

## **A Working Step 1 Guide**

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### **Step 1 We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.**

Surrender is ESSENTIAL in order to recover from alcoholism. The “Big Book” devotes 51 pages to the first part of the surrender process; which is to admit we have a problem that we cannot help ourselves with.

The Big Book authors begin by describing the physical, mental and spiritual symptoms of alcoholism. Later they ask us to acknowledge that we are alcoholics. Before we can do this, we need to know what the difference is between an alcoholic and a non-alcoholic.

Much of the section called “The Doctor’s Opinion” is based on two letters written by Dr. William D. Silkworth, a physician at Towns Hospital in New York City. In the late 1930’s, very little was known about alcoholism, but what Dr. Silkworth wrote THEN is STILL relevant today.

Please turn to Roman numeral page 23 (xxiii) in the Third Edition of the Big Book or page 25 (xxv) in the Fourth Edition. Dr. Silkworth describes how Bill Wilson, one of the co-founders of A.A., recovered from alcoholism. Bill had once been a well-respected Wall Street Stock Analyst, but he had lost everything due to his drinking. Page xxiii in the Third Edition or xxv in the Fourth Edition, middle of the page:

“In late 1934 I attended a patient who, though he had been a competent businessman of good earning capacity, was an alcoholic of a type I had come to regard as hopeless.

In the course of his third treatment he acquired certain ideas concerning a possible means of recovery. As part of HIS rehabilitation he commenced to present his conceptions to other alcoholics, impressing upon them they MUST do likewise with still others. This has become the basis of a rapidly growing fellowship of these men and their families. This man and over one hundred others appear to have recovered.

I personally know scores of cases who were of the type with whom other methods had failed completely.”

For several years prior to 1934, Dr. Silkworth had been treating alcoholics at Towns Hospital with very little success. Then, during his third trip to the hospital, Bill Wilson discovered the spiritual solution to alcoholism, which he helped develop into the A.A. program.

One of the things Bill learned while in Towns Hospital was that he HAD to work with other alcoholics in order to stay sober HIMSELF. He also learned that alcoholism was a physical AND a mental illness which ONLY a spiritual experience would conquer.

On Roman numeral page 24 (xxiv) in the Third Edition or 26 (xxvi) in the Fourth Edition, the authors confirm that Dr. Silkworth was well aware of the physical aspects of alcoholism. Page xxiv or xxvi in the Fourth Edition, about a quarter of the way down the page:

“The physician who, at our request, gave us this letter, has been kind enough to enlarge upon his views in another statement which follows. In this statement he confirms what we who have suffered alcoholic torture MUST believe - that the body of the alcoholic is quite as abnormal as his mind. It did not satisfy us to be told that we could not control our drinking just because we were maladjusted to life, that we were in full flight from reality, or were outright mental defectives. These things were true to some extent, in fact, to a considerable extent with some of us. But we are SURE that our bodies were sickened as well. In our belief, ANY picture of the alcoholic which leaves out this physical factor is INCOMPLETE.

The doctor's theory that we have an allergy to alcohol interests us. As laymen, our opinion as to its soundness may, of course, mean little. But as ex-problem drinkers, we can say that his explanation makes good sense. It explains many things for which we cannot otherwise account.”

Please notice the word “allergy” at the beginning of this last paragraph we just read. This word can be misunderstood since the only experience most of us have with allergies is that some substance brings about watery eyes, a rash, sneezing, swelling, or some other physical reaction. For almost all of us, these kinds of reactions to drinking alcohol did not happen, so what is Dr. Silkworth talking about?

The definition for the word “allergy” is, “an abnormal reaction to any food, liquid, or substance.” So let’s look at a normal reaction to alcohol.

Alcohol is a poison. The NORMAL reaction to alcohol is to have one or two drinks and not go any further. But, OUR reaction is MUCH different. We have one or two drinks just to get STARTED. Once an alcoholic starts drinking, because of the unique way it's processed in their body, we set off a craving where we want more alcohol. This is an allergy or abnormal reaction to alcohol because about nine out of ten people don't get that, once they start drinking. So an alcoholic CANNOT always predict how much they are going to drink, and a NON-alcoholic CAN always predict how much they are going to drink.

Please turn to the first full paragraph on page xxvi or xxviii in the Fourth Edition, where the Big Book mentions the allergy again:

"We believe, and so suggested a few years ago, that the action of alcohol on these chronic alcoholics is a manifestation of an allergy; that the phenomenon of craving is limited to THIS class (they are talking about alcoholics here) and NEVER occurs in the average temperate drinker. These allergic types can NEVER safely use alcohol in ANY FORM AT ALL; and once having formed the habit and found they cannot break it, once having lost their self-confidence, their reliance upon things human, their problems pile up on them and become astonishingly difficult to solve.

Frothy (which means "long winded") emotional appeal seldom suffices (or rarely is enough). The message which can interest and hold these alcoholic people must have depth and weight. In nearly ALL cases, their ideals MUST be grounded in a power GREATER than themselves, if they are to re-create their lives."

Toward the bottom of Roman numeral page 28 (xxviii) in the Third Edition or page xxx in the Fourth Edition, Dr. Silkworth tells us that, because of this abnormal reaction, we MUST refrain from drinking. Page xxviii or xxx in the Fourth Edition, last full paragraph:

"All these (they're talking about different types of alcoholics), and many others, have ONE symptom in common: they CANNOT start drinking without developing the phenomenon of craving. This phenomenon as we have suggested, may be the manifestation of an allergy which differentiates these people, and sets them apart as a distinct entity. It has NEVER been, by ANY treatment with which we are familiar, permanently eradicated (which means "removed"). The ONLY relief we have to suggest is ENTIRE abstinence."

