

Living Sober

“ . . . Treatment primarily involves
not taking a drink ”

American Medical Association

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., New York

LIVING SOBER

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First Printing, 1975
Fifty-second Printing, 2020

*This is A.A. General Service
Conference-approved literature*

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 75-328-153

ISBN 978-0-916856-04-5

Printed in the United States of America

About that title...

Even the words “stay sober”—let alone *live* sober—offended many of us when we first heard such advice. Although we had done a lot of drinking, many of us never felt drunk, and were sure we almost never appeared or sounded drunk. Many of us never staggered, fell, or got thick tongues; many others were never disorderly, never missed a day at work, never had automobile accidents, and certainly were never hospitalized nor jailed for drunkenness.

We knew lots of people who drank more than we did, and people who could not handle their drinks at all. We were not like that. So the suggestion that maybe we should “stay sober” was almost insulting.

Besides, it seemed unnecessarily drastic. How could we live that way? Surely, there was nothing wrong with a cocktail or two at a business lunch or before dinner. Wasn't everyone entitled to relax with a few drinks, or have a couple of beers before going to bed?

However, after we learned some of the facts about the illness called alcoholism, our opinions shifted. Our eyes have been opened to the fact that apparently millions of people have the disease of alcoholism. Medical science does not explain its “cause,” but medical experts on alcoholism assure us that any drinking at all leads to trouble for the alcoholic, or problem, drinker. Our experience overwhelmingly confirms this.

So not drinking at all—that is, staying sober—becomes the basis of recovery from alcoholism. And let it be emphasized: Living sober turns out to be not at all grim, boring, and uncomfortable, as we had feared, but rather something we begin to enjoy and find much more exciting than our drinking days. We'll show you how.

Some tips on LIVING SOBER

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**Some questions often asked
by new nondrinkers—and pages
that offer some answers**

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Why 'not drinking'?

We members of Alcoholics Anonymous see the answer to that question when we look honestly at our own past lives. Our experience clearly proves that any drinking at all leads to serious trouble for the alcoholic, or problem drinker. In the words of the American Medical Association:

Alcohol, aside from its addictive qualities, also has a psychological effect that modifies thinking and reasoning. One drink can change the thinking of an alcoholic so that he feels he can tolerate another, and then another, and another. . . .

The alcoholic can learn to completely control his disease, but the affliction cannot be cured so that he can return to alcohol without adverse consequences.*

And we repeat: Somewhat to our surprise, staying sober turns out not to be the grim, wet-blanket experience we had expected! While we were drinking, a life without alcohol seemed like no life at all. But for most members of A.A., living sober is *really* living—a joyous experience. We much prefer it to the troubles we had with drinking.

One more note: anyone can *get* sober. We have all done it lots of times. The trick is to stay and to *live* sober. That is what this booklet is about.

*From an official statement issued July 31, 1964

1 Using this booklet

This booklet does *not* offer a plan for recovery from alcoholism. The Alcoholics Anonymous Steps that summarize its program of recovery are set forth in detail in the books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. Those Steps are not interpreted here, nor are the processes they cover discussed in this booklet.

Here, we tell only some methods we have used for living *without* drinking. You are welcome to all of them, whether you are interested in Alcoholics Anonymous or not.

Our drinking was connected with many habits—big and little. Some of them were thinking habits, or things we felt inside ourselves. Others were doing habits—things we did, actions we took.

In getting used to not drinking, we have found that we needed new habits to take the place of those old ones.

(For example, instead of taking that next drink—the one in your hand or the one you've been planning on—can you just postpone it until you read to the bottom of page 6? Sip some soda or fruit juice, instead of an alcoholic beverage, while you read. A little later, we'll explain more fully what's behind this change in habits.)

After we spent a few months practicing these new, sober habits or ways of acting and thinking, they became almost second nature to most of us, as drinking used to be. Not drinking has become natural and easy, not a long, dreary struggle.

These practical, hour-by-hour methods can easily be used at home, at work, or in social gatherings. Also included here are several things we have learned *not* to do, or to avoid. These were things that, we now see, once tempted us to drink or otherwise endangered our recovery.

We think you'll find many or even all of the suggestions discussed here valuable in living sober, with comfort and ease. There is nothing significant about the order in which the booklet presents them. They can be rearranged in any way you like that *works*. Nor is this a complete

listing. Practically every A.A. member you meet can give you at least one more good idea not mentioned here. And you will probably come up with brand-new ones that work for you. We hope you pass them on to others who can also profit by them.

