



# Getting Unstuck: Heal your Life

## Day Seven – Getting unstuck from addiction

Anyone who has recovered will say the same—the best way to help others get unstuck is to tell your story. In my case, it was alcohol.

I can't blame my parents—they rarely drank. There were alcoholics here and there in the extended family tree, but other than hidden in genetics, I had nothing to make me prone to addiction. I didn't even drink for quite a while—even though I had chances. Attitudes about alcohol were loose when I was a child—you gave a baby a tablespoon of whiskey when teething. I had a sip of a beer once as a boy, with permission—and it was nasty, bitter stuff. When I was 16, my father's best friend's son and his friends took me out (they were 18 and up) to a bar and got pitchers. The bartender put a hand on my shoulder and to ask how old I was, and when I said "18," and just muttered something about how he bet I just turned it too, but walked away and left me alone. I had two glasses, and was terrified my parents would smell it when I returned. It wasn't anything I enjoyed.

I didn't drink all through music gigs in high school with musicians who were smoking pot and downing beers. I didn't drink my freshman year at college. But for whatever reason, sophomore year, I decided I needed to try some beer. I got a six pack (drinking age was still 18 then), and one beer went down smoothly. No big deal. So I drank another. Then

another. Then the rest of the six pack—in about 15 minutes. I was laughing at a joke and pretended to knock my head against the desk, but not really. I didn't feel the real impact, and friends had to point out my forehead was cut and bleeding. When I made the way through the swirling world back to my own room, I crashed on the mattress, which then swayed and then flipped over and over until I vomited and it slowly rocked back to earth as I passed out.

The next morning, making my way into work with a throbbing head, my manager asked what happened. I said I walked into a door. He asked "How drunk were you?" You have thought a rational mind would stop there. But no. I began a pattern of binge drinking and swearing never again, over and over.

I learned to like whiskey, then scotch. Senior year, I moved off campus, and one of my housemates had a cousin who worked at Miller and could get a discount. We each had cases of Lowenbrau Dark piled high in our closets. I liked a little wine too, especially Rosé. A few people suggested I might be an alcoholic. I laughed at thought. I wasn't living under a bridge with a bottle in a paper bag. I was just a college student, doing what college students do. Or so I thought.

After college, I worked as a bartender, then a mutual fund salesman. I went to grad school in Boston, where I kept stocked up on Rolling Rock, my housemates' favorite. Half a year later, the stress and cost of school full time and working full time caught up with me, and I took an indefinite leave of absence. I returned to Syracuse and took a job as a bank teller.

Going into the holidays, we had been given bottles of wine and champagne by some of the regular customers, and New Year's Eve found me sitting in my apartment in the projects, watching the countdown show on my small black and white TV and feeling sorry for myself. I hated my job. I wasn't in the relationship I had wanted. I wasn't in the career I wanted. Everything sucked.

And then...I don't know why...something snapped. I took a hard look at myself, and didn't like what I saw. I decided enough of the pity party. And enough of the drinking. I chugged the rest of the champagne, turned off the television, and went to bed. In the morning, I hit the streets, engaged with finding work I liked—and without drinking. I just quit.

For a few years.

I managed a metaphysical bookstore for a while, promoted some concerts, and followed those skills to a marketing offer with Silo/Alcazar, the largest independent music wholesaler in the U.S., in the heart of the Green Mountains of Vermont. Sounded perfect. But the job didn't work out as I had hoped, and half a year later, I was back in Syracuse, where I shared a large three-story house with friends. I found work at a local major label music wholesaler.

The new living situation was peaceful...good people, nice neighborhood, lovely times. At

dinner, my friends would often have a beer. I turned my nose up...not a healthy habit, and I had become Mr. Health Food. But as time passed...oh, what the hell, I'll have one. And if I had one, I'd have another one. OK, one more. Then back the next day or two to sticking my nose up...but always returning in a few days, and never to have a single beer. "Tim somehow thinks three beers every three days is healthier than a beer a day," observed one of my friends. Busted. I hadn't thought of it until he mentioned it. I really didn't notice I was doing that.

Before long I was drinking every day. I left the hard stuff alone, and wine always gave me a headache, so I stuck with beer. Molson Golden Ale. My friends thought it was the best, so I did too.

When we all went our separate ways, I moved out to the country, where I bought my own place. There's always work to be done, and a nice beer went nicely with it. Soon I was drinking throughout the day, everyday. I knew it was too much. So...I decided to cut down. I did...over a period of several months. I did finally stop drinking again...but it was quite a difficult chore. And I had done it in a weird way...I wanted to get back into shape too, so I used beer as calories while getting through the headaches dieting can bring. It was a bad precedent.

I stayed dry for a few years. Then I met Melanie. She drank Coors Light...so I did too. I didn't join in the pot smoking—I never liked it, even in college. Hurts my throat, and didn't do anything for me really anyway. Soon I was back to drinking every day. We talked of a life together, moving in, what our kids would look like. Until she called me at 2:00 a.m. in tears from someone else's bedroom. Way to break the break-up news.

I did not take it well. I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't stay inside—the walls were just closing in on me. I drank and I ran. I couldn't eat. I just drank and ran, drank and ran...for two and a half weeks. I lost 20 lbs. I felt like I was falling, falling, falling, that there was no bottom, that there would never be a bottom, that I would fall forever. It was horrible.

Then it stopped. I remember exactly where I was, a mile and a half up the road, running. I suddenly felt my grandfather with me (he had died seven years earlier), and everything was calm. I wasn't falling anymore. I felt terrible, but I wasn't falling. I was standing on the bottom, a firm bottom, and I could climb back from there. I walked home.

I got into therapy—though not for alcoholism. I wanted to work through the pain. And we did—the first session, in response to something I thought was innocuous (so innocuous I don't know what it was), the therapist said to me, "Now, usually when I hear someone say something like that, there's been a history of abuse." I was floored. Huh? I didn't know what to say; I explained how no, while my mother could certainly have words, we just went through what children raised by caring parents did in those days. Later, I called my sister and asked, "Hey—do you think Mom was abusive?" Her answer was immediate—"Duh!" Oh.

Anyway, we worked through quite a few things, including how I dealt with my childhood. “It’s kind of amazing,” the therapist remarked one day. “Your world didn’t work well, so you created one that did, and you’ve carried that skill into your work life. If you could manage your personal life the way you do your professional one, you’d be doing great!” Well...there you have it. And I’ve always been a workaholic, because while difficult, it was one area where I could learn to manage and succeed—so I did more of it. I used to think that was because I had to so I could survive; today I know I have choices.