So much for alcoholics ever becoming moderate drinkers again.

For more on whether or not alcohol cooks off when preparing food please go back to the Step 1 files and read "Step 1 – Alcohol Does Not Cook Off."

For more on the allergy please go back to the Step 1 files and read "Step 1 – The Phenomenon of Craving."

Abstinence might work if alcoholism was ONLY a PHYSICAL illness, but Dr. Silkworth found that alcoholism has a MENTAL component as well. In addition to an abnormal PHYSICAL reaction, we also have a mental obsession. Our mind does not tell us that what we are about to do is harmful, even as alcohol is bringing us closer and closer to death. No matter how much we may want to stop, if we do not seek a spiritual solution, sooner or later we will return to drinking.

Dr. Silkworth describes this mental obsession in his letter on Roman numeral page 26 (xxvi) or xxviii in the Fourth Edition. Please keep in mind that Dr. Silkworth is talking about ALCOHOLICS here when he writes at the bottom of the page xxvi or xxviii in the Fourth Edition:

"Men and women drink essentially because they like the effect produced by alcohol. The sensation is SO elusive that, while they admit it is injurious, they cannot after a time differentiate the true from the false. To them, their alcoholic life seems the only normal one. They are restless, irritable and discontented, unless they can again experience the sense of ease and comfort which comes AT ONCE by taking a few drinks - drinks which they see OTHERS taking with impunity (which means freedom from problems). After they have succumbed to the desire again, as so many do, and the phenomenon of craving develops, they pass through the well-known stages of a spree, emerging remorseful, with a firm resolution not to drink again. This is repeated over and over (and over and over and over), and unless this person can experience an ENTIRE psychic change there is very little hope of his recovery."

In case you didn't know, the word "psychic" means, "of or pertaining to the human mind, soul or spirit." So, a prominent doctor in the field of alcoholism, with NINE YEARS of experience with alcoholics at the time this was written, tells us that the medical community CAN'T help us. Our ONLY hope is what Dr. Silkworth calls "an ENTIRE psychic change", otherwise known as "a spiritual awakening".

The OTHER part of the physical difference between an alcoholic and a non-alcoholic is that alcohol DOES something for the alcoholic that it DOESN'T do for the NON-alcoholic. If you were to ask a non-alcoholic what happens when they drink alcohol, they would tell you that they get something like an "out of control, beginning of a nauseating, slightly tipsy, I don't like this so I don't want any more" kind of a feeling. That's why they stop after a few. But when the ALCOHOLIC puts alcohol into their body, they get an "IN control, ease and inner comfort, let's get up and go into town, I like this so I'm going to get more" kind of a feeling. So that's why the non-alcoholic will say things like, "I don't want another drink because I'm starting to feel that first one." Then we look at

them funny because we LIKE what it's doing for us, and that's why we're going for more. THEY are having a COMPLETELY different experience than WE are having. Then because of the way we alcoholics deal with others, with our emotions, and with life; we have a lot of inner turmoil and anxiety going on. Since we can't seem to bring about this relief, ease, and inner comfort on our own, we turn to alcohol again and again, because alcohol does for us what we can't do for ourselves.

So it's important to see that if you're an alcoholic, alcohol is NOT your problem. It's your SOLUTION to your problem. We don't see the truth about the problems that alcohol causes us because we're ONLY thinking about the RELIEF that comes when we drink. That's why the AA program of working the Steps are more than just not drinking. They're about finding a comfortable way of life that doesn't include needing alcohol. There's a big difference between just not drinking, and not drinking and being happy about it.

So if you cannot handle drinking AND you cannot handle NOT drinking, THEN AA's for you.

Also included in that last paragraph at the bottom of page xxvi or xxviii in the Fourth Edition is the mention of another aspect of alcoholism. It is the unmanageability mentioned in Step One. It is sometimes called the spiritual malady, or untreated alcoholism, or the mental state that precedes the first drink, or the root of our problem. The spiritual malady (or spiritual illness), which is the result of being spiritually blocked off by self-centered fear, exists for us as long as we are not seeking and growing toward a spiritual solution, WHETHER WE ARE DRINKING OR NOT. The Big Book gives us many descriptions of the inner condition that occurs if an alcoholic does NOT deal with this spiritual malady. Dr. Silkworth just described their inner state as being, "restless (which means having anxiety), irritable (which means easily annoyed) and discontented (which means never satisfied)." You do NOT have to turn there now, but page 37 describes this condition as, "Nervousness, anger, worry, depression, jealousy or the like." Again, you do NOT have to turn there but Page 52 also describes the inner unmanageability as, "having trouble with personal relationships, not being able to control their emotional natures, being a prey to misery and depression, not being able to make a living (which includes not being able to make a successful life), having a feeling of uselessness, being full of fear, being unhappy, and not seeming to be of real help to other people." Page 73 refers to the spiritual malady in this way: "More than most people, the alcoholic leads a double life. He is very much the actor. To the outer world he presents his stage character. This is the one he likes his fellows to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation, but knows in his heart he DOESN'T deserve it. The inconsistency is made worse by the things he does on his sprees. Coming to his senses, he is revolted at certain episodes he vaguely remembers. These memories are a nightmare. He trembles to think someone might have observed him. As far as he can, he pushes these memories far inside himself. He hopes they will never see the light of day. He is under constant fear and tension, that makes for (or leads to) more drinking. And page 82 says: "The alcoholic is like a tornado roaring his way through the lives of others. Hearts are broken. Sweet relationships are dead. Affections have been uprooted. Selfish and inconsiderate habits have kept the home in turmoil."

