

THIS IS
A. A.

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ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS IS A FELLOWSHIP of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

- *The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.*
- *A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.*
- *Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.*

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ONLY YOU CAN DECIDE

If you seem to be having trouble with your drinking, or if your drinking has reached the point where it worries you a bit, you may be interested in knowing something about Alcoholics Anonymous and the A.A. program of recovery from alcoholism. After reading this brief outline, you may decide that A.A. has nothing to offer you. Should this be the case, we suggest only that you keep an open mind on the subject. Consider your drinking carefully in the light of what you may learn from these pages. Determine, *for yourself*, whether or not alcohol has truly become a problem for you. And remember that you will always be most welcome to join the thousands of men and women in A.A. who have put their drinking problems behind them and now lead "normal" lives of constructive, day-by-day sobriety.

WHO WE ARE

We in A.A. are men and women who have discovered, and admitted, that we cannot control alcohol. We have learned that we must live without it if we are to avoid disaster for ourselves and those close to us.

With local groups in thousands of communities, we are part of an informal international fellowship with members in more than 90 countries. We have but one primary

purpose: to stay sober ourselves and to help others who may turn to us for help in achieving sobriety.

We are not reformers, and we are not allied with any group, cause, or religious denomination. We have no wish to dry up the world. We do not recruit new members, but do welcome them. We do not impose our experience with problem drinking on others, but we do share it when we are asked to do so.

Within our membership may be found men and women of all ages and many different social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Some of us drank for many years before coming to the realization we could not handle alcohol. Others were fortunate enough to appreciate, early in life or in their drinking careers, that alcohol had become unmanageable.

The consequences of our alcoholic drinking have also varied. A few of us had become derelicts before turning to A.A. for help. Some had lost family, possessions, and self-respect. We had been on "Skid Row" in many cities. Some of us had been hospitalized or jailed times without number. We had committed grave offenses — against society, our families, our employers, and ourselves.

Others among us have never been jailed or hospitalized. Nor had we lost jobs or families through drinking. But we finally came to a point where we realized that alcohol was interfering with normal living. When we

discovered that we could not live without alcohol, we, too, sought help through A.A.

All the great faiths are represented in our Fellowship and many religious leaders have encouraged our growth. There are even a few self-proclaimed atheists and agnostics among us. Belief in, or adherence to, a formal creed is not a condition of membership.

We are united by our common problem, alcohol. Meeting and talking and helping other alcoholics *together*, we are somehow able to stay sober and to lose the compulsion to drink, once a dominant force in our lives.

We do not think we are the only people who have the answer to problem drinking. We know that the A.A. program works for us and we have seen it work for every newcomer, almost without exception, who honestly and sincerely wanted to quit drinking.

Through A.A. we have learned a number of things about alcoholism and about ourselves. We try to keep these facts fresh in our thinking at all times because they seem to be the key to our sobriety. For us, sobriety must always come first.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT ALCOHOLISM

The first thing we have learned about alcoholism is that it is one of the oldest problems in Man's history. Only recently have we

begun to benefit from new approaches to the problem. Doctors today, for example, know a great deal more about alcoholism than their predecessors did only two generations ago. They are beginning to define the problem and study it in detail.

While there is no formal "A.A. definition" of alcoholism, most of us agree that, for us, it could be described as *a physical compulsion, coupled with a mental obsession*. We mean that we had a distinct physical desire to consume alcohol beyond our capacity to control it, and in defiance of all rules of common sense. We not only had an abnormal craving for alcohol but we frequently yielded to it at the worst possible times. We did not know when (or how) to stop drinking. Often we did not seem to have sense enough to know when not to begin.

As alcoholics, we have learned the hard way that will power alone, however strong in other respects, was not enough to keep us sober. We have tried going on the wagon for specified periods. We have taken solemn pledges. We have switched brands and beverages. We have tried drinking only during certain hours. But none of our plans worked. We always wound up, sooner or later, by getting drunk when we not only wanted to stay sober but had every rational incentive for staying sober.

We have gone through stages of dark despair when we were sure that there was something wrong with us mentally. We came to hate

ourselves for wasting the talents with which we had been endowed and for the trouble we were causing our families and others. Frequently, we indulged in self-pity and proclaimed that nothing could ever help us.

We can smile at those recollections now but, at the time, they were grim, unpleasant experiences.

