

## Staying sober under all conditions

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf explains Jewish spirituality as: *walking along a street that's studded with precious stones, and the goal is to gather as many stones as you can or a few of them that are beautiful. The street is three thousand years old, so there are many precious gems in it. Some of the jewels are easily dislodged from the pavement, so you can easily put them into your life, but others will remain stuck in the pavement. Some are so obviously beautiful that you can understand them just by looking at them. Some of them are very obscure and hard to appreciate.*

AA doesn't have a three thousand year tradition to call upon, but we can borrow wisdom from any source. These next sections offer useful, borrowed gems that can improve an alcoholic's life. Remember that by growing we don't lose anything except the shackles of alcoholism.

## Stay away from one drink, one day at a time

This is a concept that we probably encountered at our first meeting. To remain sober all we need to do is to stay away from our first drink on a daily basis. If we don't take the first then the second and subsequent drinks cannot occur. We often challenge this idea. We argue that if we accept that we have an incurable illness and that drinking again is insanity, why not simply stop forever. This is yet another symptom of our illness. We seek to argue and impress when we should simply accept. We plan never to drink again and we are going to do this by not drinking one day at a time.

*I was a few months away from my last drink driving down one of those long straight roads that go on into the distance forever. My mind suddenly said, "That is your life, on and on, Christmas, Holidays and Deaths all without a drink". Shaken, I knew that I couldn't face the idea. What would I do when faced with the death of my parents or a friend? There was absolutely no point in continuing trying to stay away from drink because I could see that I couldn't do it.*

*In the midst of this desolation echoed the suggestion that I had heard at the meetings: Stay away from it for the rest of the day and make a new decision tomorrow. My spirits lifted as this finally made sense. I knew that I might decide to drink again, but it wasn't going to be today.*

Instead of attempting the unachievable ideal of stopping forever, we can manage the smaller and more achievable decision – not to drink today. At first, it can prove too difficult to achieve one day, but we can break it down further and not drink for the next hour, after which we can reassess the benefit of drinking. If during the hour, we take positive action to help ourselves we will stay safe.

In layman terms, alcohol is rich in sugar and energy, when our body feels starved and wants feeding it will trigger a craving. Due to habit and the illness, our first reaction is to assume that we need a drink. Because we have always justified or rationalised our feelings, we genuinely might not understand what people are talking about in "craving". We have been thirsty and when we felt like a drink, we took one. The cravings are insidious. They are the hinted suggestion that a drink would be nice, if ignored, they return in another guise- possibly that we deserve a drink. They escalate until a drink is absolutely the only thing that will enable us to survive. If we give in to the first urge, we never experience the escalation and consequently don't recognise the process.

There is no scientific support for the following simple pieces of wisdom, but we can claim proof that they work.

Talking to another alcoholic is something we usually find difficult. No matter how alien it is to us, this technique has stood the test of time. A phrase like "a problem shared is a problem halved," would not exist if it had never worked. It is almost certain that we will reduce or remove a problem if we pick up the phone and talk to another person.

Taking a drink with some sugar in it, in this health conscious world, how we recoil from such a suggestion. We drank liquid that could run a rocket engine, but now object to added sugar. We were on a route to certain death, but we don't want to put on weight.

A pocket full of sweets can save the life of an alcoholic embarking on recovery. There can be no excuses for us. The illness is going to use its considerable cunning to trick us into taking a drink. By convincing us to

ridicule the idea, we leave ourselves open to attack. We can actually feel self-conscious buying sweets, but this is simply the illness fighting back.

*Changing our habits* is essential, trying to behave exactly as we always have, except not drinking, doesn't work and can cause "drinking thinking". If we drank at a particular time, or with certain friends we can be tempted to switch to soft drinks and carry on doing this.

*When I stopped drinking, I carried on meeting my friends, but switched to ordering tomato juice. One bottle was merely a mouthful compared to the beer I used to consume and I quickly escalated to having four in a glass. It was a bit of a joke, but my friends accepted this. Then one night as the barmaid served me she laughed and said, "Why don't you just get a tin of soup and a straw". I was furious and immediately ordered a beer...*

Even if we don't drink, we can feel uneasy. Instead of perpetuating the same behaviour, it is better to throw ourselves out of our routine with something different, like taking some exercise or visiting a library.