There are OTHER statements in the Big Book that refer to the spiritual malady or the unmanageability mentioned in Step One, but those we just read are some of the better ones. Please keep in mind that this happens even if we are NOT currently drinking. If these conditions generally describe your CURRENT inner experience, please consider the fact that you may be suffering from untreated alcoholism (whether you are drinking or not), you may be headed toward your next drink, and you may be closer to a relapse than you think you are. It doesn't matter so much how long it's been since my LAST drink. What matters more is how close I am to my NEXT one. It's something to think about.

A good way to see how you are doing with the mental, emotional & spiritual unmanageability mentioned in Step 1 (no matter how long you have been in AA), please go back to the Step 1 files and do the "Step 1 Unmanageability Exercise."

The book continues with the first full paragraph on page xxvii or xxix in the Fourth Edition. This paragraph offers us some hope:

"On the other hand - and strange as this may seem to those who do not understand - once a psychic change (otherwise known as a spiritual awakening) has occurred, the very same person who seemed doomed, who had so many problems he despaired of ever solving them, suddenly finds himself easily able to control his desire for alcohol, the only effort necessary being that required to follow a few simple rules (and the few simple are the Twelve Steps)."

Let's move on to Chapter One, "Bill's Story", and in this part of the book the page numbers are the same in both the Third and Fourth Editions. In this chapter we learn more about the physical and mental aspects of alcoholism, and also more about the spiritual solution. As we mentioned earlier, Bill is the New York Stock Analyst who is one of our co-founders.

Some people have difficulty identifying with Bill's story because he was such a low bottom, hopeless alcoholic. Here, as elsewhere in the book, we ask that you look for similarities rather than differences. Just like when we are at an AA speaker meeting, we should see where we can relate to the way he thought, the way he felt, and the way he drank, long after alcohol has become a problem. In this way, you will be able to "identify, and not compare".

"Bill's Story" is 16 pages, broken up into two halves. In the first eight pages, Bill writes about what it was like and describes the progressive nature of his drinking. In a few short years he loses everything. He becomes an unemployed, hopeless drunk. Then in the second eight pages of Bill's Story, he talks about what happened and what it's like now.

Please turn to regular page 8, where Bill has a moment of clarity. He realizes alcohol is his master. He is licked - defeated. Page 8, paragraph 1. This is where Bill reaches the conclusion of Step One:

“No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in the bitter morass of self-pity. Quicksand stretched around me in all directions. I had met my match. I had been overwhelmed. Alcohol was my master.”

But Bill can't stop drinking on this admission alone. In late November 1934, he is visited by an old school chum, Ebby T. Bill is drunk. Ebby has been sober for several months. When Bill asks Ebby how he stopped drinking, Ebby tells him in the middle of page 9, “I've got religion.” Bill is shocked but he lets Ebby continue because, as he writes, “my gin would last longer than his preaching.”

Ebby explains to Bill that he has found a group of people who rely upon a Power greater than themselves and who try to live their lives based on spiritual principles. In 1934, this organization was called “The Oxford Group”. In 1938, it became “Moral Re-armament” or “M.R.A.”, and a few years ago they changed their name to “Initiatives for Change”. This organization still exists today.

The Oxford Group is a life-changing fellowship, which utilizes six spiritual tenets or principles. These tenets can be found on page 292 in the Third Edition or 263 in the Fourth Edition so please turn there now. The six tenets of the Oxford Group as found on page 292 or 263 in the Fourth Edition are:

- 1 - Complete deflation (which became our First Step.)
- 2 - Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power (which became our Second, Third, Sixth, Seventh and Eleventh Steps.)
- 3 - Moral inventory (which became our Fourth and Tenth Steps.)
- 4 - Confession (which became our Fifth Step.)
- 5 - Restitution (which became our Eighth and Ninth Steps.)
- 6 - Continued work with others (which became our Twelfth Step.)

Please turn back to page 12. Ebby provides Bill with the Oxford Group solution. For the first time, Bill learns about how he can move toward having what Dr. Silkworth called “an ENTIRE psychic change” by turning his will and life over to a God of his own understanding.

In the middle of the page, Bill takes Step Two. Page 12, paragraph 4:

“It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning. I saw that growth could start from that point. Upon a foundation of COMPLETE willingness I might build what I saw in my friend. Would I have it? Of course I would!”

Soon after Ebby's visit, Bill checks into Towns Hospital. There, under the direction of Dr. Silkworth, Bill is physically withdrawn from alcohol for the third time that year. While in the hospital, Bill applies the Oxford Group's Six Tenets or Spiritual Activities (which later became the Twelve Steps) and never drinks again.

On page 13 in the second paragraph, Bill experiences the Oxford Group Tenet of “Dependence on a Higher Power”. In other words, here is where Bill takes Steps 2 and 3. Page 13, paragraph 2:

“There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost.”

