. There can be some justification if we have to deal with alcoholics on a professional basis. A counsellor or a doctor doesn’t want to feel the need to put on a “brave face” if they encounter their own patients, but for the rest of us, our fears subside and drop away. The pleasure of being able to walk, rather than drive to a meeting normally outweighs any fear of criticism. After all, did making a fool of ourselves stop us before? Fighting, causing a scene, or covering ourselves in vomit, didn’t keep us away for long. Why then would we be scared to be seen getting help to sort out our lives? Possibly, we want to make sure that we have a way back into our old life should we decide that AA isn’t right for us.

Why we should go to meetings

The important action is to identify some meetings that we can attend. “Ninety meetings in ninety days, if you don’t like what you see then we refund your misery,” is an often-heard saying. It is important to make the commitment to get to meetings and try to become part of the “fellowship” of AA.

Our attitude needs to stay fresh for the rest of our lives and there is a regular pattern seen at most meetings. Look at the people who stay behind to talk after the formal part of the meeting. If we go back to the meeting five years later, we will see the same faces doing the same thing. There will have been a hundred faces come and gone during the five years, but these people survived, proving that those who are actively involved with others stay sober.

There are many reasons why we should attend meetings and here are a few.

Humility, not to be confused with Humiliation, the emotion we feel if we expose ourselves to ridicule. A meeting never judges us, we share to we keep ourselves in perspective, gaining insight into a “modest sense of our own true worth”.

Guidance, through exposing our shortcomings and feelings we make it possible for other people to help and guide us. How could they know that we are heading down a dangerous path if we don’t tell them what we are planning? Somebody in the room will have tried whatever seems a bright idea to us and they will be able to point out the pitfall in our plans.

Gratitude, towards the people who freely gave their own time to our recovery, it is often said that it is impossible to drink when we are grateful for our sobriety.

Support, even if we don’t feel we have anything to offer, by stopping drinking and attending our second and subsequent meetings, we give hope to others. It can be overwhelming for a newcomer to conceive of twenty years without a drink, but they get hope when they see somebody who has achieved a week. Similarly, somebody with five years gives hope to people with two years, the ten year old to the five year old and so on.

Companionship, we soon realise that drunks are boring to sober people and whilst we all have friends outside the fellowship of AA, these are not the “fair weather” friends from the pub. The people at the meetings soon become closer than we could imagine and we understand what friendship is really about.

Commitment, we stay safe when we continue to remind ourselves about the seriousness of our illness. There can be no argument or discussion about attending meetings. We need to get to as many as we can sensibly

attend because without remaining fully committed to recovery, we will fail. This is especially true when we start to justify why it makes sense not to go. "It's too cold / late", "I'm too tired" are possibly signs of a problem.

Why do people stop going to meetings?

There isn't a definitive answer to this, but a common theme is a tendency to allow *living* to become more important than *sober living*.

Life got too comfortable, if sitting in the meeting and not sharing becomes too comfortable, the monkey will convince us that we are not gaining anything from being there. We cut down on our meetings, but tell ourselves that we are still following the program and continue the justification even when we finally tail off to not attending any at all.

Complacency, life had once seemed finished, but as our minds clear and things improve, we seem to run out of time. We decide that we can cut down on going to meetings and talking with sober alcoholics. We reason that now we are sober we want to live our lives to the full.

Our problem is that our vision of "living life to the full" can be unrealistic and involve activities any sober person wouldn't consider. We start to believe that we can run on the edge and freely mix with drinking people. If anybody challenges us, we tell them "I didn't get sober to hide away in meetings", brushing aside any concerns they harbour. As we do so, things that had been unacceptable creep back in to become acceptable. Each line we cross adds another barrier between sobriety and us.

Secrets mean that we don't want to share in the meeting because "they will not understand". By not being able to share openly, we continually share the same old stories from our past, failing to reveal what is really happening in our lives. Because we get nothing from sharing, the meeting seems to drag and we decide to cut down on them claiming that they don't work any more.

Pride often gets in the way of honest sharing. We sometimes feel that the meeting is unfairly judging us and rather than accept the criticism we either clam up or stop attending.

Are the meetings perfect?

It would be great to say that AA and the meetings exist untainted without a hint of ego and politics, but meetings involve people and people get things wrong. Common examples are dominating the meeting with overtly religious attitudes or trying to form specialist groups, such as "young, single, left handed, tall people" meetings. Most of what is proposed sounds attractive and plausible. After all, what is wrong with wanting a meeting made up of "like-minded" people?

