

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path

The illness lies like a reef beneath the surface of a calm sea. In good weather, our boat sails cleanly over the hazard, but in strong tides, the rocks are capable of grinding mercilessly through the hull of our boat, plunging us into peril. A good sailor knows where the dangers lie in their coastal waters and when they must avoid certain stretches.

Chapter five in the Big Book starts with the line: *Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path*. It is obvious that many people do fail to achieve and maintain a sober life. Look around the meeting and do some maths, how many arrive through the doors, how many stick around? Where do the others go? Sadly, many give up. Rather than embracing the benefits on offer, they accept the first glimmerings of a better life and drift away. It is not just the meetings they abandon, but also the safety of AA and many find that the illness is waiting for them.

We are never safe

The absolute truth is that regardless of how long we have been dry, we are never safe from the illness. A fact that will never change is that the nature of an alcoholic is to drink. To an outsider it would seem logical that the longer we remain sober, the easier it gets - this isn't true. An old timer has to resist all of the temptations that a newcomer encounters, as well as coping with more subtle ones that creep in later. Life is like learning a martial art. We learn moves to counter each ploy our opponent exposes, but a new trick that we have not encountered before can defeat us. The monkey can continually bounce us off the mat whilst we try to discover a counter-move, or we can look for help. Over time, our knowledge of the game improves, but our opponent, the monkey, is also improving. The final objective of its game is to find a way to make drinking seem acceptable. If we allow this to happen, we are almost certainly heading for a slip – a drink. The term “slip” seems too lightweight for such an enormous event, but seen as an acronym for Sobriety Lost Its Priority, it seems perfect.

Early days

Nobody is motivated into trying AA merely out of a passing interest and we are particularly vulnerable when we first walk through the doors of AA. We are not usually capable of understanding or accepting how serious our illness is and we look for “loop holes” that will allow us to drink again.

Some people arrive apparently determined that they are not going to stop drinking. They might stick around for a short time because they are under the eagle eye of someone who escorts them to meetings, but they listen selectively and use this to justify why AA is wrong for them.

What is there to lose?

Even when we have decided to take it seriously, it can be hard to stay motivated. At the beginning, we can use the number of days we have been sober as a form of incentive. We can tell ourselves that we have achieved “x” days, weeks or months without a drink and we are not willing to waste all of the effort it took to get to this point. The accumulated days in themselves actually count for little. Not drinking one day at a time is essential, but if the only benefit we feel we are getting is that we are not drinking, we will probably start again.

“Just not drinking” is the lowest point we survive at and we all feel this way at times during our recovery. Each day not drinking, we remain clear of insanity, each time we drink, we pull the trigger in our selfish game of Russian roulette. If we can see each day as a contribution towards a better way of life, we are in with a chance.

Failing to accept all of the implications of Alcoholism

A common description of the thinking before embarking on a bout of drinking is the desire to take a holiday from the “AA thing”. Although we have stopped drinking, we are usually trying to act the same as we always have. The idea strikes us that just for the one evening we can take a break. We simply want to have our old life back for a short time.

“A” was a man who had achieved great levels of success in his business life and to all of his acquaintances he was a “jolly good chap”. If a charity needed somebody to jump out of an airplane or run a marathon to raise funds, “A” was the man. When he returned from each drinking session he proclaimed that it was “too easy” to recover. He explained that if only it would take more than a couple of weeks to recover, he could accept the idea that he was progressively killing himself. At each point in his descent, he failed to attribute the problem to alcoholism. His business failed, but that was the bank and a couple of rogue customers. His jaw was broken in a brawl, but that was simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. His doctors warned that his heart was

failing, but that was merely the “nanny state” trying to restrain a free spirit. Each time he returned he uttered the same plea that he wished it wasn’t so easy to recover. Finally, death granted his wish.