The next line mentions the Oxford Tenet of “Moral Inventory”, which is Bill's Step Four. It's followed by what later became Steps Six and Seven:

“...I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new found Friend (he is using a capital “F” here so he is talking here about God) take them away, root and branch. I have not had a drink since.”

When Bill wrote, “I ruthlessly faced my sins...,” he is using an Oxford Group term. According to the Oxford Group, the definition for the word “sin” is anything that blocks us off from God and others.

Bill then works the Tenet of “Confession” and becomes willing to go through with the Tenet of “Restitution”. These actions are known as Steps Five, Eight and Nine:

“My schoolmate visited me (so Ebby returns), and I fully acquainted him with my problems and deficiencies. We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed my ENTIRE willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong. NEVER was I to be critical of them. I was to right ALL such matters, to the UTMOST of my ability.”

In the next paragraph, Bill practices the Oxford Group Tenet of “Dependence and Guidance from a Higher Power”. Bill begins doing Step 11:

“I was to test my thinking by the new God-consciousness within. Common sense would thus become uncommon sense. I was to sit quietly when in doubt, asking ONLY for direction and strength to meet my problems as HE would have me. Never was I to pray for

myself, except as my requests bore on my usefulness to others. THEN ONLY might I expect to receive. But that would be in great measure.”

The book continues by partially describing Step 12 when it says at the bottom of page 13:

“My friend promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a new way of living which answered ALL my problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the NEW order of things, were the ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS.” (Not suggestions but requirements.)

“Simple, but not easy; a price HAD to be paid. It meant DESTRUCTION of self-centeredness. I MUST turn in ALL things to the Father of Light who presides over us all.

At the bottom of page 14, Ebby explains the necessity of the last Tenet, which is “Continued work with others”. This part of Step 12 begins in the last paragraph when Bill writes:

“My friend had emphasized the ABSOLUTE NECESSITY of demonstrating these principles in ALL my affairs. Particularly was it IMPERATIVE to work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead, he said. And how appallingly true for the alcoholic! (Now this next line might be one of the MOST important lines in this whole book, so please notice what it says.) For if an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could NOT survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would SURELY drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that.”

Bill takes the actions prescribed by the Oxford Group and has a sudden conversion experience. He has the “entire psychic change” that Dr. Silkworth talks about in “The Doctor’s Opinion.” In the second paragraph on page 14, Bill describes his spiritual awakening:

“These were revolutionary and drastic proposals, but the moment I FULLY accepted them, the effect was electric. There was a sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known. There was utter confidence. I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound.”

Bill’s life is drastically changed. He never drinks alcohol again, as THE result of taking certain actions.

Please turn to page 17. This is the beginning of the next chapter called “There Is A Solution”. At the bottom of the second paragraph on page 17 it says the following:

“The feeling of having shared in a common peril is ONE element in the powerful cement which binds us. But that in itself would NEVER have held us together as we are now joined.

The tremendous fact for every one of us is that we have discovered a common solution. We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action. This is the great news this book carries to those who suffer from alcoholism.”

Where we get the feeling of having shared in the common peril is in the fellowship of AA, but the book is warning us that getting involved in JUST the fellowship is NOT enough. There are TWO parts to AA’s solution to alcoholism, the fellowship AND the program (which are the Twelve Steps), and we need to be involved in BOTH parts. The book continues:

Please turn to the next page. The fourth paragraph on page 18 says:

“But the ex-problem drinker who has found this solution, who is properly armed with facts about himself (which is another way of saying that he has worked the Steps), can generally win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours. Until such an understanding is reached, little or nothing can be accomplished.”

The next paragraph gives a pretty good description of what to look for in a sponsor when it says:

“That the man who is making the approach has had the same difficulty, that he obviously knows what he is talking about, that his whole deportment (which means his behavior and attitude) shouts at the new prospect that he is a man with a real answer, that he has no attitude of Holier Than Thou, nothing whatever except the sincere desire to be helpful; that there are no fees to pay, no axes to grind, no people to please, no lectures to be endured these are the conditions we have found most effective. After such an approach many take up their beds and walk again.”

Please turn to page 22 where the authors make an important point about the mental aspect of alcoholism. The last paragraph on page 22 says the following:

“We know that while the alcoholic keeps away from drink, as he may do for months or years, he reacts much like other men. We are equally positive that once he takes ANY alcohol WHATEVER into his system, something happens, both in the bodily and mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to stop. The experience of any alcoholic will abundantly confirm this.

These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the MAIN problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.”

So, it’s important to identify by asking yourself if you can relate to the physical feature of alcoholism by seeing if your drinking career reflects the inability to predict how much you are going to drink once you start. BUT, you don’t have to worry about THAT part of alcoholism if you NEVER put alcohol in your body in the FIRST place. So the MAIN problem of the alcoholic centers in their mind and in their spiritual condition, because their spiritual condition controls their mind.

Please turn to page 24. Starting at the top of page the authors say the following:

“At a certain point in the drinking of every alcoholic, he passes into a state where the most powerful desire to stop drinking is of absolutely NO avail. This tragic situation has already arrived in practically every case long before it is suspected. The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so-called will power becomes practically nonexistent. We are unable, at certain times (not ALL the time but at CERTAIN times), to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago (and in some cases of even a day or a few hours ago). We are without defense against the first drink. The almost certain consequences that follow taking even a glass of beer do not crowd into the mind to deter (or prevent) us. If these thoughts occur, they are hazy (which means vague) and readily supplanted (or replaced) with the old threadbare (which means worn out) idea that this time we shall handle ourselves like other people. There is a complete failure of the kind of defense that keeps one from putting his hand on a hot stove.”

