

# KEEPING IT SIMPLE

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## Introduction

This book is a compilation of five booklets written by Robert C. Hickie originally published between 1976 and 1980. As the years have passed Bob retired as the EAP director for a major national railroad, and had sold or given away his stock of booklets until finally he had none. Having known him since 1979 I asked him during a phone conversation in 1994 what was going to happen to his booklets when he died. He told me "I guess they'll die with me." At that time I suggested that he give me permission to update and republish the booklets. He graciously gave that permission.

After working on the project off and on since then they are now ready to be reintroduced. I believe you, the reader will find the combination of wit, wisdom and personal character which comes from Bob's love for the alcoholic as I have over the years. Though the general topic of the book is about alcoholism, the information easily applies to other addictions and to life in general. I am sure you will enjoy this work as much as I have learning something new every time you read it.

Thomas H. Schear, Ph.D.

# Responsible Drinking & Other Myths

by Robert C. Hickle, M.A.

edited & updated by Thomas H. Schear, Ph.D.

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The goal of any good professional counselor  
is to become progressively unnecessary.

To my wife Evelyn for her patience and tolerance

## Preface

In October 1948 I attended my first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was singularly unimpressed. In fact, I was so unimpressed that I would not have returned except for the fact that they wouldn't let me put any money in the hat, and I wanted to know more about an organization that wouldn't take my money.

Since that time I have attended many AA meetings and met many alcoholics, both practicing and recovering. Most of the information in this book has been gleaned from those meetings. These people have been most patient with me, teaching me and guiding me to understand this baffling disease. These are the only people who understand it. Alcoholics are the only real experts.

These early days were lonely ones, both for the alcoholic and for those who would help the alcoholic. But the lonely days are over, and we have until recently been surrounded by an exploding treatment-research complex that has threatened to overwhelm us. It has been chic to be concerned with alcoholism, but somehow the alcoholic is still alone.

This small book then is an effort to call our wandering attention back to the reason we started all these activities in the first place—the suffering alcoholic.

Robert C. Hickle, M.A.

## HOW ALCOHOLISM PROGRESSES

I am impressed by the *progressive nature* of alcoholism. We are all aware that the disease progresses while the alcoholic is drinking—the evidence is obvious.

There seems to be more and more people agreeing that the disease proceeds to get worse, even when the alcoholic has stopped drinking. When they return to drinking after a period of sobriety, they don't return to the old "successful" drinking, nor do they return to the level of aberrant drinking which they had reached when they had stopped. Instead the drinker starts at the point they *would have reached* had they continued drinking.

If this is true, it has some fascinating implications. Ignoring for the moment the possibility that alcohol did make them cross the line from social drinking to alcoholism, it appears that the progress of the disease may be independent of the use of alcohol. It would be powerful evidence of the genetic predisposition toward alcoholism.

If the progress of the disease is independent of the use of alcohol, is it possible that a person could be an alcoholic all of one's life with the disease progressing along as one grows older, and one would never know it unless one took a drink?

I am unaware of any studies that would identify alcoholics who started drinking, say, in their forties and would discover whether they started in the early stages of alcoholism, or if they really started in the later stages of alcoholism.

A little glimpse of this possibility is shown in the limited studies of alcoholism among the elderly. There seems to be evidence that many of them did not have a drinking problem until they got pretty old. It would be interesting to find out when they actually began drinking.

## REASONS FOR DRINKING

I believe that alcoholics and social drinkers drink for the *same reasons*. The difference seems to be *what happens* after they start drinking.

Examine the reasons social drinkers give for drinking: to be one of the crowd (peer pressure), to enjoy oneself (enhancement of feelings), to drown one's sorrow (relief drinking), to temporarily escape from life's problems (fantasy drinking), to deal with personal problems (escape drinking), to heal the effects of a previous drinking bout or to alleviate the pain or illness (medicinal drinking)?

Alcoholics drink for all these reasons. In fact, a very careful examination of this fact leads to the idea that there is no clear demarcation line between the alcoholic and the non-alcoholic; no one has ever been able to discover that line.