A.A. as a fellowship does not formally endorse nor recommend for all alcoholics every line of action included here. But each practice mentioned has proved useful to some members, and may be helpful to you.

This booklet is planned as a handy manual for consulting from time to time, not something to be read straight through just once, then forgotten.

Here are two cautions which have proved helpful:

A. Keep an open mind. Perhaps some of the suggestions offered here will not appeal to you. If that is the case, we have found that, instead of rejecting them forever, it's a better idea to just set them aside for the time being. If we don't close our minds to them permanently, we can always go back later on and try out ideas we didn't like before—if we want to.

For instance, some of us found that, in our initial nondrinking days, the suggestions and comradeship offered by an A.A. sponsor helped us greatly to stay sober. Others of us waited until we had visited many groups and met many A.A.'s before we finally called on a sponsor's help.

Some of us found formal prayer a strong aid in not drinking, while others fled from anything that suggested religion. But all of us are free to change our minds on these ideas later if we choose.

Many of us found that the sooner we started work on the Twelve Steps offered as a program of recovery in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the better. Others of us felt the need to postpone this until we had been sober a little while.

The point is, there is no prescribed A.A. "right" way or "wrong" way. Each of us uses what is best for himself or herself—without closing the door on other kinds of help we may find valuable at another time. And each of us tries to respect others' rights to do things differently.

Sometimes, an A.A. member will talk about taking the various parts of the program in cafeteria style—selecting what he likes and letting alone what he does not want. Maybe others will come along and pick up the unwanted parts—or maybe that member himself will go back later and take some of the ideas he previously rejected.

However, it is good to remember the temptation in a cafeteria to pick up nothing but a lot of desserts or starches or salads or some other food we particularly like. It serves as an important reminder to us to keep a balance in our lives.

In recovering from alcoholism, we found that we needed a *balanced* diet of ideas, even if some of them did not look, at first, as enjoyable as others. Like good food, good ideas did us no good unless we made intelligent use of them. And that leads to our second caution.

B. Use your common sense. We found that we have to use plain everyday intelligence in applying the suggestions that follow.

Like almost any other ideas, the suggestions in this booklet can be misused. For example, take the notion of eating candy. Obviously, alcoholics with diabetes, obesity, or blood-sugar problems have had to find substitutes, so they would not endanger their health, yet could still get the benefit of the candy-eating *idea* in recovery from alcoholism. (Many nutritionists favor protein-rich snacks over sweets as a general practice.) Also, it's not good for anybody to overdo this remedy. We should eat balanced meals in addition to the candy.

Another example is the use of the slogan "Easy Does It." Some of us have found that we could abuse this sensible notion, turning it into an excuse for tardiness, laziness, or rudeness. That is not, of course, what the slogan is intended for. Properly applied, it can be healing; misapplied, it can hinder our recovery. Some among us would add to it: "'Easy Does It'—but do it!"

It's clear that we have to use our intelligence in following any advice. Every method described here needs to be used with good judgment.

One more thing. A.A. does not pretend to offer scientific expertise on staying sober. We can share with you only our own personal experience, not professional theories and explanations.

So these pages offer no new medical shortcuts on how to stop drinking if you are still doing it, nor any miraculous secrets for shortening or avoiding a hangover.

Sometimes, getting sober can be done on your own at home; but frequently, prolonged drinking has caused such serious medical problems that you would be better advised to seek medical or hospital help for drying out. If you are that seriously ill, you may need such professional services before you can possibly be interested in what we offer here.

Many of us who were not that sick, however, have sweated it out in the company of other A.A. members. Because we have been through it ourselves, we can often help—in a layman's way—to relieve some of the misery and suffering. At least, we understand. We have been there.

So this booklet is about *not* drinking (rather than about *stopping* drinking). It's about living sober.

We have found that for us recovery *began* with not drinking—with getting sober and staying completely free of alcohol in any amount, and

in any form. We have also found that we have to stay away from other mind-changing drugs. We can move toward a full and satisfying life only when we stay sober. Sobriety is the launching pad for our recovery.

In a way, this booklet is about how to handle sobriety. (Before, we couldn't; so we drank.)

2 Staying away from the first drink

Expressions commonly heard in A.A. are "If you don't take that first drink, you can't get drunk" and "One drink is too many, but twenty are not enough."

Many of us, when we first began to drink, never wanted or took more than one or two drinks. But as time went on, we increased the number. Then, in later years, we found ourselves drinking more and more, some of us getting and staying very drunk. Maybe our condition didn't always show in our speech or our gait, but by this time we were never actually sober.