Problems occur when we want to exclude people from "our" meeting. All too easily, intolerance draws us into judging people as not "the right sort". The basis of the judgement can be skin colour or religion. It can be their social background or colourful vocabulary. It can be as simple as wanting single sex meetings. It is ridiculous, but more than one meeting has suggested refusing entrance to people who have been drinking that day.

Soon after the start of AA, they found they needed guidelines to help people keep the meetings free from restrictive and damaging behaviour. The "Traditions" of AA embody these guidelines and maintaining them is as important to our common welfare as the program is to our individual recovery. We should avoid meetings that stray from the Traditions of AA. Over time, either they will correct themselves, or because people stop attending them, they fail and close.

The Twelve Traditions

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority, a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose, to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centres may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized, but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Finding a home group

A meeting should have the same personality we look for in a close friend or sponsor within AA. It should be approachable and able to guide us when we stray from the program. We should be able to share and feel safe that what we say in the meeting will stay in the meeting.

When we find a group that feels like a sponsor, we should consider making it our home group. A home group is simply a meeting we make a commitment to attending. This group of people will watch us mature from our shaky start into a fully committed member of AA. These strangers often know more about us than our own family do and they can challenge us when they see that we are not functioning within the principles of the program. A home group is a guardian to watch over us and help us to stay on course. We all waver at times and this is frequently apparent to others a long time before we know about it.

People

The people at a meeting usually come from a broader background than encountered under any other circumstances. The illness is the same whether we drink rough alcohol or champagne and the characters at the meeting range from thieves to priests, tramps to millionaires. These unlikely companions make up the *Fellowship* of AA. Regardless of their background, there are two absolute truths:

- We are all Alcoholics
- We are all at some stage of recovery or relapse.

To put it another way, there are no bosses or professionals to tell us what we “should” be doing and because we all suffer from the illness of alcoholism, we all need help and support to remain well.

There will be people we find physically or emotionally attractive and others who seem downright scary. We will listen to some who bore or revolt us and encounter many who enthral and entertain. At first, we think that we will have more in common with people who have only been sober for a short period. We suspect that those who have been around a long time will not want to be bothered with a newcomer. These thoughts are untrue and dangerous.

It is the monkey tricking us when we decide to strike up a friendship with another newcomer. Other newcomers cannot support us and the meeting is not a social club. We go to meetings to learn how to live a happy sober life and it is far better to talk to somebody who is doing that than to simply find “new pals”. People with a long-term sobriety usually enjoy talking with newcomers offering support and experience. We learn to trust that there are people who will put out their hand to somebody without expecting anything in return. Trust does not come easily. Our defects motivated us for so long that we assume everybody else behaves the same way.

People with a sobriety that we admire

It can be puzzling when people tell us not to be judgemental and to not take other peoples inventories, and then in the next breath tell us to look for *people with a sobriety we admire*. How are we supposed to do this, especially when they tell us that length of time not drinking is no indication of sobriety?

We judge others based upon simple criteria; are they like us? Do they have a nice car or house? Do they have a job we admire? These material criteria don't work well when we are evaluating sobriety, the people who learnt the most during their recovery often fell the farthest.

Few of us arrive readily able to identify spiritual wealth. It takes time to learn how to sit quietly in a room and appreciate the depth of experience other people have to offer. These people may not be the most affluent, or skilled at putting their experience into words, but by ignoring our prejudice, we can see that they do in fact have a better quality of life than ours, even when they don't “measure up” based upon our old standards.

Sharing

We usually envisage other types of meetings as a lot of talking, usually by a few loud voices looking to push through their own agenda. However, at an AA meeting, the focus is upon listening. Even if we have urgent questions or issues, we have to wait our turn and remain silent allowing the current speaker their opportunity to share.

Most of us don't even understand the term “sharing”, we think it is the same as talking – and we know how to do that. We often want to dominate, babbling about how badly life has treated us. Somebody may suggest that we “take the cotton wool out of our ears and stuff it in our mouth”, although this statement initially hurts us, there are extremely good reasons why this is good advice.

Sharing is in fact a two way process, speaking and listening. The normal person is born with two ears and one mouth and we should use them in these proportions. Whilst it can be therapeutic to talk, we learn by listening. The meeting is a good classroom and we learn about humility and common courtesy. Adopting acceptable behaviour within meetings prepares us to use it in our daily life.

If the monkey can prevent us from learning how to share, it has won the battle, unchanged, we will remain isolated, self-absorbed and sick. When we attend an AA meeting, we are threatening the monkey's habitat and it will play every trick it knows to protect itself. It does this by manipulating our defects to block our ears and keep our mouths closed. The main symptom of these defects is judgement. We judge everyone around us and our judgement holds shut the doorway to growth. If we look deeper into our emotions, the same defects we identified earlier emerge.

