

Conference 2025

Proposed DRAFT text for the pamphlet 'AA and Mental Health'

The stories in this leaflet comprise member submissions – please recognise that is their voice being expressed when reading this document

Introduction

The members contributing to this pamphlet tell their stories about their mental health issues and their alcoholism. The mental health conditions which they describe are not of course peculiar to alcoholics. They reflect those found in society at large. Some have been diagnosed as bipolar, others as being on the autistic spectrum. Yet others have been subject to emotionally unstable personality disorder, suffer from depression and anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some have had frequent thoughts of self-harm or suicide, leading on occasion to attempts to take their own lives. All of them are alcoholics and without exception they have found the Fellowship of AA to be beneficial.

Jennie found it relatively simple to admit that she was powerless over alcohol but had more difficulty in recognising her mental health problems. Depression and anxiety had dogged her all her life. After two years sober, she was diagnosed with clinical depression. She was dealing with that successfully until others in the Fellowship told her that she ought to stop taking medication. As a result, she became clinically depressed again. She was advised by her sponsor that AA does not have an opinion on medical matters: “No AA member should play doctor”. As a result, she resumed her medication which has helped with her anxiety and depression. Doing service across the various levels of the Fellowship has been a life-saver for her. “If I’d not got sober, my clinical depression would not have been diagnosed and sorted (one day at a time), and my autism would not have been diagnosed (now being understood and explored one day at a time).”

Mark, who has attention ADHD, emphasises the need for honesty about mental health problems, and the need to talk about the challenges which they pose. He was initially reluctant to join AA because he heard that you could not be sober if you took mind-altering substances. As time went on, he heard members with similar problems talking about the help which they had received from their sponsors, and the fact that it was all right to take medically prescribed medication. He found a sponsor who told him to take professional advice for his condition. As a result, he says, “Today I can honestly say that my mental health has improved tenfold”.

James had daily thoughts of suicide which he did not mention to his sponsor, fellow members or therapists as he believed it to be, “as universal and natural as breathing”. He says that the Fellowship of AA saved him from suicide and enabled him to get to grips with the PTSD which was linked to a sexual assault in his childhood. He states: “Without recovery from alcohol, I would not have been able to deal with my mental health issues, and had I not then looked at those issues, I fear my recovery may not have sustained me”.

Stuart, who is bipolar, describes himself as one of those alcoholics who is suffering from a, “grave emotional and mental disorder” (Big Book Alcoholics Anonymous page 58). The psychiatric help which was offered to him was of no assistance while he was in active alcoholism. Once he had found a sponsor and went through the 12 Steps, he re-engaged with psychiatric services. He has now been stable and sober for many years.

Diane has been plagued by the compulsion to self-harm and a series of drug overdoses which resulted in stays in mental hospitals - on one occasion for three years. In the Fellowship, she found that work on the 12 Steps with her sponsor and deep therapy with her therapist worked well together. Now, she says, “My mind has peace at last”

Valerie was diagnosed with emotionally unstable personality disorder which led to self-harm and suicide attempts. She found a new sponsor who insisted that she consult a mental health professional. Although she has continued thoughts of suicide, the desire to act upon them has disappeared.

Terry has found that the tools provided by the AA programme have provided a framework for addressing his mental health problems. He stopped medication under medical supervision because he wanted to go through the experience of living, rather than skipping to the desired outcome artificially. He has been sober for over 30 years, and has had no recurrence of mental illness for many years.

The experience strength and hope expressed by these members is truly inspiring. Their stories are a source of encouragement to the many members of our Fellowship who deal with mental health problems, in addition to their alcoholism.

Jennie

My name is Jennie and I am an alcoholic. What an admission! Once I'd realised I was an alcoholic, there was no hesitation in admitting I was powerless over alcohol and that my life was unmanageable - one hundred percent!