You may have noticed that the first line on this page said that, “the most powerful desire to stop drinking is of absolutely NO avail”. Although a desire to stop drinking is the only requirement for AA membership, which means simply that you are allowed to sit at a closed meeting, this desire alone is NOT enough to bring about permanent recovery.

The last paragraph on this page says that:

“When this sort of thinking is fully established in an individual with alcoholic tendencies, he has probably placed himself beyond human aid, and unless locked up, may die or go permanently insane.”

So again, we are beyond human aid. It also says this in the ABC’s at the end of “How It Works” - “That probably NO human power could have relieved our alcoholism.” Although a sponsor and the fellowship IS very important, they are STILL forms of human aid, and are NOT enough to bring about permanent recovery from alcoholism.

Please turn to page 30. The Big Book authors give us more about how the mental obsession kills so many of us. Starting at the top of page 30, it says:

“Most of us have been unwilling to admit we were real alcoholics. No person likes to think he is bodily and mentally different from his fellows. Therefore, it is not surprising that our drinking careers have been characterized by countless vain attempts to prove we could drink like other people. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession (or lie) of EVERY abnormal drinker. The persistence of this illusion (or lie) is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death.”

It’s almost humorous that the “Big Book” says, “The idea that someday he will control AND enjoy his drinking is the great obsession...”. If I am an alcoholic, there were times when I could do one or the other, but never both. There were times when I was controlling my drinking, but I was NOT enjoying it. And there were times when I was enjoying my drinking, but these times could not be described as having control. So, if I am an alcoholic, the times of controlling AND enjoying my drinking are long gone.

They further emphasize the mental obsession starting on page 34 and continuing through to the end of the chapter, by stating again and again that, no matter HOW strong our willpower or our conviction, at CERTAIN times we are UNABLE to stay away from the first drink. Page 34, paragraph 2:

“For those who are unable to drink moderately the question is how to stop altogether. We are assuming, of course, that the reader desires to stop. Whether such a person can quit upon a non-spiritual basis depends upon the extent to which he has already lost the power to choose whether he will drink or not. Many of us felt that we had plenty of character. There was a tremendous urge to cease forever. Yet we found it impossible. This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it - this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish.” (That’s a great description of powerlessness. The book continues)

“How then shall we help our readers determine, to their own satisfaction, whether they are one of us? The experiment of quitting for a period of time will be helpful, but we think we can render an even greater service to alcoholic sufferers, and perhaps to the medical fraternity. So we shall describe some of the mental states that precede a relapse into drinking, for obviously this is the crux (or the most important point) of the problem.” (Please keep this statement in mind as we go through the rest of this chapter. The examples given in the next few pages are there to show the MENTAL STATE prior to drinking. The book continues.)

“What sort of thinking dominates an alcoholic who repeats time after time the desperate experiment of the first drink? Friends, who have reasoned with him after a spree which has brought him to the point of divorce or bankruptcy, are mystified when he walks directly into a saloon. Why does he? Of what is he thinking?

Our first example is a friend we shall call Jim. This man has a charming wife and family. He inherited a lucrative automobile agency. He had a commendable world war record. He is a good salesman. Everybody likes him. He is an intelligent man, normal so far as we can see, except for a nervous disposition. He did no drinking until he was thirty-five. In a few years he became so violent when intoxicated that he had to be committed. On leaving the asylum, he came into contact with us.

We told him what we know of alcoholism (they told him about Step 1, the physical allergy or craving for more once we take a drink, and the mental obsession that ensures that we'll return to drinking even when we stop) and the answer we had found (they told him about Steps 2 through 12). He made a beginning (so he started working only SOME of the Steps). His family was re-assembled, and he began to work as a salesman for the business he had lost through drinking. All went well for a time, but he FAILED TO ENLARGE HIS SPIRITUAL LIFE (the way we enlarge our spiritual lives is by continued work with ALL the Steps on a daily basis, going to meetings and helping others. The Big Book says that the Third Step is only a beginning, so the gentleman in this story probably did the first three Steps but then did NOT go on with the REST of the program. Also, it has been said that EVERY member of AA who has EVER relapsed, did so because of that last sentence - they failed to enlarge their spiritual life. So please stay aware of this as time passes in your OWN recovery. The book continues). To his consternation, he found himself drunk half a dozen times in rapid succession. On each of these occasions we worked with him, reviewing carefully what had happened. He agreed he was a real alcoholic and in serious condition. He knew he faced another trip to the asylum if he kept on. Moreover, he would lose his family, for whom he had deep affection.

Yet he got drunk again. We asked him to tell us exactly how it happened. This is his story: "I came to work on Tuesday morning. I remember I felt irritated that I had to be a salesman for a concern I once owned. I had a few words with the boss, but nothing serious. Then I decided to drive into the country and see one of my prospects for a car. On the way I felt hungry so I stopped at a roadside place where they have a bar. I had no intention of drinking. I just thought I would get a sandwich. I also had the notion that I might find a customer for a car at this place, which was familiar, for I had been going to it for years. I had eaten there many times during the months I was sober. I sat down at a table and ordered a sandwich and a glass of milk. Still no thought of drinking. I ordered another sandwich and decided to have another glass of milk."

