10 Making Use of Telephone Therapy

When we were first trying to achieve sobriety, many of us found ourselves taking a drink without planning to. Sometimes, it seemed to happen practically without our knowing it. There was no conscious decision to drink, and there was no real thought about possible consequences. We had not intended to set off an entire drinking episode.

Now we have learned that simply postponing that first drink, putting something else in its place, provides us with a chance to think about our drinking history, to think about the disease of alcoholism, and to think about the probable results of starting to drink.

Fortunately, we can do more than just think about it, and we do. We telephone someone.

When we stopped drinking, we were told repeatedly to get AA people's telephone numbers, and instead of drinking, to phone these people.

At first, the thought of telephoning a new acquaintance, someone we barely knew, seemed strange, and most of us were reluctant. But the AA's—those with more non-drinking days behind them than we had—kept suggesting it. They said they understood why we hesitated, because they had felt the same way. Nevertheless, they said, just try it, at least once.

And so, finally, thousands and thousands of us have. To our relief, it turned out to be an easy, pleasant experience. Best of all, it worked.

Maybe the quickest way to understand this, before you try it, is to put yourself mentally in the place of the person being called. It is a rewarding and gratifying thing to be trusted that much. So the person receiving the call is almost invariably nice, even charming, about it— not at all surprised, and even glad to hear from us.

There's more. Lots of us have found that when we wanted to drink, we could telephone someone more experienced in sobriety than we were, and it was not even necessary to mention that we were thinking of drinking. That was often

understood, without a word. *And it really did not matter what time we called, day or nights!*

Sometimes, for no apparent reason, we found ourselves suddenly, inexplicably undergoing an onslaught of anxiety, fear, terror, even panic, which made no sense. (This happens to lots of human beings, of course, not just to alcoholics.)

When we told the truth about the way we really felt, what we were doing, and what we wanted to do, we found we were perfectly understood. We got total empathy—not sympathy. Everyone we called, remember, had been in exactly the same boat some time or other, and they all remembered, vividly.

More frequently than not, only a few moments of conversation made our thought of a drink disappear. Sometimes, we got practical, eye-opening information, or gentle, indirect guidance, or tough, direct, heart-to-heart advice. Sometimes, we found ourselves laughing.

Observers of recovered alcoholics have noticed the extensive network of informal social contacts among AA members, even when we are not at AA meetings, and often when no one is thinking or talking of drinking. We've found we can have about as much social life with each other as we want, doing together the usual things friends do—listening to music, gabbing, going to plays and movies, eating together, camping and fishing, sight-seeing, or just visiting, in person or by note or telephone-all without the necessity of a single drink.

Such acquaintanceships and friendships have a unique value for those of us who choose not to drink. We are free to be ourselves among people who share our own concern for the maintenance of a happy sobriety, without being fanatically against all drinking.

It is possible, of course, to remain sober among people who are not recovered alcoholics, and even among those who drink a lot, though we will probably feel some social discomfort in their company. But among other sober alcoholics, we can be sure that our recovery from alcoholism is highly prized and deeply understood. It means a lot to these friends, just as their health is cherished by us.

The transition to enjoyment of sobriety sometimes begins when, newly sober, we keep in touch with others equally new at the game. At first, it often seems a little awkward to strike up friendships with people who have been sober for years. We are usually more at ease with those who, like ourselves, are just setting out toward recovery. That's why many of us make our first telephone calls about not drinking to our AA "contemporaries."

"Telephone therapy" works even when we don't know any individual to call. Since a number for AA is listed in practically every telephone directory in the United States and Canada (and in many other countries), it is easy simply to dial that number and instantly be in touch with someone who honestly understands, at gut level. It may be a person we have never met, but the same genuine empathy is there.

Once the first call is made, it is much, much easier to make another, when it is needed. Finally, the need to talk away a desire for a drink virtually disappears for most of us. When it does, though, many of us find we have established a habit of occasional friendly telephone visits, so we keep them up because we enjoy them.

But that usually comes later. At first, "telephone therapy" is primarily for helping us stay sober. We reach for the phone instead of a drink. Even when we don't think it will work. Even when we don't want to.