ALCOHOLISM A DISEASE

Today we are willing to accept the idea that, as far as we are concerned, alcoholism is an illness, a progressive illness that can never be "cured" but which, like some other illnesses, *can* be arrested. We agree that there is nothing shameful about having an illness, provided we face the problem honestly and try to do something about it. We are perfectly willing to admit that we are allergic to alcohol and that it is simply common sense to stay away from the source of our allergy.

We understand now that once a person has crossed the invisible borderline from heavy drinking to compulsive alcoholic drinking, he will always remain an alcoholic. So far as we know, there can never be any turning back to "normal" social drinking. "Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic," is a simple fact we have to live with.

We have also learned that there are few alternatives for the alcoholic. If he continues to

drink, his problem will become progressively worse; he seems assuredly on the path to Skid Row, to hospitals, to jails or other institutions, or to an early grave. The only alternative is to stop drinking completely, to abstain from even the smallest quantity of alcohol in any form. If he is willing to follow this course, and to take advantage of the help available to him, a whole new life can open up for the alcoholic.

There were times in our drinking careers when we were convinced that all we had to do to control our drinking was to quit after the second drink, or the fifth or some other number. Only gradually did we come to appreciate that it was not the fifth or the tenth or the twentieth drink that got us drunk; it was the first! The first drink was the one that did the damage. The first drink was the one that started us on our merry-go-rounds. The first drink was the one that set up a chain reaction of alcoholic thinking that led to our uncontrolled drinking.

A.A. has a way of expressing this: "For an alcoholic, one drink is too many and a thousand not enough."

Another thing that many of us learned during our drinking days was that enforced sobriety was generally not a very pleasant experience. Some of us were able to stay sober, occasionally, for periods of days, weeks and even years. But we did not enjoy our sobriety. We felt like martyrs. We became irritable, difficult to live

and work with. We persisted in looking forward to the time when we might be able to drink again.

Now that we are in A.A., we have a new outlook on sobriety. We enjoy a sense of release, a feeling of freedom from even the desire to drink. Since we cannot expect to drink normally at any time in the future, we concentrate on living a full life without alcohol *today*. There is not a thing we can do about yesterday. And tomorrow "never comes." Today is the only day we have to worry about. And we know from experience that even the "worst" drunk can go twenty-four hours without a drink. He may need to "postpone" that next drink to the next hour, even the next minute — but he learns that it *can* be put off for a period of time.

When we first heard about A.A., it seemed miraculous that anyone who had really been an uncontrolled drinker could ever achieve and maintain the kind of sobriety that older A.A. members talked about. Some of us were inclined to think that ours was a special kind of drinking, that our experiences had been "different," that A.A. might work for others but that it could do nothing for us. Others among us, who had not yet been hurt seriously by our drinking, reasoned that A.A. might be fine for the Skid Row drunks but that we could probably handle the problem by ourselves.

Our experience in A.A. has taught us two im-

portant things. First, that the problems the alcoholic faces are the same whether he is panhandling for the price of a short beer or holding down an executive position in a big corporation. Secondly, we now appreciate that the A.A. recovery program works for almost *any* alcoholic who honestly wants it to work, no matter what his background or particular drinking pattern may have been.

WE MADE A DECISION

All of us now in A.A. had to make one crucial decision before we felt secure in the new program of life without alcohol. We had to face the facts about ourselves and our drinking realistically and honestly. *We had to admit* that we were powerless over alcohol. For some of us, this was the toughest proposition we had ever faced.

We did not know too much about alcoholism. We had our own idea about the word "alcoholic." We tied it up with the down-and-out derelict. We thought it surely meant weakness of will, weakness of character. Some of us fought off the step of admitting that we were alcoholics. Others only partially admitted it.

Most of us, however, were relieved when it was explained to us that alcoholism was an illness. We saw the common sense of doing something about an illness that threatened to

destroy us. We quit trying to deceive others — and ourselves — into thinking that we could handle alcohol when all the facts pointed the other way.

We were told from the beginning that no one could tell us that we were alcoholics. The admission had to come from us — not from a doctor or minister or wife or husband. It had to be based on facts which we knew to be true. Our friends might understand the nature of our problem, but we were the only ones who could tell for sure whether or not our drinking was out of control.

Frequently we asked: "How can I tell if I am really an alcoholic?" We were told that there were no hard and fast rules for determining alcoholism. We learned that there were, however, certain tell-tale symptoms. If we got drunk when we had every reason to stay sober, if our drinking had become progressively worse, if we no longer got as much fun from drinking as we once had — these, we learned, were apt to be symptoms of the illness we call alcoholism. Reviewing our drinking experiences and their consequences, most of us were able to discover additional reasons for recognizing the truth about ourselves.