Six months later, therapy was pretty much wrapped up, except for drinking, and I wasn’t concerned about that (though my therapist was). She once remarked and was correct—I wanted to drink. And since I wasn’t drinking like I had been when self-medicating the emotional pain, I didn’t see the problem. I was just glad it was a reason for insurance to pay for the counseling sessions.

It cost me. I met Louise a few years after this, and fell very much in love. I had never met anyone like her. But I wasn’t ready (I didn’t know that), and in particular, would show up for dates at 11 a.m. half in the bag already. When she broke it off, she said she hoped and prayed I would find my way to AA. I thought she was being silly, over-reacting, just criticizing randomly. I should have listened.

I continued on the next few years, concentrating on my work life. I figured I should cut down. My doctor at the time pointed out my blood pressure was pre-hypertensive when I drank (it’s hard on the arteries in the kidneys), and when I cut back and ate right, my BP would fall back to 120/80. So I continued a cycle of cutting back, picking up, cutting back, picking up. I didn’t notice that my cutting back method was taking years...and without results. But I kept figuring that while it was hard, I had done it before, so I could do it again. I didn’t know that alcoholism was progressive, and that I wasn’t facing the same demon I had before—this demon had become a dragon.

During this period, I had my one brush with the law—a very bad end to a very sad day.

My shepherd/Airedale mix, Sasha, my constant companion for 15 and a half years, and very healthy for 15 of those years, had turned ill the last six months. First, it was lymphoma, which we caught early, so treating it was actually feasible...though it meant replacing her hip arthritis anti-inflammatory medication with acupuncture—actually injections of B12 at acupuncture points—to go easier on her liver while fighting the lymphoma. While this was going on, she also developed spinal cord degeneration, and slowly lost control of her hind legs...they actually make nice carts for this, and can rehabilitate dogs. But then we also faced anaerobic infections, and she spent a night at the vets with a very high fever.

The vet helped her turn the corner on that episode, but she also had a talk with me. “I have four dogs,” she said, “and my vet care is essentially free. But even then, there’s a point at which you’ve gone as far as you can go. We’re at that point.” I told her I’d like to let her

live out whatever months she had left. She said quietly, “You don’t have months.” I understood, and took Sasha home. At the end of the week, we’d spend one last weekend together, as quality as we could, before saying goodbye. But that Thursday, I could see the infection cycle was starting all over again, and I couldn’t put her through that again. It was time. I called the vet to make an appointment that Friday.

Friday was horrible. I called the vet to postpone the appointment for later in the day, so I could take Sasha to Stoney Pond, where we had run, walked, skied, swam for much of our days together. I opened the car doors as she rested on the passenger seat, the back all the way down, and pet her while trying to take in the peace. And, of course, I was drinking beer after beer the whole time. But Sasha was just tired, so finally, we made our way to the vet.

She was ready for us, blanket on the floor. I brought her in, lay her down, and she went back to resting, eyes closed, peaceful, tired, and as she slipped away, the only thing that changed was her breathing ceasing, as we sat with her on the floor, my hand on her head. I remembered how I found her—someone had dropped her off out of a car, six and a half weeks old, where people were swimming at Jamesville Dam. No one else was taking her, not even the kids playing with her. “We can’t just leave her here,” I told my friend Tamis. I bent down, and the puppy climbed over my shoulder—and went to sleep, like she’d been waiting for me. “What’s your doggie’s name?” she retorted. “Don’t be silly,” I said. I knew the next day I would be keeping her. We clicked right from the start.

“Someone didn’t want this dog,” I told the vet. I paused, tears in my eyes. “They sure messed up.”

“Yeah, they sure did,” agreed the vet. I gave Sasha a final pat, and stood to go.

It was late afternoon now, almost evening, and I decided to do something to snap myself out of my depression. Get out and meet people. Stop feeling sorry for myself. So I drove to a nearby town to check out a large bar/dance place called “Nothing Fancy” a friend had told me about. But when I got there, they weren’t open yet. The doors were unlocked, but no one was there except staff preparing for the evening. I used the rest room, decided I was just too tired, and I should go home, sleep, start the next day anew.

While leaving, I had to turn left off the main route to the country road back to my home. There was a stream of traffic, so when I saw a brief opening, I took it.

Wham. A pickup truck swerved but still hit my right front wheel.

“What the fuck was that?” demanded the driver, who then spun around.

“I saw the whole thing,” said a gas station employee, “I called the cops.”

They were prompt. Very prompt. And ignored my dog story. Right to the sobriety tests.

Then the handcuffs. And a very long ride to the Sheriff's office.

After quite a while, another deputy came in to do the chemical breathalyzer. I'm a wind musician, and I had been taking deep breaths—a normal person breathes 12-16 times a minute; I breathe 3. The officer stood there saying "Blow! Blow! Blow! Blow! Blow! Blow!" I was blowing, and I realized he needed volume (later I'd find out from research that they need the air in the bottom of the lungs). I had already exhaled longer than a normal person, so I stopped, with my lungs half full. The officer finished the test, told the arresting deputy "1 Oh" and left us alone again.

I don't know what I blew at the scene, but the officer just sat there in silence for the longest time. He clearly wasn't expecting .10 (which was the legal limit at the time). "Well, probably not going to help your day much," he said finally, "But with such a low test, and no priors, this will probably be plea bargained down to a DWAI. (He was right about that.)

"Hi Joe," I said when I called my friend from the phone on the wall. "I need a ride from the Sheriff's office." Two counties over, at that. "Whaat? ...Oh, never mind, we'll talk on the ride back. I just poured myself a beer...I'll dump it out." Now that's something I'd never have considered. What's one beer? Thankfully, Joe thinks differently.

For a short while, I was scared sober. But not for long. Soon I was counting my beers so I wouldn't get slammed at "alcohol school," as we called it, the weekly mandated class before I could get my license back. You can't scare an alcoholic—or a smoker or a druggie or any other addict. Getting unstuck from addiction takes considerably more.

I saw my friend Pat in the neighborhood store; I knew him through a mutual friend (who had passed on), both of whom were in AA. I told him what had happened, that I thought I might have a drinking problem. [MIGHT have a problem??? But that's how an addict thinks.] "Thursday nights, Peterboro," he replied, referring to a local meeting. We talked about it for a while. I got his number. And did nothing.

I kept trying to cut down. Months would go by, and I'd run into Pat again. We'd talk. He was smart—let me bring it up, just answered questions. One big turnoff for me was the emphasis on God in the AA book (I had seen a copy years before). "There's a whole chapter to the agnostic," Pat answered. I wasn't agnostic—I was an atheist, convinced God was a fairy tale from my younger days. Besides, I was busy at work...I didn't have time for meetings, not even an evening. Or so I told myself.

