6 Getting Active

It is very hard just to sit still trying not to do a certain thing, or not even to think about it. It's much easier to get active and do something else—other than the act we're trying to avoid.

So it is with drinking. Simply trying to avoid a drink (or not think of one), all by itself, doesn't seem to be enough. The more we think about the drink we're trying to keep away from, the more it occupies our mind, of course. And that's no good. It's better to get busy with something, almost anything, that will use our mind and channel our energy toward health.

Thousands of us wondered what we would do, once we stopped drinking, with all that time on our hands. Sure enough, when we did stop, all those hours we had once spent planning, getting our drinks, drinking, and recovering from its immediate effects, suddenly turned into big, empty holes of time that had to be filled somehow.

Most of us had jobs to do. But even so, there were some pretty long, vacant stretches of minutes and hours staring at us. We needed new habits of activity to fill those open spaces and utilize the nervous energy previously absorbed by our preoccupation, or our obsession, with drinking.

Anyone who has ever tried to break a habit knows that substituting a new and different activity is easier than just stopping the old activity and putting nothing in its place.

Recovered alcoholics often say, "Just stopping drinking is not enough." Just *not drinking* is a negative, sterile thing. That is clearly demonstrated by our experience. To *stay* stopped, we've found we need to put in place of the drinking a positive program of action. We've had to learn how to *live* sober.

Fear may have originally pushed some of us toward looking into the possibility that we might have a drinking problem. And over a short period, fear alone may help some of us stay away from a drink. But a fearful state is not a very happy or relaxed one to maintain for very long. So we try to develop a healthy respect for

the power of alcohol, instead of a fear of it, just as people have a healthy respect for cyanide, iodine, or any other poison. Without going around in constant fear of those potions, most people respect what they can do to the body, and have enough sense not to imbibe them. We in AA now have the same knowledge of, and regard for, alcohol. But, of course, it is based on firsthand experience, not on seeing a skull and crossbones on a label.

We can't rely on fear to get us through those empty hours without a drink, so what *can* we do?

We have found many kinds of activity useful and profitable, some more than others. Here are two kinds, in the order of their effectiveness as we experienced it.

A. Activity in and around A.A.

When experienced AA members say that they found "getting active" helpful in their recovery from alcoholism, they usually mean getting active in and around A.A.

If you want to, you can do that even before you decide whether or not you want to become an A.A. member. You don't need anyone's permission or invitation.

In fact, before you make any decision about a drinking problem, it might be a good idea to spend some time around A.A. Don't worry— just sitting at, and observing, A.A. meetings does not make you an alcoholic or an AA member, any more than sitting in a hen house makes you a hen. You can try a sort of "dry run" or "dress rehearsal" of AA first, then decide about "joining."

The activities we often use at first in AA may seem fairly unimportant, but the results prove them valuable. We might call these things "ice breakers," because they make it easier to feel comfortable around people we do not know.

As most AA meetings end, you'll generally notice that some of those present start putting away the folding chairs, or emptying ashtrays, or carrying empty tea and coffee cups to the kitchen.

Join in. You may be surprised at the effect on yourself of such seemingly little chores. You can help wash out the cups and coffeepot, put away the literature, and sweep the floor.

Helping out with these easy little physical tasks does not mean you become the group's janitor or custodian. Nothing of the sort. From years of doing it and seeing fellow members do it, we know that practically every person happily recovered in A.A. has taken his or her turn at the K.P. or refreshment-and-cleanup detail. The results we have felt from doing these tasks are concrete, beneficial, and usually surprising.

In fact, many of us began to feel comfortable around AA only when we began to help with these simple acts. And we were even more at ease, and much further away from drinking or the thought of it, when we accepted some small, but specific, regular responsibility—such as bringing the refreshments, helping to prepare and serve them, being a greeter on the hospitality committee, or performing other tasks that needed doing. Simply by watching other people, you'll learn what needs to be done to get ready for the A.A. meeting, and to straighten up afterwards.

No one *has* to do such things, of course. In A.A., no one is ever required to do, or not do, anything. But these simple, menial chores and the commitment (only to ourselves) to do them faithfully have had unexpectedly good effects on many of us, and still do. They help give some muscle to our sobriety.

As you stay around an A.A. group, you'll observe other tasks that need undertaking. You'll hear the secretary make announcements and see the treasurer take charge of the contributions basket. Serving in one of those capacities, once you get a little accumulation of non-drinking time (about 90 days, in most groups), is a good way to fill some of the time we used to spend drinking.

When these "jobs" interest you, leaf through a copy of the pamphlet "The A.A. Group." It explains what the group "officers" do, and how they are chosen.

In A.A., no one is "above" or "below" anyone else. There are no classes or strata or hierarchies among the members. There are no formal officers with any governing

power or authority whatsoever. A.A. is not an organization in the usual sense of that word. Instead, it is a fellowship of equals. Everybody calls everybody else by first name. AA's take turns doing the services needed for group meetings and other functions.

No particular professional skill or education is needed. Even if you have never been a joiner, or a chairman or secretary of anything, you may find—as most of us have—that within the A.A. group, these services are easy to do, and they do wonders for us. They build a sturdy backbone for our recovery.

Now for the second type of activity that helps keep us away from drinking.

