8 Changing Old Routines

Certain set times, familiar places, and regular activities associated with drinking have been woven closely into the fabric of our lives. Like fatigue, hunger, loneliness, anger, and over elation, these old routines can prove to be traps dangerous to our sobriety.

When we first stopped drinking, many of us found it useful to look back at the habits surrounding our drinking and, whenever possible, to change a lot of the small things connected with drinking.

To illustrate: Many who used to begin the day with an eye-opener in the bathroom now head for coffee in the kitchen. Some of us shifted the order of things we did to prepare for the day, such as eating before bathing and dressing, or vice versa. A change in brands of toothpaste and mouthwash (be careful about the alcohol content!) gave us a fresh, different taste to start out with. We tried a little exercise or a few quiet moments of contemplation or meditation before plunging into the day.

Many of us also learned to try a new route when we first left the house in the morning, *not* passing by a familiar watering hole. Some have switched from the car to a train, from the subway to a bicycle, from a bus to walking. Others joined a different car pool.

Whether our drinking was in the commuter bar car, the neighborhood gin mill, the kitchen, the country club, or the garage, each of us can spot pretty exactly his or her own favorite drinking locale. Whether we were the occasional bender-thrower or the round-the-clock wine sipper, each of us knows for himself or herself what days, hours, and occasions have most often been associated with our tippling.

When you want not to drink, it helps to shake up *all* those routines and change the pieces around, we have found. Housewives, for instance, say it helps to shift shopping times and places and rearrange the agenda of daily chores. Working people who used to sneak out for a snort on the coffee break now stay in and really have coffee or tea and a bun. (And that's a good time to call someone you know who's also off the sauce. During times when we used to drink, if s reassuring to

talk to a person who has been through the same experiences.)

Those of us who began our sobriety while confined to a hospital or a jail tried to change our daily paths so we would not encounter the institution's bootlegger so often.

For some of us, lunchtime was usually an hour or two of liquid refreshment. When we first stop drinking, instead of going to the restaurant or steak pit where the waiters or the bartender always knew what we wanted without being told, it makes good sense to head in a different direction for lunch, and it's especially helpful to eat with other nondrinkers. "Testing your willpower," in a matter involving health, seems pretty silly when it is not necessary. Instead, we try to make our new health habits as easy as possible.

For many of us, this has also meant forgoing, at least for a while, the company of our hard-drinking buddies. If they are true friends, they naturally are glad to see us take care of our health, and they respect our right to do whatever we want to do, just as we respect their right to drink if they choose. But we have learned to be wary of anyone who persists in urging us to drink again. Those who really love us, it seems, encourage our efforts to stay well.

At 5:00 p.m., or whenever the day's work is done, some of us learned to stop at a sandwich shop for a bite. Then we would take an unfamiliar route for walking home, one that did not lead past our old drinking haunts. If we were commuters, we did not ride in the bar car, and we got off the train at the other end—not near the friendly neighborhood tavern.

When we got home, instead of bringing out the ice cubes and glasses, we changed clothes, then brewed a pot of tea or took some fruit or vegetable juice, took a nap, or relaxed awhile in the shower or with a book or the newspaper. We learned to vary our diet to include foods not closely associated with alcohol. If imbibing and watching TV was our usual after-dinner routine, we found it helped to shift to another room and other activities. If we used to wait for the family to get to bed before hauling out the bottle, we tried going to bed earlier for a change, or taking a walk or reading or writing or playing chess.

Business trips, weekends and holidays, the golf course, baseball and football stadiums, card games, the old swimming pool, or the ski lodge often meant drinking for many of us. Boat people often spent summer days drinking on the bay or the lake. When we first stopped drinking, we found it paid to plan a different kind of trip or holiday for a while. Trying to avoid taking a drink on a vessel loaded with beer drinkers, Tom Collins sippers, flask nippers, sangria lovers, or hot-buttered-rum guzzlers is much harder than simply going to other places and, for novelty's sake, doing new things that do not particularly remind us of drinking.

Suppose we were invited to the kind of cocktail party where the chief entertainment—or business—was drinking. What then? While drinking, we had been pretty skillful at dreaming up alibis, so we just applied that skill to devising a graceful way of saying, "No, thank you." (For parties we really have to attend, we've worked out safe new routines, which are explained on page 65.)

In our early days of not drinking, did we get rid of all the booze around our homes? Yes and no.

Most successful nondrinkers agree that it is a sound precaution at first to get rid of whatever hidden stashes there may be—if we can find them. But opinions vary with regard to the bottles in the liquor cabinet or the wine rack.

Some of us insist that it was never the availability of the beverage that led us to drink, any more than the immediate *un*availability kept us from that drink we really wanted. So some ask: Why pour good Scotch down the drain or even give it away? We live in a drinking society, they say, and cannot avoid the presence of alcoholic beverages forever. Keep the supply on hand to serve when guests arrive, they suggest, and just learn to ignore it the rest of the time. For them, that worked.

A multitude of others among us point out that sometimes it was incredibly easy for us to take a drink on impulse, almost unconsciously, before we intended to. If no alcohol is handy, if we'd have to go out and buy it, we at least have a chance to recognize what we're about to do and can choose *not* to drink instead. Nondrinkers of this persuasion say they found it wiser to be safe than sorry! So they gave away their whole stock and kept none on the premises until their sobriety seemed to be in a fairly steady, stabilized state. Even now, they buy only enough for one evening's

guests.

So take your pick. *You* know what your own drinking pattern has been and how you feel about sobriety today.

Now, most of the little changes in routine mentioned in this section may seem, by themselves, ridiculously trivial. However, we can assure you that the sum total of all such alterations in pattern has given many of us an astonishingly powerful propulsion toward newly vigorous health. You can have such a boost, too, if you want it.