

# I'm an Alcoholic Who Quit Drinking

## A Rotarian wins the battle of liquor aider by an ally named 'A.A.' and a weapon called psychology.

By A.A. Anonymous

I am an alcoholic, but I haven't had a drink in more than four years.

Contradictory, not at all. With me, alcoholism is a disease - like diabetes, for example. Once a man contracts diabetes, he and his affliction are as inseparable as Siamese twins, but he can arrest his disease by taking insulin.

Its the same with alcoholism. Once you have it, you carry it to the grave. There's no such thing as an ex-alcoholic, but an alcoholic can stop drinking. Just as diabetics get their help from insulin, so nondrinking alcoholics find theirs in lending a helping hand to their drinking brothers. That's why I'm telling my story.

Believe me, I'm qualified. For 40 years I was a drinking fool. In the beginning it was simply a mischievous drink as a smart high school kid; at the end I was draining two quarts of whisky a day.

It is estimated that about 5 percent of the people who drink are alcoholics, and for them there's no moderation. Once they take a drink, they crave more and more. With them it's a case of either total abstinence or uncontrolled drunkenness. Among the other 95 percent are the cocktail drinkers - and those who at times get ingloriously drunk. But at no point in this drinking scale does liquor become the obsession it is to the alcoholic 5 percent.

Whet an alcoholic's appetite and he can no more resist liquor than a steel filing can retreat from the field of a powerful

electromagnet. The switch that turns on the irresistible power is that first drink.

Avoiding the first fatal swallow may sound like a simple trick, but it's almost too high a hurdle to clear without a boost. There is a serious science devoted to the study and treatment of alcoholism, and it is manifested in such institutions as the School of Alcoholic Studies at Yale University and in numerous high-grade sanatoria and hospitals offering what the layman calls "the cure." But a growing number of pathological drunks get a flying start on the road to regeneration through Alcoholics Anonymous - "A.A.," as members of the organization refer to it.

Having been born in a home where temperance was actively preached and practiced, I grew up with the conviction that I would never touch liquor. I couldn't foresee high school, however, where I was catcher on the baseball team and left end on the football squad. My buddies were gay and carefree and considered "a couple of rounds" after a game quite manly. At first it was only a few beers; later we began mixing in a slug of whisky.

By the time I finished high school and went to work as a department store clerk I was a steady drinker. Before I ever reached 30, I became a travelling salesman, drinking with my customers and feeling that it made us chummy - that orders came easier. I drank at meals, at clubs, at banquets, in trains, in private homes - everywhere, in fact, except

at home, where my wife would not permit liquor.

By a stroke of good fortune I was able to open my own department store in a medium-sized city. It prospered in spite of the fact that I was drifting from bad to worse. I cached supplies of whisky all over the store so I could get a "hooker" without running back to my office. I hid some in the advertising department, some in the receiving room, and more behind stocks on different floors. I was drinking as often as most people smoke cigarettes. If I didn't have a "snort" every hour or so, I'd get nervous and irritable.

At home our social life disintegrated. Not being able to depend on me, my wife stopped planning functions at home and gracefully rejected all invitations elsewhere. That made me feel I wasn't appreciated, that I was grossly misunderstood - a frustration that plunged me further and further into drink.

When the economic depression of the '30s descended, it seemed that all the forces in the world were conspiring against me. As business slumped, I worried, and the more I worried, the more I relied on drink. Every failure to stimulate sales had to be erased from my mind by alcohol.

My daily intake mounted to two quarts and more. I was hitting the bottle continuously, but I thought I was clever enough to conceal this fact from my employees, friends, and fellow Rotarians. Apparently I wasn't, though, because one day, February 8, 1942 - I'll never forget it - a prominent attorney and fellow Rotarian came to see me.

"Come over to the soda fountain and have a cup of coffee with me," he invited. I masked the shiver of revulsion that raced through me at the suggestion, but to be sociable I joined him.

"I want you to come over to my house tonight and meet some friends of mine," he said. "I think we can help you."

I stiffened. "Now look here," I snapped. "I don't need anybody's help, and I'll thank you to keep your nose out of my business."

He smiled indulgently. "You know, that's exactly what I said when I was invited to meeting a group of Alcoholics Anonymous."

You mean you're an A.A.?" I asked.

"Sure, the whole bunch at the house tonight will be. We've all had experiences like yours - and we've all, at some point, decided to quit making life so miserable for ourselves and everybody else. Why not come over and meet the boys and let them tell you about it? It can't do any harm and you're under no obligation to us. What do you say?"

I was staring into my coffee. My mind was whirring. It was true that I had vaguely realized my health couldn't forever withstand the abuse I was heaping on it, and many times when I thought of how unfair I was toward my wife, I caught myself feeling remorseful. And my business - it was skidding, almost out of control.

I forced a laugh as I turned to the attorney and with a feigned indifference said: "Yeah, sure, I'll come, if you insist. What can I lose?"

That night an amazing chain of events began. I went to that meeting breathing skepticism, disbelief, defiance. Like most alcoholics I nourished an inner feeling of exclusiveness, a kind of self-pitying smugness based on the false premise that my case was different, that no one else ever suffered the torments and disturbing influences that drove me to drink. But that group of seven A.A.'s made me feel as feeble as the winner of a booby prize at the

Liars Club. They could match - and surpass - every drinking bout I ever had. Every reason I had advanced for drinking, they, too, had experienced. Then they offered others I never thought of.

As they talked I felt my defense crumbling. I began to recognize the sham of my previous rationalization. My skepticism faded into acceptance; my disbelief turned to credence; my defiance melted into admiration. I thought: "If they could swear off, so can I."