It is possible that there is no such line, and that the whole process of beginning drinking, social drinking and alcoholism, is a smooth continuum with no interruptions. This would explain why we can not find a line of demarcation. There isn't any!

## THE DECISION TO QUIT & THE DRINK

Paradoxically, it appears that the alcoholic makes a decision to quit drinking *while still drinking*. Not the usual Monday morning, "I'll never take a drink as long as I live," decision but the surrender necessary to find real sobriety.

The corollary decision to resume drinking or relapse after a period of sobriety is made while not drinking, and then they seek a way to justify beginning again.

Since one decision is made while sober and one while drinking, it may be that alcohol has little or nothing to do with the decision making is

this regard. One might say that the pain of drinking makes one decision possible, and the pain of not drinking makes the decision to begin again possible.

## **DEALING WITH THE TENSIONS OF SOBRIETY**

Is it any wonder the alcoholic finds it difficult to stop drinking. First, they seem to be more sensitive to psychic pain and tension than the average person. Second, they have learned a way to deal with that pain and tension through the use of alcohol.

Now we ask them to change their lives, to experience the pain. Change, itself, is painful and tension-producing, so we are asking them to deal with this tension-producing change in their lives, quitting, without the means that they have always used to deal with tension. This is an interesting paradox. What is more natural than to drink to deal with the tension produced by *not* drinking?

It is a harsh road we ask the alcoholic to follow to recovery. Is it any wonder that some take a detour?

## **SOBER AND IN TROUBLE**

I have observed that many times alcoholics have terrible things happen to them shortly after they start living sober lives. These are many times physical accidents such as falling off porches, getting knocked down by horses, getting hurt on the job, getting hit by cars, etc. In fact, I have seen it so often that I sometime warn alcoholics who are starting to reshape their lives to be careful.

I suppose it all could be coincidental, but it seems real. There are a number of interesting explanations.

One is that there is really no difference in what is happening to them, but while they were drinking, they could use alcohol for the pain of

injuries while continuing to function. They just felt these things were a part of life. Then suddenly, everyone tells them how great it is going to be, and it isn't.

There are also some Freudian explanations. I have heard alcoholics say that they couldn't stand success. By the time they quit drinking, they are feeling pretty unworthy. They can't go back to drinking to prove how rotten they are, so they get hurt or make poor investments or do something else foolish.

It could also be the grandiose things that alcoholics appear to do when they get sober. They get into trouble because they break a lot of new ground, trying to make up for all the ground they lost when they were drinking.

Another explanation has occurred to me, but I don't know just how to put it. Experienced alcoholics get very cunning and careful. They move slowly, drive slowly, and many times learn to compensate for their fuzziness and lack of coordination. Now that they are sober, they decide that all that caution is unnecessary, so "let 'er rip." And they break a leg.

## **GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

It is an interesting, if futile, exercise to try to peel off layer by layer, the incredibly complex mechanism of alcoholism. I'm not sure whether this exercise is best compared with peeling off the layers of an imperfect pearl to get to the perfect pearl underneath, or with peeling an onion. The onion works best because sometimes you weep. In both cases, you may get done peeling and find that you have nothing to show for your efforts except peelings and tears.

We see alcoholism first as a behavior problem—that is, the behavior of alcoholics when they drink. Probably what we see first are the *consequences* of their drinking; their lack of judgment, and their

indifference to anything except drinking.

Peel off a layer, and we see that these consequences are caused by their behavior—aberrant drinking. Now we are getting somewhere. Their drinking causes their problems. But if we are at all perceptive, we must ask the question, "Why do they drink in this manner?" Many of our researchers get stopped at this layer, and spend their time and funds researching what is only a minor layer in the system.

The way we peel this layer is to recognize that whatever we or the alcoholic attribute to their drinking, two things become obvious: first, non-alcoholics drink for exactly the same reasons; and second, most people do not use alcohol as a way to deal with life.