Quite naturally, the prospect of a life without alcohol seemed a dreary one. We feared that our new friends in A.A. would be dull or, worse yet, wild-eyed evangelists. We discovered that they were, instead, human beings like ourselves.

But with the special virtue of understanding our problem — sympathetically, without sitting in judgment.

We began to wonder what we had to do to stay sober, what membership in A.A. would cost and who “ran” the organization locally and worldwide. We soon discovered that there are no “musts” in A.A., that no one is required to follow any formal ritual or pattern of living. We learned also that A.A. has no dues or fees of any kind; expenses of meeting rooms, refreshments and literature are met by passing the hat. But even contributions of this kind are not a requirement of membership.

It soon became apparent to us that A.A. has only a minimum of organization and has nobody giving orders. Arrangements for meetings are handled by group officers who move on regularly to make room for new people. This “rotation” system is very popular in A.A.

STAYING SOBER

How, then, do we manage to stay sober in such an informal, loosely-knit fellowship?

The answer is that, once having achieved sobriety, we try to preserve it by observing and following the successful experience of those who have preceded us in A.A.

Their experience provides certain “tools” and guides which we are free to accept or reject, as

we may choose. Because our sobriety is the most important thing in our lives today, we think it wise to follow the patterns suggested by those who have already demonstrated that the A.A. recovery program really works.

THE 24 HOUR PLAN

For example, we take no pledges; we don't say that we will “never” drink again. Instead, we try to follow what we call the “Twenty-Four Hour Plan.” We concentrate on keeping sober just the current twenty-four hours. We simply try to get through one day at a time without a drink. If we feel the urge for a drink, we neither yield nor resist. We merely put off taking that particular drink until *tomorrow*.

We try to keep our thinking honest and realistic where alcohol is concerned. If we are tempted to drink — and the temptation usually fades after the first few months in A.A. — we ask ourselves whether the particular drink we have in mind would be worth all the consequences we have experienced from drinking in the past. We bear in mind that we are perfectly free to get drunk, if we want to, that the choice between drinking and nondrinking is entirely up to us. Most important of all, we try to face up to the fact that, no matter how long we may have been dry, we will always be alcoholics — and alcoholics, as far as we know, can never again drink socially or normally.

We follow the experience of the successful "oldtimers" in another respect. We usually keep coming regularly to meetings of the local A.A. group with which we have become affiliated. There is no rule which makes such attendance compulsory. Nor can we always explain why we seem to get a lift out of hearing the personal stories and interpretations of other members. Most of us, however, feel that attendance at meetings and other informal contacts with fellow A.A.'s are important factors in the maintenance of our sobriety.

"TWELVE SUGGESTED STEPS"

Early in our association with A.A. we heard of "Twelve Suggested Steps" of recovery from alcoholism. We learned that these steps represented an attempt by the first members to record their own progress from uncontrolled drinking to sobriety. We discovered that a key factor in this progress seemed to be humility, coupled with reliance upon a Power greater than the alcoholic himself. While some prefer to call this Power "God," we were told that this was purely a matter of personal interpretation; we could conceive of the Power in any terms we thought fit. Since alcohol had obviously been a power greater than ourselves during our drinking days, we had to admit that perhaps we could not run the whole show ourselves and that it made sense to turn elsewhere for help. As

we have grown in A.A., our concept of a greater Power has usually become more mature. But it has always been our own personal concept; no one has forced it upon us.

Finally, we noted from the Twelfth Step and from the experience of older members, that work with other alcoholics who turned to A.A. for help was an effective way of strengthening our own sobriety. Whenever possible, we tried to do our share, always keeping in mind that the other person was the only one who could determine whether or not he (or she) was an alcoholic.

We were also guided by the experience of the many A.A.'s who have given new meaning to three time-worn sayings or slogans. "First Things First" is one of the slogans, reminding us that, much as we would like to try, we cannot do everything at once, that we have to remember the prior importance of sobriety in any attempt to rebuild our lives.

"Easy Does It" is another old slogan with new meaning for alcoholics who are frequently guilty of working too feverishly at whatever they are doing. Experience shows that alcoholics should, and can learn to pace themselves. "Live and Let Live" is the third slogan, a recurring suggestion that the alcoholic, no matter how long he may be sober, cannot afford to let himself become intolerant of others.

A.A. books and pamphlets are also helpful.