Pride surfaces when we want to share and impress the rest of the meeting. We sit planning our share and then afterwards mentally leave the room to think about other things. Possibly, we bask in imagined adoration from the other people in the room who are astounded by our eloquence and depth of knowledge.

Envy dominates us when we judge everybody in the room and decide that because they still have their partners and families that they don't understand the problems that we have to cope with.

Anger rules us when we stop listening because we tell ourselves that that this person or that person has nothing we want to hear or because they seem to be repeating the same old thing time after time.

Identifying what is going on in our own mind is the first step towards correcting this and just as before, the answer is to look for the opposite of the defect. Humility, gratitude, and compassion defuse these negative blocks and allow us to take part in the meeting.

Learning to share is important. To do it we need to be honest with ourselves and effectively give permission to others to be honest with us. We can be embarrassed to try. Overawed by the depth and coherence of what we hear, for the first time in our lives we listen to people speaking honestly about their feelings, pain and fears. We feel that we will never be able to match the honesty and wisdom of these people.

Nobody (except possibly us) expects a performance. We are all drunks trying to stay away from a drink one day at a time. A good starting point is to just join in, announce our name, and confirm that we are alcoholic. Nobody finds it easy and we all have different barriers towards speaking openly in the meeting. If it didn't provide huge rewards, we would not go through with it. Sometimes just sharing the frustrations felt during the day will be sufficient to open the floodgates.

For me to be able to share honestly I have to drop all masks and defences before I start and make a conscious decision to share as me. After saying, "my name is..." I take a short pause and try to confirm that I have locked "The Showman" away. I then have to be open to receiving feedback on whatever I share without being defensive or mentally blocking it because "they don't understand."

Why is anonymity important?

This is one of the questions most people ask when they arrive at the doors of AA, if, as we claim, there is nothing to be embarrassed about in attending the meeting, why the secrecy?

Everybody at the meeting is there for the same reason - to get sober. We all have a sickness and we don't need other prejudices getting in the way of recovery. How easy can it be for a priest to come and talk about not being able to understand the spiritual parts of the program? Who would try to help them understand a Higher Power? Who could talk with a Judge about wisdom or honesty? We all need the freedom to speak openly about our life. Some people will need to talk about degrading experiences and if they fear the consequences, they will not be able to share freely.

We should always respect other people's anonymity. The celebrity who attends a meeting needs as much help and support as any other person. They don't need the stress of their fame getting in the way and they certainly don't need publicity when they go to a meeting. It is tempting to tell people about the famous person we have been sitting with, but somebody we tell, may tell somebody who calls the press. Celebrity or not, what is said in the meeting and who is there should remain there.

Sponsorship

Many people come to meetings, listen and fail because they try to get sober unguided. They usually arrive just as it is starting, bustle to a chair at the back of the room and afterwards they always have somebody waiting or an important event to attend. After a few months, they stop appearing. We rarely hear from them again, or if we do, we hear that they have left their homes, jobs and families, or died. We never hear that life became so good that they discovered that they didn't need to stop drinking.

Rather than try to invent our own way of recovering, most of us benefit from getting a sponsor. This is simply somebody to guide us through the program and help us to understand the strange feelings and emotions that we experience when we start to live a sober life. When we stop drinking, it is like emerging from a cocoon. Emotions that we didn't know we had start to flicker into existence and "bright" ideas bludgeon into our consciousness. It is rare to meet anybody who has achieved a happy contented sobriety without having a sponsor and it is important to find one.

Finding a sponsor

When we are looking for a sponsor, it is usual to talk with a few people and ask how to do it. One of the confusing clichéd responses to this question is "choose somebody you don't like." Whilst we are not looking for a new best friend, we are looking for somebody in whom we have confidence.

Occasionally we may encounter somebody who makes us squirm when they share. Each time they open their mouth they seem to be taking our inner most secrets and putting them on the table. This is different from somebody we don't like, this is identifying strongly with another person's experience. A more useful interpretation of the cliché is not that we don't like them, but that they intimidate us. We need to know that they will be willing to hurt our feelings, not because they want to, but because they need to.

Rather than accept a clichéd answer to "how do I find a sponsor," look at the problem a different way. The objective is to learn how to apply the program and live a happy successful life and it is sensible to look for somebody who seems to have achieved this. Sobriety has more depth than not drinking. It means clear thinking and acting responsibly. At first, people who make a lot of noise, but really aren't living by the program can take us in. In the barroom, we claimed to know how to run major corporations and could tell the national football coach exactly how he could win the next major tournament. Alcohol appears to give vast powers of knowledge and skill without us actually needing to learn anything.