Now we come to a layer that will get us tangled in a sort of circular reasoning if we are not careful. This layer is one we perceive as the alcoholic drinking to deal with the effects of drinking. If we accept this as what it appears to be, we go back to "Go" without collecting two hundred dollars—we're back to the first layer again, and we see their problem as the *consequences* of drinking.

If, however, we avoid this pitfall, we can see their drinking as a way of dealing with drinking as a part of the larger picture, that is, drinking as a way of dealing with or adjusting to life in general.

Up until now, the layers have been fairly obvious, and rather easily removed. But I don't think we have reached the core, as yet. We must ask ourselves now, "Why had the alcoholic learned to deal with life, including the effect of drinking, in this manner?" This is not the same question we asked awhile ago, because now we're several layers deeper.

There are two explanations advanced at this lever, physical allergy and psychological dependence. At this time I am unaware of any real evidence that the alcoholic is any different physically than anyone else.

The second item, psychological dependency is not so easily disposed of. This factor seems to be present in most alcoholic families but it is

also present in many non-alcoholic ones. It seems often to occur early in the disease of alcoholism, but is not an unfailing symptom of this disease. It is by definition a learned response to alcohol, but still occurs before drinking.

It is only if we keep our eyes firmly on the fact that alcoholism is unique only because of what happens to the alcoholic after the alcoholic starts to drink can we dispose of psychological dependency as just one more layer.

Having disposed of this rather difficult layer, we move to the next. This layer involves what happens to alcoholics when they take the first drink of their life. Many alcoholics say they were alcoholic from the time they took their first drink, that alcohol did something *to* them, or more properly, *for* them that it didn't seem to do for others. I think this is worthy of examination.

Let's now go back two layers and try to find out why, but stay single-mindedly in pursuit of what. What happens? How do they describe it?

As Thomas Wolfe (an alcoholic) describes his first drink in "Look Homeward Angel," it is an almost mystical experience. Suddenly, everything becomes clear. The secrets of God and man are suddenly revealed. Right here, we must acknowledge that some alcoholics describe their drinking as a "search of God." It is easy to dismiss this as alcoholic hyperbole, but one is reminded of a generation tripping on chemicals as they sought a religious experience. (Or maybe more properly, a spiritual experience.)

I see a tie-in between this spiritual experience and the insistence of AA that the alcoholic recognize a "Higher Power." Surely, while alcoholics are drinking, the bottle is their "Higher Power," and while it is a little difficult to see the red-faced drunk as one who is reaching for a spiritual experience, it cannot be dismissed altogether.

Then, is the center, the alcoholic's use of alcohol to attain a spiritual

harmony, only to be robbed and delude? I think not. But, I think we are getting close to the germ and core. At this time, I cannot see beyond this layer.

## **THE CORK IN THE BOTTLE SYNDROME 1**

One of the most difficult forms of resistance to overcome in helping alcoholics is the "cork-in-the-bottle" syndrome. They come to see that alcohol is their problem, and therefore, they will simply stop drinking. Everyone is after them because of their drinking, and therefore they will simply stop. Now no one can say they have a drinking problem! They don't drink now.

The pitfalls of this approach are obvious and many. Everyone has told them their problem was drinking, so they have stopped. They still have all the problems they had when drinking, except those of drinking, such as hangovers. But their other problems, such as a shortage of money, a spouse who doesn't understand them, and a boss who doesn't appreciate them, still exist.

All they have done is simply deprive themselves of the way they always have dealt with problems and there they are, naked to the cruel winds of the world.

They know where there is a shelter from those winds, so they inevitably take the cork out of the bottle.

Then the next time someone talks to them about their drinking problem, they are fully convinced that it isn't alcohol, because they gave that up once, and it didn't solve a thing!

## **THE CORK IN THE BOTTLE SYNDROME 2**

Here we've got one of the toughest forms of resistance to deal with. It is also of such a nature that it is bound to create some self-doubts in

the mind of the counselor if it continues long enough.

"Okay, I've got a drinking problem. Since drinking is my problem, I'll just quit. Even you can't deny that will solve it."

Sometimes, this is very easy to deal with. Just wait a week or two, and the cork comes out to the bottle. Then, *if* the alcoholic shows up again, you can start over. Many times you won't see them again for a long time, if ever.