My doctor retired, and it took me a while to find another one I liked, one with a comfortable feel to his office, one where you could talk, not feel rushed. I remember our first appointment—I had brought a book, but was called after only five minutes. The first thing Dr. Callahan did was apologize profusely for keeping me five minutes, assuring me it would never happen again (it didn't). I was impressed; I'd never met a doctor who cared about my time before. I liked him. This is a doctor a man would actually go to when he needed a

doctor (we men are notorious for not doing that).

He asked a bunch of questions, including “How much do you drink?” I didn’t think it was all that much. “A 12-pack a day,” I said. Little more, actually. I wasn’t really sure how much more.

His entire demeanor changed instantly. “That is not good. That is not good.” I was taken aback. He expounded, quite adamant on this point. As the physical proceeded, I was in excellent health, “But we want to keep you that way,” he continued. “Many problems,” he added, referring to alcohol. “Look, you’re a smart guy—I don’t get many people in my waiting room reading Joyce.” Observant guy. “The liver regenerates, but each time there’s a tiny error. There’s a line, and we don’t know where it is.”

Alcoholism would come up at length every time I visited his office. “I’m not stranger to alcoholism,” he explained. “In my own family—Callahan.” He asked disturbing questions. “Do you have friends?” he asked. Of course I did. “Then call them and tell them you’re hurting!” I was stunned again. Hurting? “Let’s see who you are without the alcohol.” Huh? I was who I was. “Are you hurting yourself in any other way?” Does...he think I’m depressed? Me? “I have medications that can help you, but none of that is going to work as well as you putting down the drink.” We tried some too...anti-depressants, though I drank with them even though warned not to...anti-anxiety, which I didn’t use. I was fine. Wasn’t I? OK, I got down a lot, and was stressed out a lot, but I just needed to take the edge off. Right?

Dr. Callahan didn’t think so. He asked if I’d considered AA. I explained I had considered it, but it wasn’t for me. “A lot of my patients swear by it,” he said. And finally, one day, I went to the Peterboro meeting.

There was some other meeting going on that night, and I didn’t see Pat, so I wasn’t sure what was what. I looked inside a door window, but couldn’t really tell. I walked around outside. “Come on, Tim, you’ve come this far,” I told myself. Why was I so resistant? I walked around the other door to peek in—and someone pushed it open for me, so I entered and sat down. Yup, this was the AA meeting, 15 minutes in. The topic was baby steps. “Wow, the first meeting is hard, isn’t it?” I didn’t know there was a procedure for a newcomer’s first meeting. But I shared, they gave me phone numbers, and talked to me afterward—to suggest I go to a meeting the next night. Damn—didn’t these people have lives? How fanatic!

I did slowly start to check out other meetings. Some of what I heard made sense to me, and some of it seemed trite at the time. A few of the people were insistent on hammering away at the God-thing, seeing my atheism (which I did \*not\* wear as a chip on my shoulder, as some do) as a personal challenge for them to overcome. I had no interest in debating the point, and stopped going.

That wasn't going to fly with Dr. Callahan. "Well go back and explain to them that you're just there to talk about alcoholism," he said. And a lot more. I went back, to try again.

It was frustrating. I wanted to stop drinking, or at least cut down...but something always came up, or it just wasn't a good time right now, or I just needed to get through this next thing, and then once there, this next thing, and then once there, this next thing...continually. I brought the frustration up at a meeting once. "Well you must be serious about it—you keep coming back." I hadn't considered that, and it did give me hope and some comfort. But in time, I just decided again that there were too many clueless people there (somehow \*I\* was a genius?) and that it was just not an effective use of my time, and stopped going. I would cut down and stop on my own.

For a few years, Jeni and I had been friends, having met in an online discussion forum. Just friends. But without really intending it, we started lightly flirting, then noticing we were flirting, and realized we liked it. The flirting became more serious. We went from public discussion board to private email, then to long phone calls. She lived in North Carolina, but her situation was changing, especially with her daughter leaving for college, and though she had planned to head out West, she began to consider moving to New York instead, to be with me. Plans and hopes gradually became built high. On Thanksgiving, we talked about we'd start our own special traditions the next year. And we arranged to spend a week together, from just after Christmas to after New Year's. Give us a chance to get to see how we were together, though we both expected it to be a mere formality at this point.

The week got cut short after only three days. We met, and it was wonderful. That part was fine. And I was proud of myself for drinking a lot less when Jeni was around. But she had also been through some truly horrible family tragedies that involved alcohol as part of those stories—I'm going to keep those private, out of respect for Jeni—and here was her wonderful new boyfriend, clearly an alcoholic, thinking nothing of getting up to grab a beer at 5 a.m. She told a lie about her Dad falling ill and needing her and got on a plane. I learned the truth a few days later.

I was crushed. There wasn't enough beer in the world. I drank and cried. When I finished all the beer I had around home, and not enjoying a drop of it, not even wanting to drink it, I went out for a case to nurse me through the day. I didn't want to drink that either, but couldn't stop. I just wanted the pain to go away. And when the case was gone, I still didn't want to drink, but I had to—the pain was too great. I would have to go out for another case.

I was headed for a cliff, fast, and I could see it. This was the Melanie thing all over again, and I didn't want to go there. I remembered where the Saturday night meeting was, and looked at the clock. I could just make it. So desperately, knowing not what else to do, instead of going to get another case, I went to the AA meeting. I walked in, tear-stained, drunk (though I didn't think so), probably reeking of beer, and a very friendly face smiled and waved, "Tim!" I sat down. I was in the right place. They would help me. And when



they asked, as all meetings do, “Anybody coming back from a drink and want to talk about it?” I told my story.

And more importantly, I said this: “I can’t do this by myself. I need help.” Reality had dawned.

Things did not go swimmingly. I did cut down, but I still struggled with stopping. An AA friend carried a 24 hour chip in his truck, ready anytime I happened to not drink for just one day. I thought of switching to non-alcoholic beer, but my friend pointed out, “That’s no good, ‘cuz as soon as you finish that, you’ll be back at the story for the real stuff.” And it still contains alcohol, if less. Another AA friend gave me a coin that had belonged to her father, that just said “One day at a time.” It was eye-opening to me just how hard it was to stop.

A week and a half later, something changed. I had got a six-pack to wean me through the day, my next step in cutting down, still not getting that cutting down wasn’t working. But at 1:30 p.m., it was already gone. I’d have to get more! I was pissed at myself. And something snapped. Suddenly, I wanted to not drink just enough more than I wanted to drink. I called my friend. “Start the clock,” I told him, after I explained what had happened. “My 24 hours starts right now.” He congratulated me, gave me a pep talk, and I was off!