(Now please pay attention here because curly writing means it must be important.)

"SUDDENLY the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk, it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach. I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I vaguely sensed I was not being any too smart, but felt reassured, as I was taking the whiskey on a full stomach. The experiment went SO well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk. That didn't seem to bother me so I tried another.

Thus started one more journey to the asylum for Jim. Here was the threat of commitment, the loss of family and position, to say nothing of that intense mental and physical suffering which drinking always caused him. He had much knowledge about himself as an alcoholic. Yet ALL reasons for not drinking were easily pushed aside in favor of the foolish idea (or the lie) he could take whiskey if only he mixed it with milk!"

“Whatever the precise definition of the word may be, we call this plain insanity. How can such a lack of proportion, of the ability to think straight, be called anything else?

You may think this an extreme case. To us it is not far-fetched, for this kind of thinking has been characteristic of every single one of us. We have sometimes reflected more than Jim did, upon the consequences. But there was always the curious mental phenomenon, that parallel with our sound reasoning there inevitably ran some insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink. Our sound reasoning failed to hold us in check. The insane idea won out. Next day we would ask ourselves, in all earnestness and sincerity, how it could have happened.

In some circumstances we have gone out deliberately to get drunk, feeling ourselves justified by nervousness, anger, worry, depression, jealousy or the like. But even in this type of beginning we are obliged to admit that our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient in the light of what always happened. We now see that when we began to drink deliberately, instead of casually, there was little serious or effective thought during the period of premeditation, of what the terrific consequences might be."

Let's go back to the top of the page and notice some of the way's the book describes the mental obsession. In the first line they call it "the foolish idea", the fourth line down it's called "plain insanity", then a few words later "lack of proportion, of the ability to think straight", six lines later "the curious mental phenomenon", two lines after that "some insanely trivial excuse", two line later "the insane idea", seven lines after that "our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient", and then two lines later "there was little serious or effective thought during the period of premeditation of what the terrific consequences might be". This is another example of how Bill Wilson likes using different words that all mean the same thing. The Book continues at the bottom of page 37:

“Our behavior is as absurd and incomprehensible with respect to the first drink as that of an individual with a passion, say, for jay-walking. He gets a thrill out of skipping in front of fast-moving vehicles. He enjoys himself for a few years in spite of friendly warnings. Up to this point you would label him as a foolish chap having queer ideas of fun. Luck then deserts him and he is slightly injured several times in succession. You would expect him, if he were normal, to cut it out. Presently he is hit again and this time has a

fractured skull. Within a week after leaving the hospital a fast-moving trolley car breaks his arm. He tells you he has decided to stop jay-walking for good, but in a few weeks he breaks both legs.

"On through the years this conduct continues, accompanied by his continual promises to be careful or to keep off the streets altogether. Finally, he can no longer work, his wife gets a divorce and he is held up to ridicule. He tries every known means to get the jaywalking idea out of his head. He shuts himself up in an asylum, hoping to mend his ways. But the day he comes out he races in front of a fire engine, which breaks his back. Such a man would be crazy, wouldn't he?

"You may think our illustration is too ridiculous. But is it? We, who have been through the wringer, have to admit if we substituted alcoholism for jay-walking, the illustration would fit exactly. However intelligent we may have been in other respects, where alcohol has been involved, we have been STRANGELY insane. (This is kinda funny because it's saying that even for INSANE people we are strange.) It's strong language - but isn't it true?

"Some of you are thinking: "Yes, what you tell us is true, but it doesn't fully apply. We admit we have some of these symptoms, but we have not gone to the extremes you fellows did, nor are we likely to, for we understand ourselves SO well after what you have told us that such things cannot happen again. We have not lost everything in life through drinking and we certainly do not intend to. Thanks for the information." (So what these people are saying is that they are only a LITTLE alcoholic, but their lives are manageable.)

"That may be true of certain NON-alcoholic people who, though drinking foolishly and heavily at the present time, are able to stop (because they don't have the mental obsession) or moderate (because they don't have the allergy or craving for more when they drink), because their brains and bodies have not been damaged as ours were. But the actual or potential alcoholic, with HARDLY an exception, will be ABSOLUTELY unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge. This is a point we wish to emphasize and re-emphasize, to smash home upon our alcoholic readers as it has been revealed to us out of bitter experience. Let us take another illustration."

"Fred is partner in a well known accounting firm. His income is good, he has a fine home, is happily married and the father of promising children of college age. He is so attractive a personality that he makes friends with everyone. If ever there was a successful business man, it is Fred. To all appearances he is a stable, well balanced individual. Yet, he is alcoholic. We first saw Fred about a year ago in a hospital where he had gone to recover from a bad case of jitters. It was his first experience of this kind, and he was much ashamed of it. Far from admitting he was an alcoholic, he told himself he came to the hospital to rest his nerves. (You know how it is, detoxes and rehabs are FILLED with "nerve-resters".) The doctor intimated (or suggested) strongly that he might be worse than he realized. For a few days he was depressed about his condition. He made up his mind (so he's using will power) to quit drinking altogether. It NEVER occurred to him that perhaps he could not do so, in spite of his character and standing. Fred would not believe himself an alcoholic (he never took Step 1), much less accept a spiritual remedy for his problem (if you don't take Step 1, there's no need for Steps 2 through 12). We told him about alcoholism (notice the Twelfth Step work they did back then. Again, they told him about the mental obsession and they told him about the allergy). He was interested and conceded that he had SOME of the symptoms, but he was a long way from admitting that he could do nothing about it himself. He was positive that this humiliating experience, plus the knowledge he had acquired, would keep him sober the rest of his life. Self-knowledge would fix it.