Having mental health issues though, now this is another matter. Mental Health is a topic that I have come to understand as an 'outside issue' to AA, even though poor mental health has been with me all my life... depression, anxiety, more depression, anxiety and so on. I just didn't realise it. It was all bound up together in my head with my alcoholism. I could not see my poor mental health until I put down the drink and got sober from alcohol, and took steps towards my emotional sobriety.

In my first two years of sobriety, I began to identify other issues that were not quite right with me. For example, not sleeping, lack of concentration, gut-wrenching anxiety and crying all the time. I thought, 'if this is sobriety - you can shove it!' I went back to my doctor who identified clinical depression. Through the guidance of my doctor, I took steps to mitigate my depression. I went to cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness classes. I also agreed to take medication to help me. All three changes, along with my 12 Step programme turned my depression around. Medication did not affect my sobriety in any way but some people in the Fellowship near me told me that it would, and said I should stop taking medication. This I did. I went through terrible withdrawal from the medication (worse than coming off the drink) and I

became clinically depressed again. I was advised by my sponsor that AA does not have an opinion on medical matters as these are issues outside of the Fellowship. As it says in the pamphlet *The AA Member - Medication And Other Drugs*, “No AA member should play doctor”.

Since I elected to stay sober one day at a time, not pick up that first drink, and keep on my course of meds which continue to help me with anxiety and depression, I have been more balanced and this has allowed me to grow and experience emotional sobriety – a bit at a time, a day at a time.

I had (and still have, if I do not work my programme) crippling social anxiety, and anxiety full stop about everything. This was a trigger for my clinical depressive state. I thought what can I do about it, how can I get out of self?! Doing service across each level of the Fellowship was an absolute life saver for me. It has helped me increase my connection with other people, improve my skills, self-worth and confidence. Giving back, I found, was a great way to move forward emotionally. I worked through social anxiety and found some understanding of boundaries. I can now begin at the beginning of projects and work through them to the end. I found that people are OK if you give them time and space, just as they have for me. It is amazing how it works! I have not returned to clinical depression.

Fast forwarding to the present, I knew that something else was still not quite right in the way I behaved around people and social situations, where I became overwhelmed. Fortunately, I have some days of sobriety under my belt, and some self-knowledge which propelled me to seek further help and diagnosis. It turned out that I am on the autism spectrum. Recognising this was like recognising I am an alcoholic. Work on my autism and my understanding of it has only just begun. It is a revelation – a similar experience to understanding my alcoholism. It is another piece of the jigsaw of my life that has fitted into place, and I now know that I can seek further help.

I hope my story of depression, autism diagnosis and mental health helps you. If I'd not got sober, my clinical depression would not have been diagnosed and sorted (one day at a time), and my autism would not have been diagnosed (now being understood and explored one day at a time).

My sobriety keeps on revealing more and more, just as long as I follow the path that is destined for me, and that I remain prepared to take action over myself.

Mark

My name is Mark, and I am an alcoholic. I have struggled with mental health throughout my life. When I became sober in 2013 my mental health started to improve, however, I still had a lot of work to do. I was fortunate enough to be given respite in a dry house. That is where I started my journey of recovery; part of the requirement of having a placement at the dry house was that I had to attend at least four AA meetings, which I did. While I was in those meetings, I heard many stories. Some inspired me, some made me worry. One that sticks in my mind was, “to be sober means not taking any mind-altering drugs”. At the time I heard this I was prescribed medication for depression and psychotic symptoms and couldn't get my head around this statement. It made me question my recovery. So, I completed my four

meetings, and then only went to meetings on sober anniversaries. I found other ways to do recovery until 2021 when, after again struggling with my mental health, I had a spiritual calling to attend AA to enhance my recovery, continue my journey and see if the Steps could help me.

I was going through a horrible personal situation which had affected my mental health in a negative way. I was feeling depressed and anxious and was hoping that AA could help, not just with my addiction issues but also with my mental health. This is when the strangest thing happened. In the meetings I was not looking for differences. I was looking for people who had been or who were going through a similar situation. I heard many people talk about going through similar situations and that they had support from a sponsor. I even heard stories about fellows asking their sponsor about medication and their sponsor telling them: "it's ok to take medication as it's been prescribed by a professional body (i.e. a GP), and not bought from the street."