Until an hour later. My resolve was still fine, but the craving was unbelievable. How would I get through a day? Only 90 minutes into my new sobriety, I was back on the phone with my friend, practically in tears. “I can’t do this!” I explained. “I really want to, but I just can’t do it!” I was upset. That’s really what I thought. I was trapped. I would never be able to be sober.

My friend talked me down a bit – and at least I had called before I drank, rather than after (as I had previously done). “I’ve got to get back to work,” he said, when I was a little calmer, “But you have a phone list, right?” I did—AA members at meetings I had attended list their first names and phone numbers for people to call for support. “Well,” he said, “Start working your way down it. I’ll check in when I’m finished at work.”

And I did. I spent the afternoon on the phone, one person after another, telling my story, getting enough support to go another half hour, or even five or ten minutes. After five, the phone rang. My friend. “How you doing, Buddy?” I told him I hadn’t had a drink, but I was struggling, and that the phone list had helped. “Thing to do now,” he said, “is just hang on until the meeting.” That was a good idea—meetings always helped, keeping me calm for an hour. A couple hours and I’d be there. I could do that.

I did. At the meeting, I was elated—this was the longest I had gone without a drink in over a decade! I was shaky, but glad I had put together the afternoon and evening at least. “Thing to do now,” my friend told me at the end of the meeting, “is just go right home and go to bed.” It was good advice, and I did exactly that—went home, feed the dog and the

cats, and immediately hit the sheets. I had heard the further away you are from a drink, the easier it gets. The more time I could put together, the better.

The morning was...strange. Every day for years I would wake up and think, "Today, I just won't drink." And then I'd get up and open a beer. This morning, marveling I hadn't had a drink since the day before, I realized that if I could just hold off until 1:30, I'd earn my 24 hour chip! Then I could drink if I had to, but I'd at least have done a day without drinking. So I white-knuckled it to 1:30—and it was not an easy morning. But around 1:30, I had worked through a few bad craving sessions and felt better. "Gee," I thought. "Why don't I see if I can make it to the meeting?" So I did—and proudly received my 24 hour chip. I had just done something that I honestly didn't think was possible anymore. Thing to do now? Go home and go right to bed! I did.

The next morning, I realized that if I could make it to 1:30, I'd have put together two days! Then, at 1:30, why not see if I could make it to the meeting? Then right home to bed. And that's how I lived my life, 1/3 of a day at a time, for the next few weeks.

Two weeks in, early one morning, I found a beer can I had missed when I got all the beer out of the house, buried under some other stuff, and while I was thinking about what to do about this, my hands had already opened it and poured it down my throat. That's the power of habit—I really didn't have an awareness of the situation until the beer was already gone. I wasn't happy about it...but at least I had only lost two weeks of sobriety, now that I'd have to start over.

I went to work, a long, stressful day, and on the way home, decided as long as I'd blown my sobriety date for now, I may as well get a pint to take the edge off. Then at home, early evening, I figured I may as well relax from the day by going out for a six-pack. The sane portion of my brain finally kicked in then—after all that struggle, I was about to throw it all away and start over! That's the alcoholic mind. I didn't go to the store—I went to a nearby AA meeting instead.

I really didn't know what to expect. I'd heard at every meeting "Anybody coming back from a drink?" but had never seen what happens. I'd learn later that every group has a little different take on how to handle this. I learned that night that this group didn't believe in coddling their drinkers. I told my sad story. One member who didn't quite hear me asked his neighbor "What's this over? A woman?" I wasn't going to get much empathy. This wasn't the place for a pity party. I \*did\* get a solid and unsympathetic reality check. These people weren't about my sensitive feelings. They were about me not picking up a drink again. It was a rough night.

Pat followed me into the parking lot afterward. What he had to say, though, I was already thinking—the most important thing now wasn't what had happened or how I got there, but what happened next. And the good news? What happened that day scared me. That I could so easily go back to what I had struggled so hard to escape was just terrifying. And I

saw clearly that while I thought I was on a good path, that path wasn't enough. I was going to have to do something radical. I was going to have to do something I never imagined I would do. I was going to do something far beyond anything I had yet done. And I did it.

I took the suggestions that were freely given to me.

That's it. That's my radical step. Until then, I had really been cherry picking suggestions, adjusting them, taking what ones I liked, ignoring the rest as the ideas of people who didn't really understand my situation. Now I saw that they understood my situation far better than I did. Far better. I stopped analyzing. I stopped second guessing. I stopped judging. I just fucking did it.

They said to make changes—and I did. One old-timer suggested I drive a different way to work. I did. They said to avoid people, places and things associated with my drinking. I shopped at different stores, bought gas at different stations, because I had worn paths leading to the beer aisles. I still shop at those different stores. In fact, the first few times I went, I took people in the AA program with me! And instead of just trying not to do things, I replaced old habits with new habits. I used to get up every morning and open a beer; I made coffee first thing every morning instead—I still do. For quite a while, a few months, I called someone in the program every time before I left home, just so I wouldn't stray into a beer store. They told me to go to 90 meetings in 90 days (with the guarantee that after 90 days, if I wasn't satisfied, they'd gladly refund my misery). I didn't quite make 90 in 90, because of work commitments, but I came close. I had learned how fragile sobriety can be, especially in early recovery.

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I was about to learn something else--early sobriety sucks. All that emotional pain and confusion buried under a numbing haze for years suddenly comes rushing out, it's source long forgotten, but the pain very, very real--all when the chief habitual means of dealing with such things, alcohol, is no longer an option.

I had thought I was on top of things, functioning well. I was successful in my career, and I wasn't getting into the trouble that I had associated with what I had imagined alcoholism to be. I thought I managed well, that I just drank too much, and that solved, I'd be fine. Oh no. I had thought I wasn't afraid of anything--I found out I was afraid of just about everything. Fear and anxiety washed over me in waves. I didn't understand what was happening to me. Fortunately, the other AA members did, and helped me through this, one perceived crisis at a time.

Sometimes things got easier, sometimes not. My 59th day sober was almost my last. I went for a three hour walk in the forest with my dog, alternately cursing myself for being so far away from anywhere I could get beer to gratitude at being so far away from anywhere I could get beer. I got through it, and the next day received my 60 day chip at a meeting from my sponsor. I brought up the previous day as a topic.

I had dragged my feet on getting a sponsor. Everyone kept saying “Get a sponsor,” but I didn’t know who I would want to pick, and didn’t see the need to rush into it. The topic was brought up at meetings, “I’d like to hear about the importance of getting a sponsor,” by people with long sobriety who had sponsors, a passive-aggressive topic I called it, aimed at me. It pissed me off. There were half a dozen guys I liked and talked to, and that was fine with me.