We heard no more of Fred for a while. One day we were told that he was back in the hospital. This time he was quite shaky. He soon indicated he was anxious to see us. The story he told is most instructive for here was a chap ABSOLUTELY CONVINCED he had to stop drinking, who had NO excuse for drinking, who exhibited splendid judgment and determination in all his OTHER concerns, yet was flat on his back nevertheless."

"Let him tell you about it: "I was much impressed with what you fellows said about alcoholism, but I frankly did not believe it would be possible for me to drink again. I somewhat appreciated your ideas about the subtle insanity which precedes the first drink, but I was confident it could NOT happen to me after what I had learned. I reasoned I was not so far advanced as most of you fellows, that I had been usually successful in licking my OTHER personal problems, that I would therefore be successful where you men failed. I felt I had every right to be self-confident, that it would be ONLY a matter of exercising my will power and keeping on guard." (Again, self-will & self-knowledge is not enough if you're an alcoholic.)

"In this frame of mind, I went about my business and for a time all was well. I had no trouble refusing drinks, and began to wonder if I had not been making too hard work of a simple matter. One day I went to Washington to present some accounting evidence to a government bureau. I had been out of town before during this particular dry spell, so there was nothing new about that. Physically, I felt fine. Neither did I have any pressing problems or worries. My business came off well, I was pleased and knew my partners would be too. It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud on the horizon." (The interesting thing about what leads up to Fred's relapse is that he was neither hungry, angry, lonely, nor tired. What the fellowship calls H.A.L.T. does not apply here. If you remember, in the Jim story earlier, Jim was not having an "up" day. But Fred here is having a REALLY good day.)

"I went to my hotel and leisurely dressed for dinner. (Now here's the curly writing again.) As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with dinner. That was all. Nothing more. I ordered a cocktail and my meal. Then I ordered another cocktail. After dinner I decided to take a walk. When I returned to the hotel it struck me a highball would be fine before going to bed, so I stepped into the bar and had one. I remember having several more that night and PLENTY next morning. I have a SHADOWY recollection of being in an airplane bound for New York, of finding a friendly taxicab driver at the landing field instead of my wife. The driver escorted me about for several days. I know little of where I went, or what I said and did. (Sounds like he had a blackout!) Then came the hospital with its unbearable mental AND physical suffering."



(I love these next few words!) "As soon as I regained my ability to think, I went carefully over that evening in Washington. Not only had I been off guard, I had made NO FIGHT WHATEVER against that first drink. THIS time I had NOT thought of the consequences AT ALL. I had commenced to drink as carelessly as though the cocktails were ginger ale. I now remembered what my alcoholic friends had told me, how they prophesied that IF I had an alcoholic mind, the time and place would come - I would drink again. They had said that though I did raise a defense, it would one day give way before some TRIVIAL reason for having a drink. Well, just that did happen and more, for what I had learned of alcoholism did NOT occur to me at all. I knew from that moment that I had an alcoholic mind. I saw that will power and self-knowledge would NOT help in those STRANGE MENTAL BLANK SPOTS (AGAIN they're describing the mental obsession). I had never been able to understand people who said that a problem had them hopelessly defeated. I knew then. It was a crushing blow."

(Notice the Twelfth Step work here again.) "Two of the members of Alcoholics Anonymous came to see me. They grinned, which I didn't like so much, and then asked me if I thought myself alcoholic and if I were really licked this time. I had to concede both propositions (so he finally takes Step 1). They piled on me HEAPS of medical evidence to the effect that an alcoholic mentality, such as I had exhibited in Washington, was a HOPELESS condition. They cited cases out of their own experience by the dozen. This process snuffed out the last flicker of conviction that I could do the job myself." (That's his description of his taking Step 2.)

"Then they outlined the spiritual answer and program of action which a hundred of them had followed successfully. Though I had been only a nominal churchman, their proposals were not, intellectually, hard to swallow. But the program of action, though entirely sensible, was pretty drastic. It meant I would have to throw several LIFELONG conceptions out of the window. That was not easy. But the moment I made up my mind to go through with the process (otherwise known as Step 3), I had the curious feeling that my alcoholic condition was relieved, as in fact it proved to be."

"Quite as important was the discovery that spiritual principles would solve ALL my problems. I have since been brought into a way of living INFINITELY more satisfying and, I hope, more useful than the life I lived before. My old manner of life was by NO MEANS a bad one, but I would NOT exchange its best moments for the worst I have now. I would not go back to it even if I could." (And the only way he could have experienced all that is by working Steps 4 through 12.)

"Fred's story speaks for itself. We hope it strikes home to thousands like him. He had felt only the first nip of the wringer. Most alcoholics have to be pretty badly mangled before they really commence to solve their problems."

Many doctors and psychiatrists agree with our conclusions. One of these men, staff member of a world-renowned hospital, recently made this statement to some of us: "What you say about the general hopelessness of the average alcoholic's plight is, in my opinion, correct. As to two of you men, whose stories I have heard, there is no doubt in my mind that you were 100% hopeless, apart from DIVINE help. Had you offered yourselves as patients at this hospital, I would NOT have taken you, if I had been able to avoid it. People like you are too heartbreaking. Though not a religious person, I have profound respect for the spiritual approach in such cases as yours. For most cases, there is virtually NO other solution."

