## 14 Fending Off Loneliness

Alcoholism has been described as "the lonely disease," and very few recovered alcoholics argue the point. Looking back at the last years or months of our drinking, literally hundreds of thousands* of us remember feeling isolated even when we were among a lot of happy, celebrating people. We often felt a deep sense of not belonging, even when we cheerfully acted sociable.

Many of us have said we drank originally to be "a part of the crowd." Many of us felt we had to drink to "get in," and to feel that we fitted in with the rest of the human race.

It is an observable fact, of course, that our chief use of alcohol was egocentric—that is, we poured it into our *own* bodies, for the effect we felt within our *own* skin. Sometimes, that effect momentarily helped us to behave sociably, or temporarily assuaged our inner lonesomeness.

But when that effect of alcohol wore off, we were left feeling more set apart, more left out, more "different" than ever, and sadder.

If we felt guilty or ashamed of either our drunkenness itself or anything we did while drinking, that compounded our feeling of being an outcast. At times, we secretly feared or even believed that we deserved ostracism, because of the things we did. "Maybe," many of us thought, "I really am an outsider."

(Perhaps this feeling is familiar to you, when you think back to your last bad hangover or bad drunk.)

The lonely road ahead looked bleak, dark, and unending. It was too painful to talk about; and to avoid thinking about it, we soon drank again.

Although some of us were lone drinkers, it can hardly be said that we completely lacked companionship during our drinking days. People were all around us. We saw, heard, and touched them. But most of our important dialogues were entirely interior, held with ourselves. We were sure nobody else would understand. Besides, considering our opinion of ourselves, we were not sure that

we *wanted* anybody to understand.

No wonder, then, that when we first listen to recovered alcoholics in AA talking freely and honestly about themselves, we are stunned. Their tales of their own drinking escapades, of their own secret fears and loneliness, jar us like a thunderbolt.

We discover—but can hardly dare to believe right at first—that *we are not alone*. We are *not* totally unlike *everybody*, after all.

The brittle shell of protective and fearful egocentricity we have dwelled in so long is cracked open by the honesty of other recovered alcoholics. We sense, almost before we can articulate it, that we do belong somewhere, and the loneliness starts rapidly leaking away.

Relief is too weak a word to convey our initial feeling. It is mixed with wonder, too, and almost a kind of terror. Is it real? Will this last?

Those of us sober in A.A. a few years can assure any newcomer at an A.A. meeting that it *is* real, very real indeed. And it does last. It is not just another false start, of the sort that most of us have experienced too often. It is not one more burst of gladness soon to be followed by hurt disappointment.

Instead, as the number of people now sober for decades in AA swells each year, we see before our eyes more and more hard proof that we can have a genuine and enduring recovery from the loneliness of alcoholism.

Still, getting over years-long, deeply ingrained habits of suspicion and other protective mechanisms can hardly be an overnight process. We have become thoroughly conditioned to feeling and acting misunderstood and unloved—whether we really were or not. We are accustomed to acting like loners. So, after we first stop drinking, some of us may need a little time and a little practice to break out of our customary solitude. Even though we begin to believe we are not alone any more, we sometimes act and feel in the old ways.

We're green at reaching out for friendship—or even accepting it when it is offered.

We're not quite sure how to do it, or whether it will work. And that piled-up, super-heavy burden of years of fear still can drag at us. Therefore, when we start to feel a bit lonely—whether we are actually, physically alone or not—the old routines and the balm of booze can easily entice us.

Now and then, some of us are even tempted just to give up, and go back to the old misery. At least, it is familiar, and we wouldn't have to work hard to recapture all the expertise we achieved at the drinking life.

Telling an A.A. group about himself, a fellow once said that being a drunk from his teen-age years to his forties was a full-time occupation, and he passed by most of the things North American males usually learn as they grow into young manhood.

So there he was in his forties, he said, sober. He knew how to drink and brawl, but he had never learned a vocational or professional skill, and he was ignorant of most social graces. "It was awful," he declared. "I didn't even know how to ask a girl for a date or what to do on one! And I found there aren't any classes on 'How to Date' for 40-year-old bachelors who never learned."

The laughter in the A.A. meeting room that night was particularly hearty and affectionate. So many there empathized, had gone through the same brand of unease. When we feel such awkwardness, incongruous at 40 (or even at 20, these days), we might think we were pathetic, even grotesque—were it not for the many rooms full of understanding AA people who have known that very type of fear, and can now help us see the humor in it. So we can smile as we try again, until we get it right.We do not have to give up in secret shame any more; we do not have to renew our old, hopeless attempts to find social confidence in the bottle, where we found loneliness instead.

That is just one extreme example of the kind of all-arms-and-legs feeling some of us get when we first set sail on sobriety. It illustrates how dangerously lost we might be if we tried to go it alone. There might be one chance in millions that we'd make the voyage somehow.

But we know now that we do not have to proceed all on our own. It is far more

sensible, safer, and surer to do it in the company of the whole happy fleet going in the same direction. And none of us need feel any shame at all at using help, since we all help each other.

It is no more cowardly to use help in recovering from a drinking problem than it is to use a crutch if you have a broken leg. A crutch is a beautiful thing to those who need it, and to those who see its usefulness.

Is there really anything heroic in a sightless person's stumbling and groping—just because he or she refuses to use easily obtained assistance? Foolish risk-taking—even when it is not at all necessary— sometimes does get undeserved praise. But mutual helpfulness—since it always works better—really should be more prized and admired.

Our own experience at staying sober overwhelmingly reflects the wisdom of using whatever good help is available in recovery from a drinking problem. Despite our great need and desire, none of us recovered from alcoholism solely on our own. If we had, of course, we would have had no need to approach AA, a psychiatrist, or anyone else for aid.

Since no one can live totally alone, since all of us are dependent to some degree on our fellow human beings for at least some goods and services, we have found it sensible to accept that particular reality, and to work within it in the highly important venture of getting over our active alcoholism.

Thoughts of a drink seem to sneak into our minds much more smoothly and slyly when we are alone. And when we feel lonesome, and an urge for a drink strikes, it seems to have special speed and strength.

Such ideas and desires are much less likely to occur when we are with other people, especially other nondrinkers. If they do occur, they seem less potent and more easily put aside while we are in touch with fellow A.A. members.

We are not forgetting that almost everyone occasionally needs some time to himself, or herself, to collect thoughts, take stock, get some thing done, work out a private situation, or just vacation from the stress of the usual day. But we have

found it dangerous to become too indulgent about this, especially when our mood becomes a bit morose or self-pitying. Almost any company is better than a bitter privacy.

Of course, even at an A.A. meeting, it is possible to want to drink, just as people can feel lonely in a crowd. But the odds against taking the drink are much better in the company of other AA's than they are when we are alone in our room, or in a hidden corner of a quiet, deserted barroom.

When we have only ourselves to talk to, the conversation gets kind of circular. More and more, it excludes the sort of sensible input other people can supply. Trying to argue yourself out of a drink is rather like attempting self-hypnosis. Often, it is about as effective as trying to persuade a pregnant mare not to foal when her term has come.

For these reasons, then, when we suggest avoiding fatigue and hunger, we often tie in a mention of one more hazard to make it a triple play: "Don't let yourself get too tired, too hungry, or too lonely."

Check it out.

If the notion of taking a drink crosses your mind any time soon, pause to consider. As often as not, you are likely to find you are in one or more of those three high-risk conditions.

Tell somebody, fast. That at least starts to relieve the loneliness.