So when they told me that the only prerequisite for joining Alcoholics Anonymous was a sincere admission that alcohol had me whipped so completely my life had become unmanageable, I readily made that admission.

The vary articulation of this truth seemed to sweep a great network of cobwebs out of my brain. Merely stating this fact, about which I had long tried to delude myself, was like opening a window in my mind and letting in a refreshing gust of clean, invigorating air. For the first time in years I sensed a gratifying relaxation course through my body.

Almost involuntarily I accepted an invitation to join A.A. I was made a member on the spot, and my new friends told me more about the way the organization works. I vowed, as I had vowed before, to quit drinking. But this time the circumstances differed. I had already achieved a state of intellectual humility and I had, in these A.A.'s, living proof that abstinence was possible. Moreover, I was too proud to let myself fail where they had succeeded - and I knew I could lean on them for help if I weakened.

As I fought to release myself from the grip of the obsession that enslaved me, I formed a clear picture of what was happening and what had happened to me during

those 40 years of drinking. I was like a small boy passing a cemetery at night. Leaves rustle. His eyes pop and his hair stands on end. The wind shrieks eerily through the shrubs and he breaks into a run. The moving shadow of a swaying bush behind a tomb looks like a sinister zombie. The boy's feet sprout wings and he races frantically on. An owl hoots and he grows panicky trying to coax a few extra miles an hour out of his flying feet.

My rustling leaves, shrieking wind, moving shadows, and hooting owls had been business and social problems, feeling of inferiority, frustrations, worries over personal as well as business matters. To escape each new fear-inducing stimulus I gulped stronger and ever stronger draughts of liquor.

Now, I could see, I was imposing a sound, sensible procedure over this subconscious fear motivation. I had analyzed this 40-year flight from fear and knew the reasons for it. Bolstered by this knowledge, I could say convincingly to myself: "I am afraid no longer. I will stop running and take a deliberate step forward, then another and another. I will quiet this fluttering heart, stop perspiring, and walk out of this alcoholic cemetery with dignity."

That's the way it was. Looking back over my shoulder today and analyzing my salvage, I find that what happened after I joined Alcoholics Anonymous became a story of four parts. Here is the way it developed:

*Part I:* I admitted to myself my bondage to liquor and my inability to manage my life. This psychological broom swept the dust of deceit and delusion from my mind, preparing it for a readjustment. In a religious sense this was the act of repentance.

*Part II:* According to A.A.

formula, I made a moral inventory of myself and acknowledged my shortcomings and faults to at least one other person. The pious will recognize this as an application of the principle of public confession. To the psychologist it amounts to bringing social influence to bear. Thus, having unfurled his faults publicly, the candidate's conduct will reap either social approval or censure. And being a vain creature, man strains mightily for approbation.

*Part III:* A.A. built a foundation of confidence and hope under me by showing me that the liquor habit could be conquered, for every member of this organization was persistent proof that others had won out. That victory was forged by a combination of my own will and *outside* help, both human and divine.

Help was always forthcoming from other A.A.'s themselves, of course. This is one of the strongest pillars in the A.A. structure. Whenever a man feels himself slipping, he calls another member for help.

*Part IV:* This is the crux of the whole program. The first three parts set the stage; in Part IV the act begins. "Act" is the word, for the principle upon which A.A. works is that the alcoholic must do more than want to quit drinking. He must *do something - right now!* I am told that this is the practical application of the James -Lange psychological theory, which states that in the formation of habit, one first articulates a desire and then immediately translates that mental intention into physical action. By constantly reenforcing the mental impulse with physical activity, the individual establishes new behavior patterns.

All right, but what does one do? Well, it doesn't matter very much. It might take the form of

going for a walk, of taking a drink - of water - or even reducing the number of drinks taken each day. As a follow-up of the Part II moral inventory, action can be taken to make amends to injured people whenever possible. If you've mistreated your wife, you might bring her some flowers or candy; if, when drinking, you've habitually growled at the neighbours, you might stop and say a kind word; if you've gone into debt, you might pay off these obligations - and so on.

And then, after you've won your victory, you have the never-ending opportunity of helping new members, which enables you continuously to reenforce your desire to stop drinking by doing something for another alcoholic. Only one who has himself been through the same experience can administer the proper mixture of sympathy and discipline to pull a patient through trying hours.

Phenomenal though its record is, A.A. does not guarantee to cure an alcoholic's predilection for liquor. About half recover immediately and another 25 percent make it after a relapse or two. Since 1934, when it was founded by a New York broker and an Akron, Ohio, physician, about 25,000 alcoholics have become members of A.A. They are banded together in nearly 900 groups in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Just to clear up a few points often misunderstood, I'd like to emphasize that we are not prohibitionists. Our sole object is to remove the temptation of that first drink from those who cannot take just one or two and stop there. Many of us actually serve liquor in our homes; yet when we ourselves raise our glasses in toast, ours are filled with soft instead of hard drinks. Another

thing: we are not reformers; we undertake to help only those alcoholics who apply for assistance.

The hundreds of case examples citing how A.A. has helped alcoholics are doubtless familiar to Rotarians, some of whom may have gone through the same experiences, so I shall not add others I have witnessed. But I can truthfully report that my own life has changed completely. My wife and I have reestablished our social contacts and again I am a respected member of a growing circle of friends. My

business has improved 662/3 percent, employee moral is higher than ever, and we enjoy a credit rating the business never before attained. And the opportunity of serving my fellow alcoholics by helping them over the rough spots as I was helped has given me a new purpose in life.

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Headquarters of Alcoholics Anonymous are in New York. Readers desiring information about this organization should write to The Alcoholic Foundation, P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Annex, New York 17, New York, U.S.A.

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