Finally, at one such meeting, I was just getting more and more angry, and when it was my turn to talk, let my feelings be known. It was tense, but I was really the only tense one. Finally, a calm, quiet voice to my left said, “You know, you can just get a temporary sponsor.” He was also one of the people on my “short list,” particularly when I heard him talk at meetings about “How important is this, really?” I turned to him and said, “Fine. How’d you like to be my temporary sponsor?” in a challenging tone. Very pleasant, and with enthusiasm, he said, “Yeah! I can do that!” And he’s been my sponsor ever since.

Best. Decision. Ever. Oh my God. With a sponsor, things that had seemed so cloudy became clear. With a sponsor, the mysteries of the program became lighthouses and principles. With a sponsor, doors and windows opened easily where before I saw only solid walls and blockages. I now had a guide, a coach, someone who knew the journey I was undertaking well, someone I would learn to rely on and trust, someone who knows the things I wasn’t telling others, someone who today is one of my very best friends. If you’re in recovery, get. a. sponsor.

One problem I ran into that first summer was finding “suitable” meetings. AA has a wide range of personalities, and I found that many of the meetings were full of intolerable assholes--I didn’t realize, of course, that as I got more time sober behind me, those assholes would miraculously reform. For a while, if a meeting one night got annoying, I’d go to a different meeting on that night. But soon I found a few nights I had no meeting left.

I had given some thought about how I would explain this to my sponsor. He listened as I did, and then said, “Let’s mix it up!” I wasn’t sure what he meant. “Let’s mix it up--go to some different places!” And he rattled off several places I thought were way too far to drive for an hour meeting.

I was speechless for a minute. I hadn’t expected this. Not even a discussion, not even disagreement. He didn’t give me time to mull it over either. “There’s a meeting tonight in Fayetteville.” I didn’t want to go that far, but before I could answer, added “I’ll swing by and pick you up at 7:00.” Hmm. Seemed crazy to me. But it would be a good chance to get to know my sponsor, as we could chat on the drive. I said OK.

We spent the summer driving all over. And everywhere we went, people said, “Doug! Great to see you!” Everywhere. No matter how far, there were people there who knew him. One night we headed out to Manlius; as we walked to the door, again, “Doug! What are you

doing out here?” A chummy conversation followed.

After, as we walked inside, I asked “How is it that you know all these people?” He just laughed. “Keep coming back,” he said. “You’ll see.”

I grew in sobriety, and started going to local meetings again, and liked it, but I also went out to the farther meetings, because I had come to like those people. It gave me a wonderfully rich palette of friends in recovery.

One Saturday, Doug and I took the day just to hang out. We went to dinner, chatted for hours, and headed out to a meeting--happened to be the Manlius meeting. Now, meetings change over time...people come and go. As we sat down, Doug looked around and asked “Who’s that?” I explained. He pointed to someone else. “Who’s that?” I filled him in. And again, “Who’s that?” “Who’s that?” “Who’s that?” I answered each question with names and a little about them. Then he leaned over to me and asked, “How is it you know all these people?” I laughed. He had me--lesson learned. We still tell this story today.

I needed friends in recovery. I found my first few months that what was in my head and what was reality were entirely different, and that I couldn’t tell the difference. Read that again--can you imagine what a terrifying realization that would be? It was terrifying. And it was a good 18 months before the mists even began to clear. This as much as anything made clear to me that I needed help, that I couldn’t do this alone, that I desperately needed these people. Fortunately, they knew the journey well, and I learned that I could trust them--because I had no choice, at first, but then, because they repeatedly steered me well.

I had thought I was a loner. I had tried to everything by myself. I had to let go of my pride. I had to learn humility. I had to learn to let things go. I didn’t like it. But as I learned to do it, my life continually got better and better--just as these people had promised it would.

Various situations arose where I was misjudged, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it. I had to learn to let go. I didn’t like that either. But as I slowly did, a tremendous chip I had been carrying on my shoulder--without realizing it--came down too, and I felt so light and free. As I ran into conflicts during the day, I started letting those go before they started, simply because I felt I had enough on my plate already. Seriously--I would have fought the battle, but I let it go because I was just handling enough already. Gradually, I learned to sort out which things just weren’t important, and as this became a habit, life became so much easier and a hell of a lot more fun.

My sponsor got me started on the Twelve Steps, and suggested I write out the first one on a pad. “It will set you up for your Fourth Step,” he explained, but I readily recognized the value of writing out my journey, and I was completely willing to follow his suggestions anyway. Besides, I was curious: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.” I wanted to explore exactly when I lost control over alcohol. So I eagerly started on my quest.

My eagerness quickly turned to despair. The ink was still wet, literally, as I was still writing, pages later, when I realized the truth--I had *NEVER* had control over alcohol. Right from the start, I had never had one drink, and throughout my story, despite the periods of sobriety, I never, ever, had just one drink. And each time I returned to drinking, it was worse than before, and harder to stop each time. AA would later explain to me that alcoholism is progressive, even during sobriety. I believe it. Drinking will never be an option for me.

I also realized just what a mess I was--and I had thought I had already come to my knees. I really had no realistic idea of my drinking history. I wasn't even positive how much I drank. I had been lying to myself for so long (very common among alcoholics, I found later) that I believed the nonsense I had been telling myself for so many years.

I was in tears. I didn't know how to proceed. I had a successful career, won honors and awards, and yet, I couldn't even sort out truth from fiction in my own head. Thankfully, AA members were there to tell me (1) that this is normal and (2) that it would get better. I needed to hear that. Very much.

My sponsor helped me get out of my racing head and start keeping things simple, one day at a time. We actually drew up a daily schedule. When are you going to get up? What time will you eat lunch? When will you eat dinner? What time is the meeting? When will you go to bed? Really, I had to be told to eat three square meals and to set regular/reasonable bedtimes ("Your dog knows when it's time to go to bed," Doug told me once when I was trying to explain why bedtimes were erratic). HALT--Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired, the classic triggers. We'd eliminated hungry and tired anyway, which helped with angry and meetings for lonely.

"OK, what do you want to accomplish in the morning?" I picked a task and wrote it in. "In the afternoon?" I filled in the space. "OK! That's tomorrow. Just focus on tomorrow." I thought of something else I need to get down and went to write it down. "NO ADDING TO THE LIST!" Doug said. I looked at him. "You're sitting an all you can eat buffet and just heaping your plate high. You can always come back to the table later." So slowly, one day at a time, I learned to return to balanced, structured living.