### **Denial, denial, denial**

Denial is such an intrinsic part of alcoholism we call it "the illness of denial". We deny that we have a problem or argue that the problem is everybody else's to deal with. We only had a drink because we were bored, lonely, tired, angry etc. Our family and friends continue the denial. They prefer to justify our behaviour rather than recognise that we are in the grip of an illness such as alcoholism.

*A friend used his mother's denial of his illness to obtain alcohol. He had returned to his mother with a tale that his wife was refusing to let him drink the strong dark beer that kept him healthy. His mother saw her fearful and weak son and wanted to help him. She was over eighty and could only walk with the aid of a frame, but every day she went to the shops to buy his "medicine". His wife pleaded with his mother to stop, but she could see how much her son improved when he had his beer and continued until he died.*

Even in recovery, we continue to deny how much the monkey and our own self-will influences our motives. We are the masters of justification and learning to be honest about our behaviour is the part of living sober that eventually means people will trust what we are saying. Only by recognising that we are denying the full extent of the sickness, do we really come to terms with it and start to recover. Certainly, in the early days this is characterised by the phrase:

I can't be an alcoholic because...

- My friends drink more than I ever did.
- A glass of wine is good for circulation and I only drink wine.
- Alcoholics drink all the time and I only drink at the weekend.

*I still look back bemused at my first contact with AA. To me, appearance was everything and so the house was tidy, I wore expensive clothes and thought I looked great. I couldn't see the overall impression, like an invalid, I sat propped up in a chair, wasted and frail with my feet bloated and my skin a sickly grey. I listened, but they seemed to be talking nonsense when they talked about dying. My own "I can't be because" was that because I hadn't had an alcoholic fit for nearly a year I was getting better. It was only a matter of time before I recovered fully. I wished them well and they left.*

### **HALT – Danger Sign (Hungry Angry Lonely Tired)**

It is worth thinking of these as the younger brothers of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. When we experience one, the rest usually appear. Their arrival heralds a "brain storm" of dangerous thinking, but they are magical and travel in disguise. Regardless of length of sobriety, we insist that "people, places or things" are the problem and fail to recognise the true cause of our feelings.

*I am certain that my mouth dropped open when I heard this at my first meeting and I thought somebody must have told them how I lived my life. I was always late in the morning and rushed out without eating anything. I lived in constant conflict with the fools that I had to work with leaving me angry and isolated from them. To*

*make up for their incompetence I worked through my lunch break and long into the evening. I finished my day by grabbing an instant meal of some form and drowning the day out with drink. The idea of eliminating these stresses from my life seemed more difficult than stopping drinking.*

We rarely manage to avoid them completely. We all choose to skip lunch or to put more into the day than we can cope with. When we are having a difficult time, it is worth running a quick check. Mentally say, "HALT" and see if we are suffering the aftermath of allowing them to occur. We can usually laugh at our own stupidity and see that there is nothing wrong that a chat and a sandwich won't cure.

### **Going back to basics**

People say this at meetings as if they had progressed to some higher level of the program. They confess that life has become too difficult and they are correcting the drift by "going back to basics". There is no higher level, there are only basics and of course, we should go back to them.

*I had been lucky that my company had supported me when I needed to take a few months off with "stress". They weren't aware that I had attended my first AA meeting and after a faltering start had discovered I was an alcoholic.*

*In school, I had always excelled at study and exams and thought the AA program was just another test I had to revise for and pass. I followed the suggestions, read the books and soon felt able to return to work. My company allowed me to ease myself back in part time, but I quickly returned to running most of the department. As I did this, I found that "living in the day" and the other sayings didn't help during my hectic working day. The demands of work conflicted with my regular meetings and if I prayed at all, it was in the car on the way to the office.*

*I lasted six months before my wife found me sitting in the car on the driveway long after I had left the house. I took the day off and spoke with a few friends from AA. That evening I was at a meeting and shared what I had been doing. It seemed too simple, but all I could do was to hope to return to the basics of the program that had put me on my feet in the first place.*

Correcting ourselves after realising we have drifted is how most of us progress and there is nothing wrong with acknowledging that we need to return to the principles of the program. Our old life was our comfort zone for a long time and to expect to change, never to drift back into old behaviour would be unrealistic.