Hearing these stories really did inspire me and because I heard this, I decided to stick with AA. I soon got a sponsor and a service position and went through the Steps. It was around this time that I was also diagnosed with ADHD. I talked to my sponsor every time after a consultation with the ADHD professional. I was never told not to take medication. In fact, I was encouraged to take the professional's advice. I found this very refreshing as I still had the story in my head from years back that, "taking medication means you are not in recovery". I reflected with my sponsor about this statement, and he told me that we must listen to a professional's advice. I believe if I was told something different at that time, there was a chance I would have left AA. I felt supported and listened to and found it a benefit that I could talk to my sponsor about medication I was prescribed.

This did not stop my mental health challenges and since I was not being honest about a situation in my life, my mental health became worse. It really is true secrets can keep you sick! I then became very unwell with mental illness. I became very depressed and anxious and had thoughts of ending my life. I had a plan. I was going to drive over a cliff. That day, however, something my sponsor had said sprang to mind. It was: "It's ok to reach out and ask for help." So I phoned 101 and told the professional that I was going to end my life. I was kept on the phone and a taxi was arranged for me so I could be taken to hospital. Being a mental health professional, myself made this all the harder. Because of what I had heard from my sponsor and in the AA rooms, and what I had learnt, I knew it was OK to reach out for help outside the AA Fellowship.

I spent one night in the hospital and my medication was reviewed and increased. I was discharged and supported by the home treatment team for two weeks. Once my head was in the right place I asked for a meeting with my sponsor and I was totally honest about the marriage breakdown that near on destroyed me, and told my sponsor how I was running on self-will. I told them everything, and what I found really refreshing about this was I was not judged. I was offered love, kindness and compassion. This in turn spilled into the meetings and other people in the Fellowship offered an ear. I did not feel alone and my mental health started to improve.

I would have daily talks with my sponsor as well as talks with mental health professionals. Both became an integral part of mental health improvement and recovery. I started to go to

more meetings. I took some time off work. All of these decisions I ran past my sponsor. After all, self-will had made me ill.

Today, I can honestly say that my mental health has improved tenfold. I'm still prescribed medication and know this is part of my recovery journey (for now). I will talk with a GP regularly and not make any medication changes unless a GP tells me. I'm in contact with my sponsor daily and attend at least three meetings weekly.

The AA program truly does work when you are honest with another trusted person. AA can't always fix everything, however, and sometimes we must reach outside the Fellowship to ask for support, help and guidance. I am glad that when I was struggling with my mental health I reached out for professional help, and that I told my sponsor what I was doing. Talking about my mental health challenges was the best way to free myself from them.

Remember: you are not alone!

James

When I came to AA, I knew that I had been an unhappy child, whose feelings of alienation had been masked by alcohol from the age of 15. I got sober 21 years later, brought to my knees when drink ceased to work.

After a couple of months of meetings, I had a flashback at my home group. I remembered that I had been sexually assaulted as a child – and had successfully buried any memories of it for over 25 years. The vivid and terrifying replay of the event came to me just before Christmas, and my immediate thought was that if it happened again, I would be able to drink or drug my way through it, and thus avoid confronting the feelings. Thankfully, after discussing it with my sponsor and other trusted friends, I didn't pick up. I took the suggestion of seeing a therapist and subsequently felt the matter had been dealt with, to the best of my ability. I went on to 'complete' the Steps and to enjoy a recovery with group level service and warm fellowship.

Ten years later I discovered that my upstairs neighbour had hanged herself. She was a veteran of many stays in treatment centres, whom I had been helping to get sober by driving her to meetings. Shortly thereafter, I shared at my meeting that I regretted not being killed by a bomb which had set off in Central London. My sponsor confronted me: "I don't want to go to your funeral. Get help!". I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I took a leave of absence from my stressful job and was prescribed medication. I was very reluctant to take this advice and reluctantly swallowed my first tablet, feeling a mixture of shame and defeat. Few of my AA friends knew that I had taken this route and I was advised not to share it at meetings.