If that bothered us too much, we would cut down, or try to limit ourselves to just one or two, or switch from hard liquor to beer or wine. At least, we tried to limit the amount, so we would not get too disastrously drunk. Or we tried to hide how much we drank.

But all these measures got more and more difficult. Occasionally, we even went on the wagon, and did not drink at all for a while.

Eventually, we would go back to drinking—just one drink. And since that apparently did no serious damage, we felt it was safe to have another. Maybe that was all we took on that occasion, and it was a great relief to find we could take just one or two, then stop. Some of us did that many times.

But the experience proved to be a snare. It persuaded us that we could drink safely. And then there would come the occasion (some special celebration, a personal loss, or no particular event at all) when two or three made us feel fine, so we thought one or two more could not hurt. And with absolutely no intention of doing so, we found ourselves again drinking too much. We were right back where we had been—overdrinking without really wanting to.

Such repeated experiences have forced us to this logically inescapable conclusion: If we do not take the first drink, we never get drunk. Therefore, instead of planning never to get drunk, or trying to limit the

number of drinks or the amount of alcohol, we have learned to concentrate on avoiding only one drink: the first one.

In effect, instead of worrying about limiting the number of drinks at the end of a drinking episode, we avoid the one drink that starts it.

Sounds almost foolishly simplistic, doesn't it? It's hard for many of us now to believe that we never really figured this out for ourselves before we came to A.A. (Of course, to tell the truth, we never really wanted to give up drinking altogether, either, until we learned about alcoholism.) But the main point is: We know now that this is what works.

Instead of trying to figure out how many we could handle—four?—six?—a dozen?—we remember, “Just don't pick up that first drink.” It is so much simpler. The habit of thinking this way has helped hundreds of thousands of us stay sober for years.

Doctors who are experts on alcoholism tell us that there is a sound medical foundation for avoiding the first drink. It is the first drink which triggers, immediately or some time later, the compulsion to drink more and more until we are in drinking trouble again. Many of us have come to believe that our alcoholism is an addiction to the drug alcohol; like addicts of any sort who want to maintain recovery, we have to keep away from the first dose of the drug we have become addicted to. Our experience seems to prove this, as you can read in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and in our Grapevine magazine, and as you can hear wherever A.A. members get together and share their experiences.

3 Using the 24-hour plan

In our drinking days, we often had such bad times that we swore, “Never again.” We took pledges for as long as a year, or promised someone we would not touch the stuff for three weeks, or three months. And of course, we tried going on the wagon for various periods of time.

We were absolutely sincere when we voiced these declarations through gritted teeth. With all our hearts, we wanted never to be drunk again. We were determined. We swore off drinking altogether, intending to stay off alcohol well into some indefinite future.

Yet, in spite of our intentions, the outcome was almost inevitably the

same. Eventually, the memory of the vows, and of the suffering that led to them, faded. We drank again, and we wound up in more trouble. Our dry “forever” had not lasted very long.

Some of us who took such pledges had a private reservation: We told ourselves that the promise not to drink applied only to “hard stuff,” not to beer or wine. In that way we learned, if we did not already know it, that beer and wine could get us drunk, too—we just had to drink more of them to get the same effects we got on distilled spirits. We wound up as drunk on beer or wine as we had been before on the hard stuff.

Yes, others of us did give up alcohol completely and did keep our pledges exactly as promised, until the time was up.... Then we ended the drought by drinking again, and were soon right back in trouble, with an additional load of new guilt and remorse.

With such struggles behind us now, in A.A. we try to avoid the expressions “on the wagon” and “taking the pledge.” They remind us of our failures.

Although we realize that alcoholism is a permanent, irreversible condition, our experience has taught us to make no long-term promises about staying sober. We have found it more realistic—and more successful—to say, “I am not taking a drink *just for today*.”

Even if we drank yesterday, we can plan not to drink today. We may drink tomorrow—who knows whether we’ll even be alive then?—but for *this* 24 hours, we decide not to drink. No matter what the temptation or provocation, we determine to go to any extremes necessary to avoid a drink *today*.

Our friends and families are understandably weary of hearing us vow, “This time I really mean it,” only to see us lurch home loaded. So we do not promise them, or even each other, not to drink. Each of us promises only herself or himself. It is, after all, our own health and life at stake. We, not our family or friends, have to take the necessary steps to stay well.

If the desire to drink is really strong, many of us chop the 24 hours down into smaller parts. We decide not to drink for, say, at least one hour. We can endure the temporary discomfort of not drinking for just one more hour; then one more, and so on. Many of us began our recovery in just this way. In fact, *every recovery from alcoholism began with one sober hour*.