“B” was a man who turned things around from living rough on the street. His life improved as he progressed from hostels into dry houses and finally he moved into his own first apartment. He loved where recovery had taken him, but lost control of his finances. After a difficult meeting with his bank manager, he picked up a few cans. They were a way of relieving the tension he was feeling. He didn’t want to lose what he had gained, but did not see that they would really harm him that much. He was wrong. He rapidly descended back through the stages he had come up through and ended up back on the street.

Perennial “slippers” attend meetings often proclaiming that they fully understand and appreciate the benefits they are experiencing and then turn up to confess that they have been drinking again.

Whilst these people accept that they have an alcohol problem they don’t accept the full implications of step one – *Admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable*. They admit that they get in a mess when they drink, but assume that they will be able to regain control quickly enough not to do any lasting damage – they are wrong.

Stress and excuses

It is common to believe that drink is the only way to relieve our stress. It sounds acceptable and we can imagine people condoning our actions. Stress is an excuse we have used in the past and this is the most common reason for people to drink on television. We have to accept that we cannot drink – regardless of how we are feeling and that we need to talk to somebody before we do.

A woman felt that she was facing an unsolvable problem. She wanted to install a childproof gate at the bottom of her stairs. Her dilemma was that the fittings would damage the expensive new wallpaper her mother had paid for, but she knew that she wouldn’t forgive herself if her child fell down the stairs. The debate seemed to rage inside her head until she screamed for relief.

A woman knew that her husband was out drinking with his friends and felt that it would be stressful when he came home. Her thoughts played and replayed how he would roll in through the door. Each time she went over it the situation got worse until she imagined that they would have a screaming row and that he would beat her senseless. She decided it was better to be drunk when she faced him.

A teacher felt that the government was placing ridiculous demands upon him. At first, he grumbled to his fellow teachers who didn’t seem to be willing to take any action. Then he moved on to complaining to his head teacher who listened, but simply replied with the “party line” about how they all had to work under these difficult circumstances. He didn’t feel like he could get anybody to take him seriously and finally the frustration seemed to mount out of control and he had to drink.

The ever-present monkey whispers constantly in our ear, “They shouldn’t be treating me this way”, or “They will criticise me”. These are destructive thoughts. We rarely question who “they” are and why they have so much power to unsettle our thinking.

Our need to be right and seen as right can be overpowering. This is simply another incarnation of Pride in our behaviour. Whether we are right or wrong is irrelevant, because we cannot live with conflict for too long. We can remove the danger and disarm these thoughts by letting go and stopping trying to control everything. If we continue to battle with them insisting that we are right then we will almost certainly lose, possibly not just the argument, but our life.

After doing the program

After we have done the program, we are still vulnerable to these early problems, but the excuses can also take on a different form. We are aware that we are alcoholic and that we risk a lot by drinking again. The monkey is always on our shoulder and tricks us into justifying a drink by placing the idea that we can either keep it secret, or that we can return submissively to the meetings having merely lost a little of our time in AA.

It rarely works out this way and if we survive the first occurrence, subsequent ones quickly follow. What had been a “one off” gamble becomes acceptable and we are once again on the merry-go-round of alcoholism. Just like the ride at the fairground, at some point the attendant will appear with their hand outstretched for payment.

Teaching others a lesson/ Cry for help

We can feel that somebody is putting us under too much pressure. This pressure can take many forms. It could be that our partner seems to have dumped a load of household tasks onto us so that we have no time for

ourselves. They could have booked to go out with some heavy drinking friends from our past or spent too much money from the joint account. We imagine their mortification when they realise that their behaviour has forced us to throw away our precious sobriety.

Sobriety has a way of making us feel like we can handle any situation life throws at us and we act as though the alcoholic we once were is long gone. In reality, we merely have a thin veneer of sanity, scratch us and the old behaviour is just beneath the surface. We can be suffering, but reluctant to speak out and stand up for our rights. We opt for a more dramatic gesture and justify our action by claiming that we were in so much emotional pain that we had block out the world and our thinking by taking a drink.

A desire to start again

I felt that I had never achieved the levels of happiness that I saw in other people's recovery. Others came in after me and seemed to be able to accept the program without arguing about every tiny detail. They certainly seemed to get a better understanding of higher powers and spirituality than I ever did.