The suggested treatment worked, and once the medication kicked in, I was able to return to work and participate more fully in my life and my recovery, with the relief of having a manageable range of 'stuff' with which to deal. The constant dysfunctional chorus of negativity and chaos had quietened. I became a fully active member of the Fellowship, doing service at many levels. I launched a well-respected business in a completely new industry, got married and was able to live a generally happy and productive life. I do not broadcast the information that I've been on medication, but I have shared my experience after meetings

with members at similar crisis points. I am happy to call out those amateur 'doctors' who proffer advice on such matters.

At over 25 years sober, I suddenly started having more flashbacks, like those experienced in my early recovery. I entered another severe bout of depression and anxiety and was referred to our excellent local mental health team. During a course in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (lots of overlap with step-work!) I was diagnosed with PTSD, caused by the sexual assault in my childhood. In the years since my first flashbacks, new methods of treatment had evolved, and I was offered the opportunity to look into the event once again.

I learned that my daily consideration of suicide was not normal. I'd not bothered mentioning it to sponsors, fellow members or even therapists up to this point, as I'd believed such thoughts to be as universal and natural as breathing. My father had attempted suicide when I was in my early teens and there had been successful suicides amongst both family and friends. Contemplation of suicide had long been a part of my emotional tool kit.

A month later, I had completed that PTSD work and felt like a new person, with an enthusiasm for life that I could barely remember from childhood. I have gratitude for my Higher Power, keeping me safe until this help was available, and the fellowship of AA, which had saved me from suicide at the time of my rock bottom, then gone on to share a new way of life that I feel privileged to be able to follow. Without recovery from alcohol, I would not have been able to deal with my mental health issues, and had I not then looked at those issues, I fear my recovery might not have sustained me.

Stuart

My name is Stuart and I am an alcoholic. I am an alcoholic that has a grave emotional and mental disorder. Thankfully, I have found the capacity to be honest and thus maintained a good quality of recovery for some years now. My sobriety date in 12th Feb 2005. About three years before this date, I had a serious episode of mental illness which led to me being diagnosed with a bipolar mood disorder. My family were worried about me, and arranged for me to see a GP who immediately sent me to a psychiatric unit for assessment. Looking back, I can understand I was having a psychotic episode. The consultant psychiatrist heading the assessment team was a Nigerian man. It just so happened that England were playing Nigeria in the World Cup Semi Final in Japan a few days later. Despite my best attempts, he declined my offer to get us tickets and go to Tokyo together! I was not detained under a 'section' as there were no beds, so I was sent back to my brother's place and put under the care of the crisis team.

The best attempts of psychiatric services were of little help to me whilst I was in the thick of active alcoholism. My drinking progressed to a point where I was waking every morning with sweats and shakes, reaching for the bottle. I would drink cheap port to take the edge off, then a bottle of vodka to get straight then continue drinking cider throughout the day until blackout. This cycle continued, along with daily calls to Samaritans to talk about my hopeless state and suicidal thoughts. I made one serious suicide attempt and required urgent medical interventions to save my life. My life had become completely unbearable. I had lost my business, my relationship with my kids and most of my family had given up on me. I had big debts, and my landlord was getting fed up with me after an occasion when the fire brigade

had to be called to put out a fire at the house I rented when I passed out with a lit cigarette on the sofa.

The day came when I could not get to the point of passing out. It was terrifying. No matter how much I drank I just could not get there. I ended up drinking the sediment sludge from a barrel of rough cider I had in my kitchen out of sheer desperation. I must have finally passed out but the sediment had made me violently ill. I could not eat or drink anything for days. The DTs were horrendous as I detoxed in a fairly unconventional way in the house of a pub landlady. I had a different kind of psychosis from the ones which were purely linked to mental illness. I had auditory and visual hallucinations. I could see things coming through the walls and could hear a rock band playing loudly next door. This, of course, was not the case in reality. The landlady nursed me well with advice from NHS direct. As soon as I could take any food or drink, I demanded a glass of white wine. This was quickly followed by a four pack of strong lager, and I was off again.