### **Accept that alcoholism is an illness**

*A memory haunts me. I remember that even though I had told her not to, my wife had gone out and left me in charge of getting our children ready for bed. I was annoyed with her because I had been working all day and wanted to unwind. I put the children in the bath, squirted them with washing up liquid and went downstairs. I put on some loud music and opened a bottle. I intended to relax even if she was determined that I wouldn't.*

*After a few more beers, I heard a small voice from the top of the stairs, "Dad, can we get out, we are all blue and crinkly". I ran up the stairs shaking my fist screaming at them. I couldn't believe they had the nerve to disturb me. The look of fear on my son's face is etched into my memory. He stood trembling and crying whilst I raged at them.*

*When I embarked upon recovery, I could not conceive how I would ever be able to live with the memory of creating such pain in their young lives.*

Grasping the fact that alcoholism is an illness is an important step towards accepting a recovery. If we believe alcoholism is an illness, we understand the statement, "can you feel guilty about having spots when you catch measles". Clinicians worldwide recognise it, but we still argue that this isn't true. Who are we to argue against these people? The answer of course is that we are alcoholic and regardless of the facts, arrogant enough to argue against anybody and anything.

*Whilst accepting it as an illness frees us from guilt concerning our actions before we knew we had it. It makes us responsible, regardless of the justification, for not re-activating our behaviour.*

We can no longer shrug our shoulders and ignore the consequences of the decision to drink. We know that to drink is to descend into insanity. More than that, as we work through our defects, we realise we cannot hide behind the belief that the only person we hurt is ourselves.

### **Never test sobriety**

This doesn't mean doing things like holding a drink close to our mouth and not drinking it. There are many ways we "test" our sobriety, dramatically declaring, "If this doesn't stop I will end up drinking again," admits the possibility of drinking being an option.

We sometimes try to apply conditions regarding sobriety as motivational goals. We insist that we will stay sober if we manage to regain our partner and family. It seems tempting to use this kind of trick as encouragement, but they can only work for a short time and if the condition succeeds or fails, what do we do then?

Here are a few examples of other ways we test our sobriety:

- Going too long without meetings
- Pushing the boundaries of honest living a bit too far
- Becoming too proud to share openly about a difficulty
- Wandering aimlessly up the drinks aisle at the supermarket

*It had always been my Saturday lunchtime routine to go to the corner shop. I would buy a loaf of bread, cigarettes, a lottery ticket and a half bottle of rum. When I started trying to get sober, I simply kept to the same routine, but didn't buy the rum. I talked to somebody at the meeting and they suggested that I was "testing my sobriety" by needlessly shopping where I could buy drink. I thought they were being silly, especially when my local shop is so handy.*

*One particular weekend I was upset. My son was supposed to be coming home and I had been looking forward to the visit. He called and said that something had come up and he couldn't make the journey. I had wanted him to see how much I had improved after my short time not drinking. I went to the corner shop and I don't remember buying the rum, but it was there when I got home. I knew I shouldn't leave it on the kitchen table, but I also knew that I was going to be on my own for the whole weekend and nobody would know if I drank it. It was open and half-empty before I even thought about it. It took many months to pluck up the courage to go back to the meeting and confess how stupid I had been.*

### **Don't make any major decisions for the first two years**

We are all told this, but rarely believe it. It is only after we have lived through the first two years that we can see what a great piece of advice it is and start to "pass it on" to newcomers ourselves. At the two-year point, we look back and see that we had been functioning with the emotional stability of a two year old on food additives. We also accept that we are probably still not as stable as we had once imagined and continue to avoid making important decisions for ourselves. Whilst most of us ignore this advice, somebody occasionally listens, or at least gains a momentary pause in a headlong spiral into an avoidable disaster.