When life settled down a little, we turned to Step Two: "Come to believe a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." This was mainly a few talks with my sponsor. Some AA members were anxious to push belief in God, but as a religious friend of mine puts it, "You can't shove the Dove." I had respect for a wide range of religions and spirituality. In fact, I had long studied them out of curiosity, and even taught a college course in World Religions at one time. But I had become rooted in needing logical proof, and that God was a convenient explanation for things we can't explain or comprehend wasn't sufficient for me.

AA has a book, “Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions,” that made this step a lot easier. Each step and tradition has its own chapter, and the Step Two chapter suggests using the group itself as a Higher Power. I was completely comfortable with this. My own experience had shown me that I couldn’t do this by myself, that I needed the group for help. A lot of newbies struggle with the “insanity” language, but I had already come face to face with the discrepancy between my head and reality. This was adequate for where I was at the time.

Later, I would do exactly as the Step says...no one conned me, no one argued with me, no one persuaded me...bit by bit, without my even knowing it, I Came to Believe. At first, I softened over the “God” language at meetings. Then I became comfortable with it. Then I freely used it myself. And life experiences would bring me face to face with God. But it’s an organic thing that will grow on its own, in its own time.

Step Three posed the question more directly: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” Enter the difference between religion and spirituality. Of all the religions I had encountered, I was entirely comfortable with Taoism, and the *Tao Te Ching* was long one of my favorite texts. In particular, I liked that Taoism didn’t pretend to know the unknowable--it was unfathomable, and they called it Tao. That there was a unifying principle to the universe was clear to me, whatever it was. Indeed, let’s call it Tao. And Tao was a great flowing energy, far beyond me or my comprehension, and turning myself over to this flow would let me flow with it, while struggling against it would create problems and prove futile. This I could do. I had done Step Three.

Or so I thought.

I put off Step Four, for several months. First, I was legitimately busy with work. And my sponsor believed in letting this happen, that when I was ready, I would know. But the months dragged on, and AA members can be infamous for putting off this step: “Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.” I read the section of the “Big Book” (nickname for AA’s main text) on the Fourth Step, and I read Twelve and Twelve on it (nickname for “Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions”). I brought it up at different meetings in different places, and found that there are roughly 183 ways to do a fourth step.

So it appeared to be highly individual, yet I just felt stuck and uncertain how to proceed. Fortunately, my sponsor had a suggestion. “Usually, if you’re stuck on a step,” he said, “you need to go back to the previous step.” Hmm. I thought I had nailed that Third Step down pretty well. But, I had learned to listen to my sponsor and to trust him, so if I needed to revisit the Third Step, I would. And I did. But how, if I had already done it?

I spent about six weeks just living with this, being open to whatever would turn up--and it did one night at a meeting. I’m sure I had heard this a hundred times before, but on whatever topic we were discussing that evening, someone (I even remember who) pointed out that “this is a daily program.” Lights flashed, fireworks popped, bells rang joyously, the

clouds parted, the angels sang the Hallelujah Chorus for me. A daily program. I had none.

Sure, I had a daily schedule, but I didn't have anything resembling a program in the day to day sense, beyond not picking up a drink, one day at a time (a good place to start). I embraced being a Taoist, but I wasn't a *practicing* Taoist. It's not like I could go hang out at the local Taoist temple, or study with my neighborhood Taoist master. But I saw that I needed to decide what my Taoist practice would be, and to practice it daily. I choose to start my day with Taoist readings--Deng Ming Dao wrote a beautiful collection in "365 Tao." A little research on Amazon turned up three others and related collections, from Taoism to Zen (when Buddhism arrived in China and met Taoism, it became Ch'an Buddhism, which then migrated to Japan to become Zen). Every since, my day begins with making coffee and doing my morning readings. No exceptions. Ever.

Lunch and Dinner fit into the rhythm of my day, becoming sacred events in their own right. A meeting rounded out the evening. And before retiring, I would meditate.

I had been meditating for years, but now my practice became an essential part of my day and took a new form. I would sit quietly and look at all that was nagging against the quiet. Then, one by one, as if removing octopus tentacles, I removed and released whatever I had become tangled in during my day. Try it--you'll sleep so much better!

But there's more. After doing this for a few weeks, I found myself during the day much more conscious of whether to take on new conflicts as they arose. After all, if I didn't get entangled, I wouldn't have to untangle it at the end of the day. Gradually, I had fewer and fewer strands to release at day's end.

And something else happened. When you do a spiritual practice every day, not skipping days (as this restarts everything), it builds. Even if you started with something very very small--faith the size of a mustard seed--it begins not just to repeat day to day, but to grow. My spiritual world grew in ways I couldn't have imagined--once my mind was no longer keeping me stuck, my higher self could align itself with and follow my Higher Power, whether we call it Tao, God, Creator, Jesus, Great Spirit, or Brahman. I urge you all to do this--choose anything at all, however small, but something you do find bottom line meaningful, and embrace it daily, celebrate it, express gratitude. You will be rewarded more than you can possibly know.

Now, I had made a conscious decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood Him. A daily choice, renewed each morning and each evening, a choice shining through my actions and thoughts and deeds throughout my day. Now, in one sense, I had done Step Three, but I also saw that Step Three--along with One and Two--were steps to take every single day, an ongoing approach to living fully one day at a time, and in the presence of God.

When I had first started Step Four, I did what the Big Book suggests, to make a list of



resentments. My first thought was that I was pretty easy going and had no resentments, but once I got writing, I had pages and pages--not necessarily current, but taking an honest and thorough look at not only current but also previous employment situations, living situations, various things that happened over the years, and so forth. I had heard that a poor Fourth Step leads to drinking again, and I wanted to ensure I stayed sober and not only just stay sober, but also start to heal.

After all my inquiries into the Fourth Step, I did what I should have done first--I just did it the way the Big Book lays it out. After the resentment column, I added a column for the cause of the resentment, then another for how the situation effects me emotionally (security, fear, and so forth). Then a column for my part in the conflict, how I was to blame, even if only in part. My sponsor had me add a column for the good in this situation, stressing that I was not a bad person at all, that lots of things have the seed of goodness in them, and that I should remember to celebrate that as well. And finally, from the Big Book, recognizing that people struggle with their own demons, and while we might feel a resentment, they are "sick people" too, and we wouldn't treat sick people harshly, but with compassion.

That right there fixed me up. The top of my resentment list was a years long stressful work relationship. But when I stepped back and recognized that this individual was struggling and doing as well as possible in that capacity, it took the "fun" out of the resentment, and I had to find a new hobby. The same with other resentments too.