But suppose the cork stays in the bottle for an extended period of time—like six months? The alcoholic and many times their family can see no reason for continuing therapy. If they don't drink there is no problem. And they don't drink.

Here the counselor gets into trouble. One's reasoning goes something like this: "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe this person wasn't really an alcoholic. Their lives seem to be straightening out, and there aren't any dry drunks. Maybe just drinking *was* the problem."

And then the hooker! If they aren't alcoholics, maybe they can return to successful social drinking.

Now if the *counselor* can get led down this road, what chance has an alcoholic got!

I guess there is no solution to this type of resistance except patience. Even that often fails.

## LOVE

Somewhere in the lives of nearly every recovering alcoholic, we find a person who really has convinced the alcoholic that they care about them. Strangely, it is seldom a spouse or a child, a parent or a brother or sister, but usually someone outside the family. Many times, it is a person whom the alcoholic did not know at all when they were drinking.

AA refers to these persons as the alcoholics' sponsor. As this relationship ripens, it becomes most unusual. First, there is a positive

identification that attributes sponsors with all the qualities necessary for the definition. They can do no wrong, say nothing wrong, and the sponsees hang on every word.

But contrary to the usual pattern of counseling, as the alcoholics grow toward maturity in their sobriety, they do not go through a negative identification. They become less and less reliant on the sponsor, and may see them less and less. However, the bond stays strong, and even if the alcoholic finds a quality of sobriety that lets them go it alone, they still have this rich, satisfying relationship.

This relationship is one of the purest forms of love. The sponsor has no axe to grind, nothing to gain (except to strengthen their own sobriety), and nothing to motivate them except that they really care. There is no way to fake this feeling, and the alcoholics, who always have their antennae out, will run like a thief from any pretense.

The alcoholics have a battered, damaged, nearly destroyed feeling of self-worth. The fact that someone loves them enough to care stuns them at first, and then bolsters them to where they can begin to look around for sobriety. If they cannot accept the fact that their sponsor really care enough, their chances of sobriety are very poor.

## **PSYCHIC PAIN**

It appears that there is as wide a difference in the ability to stand psychic pain, as there is to stand physical pain. There are people who will hardly let the dentist look in their mouth without an anesthetic, and yet a friend of mine pulled his teeth with a pair of pliers.

I believe alcoholics have a very low tolerance for psychic pain. All life is painful, and everyone has some pretty painful spots and moment in their lives. Alcoholics seem to learn rather quickly that the use of alcohol alleviates psychic pain. Rather than learning other adaptive mechanisms for the alleviation of psychic pain, they lean on alcohol.

When they reach a place where the pain caused by the use of alcohol is greater than the pain it numbs, the use of alcohol may be perceived by the alcoholic as counterproductive, and they may search for other means of dealing with the pain of life. This may be one of the reasons why the decision to stop drinking is finally made.

## **FEAR**

One of the characteristics of the disease of alcoholism seems to be fear. It is most difficult to get alcoholics to admit this fear because I think many times they do not perceive it as *fear*.

Alcoholics, like the rest of us, think that to feel fear we must actually be afraid of *something*. So they feel this disturbing emotion, and desperately try to think what it is that they are afraid of. They could remove the offending source if they only know what it was.

Psychologists call this emotion "undifferentiated fear," that is, fear without a cause. Psychiatrists like the word "anxiety." Whatever it is, alcoholics feel it tremendously, and much of the feeling of euphoria that accompanies early sobriety seems to be caused by the absence of that fear.

Now it is sometimes difficult to get to the nature of that fear while talking to alcoholics. They admit to the emotion, but like to attach it to something. They are afraid of what they did during their blackout, they are afraid to go to work after their umpteenth unexcused absence. It is only after they see themselves well into middle stages of recovery that they can see this feeling for what it is—fear.

The Bible tells us that perfect love casts out fear.

## **THE INSULATED ALCOHOLIC**

There is a population of alcoholics who we are doing a very poor job

reaching. This is the group that is protected by some unique condition in their environment from the consequences of their drinking.