We may encounter serial or "professional" sponsors, who appear to sponsor everybody in the area. They may even suggest themselves to us. Whilst there may be nothing wrong in this, is this really what we deserve, to be a battery sponsee?

Although we don't feel it, in the early days of recovery we are vulnerable people. If we were approached by somebody wearing a dirty overcoat and asked "Need a sponsor little (boy / girl)?" it would be easy to spot a potential problem. Unfortunately, such predators do not announce themselves in this way. They seem plausible and concerned for our welfare. Same sex sponsorship is sensible, because it is too easy for the kindness and empathy shown by another person to be confused with something more.

We need somebody we can really talk to, for example, if there is a shared interest in cookery, our sponsor can say something like "working through the program is rather like making a cheese sauce" and illustrate how the raw ingredients, milk, butter, cheese, and flour suddenly combine into a sauce. Whilst this is a great analogy, it is useless if we have never made a cheese sauce.

It is quite normal for sponsorship to evolve into a close and mutually supportive friendship. The "professional" sponsor will not be able to do this, nor will a sponsor we selected because we didn't like them.

To summarise, we are looking for somebody of the same sex, who has done the program, exhibits all the signs of a happy successful life and has the time to talk to us.

It can be surprising when we hear people talk of changing their sponsor. We are not buying a dog - it is not "for life". It is perfectly acceptable to swap sponsors. Sometimes people move away, or we decide that we have more rapport with somebody else. If we approach the change in a sensitive and mature manner, a sponsor will not be hurt or object.

With the help of a sponsor and a few trusted friends, we will be able to establish a routine of attending meetings that will help us develop a happy and enjoyable sobriety.

Recipe for a balanced life

It is now time to put the ingredients together, Program, Meetings, Sponsor and Friends. These soon provide a natural structure and it seems hard to understand how we thought there was a better way to live our lives.

It is impossible to dictate the blend that a specific person needs such as:

- Take one step and work through the detail of it thoroughly each month.
- Add five meetings per week.
- Meet and discuss the program with sponsor in a quiet room once a week.
- Invite two friends per month into our home to allow the detail to settle. (Be willing to reciprocate and visit theirs as well.)
- Once a day take a little time to be quiet and meditate.

It is perfectly acceptable to start with somebody else's recipe and work with that. We soon learn to take these ingredients and create a blend that suits us. Providing that all of the ingredients are included in our life it will work successfully, if it doesn't then we can adjust the quantities a little.

Time to work through the program becomes part of every day. The faster we work through the program and understand it the faster we get better. A step a day is probably too fast, a step a year is probably too slow. Remember that we can decide to do a step again and we have the rest of our life to keep working at it.

Choosing a sponsor, we need to get a sponsor as soon as possible. Remember that if we are tactful and honest it is not a problem to change sponsors later.

Sharing Honestly allows people to see who we really are. It gives people with experience of living sober an insight into how we are living our lives and it gives newcomers hope that they can recover.

People we admire, allow time for people to get to know us, learn to listen and take time to get to know other people. If we allow it to happen, we acquire worthwhile and meaningful friendships with more people than we can possibly imagine.

Number of Meetings, it is easy to reduce the number we attend and difficult to increase it. The best advice is to get to as many meetings as we can sensibly manage. In the early days, this would normally be more than three a week and as we progress rarely less than two a week.

Play the numbers game

If we honestly feel we are living within the guidelines of the program we can have the confidence to say that nobody has the right to tell us to change our lives.

For example, most of us find:

- We need more than one meeting a week.
- It difficult to survive in drinking situations
- As time passes, we need to be more vigilant for the illness creeping back in and poisoning our thoughts.

These are not facts, merely observations. It is true that for every quoted "statistic" we can search around and find the exceptions.

We might meet the lady who has achieved a happy and successful sobriety by attending one meeting a week or the man who enjoys going to nightclubs and dancing until the early hours of the morning. People told them that they were heading for a drink, but they have survived for many years and experience a happy sobriety.

Exceptions always exist, but it is more sensible to accept that we are likely to fail if we fight against the statistics. What kind of guide would let their clients choose a dangerous path without pointing out the safe one other people use?

Training the monkey!

It is impossible to tame a wild animal. The lions at the circus are not tame, but manipulated into performing as though they are. They will maul the lion tamer if he makes a mistake. The circus performer stays safe by keeping their mind on their job when they are in a dangerous situation.

The same is true for the monkey riding on our shoulder. If we stay within sensible boundaries, we are safe. We need to remain aware of our behaviour and make sure that we do not give the monkey an opening through which to attack us. If we get it right, the monkey rides quietly along with us and rarely gets a chance to intrude. To everybody else we appear cured of our incurable illness, but like the lion tamer, pain and death is one slip away.

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