One version of this is simply postponing the (next) drink.

(How about it? Still sipping soda? Have you really postponed that drink we mentioned back on page 1? If so, this can be the beginning of your recovery.)

The next drink will be available later, but right now, we postpone taking

it at least for the present day, or moment. (Say, for the rest of this page?)

The 24-hour plan is very flexible. We can start it afresh at any time, wherever we are. At home, at work, in a bar or in a hospital room, at 4:00 p.m. or at 3:00 a.m., we can decide right then not to take a drink during the forthcoming 24 hours, or five minutes.

Continually renewed, this plan avoids the weakness of such methods as going on the wagon or taking a pledge. A period on the wagon and a pledge both eventually came, as planned, to an end—so we felt free to drink again. But today is always here. Life *is* daily; today is all we have; and anybody can go one day without drinking.

First, we try living in the now just in order to stay sober—and it works. Once the idea has become a part of our thinking, we find that living life in 24-hour segments is an effective and satisfying way to handle many other matters as well.

4 Remembering that alcoholism is an incurable, progressive, fatal disease

Many people in the world know they cannot eat certain foods—oysters or strawberries or eggs or cucumbers or sugar or something else—without getting very uncomfortable and maybe even quite sick.

A person with a food allergy of this kind can go around feeling a lot of self-pity, complaining to everyone that he or she is unfairly deprived, and constantly whining about not being able, or allowed, to eat something delicious.

Obviously, even though we may feel cheated, it isn't wise to ignore our own physiological makeup. If our limitations are ignored, severe discomfort or illness may result. To stay healthy and reasonably happy, we must learn to live with the bodies we have.

One of the new thinking habits a recovering alcoholic can develop is a calm view of himself or herself as someone who needs to avoid chemicals (alcohol and other drugs that are substitutes for it) if he or she wants to maintain good health.

We have as evidence our own drinking days, a total of hundreds of thousands of man- or woman-years of a whale of a lot of drinking. We know that, as the drinking years went by, our problems related to drinking continually worsened. Alcoholism is progressive.

Oh, of course, many of us had periods when, for some months or

even years, we sometimes thought the drinking had sort of straightened itself out. We seemed able to maintain a pretty heavy alcohol intake fairly safely. Or we would stay sober except for occasional drunk nights, and the drinking was not getting noticeably worse, as far as we could see. Nothing horrible or dramatic happened.

However, we can now see that, in the long or short haul, our drinking problem inevitably got more serious.

Some physicians expert on alcoholism tell us there is no doubt that alcoholism steadily grows worse as one grows older. (Know anyone who *isn't* growing older?)

We are also convinced, after the countless attempts we made to prove otherwise, that alcoholism is incurable—just like some other illnesses. It cannot be “cured” in this sense: We cannot change our body chemistry and go back to being the normal, moderate social drinkers lots of us seemed to be in our youth.

As some of us put it, we can no more make that change than a pickle can change itself back into a cucumber. No medication or psychological treatment any of us ever had “cured” our alcoholism.

Further, having seen thousands and thousands of alcoholics who did *not* stop drinking, we are strongly persuaded that alcoholism is a fatal disease. Not only have we seen many alcoholics drink themselves to death—dying during the “withdrawal” symptoms of delirium tremens (D.T.’s) or convulsions, or dying of cirrhosis of the liver directly related to drinking—we also know that many deaths not officially attributed to alcoholism are in reality caused by it. Often, when an automobile accident, drowning, suicide, homicide, heart attack, fire, pneumonia, or stroke is listed as the immediate cause of death, it was heavy alcoholic drinking that led to the fatal condition or event.

Certainly, most of us in A.A. felt safely far away from such a fate when we were drinking. And probably the majority of us never came near the horrible last stages of chronic alcoholism.

But we saw that we *could*, if we just kept on drinking. If you get on a bus bound for a town a thousand miles away, that’s where you’ll wind up, unless you get off and move in another direction.

Okay. What do you do if you learn that you have an incurable, progressive, fatal disease—whether it’s alcoholism or some other, such as a heart condition or cancer?

Many people just deny it is true, ignore the condition, accept no treatment for it, suffer, and die.

But there is another way.

You can accept the “diagnosis”—persuaded by your doctor, your friends, or yourself. Then you can find out what can be done, if anything, to keep the condition “under control,” so you can still live many

happy, productive, healthy years *as long as you take proper care of yourself*. You recognize fully the seriousness of your condition, and you do the sensible things necessary to carry on a healthy life.

This, it turns out, is surprisingly easy in regard to alcoholism, if you really want to stay well. And since we A.A.'s have learned to enjoy life so much, we really want to stay well.