"Once more (so here's ANOTHER review): the alcoholic AT CERTAIN TIMES (not ALL the time but at CERTAIN times) has NO effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few RARE cases, neither he nor ANY other human being can provide such a defense. His defense MUST come from a Higher Power."

So now you've been given a few examples of the fact that because of the way we selfishly perceive and live our life, we create a spiritually blocked off condition for ourselves where we need to seek relief or escape from the inner turmoil, discomfort, or unmanageability. Our mind then remembers that drinking alcohol brings about the ease and comfort we seek, but conveniently FORGETS about the trouble alcohol has caused us. When we take the first drink we then trigger the physical craving for more and more alcohol. We have a spiritual malady, an obsession of the mind, and an abnormal reaction of the body (or an allergy) to alcohol. This dooms us to an alcoholic death - spiritually, mentally, and even sometimes physically.

There is additional material within these 51 pages from "The Doctor's Opinion" through to the end of Chapter 3 called "More About Alcoholism" that further explains the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of alcoholism and how our lives can become unmanageable whether we are drinking or not. If you need more proof, please read on. All we've done is provide you with some of the highlights. However, we hope we've shown you enough for you to proceed.

By way of a review, let me describe what the Big Book says about Step One and what differentiates an alcoholic physically, mentally, and spiritually, from a non-alcoholic. Physically, the alcoholic has an allergy, or an abnormal reaction, to alcohol. This abnormal reaction to alcohol is a craving for more alcohol once we take a few drinks. This craving NEVER happens to a non-alcoholic. Because of this, a non-alcoholic can ALWAYS predict how much they are going to drink, but an alcoholic CANNOT. Besides the craving, alcohol DOES something for an alcoholic that it does NOT do for a non-alcoholic. When an alcoholic drinks, they get a feeling of ease and comfort; an "IN control, get up and go into town, I like this" kind of a feeling. When a NON-alcoholic drinks, they get an "OUT of control, beginning of a nauseating, slightly tipsy, I don't like this so I don't want any more" kind of a feeling. That's why they stop after one or two, and make statements like, "I don't want another drink because I am feeling that first one." Spiritually, because of the selfish and self-centered way the alcoholic views and deals with other people, their emotions, and life; they are filled with inner turmoil, discomfort, and anxiety. Since alcohol is the ONLY thing that we have experienced, which brings relief from this inner unmanageability, we turn to alcohol again and again, even though it has caused problems for us in the past. We don't see what alcohol is doing TO us, we ONLY think about what it is going to do FOR us, which describes the alcoholic's mental obsession. A

NON-alcoholic's relationship with alcohol is a "take it or leave it" kind of relationship, but an ALCOHOLIC'S relationship with alcohol is a "I need it to deal with life" kind of relationship. Please ask yourself if you can relate to the experience of an alcoholic. For more on the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of alcoholism please go back to the Step 1 files and read "Step 1 (Physical, Mental & Spiritual)."

Also, in the middle of the first paragraph on page 44, the Big Book makes a few statements that can be used to review the information about Step One and the direction we need to move in. In the middle of the first paragraph on page 44, it says the following:

"If, when you honestly want to, you find you cannot quit entirely (which describes the mental and spiritual part of alcoholism), or if when drinking, you have little control over the amount you take (which describes the physical part of alcoholism), you are probably alcoholic. If that be the case, you may be suffering from an illness which ONLY a spiritual experience will conquer."

For a great statement about the insanity of returning (again) to drinking please go back to the Step 1 files and read "The Insanity."

Now it's time for each of us to start our personal journey toward that spiritual experience which WILL change our lives. Let's see who is ready to take the First Step.

### **Step 1 We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.**

The "Big Book" authors tell us exactly what we have to do by providing us with two statements that can be turned into questions. The first one can be found in the middle of page 30:

"We learned that we had to fully concede (or admit) to our INNERMOST selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion (or lie) that we are like other people, OR PRESENTLY MAY BE, has to be SMASHED."

In order to smash the delusion (or lie) that we're not alcoholics, we are going to ask each of you to answer a simple question, "Are you ready to concede (or admit) to your INNERMOST self you are powerless over alcohol?" In other words, "Are you an alcoholic?" All that is required is a yes or no answer.

If you're NOT convinced you are alcoholic or that your life is unmanageable, please let us know later at the end of this session. Your "sponsor" or spiritual advisor is willing to spend time with you this week to discuss your reservations. You may not be an alcoholic. We want to give you EVERY opportunity to comprehend the devastating consequences of this terrible affliction and help you identify if you are an alcoholic.

O.K., for those who are ready, let's proceed.

This is the first of the two First Step questions:

Do you concede (or admit) to your INNERMOST self you are an alcoholic?

Please answer yes or no.

There is another question associated with taking Step 1. On page 33 at the end of paragraph 1 it says:

"If we are planning to stop drinking, there MUST be NO reservation of ANY kind, nor ANY lurking notion that someday we will be immune to (or not affected by) alcohol."

So let me also ask each of you the second First Step question:

Do you have any reservations or lingering ideas that one day you will be UNAFFECTED by drinking alcohol?

Please answer yes or no.

Thank you.

Those of you who have answered "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second question have completed Step One.