Step Five is "Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs," and since I had so many pages, my sponsor suggested he and I work on Steps Four and Five a section at a time, and for the next several weeks, we did just that. After a few pages, though, I recognized the patterns myself: Column 1 ego vs. Column 4 ego. Soon after that, I notice these things, even though generally small, in my day to day life before they started happening. At first I found it frustrating, but my sponsor pointed out that now I recognized these things that had previously gone unnoticed. He was right.

Around 18 months of sobriety, I had glimpses of clarity. I had heard it takes 3 years for the head to clear, 5 years to clear completely. I could believe this now. Nonetheless, it was nice to see the mists part now and then, even if briefly at first, and gradually, I started to notice that I was calmer, happier, lighter, freer, more confident, and that things I would have worried about were now taken in stride comfortably. I was a very different man that the one who had crawled in desperately to finally ask for help. AA meetings generally include the Ninth Step promises at the beginning of the meetings:

"If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip

away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.”

I had seen these at first as just pretty words. “Your life will get better beyond your wildest dreams,” people said. Sure. I have pretty nice dreams. But they were right—my life *was* better beyond my wildest dreams, because I wouldn’t have known the right things to dream. My life had become immensely richer, and from a time I couldn’t imagine 90 minutes without alcohol, I now couldn’t imagine taking a drink. Sure, I could conceive it—but not of actually doing it. Life had become far too wonderful to ever change back.

It was about to get more wonderful still.

Step Six seemed easy: “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” After all the searching and learning and self-discovery and fruits of the program, indeed, why not let God lend a hand? But it seemed too easy, and I had so far learned that each of the steps contained a journey. So I brought it up at a meeting, one attended by a number of laid-back but careful thinkers I respected. I was surprised...each of them told a tale of a long, drawn-out process, and none of them are tales I remember today. It seemed so individualistic. I was confused, and talked about this to my sponsor. I agreed to spend some time on this step, mindful of how much letting over steps steep had helped.

So I listed character defects--no, defects of character, as my sponsor adamantly corrected, as many faults as I could think of, adding more when I thought of them, even including ones that are gray areas, with good and bad aspects. I started adding some things other people thought, no matter whether I thought they were true, for honest consideration.

And then one day at a meeting, my sponsor handed me a book, opened to a specific passage, for me to read. He had been perusing books idly, and this one, an Al Anon book on “The Alcoholic Marriage,” had struck his curiosity. The page he handed me was on Step Six, and what it said completely changed my perspective on this step. The point of removing our defects of character, it said, was to allow God to let our more positive qualities bubble up to the surface.

This was far more than fault finding, and it gelled well with what I had already been doing for months. Looking at what had happened and what was happening in my life, I considered it seriously as a mirror, that faults I noticed in others were probably faults I shared, and that changing my thoughts on them would attract more positive results. And further, this would serve the people around me far better.

Now I was really ready. I wrote out my thoughts on this. But my sponsor wasn’t yet

satisfied. I didn't know why, but he had me write out a gratitude list every night for a week. I did, though I had to push myself at first. Then he had me do it for a second week. Have you ever tried this? Do it. The third week I did it on my own. It's a wonderful experience.

We talked. I was not just responding to life, but actively creating a better one. As I let go of lesser qualities, higher ones emerged in greater relief. Then it struck me.

"Really," I explained to my sponsor, "this goes back to Step Three--all the steps, actually--turning my development over to my Higher Power, seeing the best in all people, letting things become manageable in that broader sense....it's a way out of Fear."

And with that, my sponsor's face glowed that bright glow it gets when he sees me truly get something. Only this time, I saw everything. I had always admired his easy-going, friendly way, even in the face of problems, and I understood how and why. I had what he had now. I would continue to grow with the help of my sponsor, but really, this moment was my AA graduation.

I "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings," Step Seven. And I did so with joy, trust, faith, peace. I was forever changed.

I also realized at this point that the Steps were not a Staircase, but a Pyramid. You don't do one, then that one over, start the next--you add layers. Step One is ongoing, as are Steps Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven...all the steps, all the time. We were adding depth, not quantity.

"It's like peeling an onion," my sponsor told me over and over again. Layer after layer. And often, just when I thought I had things figured out and running smoothly, life would through me another curve ball. But I realized that these were not set-backs, but rather, I was now ready to delve into another layer, one previously covered up with the earlier veneer.

The Steps would be a spiral, a constant, a way of life, a continual pattern of growth.

Step 8: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all"; Step 9: "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

"You'll know when you're ready to do Step 8," my sponsor explained. "And in Step Nine, people will show up when it's time to make your amends." That worked for me--I had already seen how life worked more smoothly than we usually notice.

Some of this was easy--making a list is a matter of rigorous honesty. Much of these "wrongs" are not big deals for me, and involve slights that would seem silly to atone for to people years later. Willingness is key, and having a sponsor review this keeps us honest. And I didn't have any of the usual family suspects, since I lived alone.

Harder was one important but neglected person who belonged on this list--me. I had sold myself short and held myself back for decades, despite my career successes. And I worked myself like a slave driver. "Treat yourself like you would treat a loved one," I read once. I definitely didn't treat myself the way I would treat people I loved. This would be a long, gradual process of learning to trust myself, love myself, and become comfortable with the person I saw in the mirror. It would happen. In time.

Then there are the grey areas--people I didn't harm, but who didn't have what they might have with me because I wasn't there for them when I was drinking. How does one atone for these sins?

The best I could do was to be present for people now, to be the best I can be now, to give the world all that I can, while still remembering to love and care for myself too. As my friend Louise said to me after sobriety, "It's nice to see the man I always knew you were." I can let my light shine, I can live well from here, and I can love truly and unconditionally.

Step 10, "Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it," was already in progress before my realization that all the steps happen continually. My nightly ritual of untangling myself during mediation had built this habit. And together with morning readings, Step 3, and my Step 9 realization had already started a Step 11 practice: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." I would add to this a nightly gratitude list.

Step 12: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs." I remember once, two weeks sober after my relapse, going to a Saturday meeting when most people had gone to the Syracuse Roundup, an AA convention. Nobody was there...except one guy making coffee. I was never so happy to see a human being in my life. I've never forgotten this. It's important we are there. As the responsibility pledge says, "I want the hand of AA to always be there, and for that, I am responsible."

So here are a few thoughts about addiction.

#### 1) Service work.

"Coffee makers make it." It's true. When I became a coffee maker for the Sunday night meeting, I just figured somebody had to do it, and I didn't mind taking a turn. What I didn't expect was the impact such a seemingly simple thing would have upon me. I cared. That became "my" meeting. Everything had to be just so...it was like I was the host, getting everything ready to make the meeting go smoothly, right down to spreading out the readings for people, getting the books and pamphlets out and available for easy reading, making sure chairs were ready--all simple things, but I took tremendous pride in all this.