The group would have to include many professionals, people who travel a lot, prominent members of the community, celebrities, people who don't have to be accountable for their time (writers or painters, for example), executives and women.

These people are protected by their money, their position, by their secretaries, by their families, and by the nature of the jobs, from the consequences of their drinking. There is money to pay the fines and smooth feelings. There is the dignity of the Company to be protected. There is position and status that cannot be called into question. And so the alcoholic is protected.

They are literally protected to death. Many times the insulation is so effective that the alcoholics literally die drunk without any real effort being made to help them. They may die in a car accident, go to sleep in their garage with the car motor running, commit suicide, or die of cirrhosis, but they're protected to death by the very people who should be helping them to sobriety and health.

## **LONELINESS**

I think most everyone in the business has heard alcoholism called the "lonely disease," but I have never heard anyone really examine what the loneliness is. There are many words that will describe in part what the alcoholic feels, such as estrangement and alienation, but loneliness probably fits best.

First, the alcoholic is lonely because of the intensely personal nature of the illness. The illness, treating the illness with alcohol, suffering the agony of the consequences, the bewildered search for a better way, the repeated resolutions to be different and the repeated surrender to worse and worse cycles of drinking and sobriety are so intimate that

they can't be shared with anyone.

The second kind of loneliness I see is estrangement from one's loved ones. They cannot understand alcoholics! All they can do is see the alcoholic's behavior from their frame of reference, and so they cannot share with them. At first they will try to explain and reason, but finally withdraw and shut loved ones out. If they can't understand, why should the alcoholic try to tell them?

Third, I see the communion with alcohol as a gradual and sure substitute for any type of rewarding relationships. Alcohol is always rewarding, is always the same and always delivers, not like friends who have their own problems to deal with. Later, of course, alcohol creates problems as it solves others temporarily, but by then the pattern of substitution is formed, and there is no way back.

Last, I see the loneliness of the alcoholic as an alienation from God. Alcoholic drinking can many times be seen as a search for something, and I see it, at least in part, as a search for something to fill the aching loneliness which comes from a failure to find spiritual solace. The cosmic loneliness of the person who feels one must go alone through this overwhelming business of living.

If one looks at these explanations of loneliness, it is not hard to see how the AA program meets almost every requirement to deal with the loneliness of alcoholism.

## **DENIAL**

The denial mechanism of the alcoholic is a strange and wonderful thing. It reaches far beyond the simple statement, "I don't have a drinking problem," to all sorts of behavior calculated to reinforce denial.

Everyone is familiar with the simpler denial:

My family has never suffered because of my drinking.  
I still have the same job I have had for 22 years.  
I have never been laid off work because of my drinking.  
I have never been arrested.  
I don't drink in the morning.  
I never miss a meal because of drinking.  
I'm not that bad, yet.

And so on, ad nauseam.

But some denial is much more subtle. I think the classic of the behavior of which I write is the poor old late-chronic, skid row, teeth gone, two-week beard, dirty, tattered, who has a dirty, twisted necktie tied around his neck. It makes you want to cry.

I think sometimes what we call the grandiose behavior of the alcoholic a denial. "I can't be an alcoholic if I drive a Continental or Lexus!" But, to go on, I know an alcoholic whose denial is to shave every day. He endangers his life by doing so, and has cuts all over his face, but he shaves nonetheless. And no one knows like the spouse of the alcoholic, the necessity of having clean clothes, sometimes several times a day.

The best way to see this mechanism working is to observe the alcoholic coming off the drunk. Shave, clean clothes, bathes, mouthwash, deodorant, shoeshine, carefully-combed hair—the whole Beau Brummell Bit. "See how nice I look. I can't have a drinking problem." And the efforts are so futile and tragic that one wonders at the full extent possible of self-deception.

## TESTING

There is a phenomenon that I have observed often enough to believe it is significant. It is called "testing the counselor" (or sponsor or

Program or AA). The phenomenon is the slip that occurs shortly after the alcoholic gets a real glimpse of the possibility of staying sober. So many alcoholics seem to have "one more drunk" after they start the program that it is interesting to speculate why.