We try never to lose sight of the unchangeable fact of our alcoholism, but we learn not to brood or feel sorry for ourselves or talk about it all the time. We accept it as a characteristic of our body—like our height or our need for glasses, or like any allergies we may have.

Then we can figure out how to live comfortably—not bitterly—with that knowledge as long as we start out by simply avoiding that *first* drink (remember?) just for today.

A blind member of A.A. said his alcoholism was quite similar to his blindness. “Once I accepted the loss of my sight,” he explained, “and took the rehabilitation training available to me, I discovered I really can, with the aid of my cane or my dog, go anywhere I want to go quite safely, just as long as I don’t forget or ignore the fact that I am blind. But when I do not act within the knowledge that I cannot see, it is then I get hurt, or in trouble.”

“If you want to get well,” one A.A. woman said, “you just take your treatment and follow directions and go on living. It’s easy as long as you remember the new facts about your health. Who has time to feel ‘deprived’ or self-pitying when you find there are so many delights connected with living happily unafraid of your illness?”

To summarize: We remember we have an incurable, potentially fatal ailment called alcoholism. And instead of persisting in drinking, we prefer to figure out, and use, enjoyable ways of living without alcohol.

We need not be ashamed that we have a disease. It is no disgrace. No one knows exactly why some people become alcoholics while others don’t. It is not our fault. We did not *want* to become alcoholics. We did not *try* to get this illness.

We did not suffer alcoholism just because we enjoyed it, after all. We did not deliberately, maliciously set out to do the things we were later ashamed of. We did them against our better judgment and instinct because we were really sick, and didn’t even know it.

We’ve learned that no good comes of useless regret and worry about how we got this way. The first step toward feeling better, and getting over our sickness, is quite simply not drinking.

Try the idea on for size. Wouldn’t you rather recognize you have a health condition which can be successfully treated, than spend a lot of time miserably worrying about what’s wrong with you? We have found this is a better-looking, and better-feeling, picture of ourselves than the

old gloomy selves we used to see. It is truer, too. We know. The proof of it is in the way we feel, act, and think—now.

Anyone who wants it is welcome to a “free trial period” of this new concept of self. Afterward, anyone who wants the old days again is perfectly free to start them all over. It is your right to take back your misery if you want it.

On the other hand, you can also keep the new picture of yourself, if you’d rather. It, too, is yours by right.

5 ‘Live and Let Live’

The old saying “Live and Let Live” seems so commonplace, it is easy to overlook its value. Of course, one reason it has been said over and over for years is that it has proved beneficial in so many ways.

We A.A.’s make some special uses of it to help us not drink. It particularly helps us cope with people who get on our nerves.

Reviewing once more a little of our drinking histories, many of us can see how very, very often our drinking problem appeared to be related somehow to other people. Experimenting with beer or wine in our teen-age years seemed natural, since so many others were doing it, and we wanted their approval. Then came weddings and bar mitzvahs and christenings and holidays and football games and cocktail parties and business lunches...and the list can go on and on. In all of these circumstances, we drank at least partly because everybody else was drinking and seemed to expect us to.

Those of us who began to drink alone, or to sneak a drink now and then, often did so to keep some other person or people from knowing how much, or how often, we drank. We rarely liked to hear anybody else talk about our drinking. If they did, we frequently told them “reasons” for our drinking, as if we wanted to ward off criticism or complaints.

Some of us found ourselves argumentative or even belligerent toward other people after drinking. Yet others of us felt we really got along better with people after a drink or two—whether it was a social evening, a tense sale or job interview, or even making love.

Our drinking caused many of us to choose our friends according to how much they drank. We even changed friends when we felt we had “outgrown” their drinking styles. We preferred “real drinkers” to people who just took one or two. And we tried to avoid teetotalers.

Many of us were guilty and angry about the way our family reacted to our drinking. Some of us lost jobs because a boss or a colleague at work objected to our drinking. We wished people would mind their own business and leave us alone!

Often, we felt angry and fearful even toward people who had not criticized us. Our guilt made us extra sensitive to those around us, and we nursed grudges. Sometimes, we changed bars, changed jobs, or moved to new neighborhoods just to get away from certain persons.

So a great number of people besides ourselves were in one way or another involved in our drinking, to some degree.

When we first stopped drinking, it was a great relief to find that the people we met in A.A.—recovered alcoholics—seemed to be quite different. They reacted to us, not with criticism and suspicion, but with understanding and concern.