*When I finally accepted defeat and came to my first meeting, I knew that my real problem was my husband. He was a pig and anybody who had to live with him would drink. All of my other friends had agreed with me that he was a burden and I was a little surprised that the women in the group didn't understand what I was telling them. Instead, they just kept saying, "stop drinking and keep coming to meetings."*

*As the days turned into weeks and months, I was still convinced that I would have to get divorced from him before I would be able to enjoy a full life again. The people at the meeting kept smiling and telling me to wait for two years before I did anything. I didn't notice the point at which he changed, but it was some time after I had stopped drinking and started to work through the program. I realised that he wasn't always wrong and actually had some well-buried feelings. I then found that we enjoyed life together and I couldn't remember what was so difficult to live with. I now feel that I was blaming all of my defects on him and that by working on removing them from me, I removed them from him as well.*

## **Inventory Taking (of others)**

Inventory taking is possibly one of the most subtle weapons the monkey can use against us. It is a worthless thief of time and peace of mind. We could be enjoying life, but instead we become transfixed by the perceived wrongdoing of others. This is not the healthy inventory taking of step four, this is when we look at other people and judge what they should or should not be doing. We usually first hear that we should not take other people's inventories when we are critical of somebody at a meeting and it is a common mistake to believe that this instruction only applies within AA. It can take a long time before we come to realise that we seem to live our lives by continually judging everything from individuals up to major international corporations.

*My ex-wife had always been a bit unstable – after all, she married me when I was drinking. We had a daughter, but we separated and I didn't see either of them for quite a long time.*

*When I started to have contact again, I found myself drawn into their arguments. My daughter told me of her mother's behaviour and I was frustrated that she had to survive in such a damaging home life. My ex-wife told me of our daughter's tantrums. I felt trapped in the middle as I watched them throw stones at each other. My time became absorbed in the attempt to reconcile them, dragging me down until it suddenly struck me how helpless I was. All I was witnessing was their relationship and I was entirely powerless to intervene.*

*At times, they still draw me into their world of tantrums and accusations and I have yet to benefit from my involvement. I am sure they are wrong, but it is not mine to judge. They seem to need this friction to survive. Maybe one day I will be able to accept it.*

*We never take inventory in a constructive fashion inspiring us into positive action. Our contentment is inversely proportional to the amount of time we spend judging how other people are behaving.*

## **Never say - At my stage in sobriety**

This phrase will cross all of our minds during our recovery. Initially, we possibly cannot imagine how we would ever try to cope with a problem without the support of the group or our sponsor, but it is almost certain that we will feel this way at some time. The monkey traps us with it and prevents us from sharing honestly. We encounter a problem that we believe we should be able to handle and feel unable to reveal it in case people laugh at us.

*I was over ten years sober when they asked me to join the golf club committee. This meant that I could not get to my home group every week as the meetings coincided, but I was confident that this was not going to be a problem and I knew I could make a real difference to the way the club was running.*

*The stupidity of these people stunned me. At every committee meeting, I had to lose my temper before they would listen. I knew this was not "sober" behaviour, but it seemed to be the only way to manage them. I remember thinking "At my time in sobriety I should be able to cope with these people".*

*My frustration spilled over into my home life and I noticed that my whole family were also stupid and I had to shout at them constantly. Finally, this frustration came with me to an AA meeting and I ended up hurting somebody I thought needed putting back on track. Outside the meeting, my sponsor spoke to me and enquired about what I had been doing. He "suggested" that I had my priorities wrong and that I might not be up to taking on the battles of the golf world. Although it hurt to give up the committee, I went along with the suggestion. Incredibly quickly, the people in AA stopped being stupid and so did my family. I don't know about the golf committee, today I just play golf there.*

We have become proud of our sobriety and don't want to go to the meeting and confess that something as simple as life has thrown us. We certainly don't want to risk somebody coming up to us and giving us advice about how to cope with the problem. It is essential that we recognise and laugh at the thought as soon as it comes into our head. *Learning to laugh at our own pomposity removes another of the weapons from the hands of the monkey and helps us to understand humility.*

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