

25 The If Trap

Emotional entanglements with people are not the only way we can get our sobriety dangerously hooked to something extraneous. Some of us have a tendency to put other conditions on our sobriety, without intending to.

One AA member says, "We drunks* are very 'iffy' people. During our drinking days, we were often full of ifs, as well as liquor. A lot of our daydreams started out, '*If only...*' And we were continually saying to ourselves that we wouldn't have gotten drunk *if* something or other hadn't happened, or that we wouldn't have any drinking problem at all *if only...*"

We all followed up that last "if "with our own explanations (excuses?) for our drinking. Each of us thought: I wouldn't be drinking this way...

If it wasn't for my wife (or husband or lover)...if I just had more money and not so many debts...if it wasn't for all these family problems... if I wasn't under so much pressure...if I had a better job or a better place to live... if people understood me... if the state of the world wasn't so lousy...if human beings were kinder, more considerate, more honest...if everybody else didn't expect me to drink...if it wasn't for the war (any war)... and on and on and on.

Looking back at this kind of thinking and our resultant behavior, we see now that we were really letting circumstances outside ourselves control much of our lives.

When we first stop drinking, a lot of those circumstances recede to their proper places in our minds. At the personal level, many of them really clear up as soon as we start staying sober, and we begin to see what we may be able to do about the others some day. Meanwhile, our life is much, much better sober, no matter what else may be going on.

But then, after a sober while, for some of us there comes a time when—plop!—a new discovery slaps us in the face. That same old "iffy" thinking habit of our tipling days has, without our seeing it, attached itself to not drinking.

Unconsciously, we have placed conditions on our sobriety. We have begun to think sobriety is just fine—*if* everything goes well, or *if* nothing goes askew.

In effect, we are ignoring the biochemical, unchangeable nature of our ailment. Alcoholism respects no ifs. It does not go away, not for a week, for a day, or even for an hour, leaving us nonalcoholic and able to drink again on some special occasion or for some extraordinary reason—not even if it is a once-in-a-lifetime celebration, or if a big sorrow hits us, or if it rains in Spain or the stars fall on Alabama. Alcoholism is for us unconditional, with no dispensations available at any price.

It may take a little while to get that knowledge into the marrow of our bones. And we sometimes do not recognize the conditions we have unconsciously attached to our recovery until something goes wrong through no fault of ours. Then—whammy!—there it is. We had not counted on *this* happening.

The thought of a drink is natural in the face of a shocking disappointment. If we don't get the raise, promotion, or job we counted on, or if our love life goes awry, or if somebody mistreats us, then we can see that maybe all along we have been banking on circumstances to help us want to stay sober.

Somewhere, buried in a hidden convolution of our gray matter, we had a tiny reservation—a condition on our sobriety. And it was just waiting to pounce. We were going along thinking, "Yep, sobriety is great, and I intend to keep at it." We didn't even hear the whispered reservation: "That is, *if* everything goes my way."

Those ifs we cannot afford. We have to stay sober no matter how life treats us, no matter whether nonalcoholics appreciate our sobriety or not. We have to keep our sobriety independent of everything else, not entangled with any people, and not hedged in by any possible cop-outs or conditions.

Over and over, we have found we cannot stay sober long just for the sake of wife, husband, children, lover, parents, other relative, or friend, nor for the sake of a job, nor to please a boss (or doctor or judge or creditor)—not for anyone other than ourselves.

Tying up our sobriety to *any* person (even another recovered alcoholic) or to *any* circumstance is foolish and dangerous. When we think, "I'll stay sober *if*— * or "I

won't drink because of—" (fill in any circumstance other than our own desire to be well, for health's own sake), we unwittingly set ourselves up to drink when the condition or person or circumstance changes. And any of these may change at any moment.

Independent, unaffiliated with anything else, our sobriety can grow strong enough to enable us to cope with anything—and everybody. And, as you'll see, we start liking *that* feeling, too.

[Some of us AA's refer to ourselves as "drunks," no matter how long we have been sober. Others prefer "alcoholics." There are good reasons for both terms. "Drunks" is lighthearted, tends to keep the ego down to size, and reminds us of our proneness to drinking. "Alcoholics" is equally honest, but more dignified and more in keeping with the now widely accepted idea that alcoholism is a perfectly respectable illness, not Just willful self-indulgence.]*