However, it is perfectly natural that we still encounter some people who get on our nerves, both within A.A. and outside it. We may find that our non-A.A. friends, co-workers, or family members still treat us as if we were drinking. (It may take them a little while to believe that we have *really* stopped. After all, they may have seen us stop many times in the past, only to start again.)

To begin to put the concept of “Live and Let Live” into practice, we must face this fact: There *are* people in A.A., and everywhere else, who sometimes say things we disagree with, or do things we don’t like. Learning to live with differences is essential to our comfort. It is exactly in those cases that we have found it extremely helpful to say to ourselves, “Oh, well, ‘Live and Let Live.’”

In fact, in A.A. much emphasis is placed on learning how to tolerate other people’s behavior. However offensive or distasteful it may seem to us, it is certainly *not* worth drinking about. Our own recovery is too important. Alcoholism can and does kill, we recall.

We have learned it pays to make a very special effort to try to understand other people, especially anyone who rubs us the wrong way. For our recovery, it is more important to understand than to be understood. This is not very difficult if we bear in mind that the other A.A. members, too, are trying to understand, just as we are.

For that matter, we’ll meet some people in A.A. or elsewhere who won’t be exactly crazy about us, either. So all of us try to respect the rights of others to act as they choose (or must). We can then expect them to give us the same courtesy. In A.A., they generally do.

Usually, people who like each other—in a neighborhood, a company, a club, or A.A.—gravitate toward each other. When we spend time with people we like, we are less annoyed by those we don’t particularly care for.

As time goes on, we find we are not afraid simply to walk away from people who irritate us, instead of meekly letting them get under our skin, or instead of trying to straighten them out just so they will suit us better.

None of us can remember anyone's forcing us to drink alcohol. No one ever tied us down and poured booze down our throats. Just as no one *physically* compelled us to drink, now we try to make sure no one will *mentally* "drive us to drink," either.

It is very easy to use other people's actions as an alibi for drinking. We used to be experts at it. But in sobriety, we have learned a new technique: We never let ourselves get so resentful toward someone else that we allow that person to control our lives—especially to the extent of causing us to drink. We have found we have no desire to let any other person run, or ruin, our lives.

An ancient sage said that none of us should criticize another until we have walked a mile in the other person's boots. This wise advice can give us greater compassion for our fellow human beings. And putting it into practice makes us feel much better than being hung-over.

"Let Live"—yes. But some of us find just as much value in the first part of the slogan: "Live"!

When we have worked out ways to enjoy *our own* living fully, then we are content to let other people live any way they want. If our own lives are interesting and productive, we really have no impulse or desire to find fault with others or worry about the way they act.

Can you think right this minute of someone who really bothers you?

If you can, try something. Postpone thinking about him or her and whatever it is about the person that riles you. You can boil inside about it later if you want to. But for right now, why not put it off while you read the next paragraph?

Live! Be concerned with your own living. In our opinion, staying sober opens up the way to life and happiness. It is worth sacrificing many a grudge or argument. . . . Okay, so you didn't manage to keep your mind completely off that other person. Let's see whether the suggestion coming next will help.

6 Getting active

It is very hard just to sit still trying *not* to do a certain thing, or *not* even to think about it. It's much easier to get active and do something *else*—other than the act we're trying to avoid.

So it is with drinking. Simply trying to avoid a drink (or not think of one), all by itself, doesn't seem to be enough. The more we think about the drink we're trying to keep away from, the more it occupies our mind, of course. And that's no good. It's better to get busy with something, almost anything, that will use our mind and channel our energy toward health.

Thousands of us wondered what we would do, once we stopped drinking, with all that time on our hands. Sure enough, when we did stop, all those hours we had once spent planning, getting our drinks, drinking, and recovering from its immediate effects, suddenly turned into big, empty holes of time that had to be filled somehow.

Most of us had jobs to do. But even so, there were some pretty long, vacant stretches of minutes and hours staring at us. We needed new habits of activity to fill those open spaces and utilize the nervous energy previously absorbed by our preoccupation, or our obsession, with drinking.

Anyone who has ever tried to break a habit knows that substituting a new and different activity is easier than just stopping the old activity and putting nothing in its place.

Recovered alcoholics often say, "Just stopping drinking is not enough." Just *not drinking* is a negative, sterile thing. That is clearly demonstrated by our experience. To *stay* stopped, we've found we need to put in place of the drinking a positive program of action. We've had to learn how to *live* sober.