Later I got busy and passed off the regular commitment to newcomers, taking it back as they moved on. Until my friend Mike walked through our doors (a stranger to me then), just back from Florida, looking to find his footing in New York. I could see he needed something, and asked him to be the new coffeemaker. He's had that job ever since, and loves it--it's the highlight of his week.

My friend James makes the coffee at my local home group--and has for 18 years. This is not the only form of service work, of course. It's an easy one to get going, low pressure, and a way to get to know people in the program. But any contribution anyway, any help to offer others, gets us out of ourselves and our minds and our problems and into being of use to our fellow men and women.

One friend tells the story of complaining about his life in early sobriety to his sponsor. "I've got just the thing," replied his sponsor. "I'll come pick you up." And when he did--he drove them straight to the Rescue Mission, where they served food to homeless people all day.

Need help? Want to solve your problems? Go help someone else.

2) Stop trying to do everything by yourself.

Learn to ask for help. I don't care that you don't need it. Ask anyway. It's foolish to insist on handling everything alone, and you're not as good at it as you think. It's also more fun to do things with other people.

I know. You're a loner. You're not good with other people. And you're the ten millionth person in early recovery I've heard say that. Get over it.

Call other people in recovery--at least one a day. If you don't feel comfortable, if the phone feels heavy, if you're just not able to do this--get over it. You're an adult, and every one of these people have been where you are. Call just to say, "Hey, I'm practicing," or "How's the weather," or even "I know this sounds stupid, but this 'Getting Unstuck' book says to call other people in recovery--crazy, huh?" It will help. When you're not feeling 100%, call somebody and chat about it. When things are really bad one day, you'll naturally pick up the phone--instead of a drink, drug, etc.

Let other people get to know you. You're a wonderful person--but not as special and unique as you think. Stop setting yourself apart, and join with these people. You'll learn to love it.

3) Replace old habits with new ones.

Right now--don't think about orange juice! Oops, too late...that's the problem with trying NOT to do something. Now, instead of orange juice, think of cranberry juice...much easier,

yes? Do the same with habits.

If you usually have a cigarette with that first cup of coffee, plan ahead of time what you're going to have with your coffee from now on (make it sustainable). If you usually have a drink after dinner, decide what you're going to have after dinner instead. If you usually get a pint of ice cream when you're having a rough day, figure out what you can have ready instead. And keep at it--it takes 21 days to change a habit, and in the case of psychological dependency, perhaps much longer. But it gets easier with time.

And time takes time.

But don't try to just stop--change.

If nothing changes...nothing changes.

4) Avoid people, places and things.

If that convenience store you stop at every day has a worn path to the scratch off tickets, shop somewhere else. If the supermarket aisles show the trail you've well-traveled to the beer displays, change stores. If the route you take home every day goes right by where you usually buy cigarettes, take a different route to and from work. Change.

If you're trying to stop drinking, smoking, gambling, over-eating, or any other addiction, stop hanging out with the people who do those things. Don't hang out where those things happen-- "You don't go to a whore house to hear the piano music," as the saying goes. You are just flirting with trouble. Don't.

And lose the things you associate with those addictions, whatever they are. Change.

It will get easier the further away you get.

5) The Rule of Three

I went through a lot of pain before I realized this. I call it the Rule of Three:

- \*I won't feel this bad in three hours (usually two).
- \*Things won't look this bad in three days.
- \*This situation will look very different in three weeks.
- \*Things will be completely different in three months.
- \*You can't even imagine where you'll be in three years.

Doubt it? Think back to how you were feeling three months ago, three weeks ago, three days ago, three hours ago. Emotions change quickly--we only treat them like the present one will last forever. It won't. Ride it out, knowing all will be well shortly. And it will.

6) Have a daily spiritual program.

Make sure it's daily, and inviolate. Let this be your touchstone each day, a way to focus and renew your energies in a positive and productive way. Daily readings are a popular way to do this, along with prayer and meditation, but whatever way works for you, whatever way is most meaningful to you day by day, is what you should organize your life around, day by day.

Ask for help. Whatever your spiritual beliefs, don't try to go through life without aligning yourself with God/Universe/Nature/Tao/Higher Power/Creator/Great Spirit or whatever other term you prefer. Be part of the whole, and let that whole govern your part in it.

At the end of the day, say "Thank you." There is tremendous power--and solace--in gratitude. Use that power, daily.

When you need help, this really works:

God, Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The Courage to change the things I can,  
And the Wisdom to know the difference.

One day at a time, my friend. Just for today. You can do it. Call when you need help.

7) One more thing...

Addiction comes from fear. Nothing logical about it--our addictions, whatever they are, serve purely emotional ends, and not in logical (i.e., not in healthy) ways. It's a denial parading as a solution. But like all lies, it comes from fear. Truth needs no lie.

One man in recovery describes it this way: "Alcoholism is the only disease that must be diagnosed by the patient, and the chief symptom is denial." This is true of all addiction. Imagine that first cigarette--eyes watering, mouth burning, the urgent cough, feeling nauseous...and then deciding to do it again. That's not the rational mind at work. Or dropping dollar after dollar on the lottery, because, "Hey, you never know!" Yes you do. When the odds of winning are one in millions, and the odds of being struck by lightning are one in a million--hey, have you ever run in terror of lightning because "Hey, you never know"? Or did you ever wonder where all the money for that gorgeous casino come from? This isn't hope--it's desperation.

To counter fear, choose love. Why do we balk at love? Why is happiness too great a price to pay? Nothing logical about that either. To counter darkness, turn on the light. Rationalizing the dark will never make it light. Love yourself. Love your fellow humans. Love your current situation, even if it seems there's not that much to love. Love. Face your

fears with love. They will run.

This is why will power so often fails otherwise strong people when aimed at addiction. It's the wrong weapon and the wrong target. Face your fears, with the help of your Higher Power and with the help of people around you. It won't be easy--but it will be real, and it will get better. It will. I promise. Your life will improve beyond your wildest dreams. Mine did. So will yours.

As one of my favorite songs says:

*"Oh! My Love! Oh My Child! Oh My Dream!  
I will give you the light if you just give me the means!"*

*"Some great Love shot right through me  
Untangled all those Fears  
It acted like it always Knew me  
It said, "Oh! My Child! I'm always Here."*

--Trans-Slambovian Bi-Polar Express (The Grand Slambovians)

*Namaste. Shanti Shanti.*