I can see two reasons for the testing. For many years, the alcoholic has been manipulating the people around them in this manner: They tell themselves and everyone around them that they drink because their spouse nags them all the time. They manipulate the spouse in such a manner as to make them nag, thus proving their thesis and giving them a reason to continue drinking.

Now, they find in the counselor or sponsor someone they cannot manipulate. No matter how badly they are treated, they don't nag. As one more effort to justify continuing to drink, they get drunk. This has always brought real disapproval on them in the past, and allowed their self-fulfilling prophecy to come true. When they find no punitive response to the last drunk, they are stripped of one more excuse to drink.

The second reason for testing is that they can't believe that this relative stranger really cares about them. There is more to this than meets the eye. They feel they can strip away the pretense of this person, and get right down to business.

Once again, when the counselor refuses to be manipulated by the strongest weapon the alcoholics have in their arsenals, the alcoholics may be forced to the reluctant conclusion that the counselor really cares, and thus open themselves to the necessary relationship to attain sobriety.

## **THE CRISIS**

There is much talk about "creating a crisis" in the alcoholics' life in order to bring them face to face with the reality of their illness. So

the theory goes, we don't wait until there is a natural, homegrown crisis available to confront the alcoholic with reality; we create one.

One of the accepted methods is for the spouse to leave. Another is for the employer to threaten termination. Since these are crisis that would eventually occur anyway, so the reasoning goes, we bring them on earlier, confront the alcoholic earlier, and thus bring about earlier recovery.

I don't really have any argument with this theory. I have observed a reaction, however, which is counterproductive, and which is very difficult to deal with.

To go back a moment, we insist that alcoholics recover for themselves, and not for someone else. That means we must get them to focus their attention on themselves. As every counselor knows, this is difficult and is part of the denial mechanism. If they recover for others, then they are free to return to drinking as soon as those others fail to respond to the alcoholic's sobriety in the manner that the alcoholic thinks is appropriate.

Now it seems to me that there is a difference between the induced crisis and the one that comes in the natural course of events. It's not that alcoholics feel the induced crisis any less credible than the other, but their participation has not been so extensive. They are not bruised and battered and prepared for the knockout punch. Every fighter knows that a boxer in good condition and rested can take a much harder punch than the same person can later in the fight.

So it is with the alcoholic. They have not gone through the necessary softening up, and all they want to do is get their family or their job back. They find it hard to understand why they should think about themselves when all they have to do is quit drinking to solve their problem. Their sobriety is apt not to be of any lasting quality if they do not concentrate on themselves during their recovery process.

## THE IMPULSIVE DRINK

I don't believe there is such a thing as an impulsive drink, although most alcoholics insist that there is. Just as it takes a lot of preparation for the alcoholic to quit drinking, I am confident that the same amount of preparation goes into returning to drinking.

The classic case that I have observed was "L". He didn't begin drinking until he was 19, but became an alcoholic very quickly. He found sobriety through AA and was sober for 12 years. It took him several years before he could complete the preparation to return to drinking.

He was a pretty good carpenter and made considerable money on the side building birdhouses and picnic tables. In addition, he had a good job, his family was content, and there was no way he could return to drinking.

First he quit his regular job as a welder. It didn't appear that there would be enough market for his services in carpentry, but there was. He was an excellent workman, and almost in spite of himself, he made a good living as a carpenter. This wouldn't serve his purpose, and he couldn't bring himself to do poor work. His solution was to delay, procrastinate, not make delivery on time, not keep his promises, etc., so he finally got to where he couldn't make a living as a carpenter.

Now his bills piled up, his wife nagged him, his children wanted more money—pressures increased. One day he took that impulsive drink—two years after he started to get ready to do so. It was only in the latter stages of his sobriety when the first drink drew near that he quit going to AA.

Just as the seed which is planted can bring sobriety much later, I believe the seed of the slip are also planted, fertilized, nourished and tended, until they produce the desired result—the impulsive drink.