Fear may have originally pushed some of us toward looking into the possibility that we might have a drinking problem. And over a short period, fear alone may help some of us stay away from a drink. But a fearful state is not a very happy or relaxed one to maintain for very long. So we try to develop a healthy respect for the power of alcohol, instead of a fear of it, just as people have a healthy respect for cyanide, iodine, or any other poison. Without going around in constant fear of those potions, most people respect what they can do to the body, and have enough sense not to imbibe them. We in A.A. now have the same knowledge of, and regard for, alcohol. But, of course, it is based on firsthand experience, not on seeing a skull and crossbones on a label.

We can't rely on fear to get us through those empty hours without a drink, so what *can* we do?

We have found many kinds of activity useful and profitable, some more than others. Here are two kinds, in the order of their effectiveness as we experienced it.

A. Activity in and around A.A.

When experienced A.A. members say that they found “getting active” helpful in their recovery from alcoholism, they usually mean getting active in and around A.A.

If you want to, you can do that even before you decide whether or not you want to become an A.A. member. You don’t need anyone’s permission or invitation.

In fact, before you make any decision about a drinking problem, it might be a good idea to spend some time around A.A. Don’t worry—just sitting at, and observing, A.A. meetings does not make you an alcoholic or an A.A. member, any more than sitting in a hen house makes you a hen. You can try a sort of “dry run” or “dress rehearsal” of A.A. first, then decide about “joining.”

The activities we often use at first in A.A. may seem fairly unimportant, but the results prove them valuable. We might call these things “ice breakers,” because they make it easier to feel comfortable around people we do not know.

As most A.A. meetings end, you’ll generally notice that some of those present start putting away the folding chairs, or emptying ashtrays, or carrying empty tea and coffee cups to the kitchen.

Join in. You may be surprised at the effect on yourself of such seemingly little chores. You can help wash out the cups and coffeepot, put away the literature, and sweep the floor.

Helping out with these easy little physical tasks does *not* mean you become the group’s janitor or custodian. Nothing of the sort. From years of doing it and seeing fellow members do it, we know that practically every person happily recovered in A.A. has taken his or her turn at the K.P. or refreshment-and-cleanup detail. The results we have felt from doing these tasks are concrete, beneficial, and usually surprising.

In fact, many of us began to feel comfortable around A.A. only when we began to help with these simple acts. And we were even more at ease, and much further away from drinking or the thought of it, when we accepted some small, but specific, regular responsibility—such as bringing the refreshments, helping to prepare and serve them, being a greeter on the hospitality committee, or performing other tasks that needed doing. Simply by watching other people, you’ll learn what needs to be done to get ready for the A.A. meeting, and to straighten up afterwards.

No one *has* to do such things, of course. In A.A., no one is ever required to do, or not do, anything. But these simple, menial chores and the commitment (only to ourselves) to do them faithfully have had unexpectedly good effects on many of us, and still do. They help give some muscle to our sobriety.

As you stay around an A.A. group, you'll observe other tasks that need undertaking. You'll hear the secretary make announcements and see the treasurer take charge of the contributions basket. Serving in one of those capacities, once you get a little accumulation of nondrinking time, is a good way to fill some of the time we used to spend drinking.

When these "jobs" interest you, leaf through a copy of the pamphlet "The A.A. Group." It explains what the group "officers" do, and how they are chosen.

In A.A., no one is "above" or "below" anyone else. There are no classes or strata or hierarchies among the members. There are no formal officers with any governing power or authority whatsoever. A.A. is not an organization in the usual sense of that word. Instead, it is a fellowship of equals. Everybody calls everybody else by first name. A.A.'s take turns doing the services needed for group meetings and other functions.

No particular professional skill or education is needed. Even if you have never been a joiner, or a chairman or secretary of anything, you may find—as most of us have—that within the A.A. group, these services are easy to do, and they do wonders for us. They build a sturdy backbone for our recovery.

Now for the second type of activity that helps keep us away from drinking.

B. Activity not related to A.A.

It's curious, but true, that some of us, when we first stop drinking, seem to experience a sort of temporary failure of the imagination.

It's curious, because during our drinking days, so many of us displayed almost unbelievably fertile powers of imagination. In less than a week, we could dream up instantly more reasons (excuses?) for drinking than most people use for all other purposes in a lifetime. (Incidentally, it's a pretty good rule of thumb that normal drinkers—that is, nonalcoholics—*never* need or use any particular justification for either drinking or not drinking!)

When the need to give ourselves reasons for our drinking is no longer there, it often seems that our minds go on a sit-down strike. Some of us find we can't think up nondrinking things to do! Perhaps this is because we're just out of the habit. Or perhaps the mind needs a period of restful convalescence after active alcoholism ceases. In either case, the dullness does go away. After our first month's sobriety, many of us notice a distinct difference. After three months, our minds seem still clearer. And during our second year of recovery, the change is

striking. More mental energy seems available to us than ever before.