Within a few weeks, I found myself on my knees at home screaming out to something or someone, using some fairly choice language about why this was happening to me. The following day I came to my first AA meeting. It turned out Samaritans had given me the AA helpline number which I had called and I found a meeting. I was in blackout and a snotty, sniffing mess at this first meeting. I came around later in an AA friend's flat. The love and support I found in AA was incredible. This man told me the next day that he would pick me up the following day and we would go to a meeting. He said this would be my first day sober. Much to my amazement, this was the case and I have not had a drink since.

I found a sponsor to take me through the 12 Step programme of recovery. I re-engaged with the psychiatric services and was helped by speaking to them and taking my prescribed medication. I have experienced some ups and downs in recovery, including the suicide of my first AA friend who helped me so much, and the suicide of my dear brother. I have re-married and moved to Wales where I live a happy and sober life. I love being part of AA, practicing my spiritual principles and helping others. I am taking someone through the programme now, which is always an honour. I have a great sponsor who is a wonderful support to me. My mental health has been stable for many years of sobriety. I no longer take medication but would not hesitate to do so if I needed it. I will always be an alcoholic, much the same as I will always have a bipolar mood disorder. By maintaining my spiritual condition by practicing Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve on a daily basis, I stay connected to the God of my understanding and live a contented and useful life.

Diane

My mind has never been a peaceful place throughout my life. My childhood was difficult. I had a lot of operations. I was diagnosed with a learning disability. I was bullied throughout my school years. When I was in senior school, alcohol became my friend. It helped me fit in with others and helped me cope with the stresses I had in life. At the age of 15, I began to self-harm. I was taking overdoses and I used alcohol to help me cope with being sexually assaulted in my teenage years. Between the ages of 16 and 18, I reduced the amount of alcohol I was consuming. When I was 18, I started going to clubs and pubs. During this time, I was consuming alcohol daily. Throughout my adulthood, in my addiction, my drinking and mental health were erratic.

Lots of drinking, self-harm, overdose trips to the hospital and crying for help. I did not know what was wrong with me apart from the drinking, wanting to die and recalling those that have passed. Throughout my addiction, I tried so many times to give up the drinking, and in many different ways, but my poor mental health would cause me to start again. Through my life, I have had many relationships. One was so bad that it caused my mental health to worsen, and it caused me to go into a mental health hospital twice. It did not help.

After all of this, I lost my partner to alcohol. I again tried to reduce my alcohol intake but fell back into the trap. This is when I met my husband who later died of alcohol-related illnesses. This led to me giving up alcohol for 3 months. I gradually fell back into the trap again and again. Losing my Nan was a catalyst for me. Within a few months I went into an alcoholic craze, drinking bottles and bottles a day, drinking until I collapsed and starting over again the next day.

One day, I remember it was Wednesday, I sought help. I said I was going to do something bad, but I was sent home and told that someone would see me on Monday. Sunday came about, and I tried to end it all. I went into prison for months, then to a mental health hospital for three years. I had the cravings for alcohol through this time but did not allow myself to drink. I was able to learn coping strategies and mindfulness to help me attempt to break the cycle. At the end, something clicked and I realised that I did not want alcohol to be my friend. My head was calmer, and being diagnosed with mental illness made it a lot better.

I was then moved into a supported living accommodation in a new town. I was doing brilliantly. I called it 'my honeymoon period'. I was able to go out and do a lot of things.

After a year, I started to realise that I was out of hospital, and all of a sudden, I stopped going out, as my fears and cravings came back. But I stayed sober for two more years. That was until one week before my six years of sobriety. I was really struggling with cravings, so I rang AA. I was told there was a meeting that night. I forgot my fears and said I would be there. I went with a support worker. It was the best decision I have made. Going to the meetings has changed my life and the people I have met have become my true friends.

