4 Remembering that alcoholism is an incurable, progressive, fatal disease

Many people in the world know they cannot eat certain foods—oysters or strawberries or eggs or cucumbers or sugar or something else—without getting very uncomfortable and maybe even quite sick.

A person with a food allergy of this kind can go around feeling a lot of self-pity, complaining to everyone that he or she is unfairly deprived, and constantly whining about not being able, or allowed, to eat something delicious.

Obviously, even though we may feel cheated, it isn't wise to ignore our own physiological makeup. If our limitations are ignored, severe discomfort or illness may result. To stay healthy and reasonably happy, we must learn to live with the bodies we have.

One of the new thinking habits a recovering alcoholic can develop is a calm view of himself or herself as someone who needs to avoid chemicals (alcohol and other drugs that are substitutes for it) if he or she wants to maintain good health.

We have as evidence our own drinking days, a total of hundreds of thousands of man- or woman-years of a whale of a lot of drinking. We know that, as the drinking years went by, our problems related to drinking continually worsened. Alcoholism is progressive.

Oh, of course, many of us had periods when, for some months or even years, we sometimes thought the drinking had sort of straightened itself out We seemed able to maintain a pretty heavy alcohol intake fairly safely. Or we would stay sober except for occasional drunk nights, and the drinking was not getting noticeably worse, as far as we could see. Nothing horrible or dramatic happened.

However, we can now see that, in the long or short haul, our drinking problem inevitably got more serious.

Some physicians expert on alcoholism tell us there is no doubt that alcoholism steadily grows worse as one grows older. (Know anyone who *isn't* growing older?)

We are also convinced, after the countless attempts we made to prove otherwise, that alcoholism is incurable—just like some other illnesses. It cannot be "cured" in this sense: We cannot change our body chemistry and go back to being the normal, moderate social drinkers lots of us seemed to be in our youth.

As some of us put it, we can no more make that change than a pickle can change itself back into a cucumber. No medication or psychological treatment any of us ever had "cured" our alcoholism.

Further, having seen thousands and thousands of alcoholics who did *not* stop drinking, we are strongly persuaded that alcoholism is a fatal disease. Not only have we seen many alcoholics drink themselves to death—dying during the "withdrawal" symptoms of delirium tremens (D.T.'s) or convulsions, or dying of cirrhosis of the liver directly related to drinking—we also know that many deaths not officially attributed to alcoholism are in reality caused by it Often, when an automobile accident drowning, suicide, homicide, heart attack, fire, pneumonia, or stroke is listed as the immediate cause of death, it was heavy alcoholic drinking that led to the fatal condition or event.

Certainly, most of us in AA felt safely far away from such a fate when we were drinking. And probably the majority of us never came near the horrible last stages of chronic alcoholism.

But we saw that we *could*, if we just kept on drinking. If you get on a bus bound for a town a thousand miles away, that's where you'll wind up, unless you get off and move in another direction.

Okay. What do you do if you learn that you have an incurable, progressive, fatal disease—whether it's alcoholism or some other, such as a heart condition or cancer?

Many people just deny it is true, ignore the condition, accept no treatment for it, suffer, and die.

But there is another way.

You can accept the "diagnosis"—persuaded by your doctor, your friends, or yourself. Then you can find out what can be done, if anything, to keep the condition "under control," so you can still live many happy, productive, healthy years *as long as you take proper care of yourself*. You recognize fully the seriousness of your condition, and you do the sensible things necessary to carry on a healthy life.

This, it turns out, is surprisingly easy in regard to alcoholism, if you really want to stay well. And since we AA's have learned to enjoy life so much, we really want to stay well.

We try never to lose sight of the unchangeable fact of our alcoholism, but we learn not to brood or feel sorry for ourselves or talk about it all the time. We accept it as a characteristic of our body—like our height or our need for glasses, or like any allergies we may have.

Then we can figure out how to live comfortably—not bitterly—with that knowledge as long as we start out by simply avoiding that *first* drink (remember?) just for today.

A blind member of AA said his alcoholism was quite similar to his blindness. "Once I accepted the loss of my sight," he explained, "and took the rehabilitation training available to me, I discovered I really can, with the aid of my cane or my dog, go anywhere I want to go quite safely, just as long as I don't forget or ignore the fact that I am blind. But when I do not act within the knowledge that I cannot see, it is then I get hurt, or in trouble."

"If you want to get well," one AA woman said, "you just take your treatment and follow directions and go on living. It's easy as long as you remember the new facts about your health. Who has time to feel 'deprived' or self-pitying when you find there are so many delights connected with living happily unafraid of your illness?"

To summarize: We remember we have an incurable, potentially fatal ailment called alcoholism. And instead of persisting in drinking, we prefer to figure out, and use, enjoyable ways of living without alcohol.

We need not be ashamed that we have a disease. It is no disgrace. No one knows exactly why some people become alcoholics while others don't It is not our fault. We did not *want* to become alcoholics. We did not *try* to get this illness.

We did not suffer alcoholism just because we enjoyed it, after all. We did not deliberately, maliciously set out to do the things we were later ashamed of. We did them against our better judgment and instinct because we were really sick, and didn't even know it.

We've learned that no good comes of useless regret and worry about how we got this way. The first step toward feeling better, and getting over our sickness, is quite simply not drinking.

Try the idea on for size. Wouldn't you rather recognize you have a health condition which can be successfully treated, than spend a lot of time miserably worrying about what's wrong with you? We have found this is a better-looking, and better-feeling, picture of ourselves than the old gloomy selves we used to see. It is truer, too. We know. The proof of it is in the way we feel, act, and think—now.

Anyone who wants it is welcome to a "free trial period" of this new concept of self. Afterward, anyone who wants the old days again is perfectly free to start them all over. It is your right to take back your misery if you want it.
On the other hand, you can also keep the new picture of yourself, if you'd rather. It, too, is yours by right.