I had been in AA for about six years when I had the bright idea, "Go back drinking and then you can work through the program again and find out where you went wrong". I was quite pleased with this thought, because it seemed so logical and I was sure that my new sponsor would approve because it would give them the chance to guide me through the program from the beginning.

We were driving back from a meeting when I tentatively suggested my good idea. He went quiet and then said, "Why not skip the drinking part? We can pretend that you have already done that and we can start to work through the steps from the beginning". I immediately felt cheated of my justified "last drink" and then I felt a bit stupid for not having come up with the idea myself.

I went through each of the steps again and this time it clicked. I followed the suggestions and stopped arguing about the details. Finally like a light being switched on I grasped the idea of a Higher Power and my sobriety has been a valued gift ever since.

Never abandoning the belief that we "gave up" something

We feel that we are recovering by "running with the hounds", but every so often, our heart desires a jaunt with the foxes. Although we claim to be happy with the way we are now living, we have an underlying belief that we have accepted a second best or crippled existence. When we hear of somebody arranging to do something that we used to enjoy, such as a trip to a sporting event or a night in a jazz club, we suddenly feel left out and envious. These occasions were rarely about the actual event, but about how much alcohol we could consume and although we make a logical decision not to go along, we still feel excluded.

As adolescents, many of us experienced the need to have the right label on our clothes and felt the pressure to show that we were part of the tribe. Now AA awakens our urge to rebel and replaces our parents by forcing us into wearing sensible shoes. Feeling excluded from the "tribe" is a powerful emotion. Not drinking doesn't actually exclude us from much that life offers and contrary to our thinking: *we fit in- until we drink.*

I grew up in one of the toughest parts of the city and I had either to be part of the gang or live in fear. Although I am small, I could fit in because I was bright and I could work things out. I cut the deals for the stolen cars and I held the cash to buy the drugs.

I found myself in AA at an early age and soon I was living a completely different life. I went to college to get an education, but when I looked for jobs, I felt that my background always held me back. I told people how I preferred my life today than where I had been heading, but inside I felt "second class" living on hand-outs.

One night I met the father of one of my old friends and we started to talk. As I walked home, my mind was racing. With all my knowledge, I didn't need to drink or use drugs again and this would make me even sharper. Within a week, I had made some calls and done a couple of break-ins to get some cash. Within two months, I was making money and handling drugs. Within six months I was using and drinking again, I flushed nine years sobriety in less than nine months.

The climb back out of this pit was the hardest thing I ever did. It took me years to recover from the deceit and dishonesty and I can now see how shallow I had been in my original acceptance.

Unwilling to accept defeat

A normal drinker doesn't understand why we would need to "surrender" to drink. For them it is merely a minor part of their entertainment. They may enjoy a nice glass of wine with a meal, or a cool beer whilst relaxing by a sunlit stream. Certainly, it is pleasant, but not worth fighting a battle for.

However, the alcoholic perceives these pleasures as their right and perseveres beyond rational behaviour to maintain them. We imagine ourselves as the battered boxer who refuses to let his corner throw in the towel to save him. In stories, he wins because despite the evidence, he suddenly produces an unexpected recovery to defeat his opponent. Unlike the fantasy of fiction, in real life the battered underdog rarely wins the fight, they simply suffer a deadly beating.

I had always accomplished anything I decided to achieve. I played sport at semi-professional level and I had moved into commerce by turning a failing business into a profit making concern. As a drinker, I prided myself on being able to escort my drunken friends' home at the end of the night.

I started to find myself inexplicably drunk and this led me to talk to my doctor. He explained that I was an alcoholic and suggested I should get treatment. I attended AA, but the idea of stopping completely seemed the attitude of a "quitter". I decided that if I could stop drinking for two years I would prove I could control my drinking. As I approached the end of the two years, I undertook a controlled drinking course that finished shortly before my own deadline. With my usual arrogance, I refused to commence their controlled path until I had completed my target of two years abstinence.