While doing the 12 Steps with my sponsor, I was also doing deep therapy with my therapist. They both worked so well for me. Since I have finished both, my life has changed so much more. I have done different services in AA, including chairing a meeting. My confidence has grown so much. I still feel bad some days, but so much better than before. I go out with friends and family and staff. My connection is improving by the day. I even went on holiday alone for six days to the seaside. Doing this has given me more confidence in myself and shown I am stronger than I ever thought.

To those who might be reading this: AA does work. I am not saying I don't have bad days, but the days aren't as bad as my old good days. I feel my mind has peace at last.

I could not have done this without my family, friends, my support system, AA and my Higher Power.

I am Diane and I am an alcoholic.

Peace at last.

Valerie

By the age of 15 I had learnt that alcohol changed the way I felt and “helped” my depression. Due to my suicide attempts and self-harming, I had a couple of lengthy stays on an adolescent psychiatric ward between the ages of 15 and 18. At 19, I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (now known as Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder). A couple of the symptoms are impulsive behaviour and substance abuse and my heavy drinking definitely increased my impulsive behaviour. I put myself in very risky positions and aimed to cause myself the most damage I could when self-harming. I also came up with some very crazy ways to try and kill myself. Back then, professionals avoided working with people who had this personality disorder, deeming them untreatable, manipulative and attention-seeking. Just as there is a lot of stigma and misunderstanding about the disease of alcoholism, the same can be true about personality disorders – which is why I tell very few people my diagnosis.

Fast forward to the age of 35 and I was a daily drinker, maybe not as crazy or impulsive as I used to be but every so often, I would drink a lot more and then the self-harm and suicide attempts would happen. Then alcohol stopped working for me, it no longer changed the way I felt, it stopped slowing my thoughts down, it just didn't help in the way it used to, so I turned to AA.

I spent a few months in and out, not being able to stay sober. I didn't have a sponsor and wasn't working the Steps. I already had a God in my life before coming to AA but I wasn't turning to Him to help me stay sober. In fact, I would deliberately shut out God so that I could carry on drinking because I knew that if I asked Him to help me, He would.

During my last drunk, I felt so low. It seemed that I couldn't get drunk no matter how much I drank and although I wanted to die, I had nothing left in me to try to end my life. A few days later I finally got a sponsor.

My first couple of months of sobriety were very difficult, I knew I didn't want to drink but I didn't have the tools of the program to cope with life yet. I took several overdoses and then (almost literally) got to the jumping off point - the police picked me up when I was on my way to a bridge and I was sectioned and admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

Once I started working through the Steps, things started to change. I was slowly gaining the tools I needed to cope. At first, I was just grateful that I wasn't dead but that changed to being grateful for being alive.

Not long after I'd reached one year of sobriety, my mental health took a dip. Along with support for my alcoholism, I relied far too much on my sponsor for mental health support. In the end my mental health difficulties were too much for her, so she had to let me go. I was devastated, probably due to how much I had relied on her. But thankfully, I found a new sponsor shortly after that.

My new sponsor had clear boundaries. One of the conditions of her agreeing to sponsor me was that I have a mental health professional to contact for mental health issues. When these issues arise, she will suggest that I speak to a mental health professional. The Big Book tells me on p133 that, if needed, outside help should be sought.

My mental health continues to go up and down. I'm coming up to 4 years of sobriety and although I've had off and on thoughts of self-harm and suicide throughout my sobriety, due to the help of God, the Steps, my sponsor, the Fellowship and mental health professionals, I have not acted on these thoughts for the last 3 years 9 months - they have remained as thoughts.

Dealing with alcoholism and a personality disorder at the same time can be tricky. Sometimes it's difficult to know which is at play - sometimes it's one or the other, sometimes it's both.

My sponsor says that just as I have to pay attention to my alcoholism one day at a time (using the tools I have been given to keep me sober- turning to God, working the Steps, going to meetings, staying grateful, recognising when I'm triggered or struggling and taking the appropriate action), I also need to pay attention to my mental health one day at a time and use the tools I have been given to cope with that.

