

## Activity Addicts

### If we can keep ourselves busy enough we won't have time to face ourselves

I CAN BE on the move in AA with a steady round of meetings, committees, conferences, banquets, board meetings--and be going absolutely nowhere in the program. This kind of *activity* can never be the effective lever for change that is provided by the *action* of continuing work with the Twelve Steps. Hypnotically attractive, the activity can easily become an end in itself and lead me along a path of perpetual motion that disguises my lack of *action*. . .and growth.

How do I know? I've spent a lot of time on that path as a tireless, selfless servant, creating a discreet tumult to make sure that everyone recognizes my contribution to our Fellowship. One of the particularly beguiling aspects of hyperactivity in AA is that it makes us highly visible. Continuing work with each of the Steps will make me only saner, happier, and more useful. It won't necessarily make people notice me.

In many respects, the activity addict resembles that national phenomenon, the work addict. Each is perpetually on the move, and each is using his activity to avoid facing himself. There's a wide gulf between the person who works effectively and productively at his job and the individual who is a persistently hard driver because he is persistently driven from within. For this man or woman, work is a drug, in the view of many authorities in the field of addiction.

The work addict's drive is not primarily for money, but for release from tension within. Researchers report that, in many cases, he makes unnecessary work simply to fill up holes within himself. Dr. Allan Cott, a New York psychiatrist, has some interesting thoughts on that question. A specialist in children, suffering from learning disabilities and hyperactivity, he provides a thought-provoking insight on the contrast between a hard worker and a work addict.

"I think it's comparable to the difference between a healthy, active child and a hyperactive child," he explains. "I think the compulsive overworker does many things which are not very productive. He's filling up time. A healthy, active child will be curious and interested in everything he sees, and many objects in a room will attract his attention, but he stays long enough with each object to learn something from it. The hyperactive child, on the other hand, has to keep on the move and goes from one thing to another without staying long enough with anything to get any real meaning from it. In most instances, it's perpetual, purposeless movement that stems from an inner uneasiness, and I think the addictive worker would be the same. Certainly, adults of this type would find retirement a threat and invariably deteriorate or die quickly. Vacations and weekends are a preview of what happens with them on retirement. They become acutely uncomfortable without ceaseless activity, which acts as a tranquilizer for them."

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the work addict often is employed in one of the helping professions. He's frequently a clergyman, a social worker, a physician, a psychologist, or a psychiatrist. When questioned about his constant working and limited time with his family, he has the finest answer of all: "I've got to do this because these people need me. They depend on my help."

Says Dr. Edwin Hallsten of St. Louis, "If his wife or children complain that they hardly ever see him, his answer is that he's 'out helping people.' There's no way for them to fight that." Hallsten, a clinical psychologist as well as an Evangelical Covenant minister, adds, "The work addict works when he feels uneasy. When he feels anxious, he works--even though it fails to relieve the sources of stress and does not provide lasting satisfaction. It seems to me that it feeds into and

fails to relieve a chronic anxiety. It's an escape response enabling the addict to avoid his family problems and inner conflicts."

These observations on the difference between work in proper perspective and work as an addictive problem offer a sharp look at the contrast between an active AA and an activity addict. AA activity in its proper niche and in accurate perspective provides a climate enabling us to grow through continuing action with all of the Steps. AA hyperactivity, on the other hand, simply breeds more activity and gradually becomes an end in itself. There is never enough time or energy to reflect on what needs to be changed within us and then do it.

Defining sin as anything that separates us from God, we readily see the compelling truth in Gandhi's observation that "hurry and overwork are always sins." The subtlety in AA hyperactivity is that it often finds an outlet with activities good in themselves. In the extreme, however, these activities produce negative results in our lives. Creating hurry and overwork, they separate us from an awareness of God and what's *really* important.

If I'm depressed, anxious, or uneasy, it's a message that *there's something wrong with me*. Unquestionably, meetings are important. AA activity is important. These are not always the right answers for treating my inner discomfort, however. Frequently, I've substituted them for needed work on the Steps. The activity has simply served as a vehicle enabling me to postpone the honest, searching looks at myself that necessarily precede any kind of spiritual growth.

Too often, my infatuation with "the big picture" in AA has blinded me to the fundamental truth that man is the reality, mankind an abstraction. Help for alcoholics begins with help for *one* alcoholic. Unless I'm sponsoring at least one alcoholic in my own area, I'm not adequately carrying the message, *no matter what else I'm doing*. Further, my work with others can be effective only if it's based on persistent work on myself through the Steps.

The program leads me to "a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps" provided I *do* the work outlined in the Steps. There's no other way for it to happen. Simply staying sober and going to meetings will *not* make it happen. Meetings and a rational amount of activity can be the catalysts that make me work the Steps--or the activity can be a method of keeping so busy that I remain asleep spiritually. One of the attractive features of activity addiction is that it can parade as necessary and noble. We think we're doing all of this for AA--when, in reality, we'd be better off (and so would AA) if we sat quietly and did some work on ourselves.

In my experience, it's important to check with close friends on the program who will point out where I'm going astray in any area, including activity. A crucial segment of my recovery depends on the help of written inventories and of other AAs to regularly shine the light of truth on what's happening in my life. These are friends who are doing a solid, continuing job with all of the Steps and will help me take my inventory by stripping away my rationalizations and dishonesty. Without their aid, I can easily waste my life by staying so busy and so active that I never have time to attend to what's *really* important--never have time to sit silently and listen for the voice of God speaking quietly to my condition.

For me, a rational amount of activity in AA keeps me in touch with members who are experiencing improvements in their lives through persistent application of every one of the Steps. Their examples strengthen my resolve to change and lead me to this kind of effort in the program. This is the *action* that transforms my life. Without it, no amount of *activity* means anything at all. This is the *action* that frees me from hurry and the frenzy of overcommitment--that simplifies my life--that brings quiet joy and expanded usefulness--that gives me a growing awareness of God's will and God's love each day.

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