When I tried to control my drinking, I failed. I was convinced there was nothing wrong with the basic plan, it just needed to be refined. I opted for maintaining a cycle of control, decline and clinic. I was in a hotel when I had my last drink. As I raised the glass to my lips, I saw myself reflected in the mirrored wall behind the bar. The man in the mirror looked scared, he knew that he was about to lose control. The humiliation of this final bender stripped all of the excuses away from me. I could not drink and the first one did the damage, regardless of will power, intelligence, planning and money, drink had finally beaten me.

Regardless of how we yearn for the impossible, we have to accept that we cannot do what other people can. People who can't eat seafood don't keep ending up in hospital because they gave it "one last try". If they did, we would consider them insane.

After a long period of sobriety

It seems puzzling that somebody could appear to be a stalwart member of AA and yet end up picking up a drink again. It happens quite frequently, we are all alcoholics and the need to stay away from one drink one day at a time never reduces in importance.

Questionable behaviour

We find ourselves drawn into something that we feel we cannot discuss with our sponsor or friends. It is something that our long experience allows us to justify as acceptable, but we can also see that it could be misinterpreted as dangerous and so we choose to keep quiet. This dishonesty creates a barrier that becomes impossible for us to overcome even when we are regularly attending meetings.

"D" was a woman with eight years sobriety when she discovered alcohol free whisky flavoured drinks. She knew they were safe, but rather than risk any misunderstanding she decided she would keep it a secret. One day she was feeling especially in need of comfort and decided to experiment with a small quantity of the real thing. The experiment went well, nobody noticed and she felt more relaxed than she had done for a long time. With the line crossed, she allowed herself a small drink every day and inevitably lost control.

Her son, who had only been a young child when she came to AA quickly turned upon her. Her husband became cold and dispassionate. He had barely coped with her final drinking days and couldn't go through the lies and deceit again. She was unable to regain sobriety and suffered a miserable existence ended by a fatal fall down a flight of stairs.

"E" had seven years sobriety when she decided it was a good idea to clean out her husband's drinks cabinet and give all of the bottles a polish. Whilst she did this, she decided to take the top off one and sniff the fumes. She didn't drink for a couple of weeks and could justify retrying the experiment with a slight difference. This time she did take a small drink of it, but not enough to affect her. After a couple of months, she had progressed into secret binge drinking. When her family found out, she lost the trust she had built up and subsequently lost everything.

Believing that the program will address any problem

We are encouraged to accept a spiritual awakening, but we can take this to an extreme. We can argue that our Higher Power is capable of anything and can therefore remove our alcoholism completely. Armed with the idea that our Higher Power "watches over us" we can justify any action claiming that if it is not God's will then something will prevent us from proceeding.

After seventeen years, "G" believed that by attending meetings and becoming active in his local church, he achieved not only a reprieve, but attained a full cure from his alcoholism. He started to drink the wine during the blessing with the knowledge that it was the "blood of Christ". He progressed on to accepting a small glass of sherry offered to toast a happy occasion. His drinking quickly ran out of control and the insanity of alcoholism destroyed his home life.

Over his nine-year recovery, "H" had been involved in AA at almost every level of service. His wife felt neglected, met somebody, packed her bags and left. "H" made a great display and proclaimed that the program was there to help him survive anything life threw at him. Even though he attended many meetings, he found himself suffering and isolated, eventually he decided the only option was to drink.

Is there any hope?

Understanding the program is different to practising it. Most of the people in the examples above could quote page numbers from the Big Book, discuss the program and help others to recognise where they were failing.

Practising the program is moving our acceptance out of our heads and into our hearts. Earlier in this book, we saw that all of the world's religions and many practitioners in mental health recognise pride, envy, greed, lust and anger as dangerous traits. The AA program is a way to learn how to adopt their positive opposites into our life. When we accept that vigilance is not a chore, but a necessary part of our life then this statement applies:

"Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path"

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