But it's during the seemingly endless first dry stretch that you will hear some of us say, "What's to do?"

The following list is just a starter for use at that time. It isn't very thrilling or adventurous, but it covers the kinds of activity many of us have used to fill our first vacant hours when we were not at our jobs or with other nondrinking people. We know they work. We did such things as:

1. *Taking walks*—especially to new places, and in parks or the country. Leisurely, easy strolls, not tiring marches.
2. *Reading*—although some of us got pretty fidgety if we tried to read anything that demanded much concentration.
3. *Going to museums and art galleries.*
4. *Exercising*—swimming, golfing, jogging, yoga, or other forms of exercise your doctor advises.
5. *Starting on long-neglected chores*—cleaning out a bureau drawer, sorting papers, answering a few letters, hanging pictures, or something of the sort that we've been postponing.

We have found it is important, though, *not to overdo* any of these. Planning to clean out all the closets (or the whole attic or garage or basement or apartment) sounds simple. However, after a day's hard physical labor at it, we can wind up exhausted, dirty, not finished, and discouraged. So our advice to each other is: Cut down the plan to a manageable size. Start out, not to straighten up the kitchen or clean out those files, but simply to clean out one drawer or one folder. Do another one another day.

6. *Trying a new hobby*—nothing expensive or very demanding, just some pleasant, idle diversion in which we do not need to excel or win, but only to enjoy some refreshingly different moments. Many of us have picked up hobbies we'd never dreamed of before, such as bridge, macrame, the opera, tropical fish, cabinetmaking, needlework, baseball, writing, singing, crossword puzzles, cooking, bird-watching, amateur acting, leathercraft, gardening, sailing, the guitar, movies, dancing, marbles, bonsai, collecting something or other. Many of us have found we now really enjoy things that we wouldn't even consider before.

7. *Revisiting an old pastime*, except you-know-what. Maybe, stored away somewhere, there is a watercolor set you haven't touched in years, a crewel kit, an accordion, table tennis or backgammon equipment, a tape collection, or notes for a novel. For some of us, it has been rewarding to dig these out, dust them off, and try having a go at them again. If you decide they're not for you any more, get rid of them.

8. *Taking a course.* Have you always wished you could speak Swahili or Russian? Enjoy history or math? Understand archaeology or anthropology? Correspondence courses, instruction on public television, or adult classes (for pleasure, not necessarily for credit) that meet about once a week are usually available somewhere. Why not give one a try? Many of us have found that such a course can not only add a fresh dimension to life, but also lead to a whole new career.

If studying gets to be a drag, though, don't hesitate to drop it. You have the right to change your mind and quit anything that is more of a hassle than it's worth. Being "a quitter" can take courage and make very good sense if we're quitting something that is not good for us, or adds no positive, pleasurable, or healthy new facet to our life.

9. *Volunteering to do some useful service.* Many, many hospitals, children's agencies, churches, and other institutions and organizations desperately need volunteers for all kinds of activity. The choice is wide, from reading to the blind to sealing envelopes for a church mailing or gathering signatures on a political petition. Check with any nearby hospital, church, governmental agency, or civic club to find out what volunteer services are needed in your community. We've found we feel much better about ourselves when we contribute even a small service for the benefit of our fellow human beings. Even the act of investigating the possibilities of such service is in itself informative and interesting.

10. *Doing something about your personal appearance.* Most of us let ourselves go pretty much. A new haircut, some new clothes, new glasses, or even new teeth have a marvelously cheering effect. Often, we had been intending to get around to something like that, and the months when we first started staying sober seemed a good time to look into it.

11. *Taking a fling at something frivolous!* Not everything we do has to be an earnest effort at self-improvement, although any such effort is worthwhile and gives a lift to our self-esteem. Many of us find it important to balance serious periods with things we do for pure fun. Do you like balloons? Zoos? Bubble gum? Marx Brothers movies? Soul music? Reading sci-fi or detective stories? Sunbathing? Snowmobiling? If not, find something else nonalcoholic that rewards you with nothing but sheer enjoyment, and have some "dry" fun. You deserve it.

12. _____

Fill this one in for yourself. Let's hope the list above sparked an idea for you which is different from all of those listed.... It did? Good! Go to it.

One word of caution, though. Some of us find we have a tendency to go overboard, and try too many things at once. We have a good brake for that, which you'll read about on page 43. It's called "Easy Does It."