Just as I will always be an alcoholic, I may always have some form of mental health problem. But as long as I pay attention to both my alcoholism and mental health, one day at a time, I don't ever need to get to the jumping off point again - and for that I am truly grateful.

Terry

My name's Terry, and I'm an alcoholic. I have also suffered from mental illness. Both my parents were institutionalised in psychiatric hospitals. Two of my sisters had psychotic episodes and manic depression. My brother was an alcoholic who died by suicide. There are mental disorders in my family extending as far as the eye can see. I was ill before I ever drank, deciding at the age of ten that life was not worth living. There followed severe depression, anxiety, panic attacks, suicidal ideation, the staging of 'accidents' in which I might die, cutting, catatonia, anti-social behaviour, and other manifestations that were disagreeable to me and others. I am also autistic.

My alcoholism, though destructive and deadly, is much simpler to describe. I drank too much every day, made myself ill, was unable to function, and kept returning to the first drink after periods of sobriety (from hours to months) despite the manifest consequences. I was maniacal when drunk and distraught when sober.

As my alcoholism progressed through my teens and into my early twenties, my mental illness galloped to keep pace, each egging the other on. Alcohol temporarily swamped the symptoms of my mental illness. It also aggravated them by cutting swathes through the structure of my life: finances, material conditions, occupation, family, friends, interests. If there had ever been hope of recovering or at least learning to cope with the mental illness, such hopes were irretrievably destroyed.

I washed up in AA at the age of twenty-one, and it was apparent to those around me, from my self-reported condition, appearance, and deportment, that I was unwell. Years later, an attendee of my first AA meeting said I was like a ghost, and he thought I was on the verge of death. I was packed off to mental health specialists by concerned AA members. The discussions with a psychiatrist and with the psychotherapist I was referred to were more than I could bear. I felt more despairing after each session than before. The problem was bigger than even I realised.

I thought that my disordered thinking, behaviour, and emotional states were phenomena, induced by genetics, bad brain wiring, upbringing, and circumstance, unalterable, to be accepted as curses. I believed the best I could hope for was a downstream intervention at the level of mood, a direct chemical alteration of my brain chemistry to tamp down the most florid of my symptoms, which would enable me to live, at least superficially, like ordinary folks.

I spoke to some AA old-timers. One in particular, a housewife from south London, suggested I might concentrate for a while on learning how to avoid the first drink, one day at a time, and build structure into my life, using AA tools, perhaps starting the Steps. I could tackle the issues from my childhood in good time, and maybe now was not the time. Relieved, I took her advice, and postponed the professional help.

I was also medicated. The medication's first effect was to relieve my anxiety. A thought occurred to me: if I continue to take this medication, I will never know whether what I feel is an authentic result of how I am living or is chemically induced. I decided it was more important for me to learn how to live than to skip to the desired outcome artificially. Under medical supervision, I stopped the medication.

The symptoms and behaviours I displayed could readily be classed into diagnoses. That's above my pay grade as an alcoholic in recovery, though. What I learned to do in AA was to look at the substance rather than applying labels. AA members have taught me to examine my beliefs, my thinking, and my behaviour and to gradually identify and pull ten thousand small levers to effect change.

I am agnostic as to the causes of my mental illness. What has proved to be the case is this: consistently working the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and making use of AA's resources of sponsorship, service, and fellowship has enabled me to uncover, discover, and discard attitudes, mental processes, and habits that do not work and replace them with attitudes, mental processes, and habits that do.

My mental problem, it seems, was not entirely mental in origin. It had upstream causes in all eight areas of my life: mental, physical, social, practical, religious, philosophical, moral, and spiritual. AA has succeeded in providing a framework for addressing each of these in turn, by means internal and external to AA. As these upstream areas were remodelled, my downstream state of mind improved.

I have remained sober for almost thirty years at the time of writing, and I have not had any recurrence of mental illness for many years. For all of this, I have AA and its superb programme of thirty-six principles to thank.