B. Activity not related to A.A.

It's curious, but true, that some of us, when we first stop drinking, seem to experience a sort of temporary failure of the imagination.

It's curious, because during our drinking days, so many of us displayed almost unbelievably fertile powers of imagination. In less than a week, we could dream up instantly more reasons (excuses?) for drinking than most people use for all other purposes in a lifetime. (Incidentally, it's a pretty good rule of thumb that normal drinkers— that is, nonalcoholics—*never* need or use any particular justification for either drinking or not drinking!)

When the need to give ourselves reasons for our drinking is no longer there, it often seems that our minds go on a sit-down strike. Some of us find we can't think up non-drinking things to do! Perhaps this is because we're just out of the habit. Or perhaps the mind needs a period of restful convalescence after active alcoholism ceases. In either case, the dullness does go away. After our first month's sobriety, many of us notice a distinct difference. After three months, our minds seem still clearer. And during our second year of recovery, the change is striking. More mental energy seems available to us than ever before.

But it's during the seemingly endless first dry stretch that you will hear some of us say, "What's to do?"

The following list is just a starter for use at that time. It isn't very thrilling or adventurous, but it covers the kinds of activity many of us have used to fill our first vacant hours when we were not at our jobs or with other non-drinking people. We know they work. We did such things as:

1. *Taking walks*—especially to new places, and in parks or the country. Leisurely, easy strolls, not tiring marches.

2. *Reading*—although some of us got pretty fidgety if we tried to read anything that demanded much concentration.

3. *Going to museums and art galleries*.

4. *Exercising*—swimming, golfing, jogging, yoga, or other forms of exercise your doctor advises.

5. *Starting on long-neglected chores*—cleaning out a bureau drawer, sorting papers, answering a few letters, hanging pictures, or something of the sort that we've been postponing.

We have found it is important, though, *not to overdo* any of these. Planning to clean out all the closets (or the whole attic or garage or basement or apartment) sounds simple. However, after a day's hard physical labor at it, we can wind up exhausted, dirty, not finished, and discouraged. So our advice to each other is: Cut down the plan to a manageable size. Start out, not to straighten up the kitchen or clean out those files, but simply to clean out one drawer or one folder. Do another one another day.

6. *Trying a new hobby*—nothing expensive or very demanding, just some pleasant, idle diversion in which we do not need to excel or win, but only to enjoy some refreshingly different moments. Many of us have picked up hobbies we'd never dreamed of before, such as bridge, macramé, the opera, tropical fish, cabinetmaking, needlework, baseball, writing, singing, crossword puzzles, cooking, bird-watching, amateur acting, leathercraft, gardening, sailing, the guitar, movies, dancing, marbles, bonsai, collecting something or other. Many of us have found we now really enjoy things that we wouldn't even consider before.

7. *Revisiting an old pastime*, except you-know-what. Maybe, stored away somewhere, there is a watercolor set you haven't touched in years, a crewel kit, an accordion, table tennis or backgammon equipment, a tape collection, or notes for a novel. For some of us, it has been rewarding to dig these out, dust them off, and try having a go at them again. If you decide they're not for you any more, get rid of them.

8. *Taking a course*. Have you always wished you could speak Swahili or Russian? Enjoy history or math? Understand archaeology or anthropology? Correspondence courses, instruction on public television, or adult classes (for pleasure, not necessarily for credit) that meet about once a week are usually available somewhere. Why not give one a try? Many of us have found that such a course can not only add a fresh dimension to life, but also lead to a whole new career.

If studying gets to be a drag, though, don't hesitate to drop it. You have the right to change your mind and quit anything that is more of a hassle than it's worth. Being "a quitter" can take courage and make very good sense if we're quitting something that is not good for us, or adds no positive, pleasurable, or healthy new facet to our life.

9. *Volunteering to do some useful service*. Many, many hospitals, children's agencies, churches, and other institutions and organizations desperately need volunteers for all kinds of activity. The choice is wide, from reading to the blind to sealing envelopes for a church mailing or gathering signatures on a political petition. Check with any nearby hospital, church, governmental agency, or civic club to find out what volunteer services are needed in your community. We've found we feel much better about ourselves when we contribute even a small service for the benefit of our fellow human beings. Even the act of investigating the possibilities of such service is in itself informative and interesting.

10. *Doing something about your personal appearance*. Most of us let ourselves go pretty much. A new haircut, some new clothes, new glasses, or even new teeth have a marvelously cheering effect. Often, we had been intending to get around to something like that, and the months when we first started staying sober seemed a good time to look into it.

11. *Taking a fling at something frivolous!* Not everything we do has to be an earnest effort at self-improvement, although any such effort is worthwhile and gives a lift to our self-esteem. Many of us find it important to balance serious periods with things we do for pure fun. Do you like balloons? Zoos? Bubble gum? Marx Brothers movies? Soul music? Reading sci-fi or detective stories? Sunbathing? Snowmobiling? If not, find something else nonalcoholic that rewards you with nothing but sheer enjoyment, and have some "dry" fun. You deserve it.

12. _____

Fill this one in for yourself. Let's hope the list above sparked an idea for you which is different from all of those listed.... It did? Good! Go to it.

One word of caution, though. Some of us find we have a tendency to go overboard, and try too many things at once. We have a good brake for that, which you'll read about on page 44. It's called "Easy Does It."