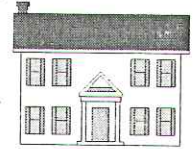




UPPER ISLAND ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE SERVICE

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF SOBRIETY



Your addiction is under control, your denial system has collapsed, you're free of the shakes and the sweats, and you're sleeping well and feeling good. Right about now, you wonder why treatment has to continue. You're ready, eager, and full of enthusiasm and confidence. There's so much to do to put your life back together, and you want to get started.

But there's plenty of work - hard work - left to do. In this last part of treatment you'll have to lay the groundwork of an invisible but essential structure that will protect your sobriety for the rest of your life. We call this structure "the house of sobriety", and it contains four distinct rooms or levels: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. As in all houses, each of these separate sections is dependent on the construction of the other parts of the house to maintain overall structural integrity. If one room is allowed to become dusty and moldy, filled with cobwebs and termites, then the other parts of the house will soon begin to rot away, too.

This house, of course, is you: your body, your mind, your feelings, and your spirit. In treatment you will be given the tools - knowledge, insight, understanding, companionship, friendship, and love - needed to build up these essential parts of you. To do the job right, you must handle these tools with skill, devotion, patience, energy, persistence, enthusiasm, and pride. Only then can you erect a structure that is solid, sound, and able to withstand both internal and external threats.

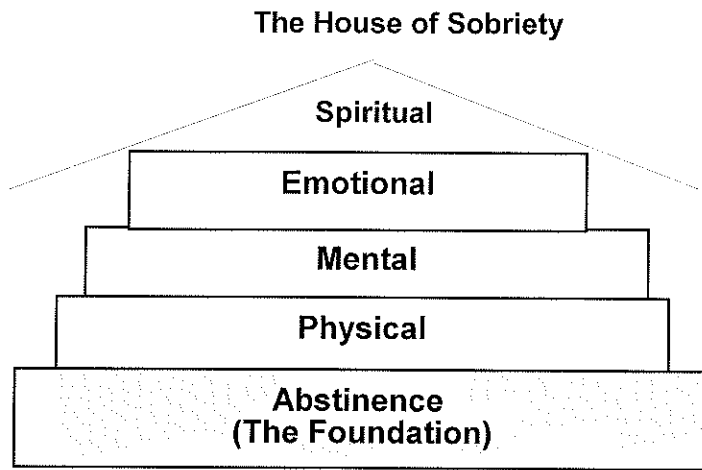
How long will it take to build your house of sobriety? The skeletal framework can be erected within a few weeks; then, over the next months, you will fortify the structure, putting on the siding, nailing down the floorboards, and insulating the walls. Within a few years your house of sobriety will be solid as a rock, sturdy, proud, and comfortable.

But the house is never, in a sense, completed. You have to work on it constantly, repair it, replace worn-out parts, get the mold out of it, clean it, dust it, scrub it, and shine it up. If you don't pay attention to this house, it will slowly fall apart, fill with cobwebs, dirt, dust and peeling paint, and become a place you wouldn't want to live in. At that point, you are lost: you will drink again. And if you continue to drink, you will die. That is the only possibility that an active addiction offers to its victims. And that is why this house of sobriety is so crucial to your recovery.

The Blueprint

The foundation of your house is abstinence. This is the only foundation that will keep the rest of the structure from collapsing in on itself. Abstinence begins the work of walling off the addiction. When you stop drinking, you essentially starve the addiction, and as the days go by it weakens in intensity, loosening its grip on your brain and your body until eventually your mind clears and you begin to feel normal - yourself - again. The rest of the house is built with the knowledge and understanding that the addiction is still "down there", walled off by the foundation. It is quiet, weak, sleeping perhaps, but still alive. If the addiction were dead or mortally weakened, there would be no need for any more work. But alcoholism is, as we've said, a chronic disease: the addiction will be with you, - out of control or under control - for the rest of your life. Any break in the foundation will reawaken the addiction and allow it to grow stronger until it threatens to overwhelm you once again.

The foundation of abstinence is thus the most crucial and basic structure of all. But what you build on top of this foundation will protect its integrity and strength and, in the process, determine the quality and direction of the rest of your life.



The First Level: Physical

The physical "room", sitting as it does directly over the house's foundation, is vitally important. This part of your house of sobriety has to do with how you feel physically. Since alcoholism has had such a profound effect on your physical health, this room will take knowledge, patience, time and skill to erect.

Knowledge is the key, because once you know about your disease you will understand the need for patience, persistence, and skill in combating it. In terms of your physical health, one of the first things you should know is that not all your physical problems will miraculously be healed as soon as you stop drinking. Alcohol affects every cell in the body, the healing takes time - weeks, months, sometimes years.

During this prolonged healing time, you may suffer from what are called "protracted withdrawal symptoms", which include irritability, depression, anxiety, mood swings, tension, memory loss, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, short attention span, insomnia, nightmares, headaches, fatigue, hunger, shakiness, excessive perspiration, and, perhaps worst of all, a recurring craving for alcohol.

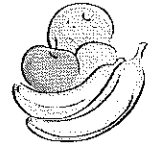
While it's important that you understand that these symptoms are a lingering effect of the disease, it's also important that you understand where they come from and what you can do to alleviate them. Many recovering alcoholics are greatly disappointed when they work so hard to get sober and then find out that sobriety has significant pains of its own. They may feel as if they have traded in one set of problems for another - only this new set of problems comes without even taking a drink. To many, that seems a questionable tradeoff.

But these symptoms are temporary - they will go away *if* you take care of yourself, eat right, exercise regularly, and avoid unnecessary stress. Understand, too, that while these may appear to be psychological symptoms, they are actually symptoms of physical imbalances in your body. Finally, be assured that there is something you can do about them, and that is what will concern you in building this first level of your house of sobriety. The continued suffering of the protracted withdrawal syndrome is caused by (1) lingering cell damage from the poisonous effects of alcohol; (2) malnutrition; and (3) hypoglycemia. Alcohol has a direct, toxic effect on many organs in the body, most notably the brain and the liver. The tenacious symptoms of nervous irritability, moodiness, and thinking disturbances are due in part to alcohol's damaging effects on the brain.

Alcohol has also drained away important nutrients necessary for healing and repair. Abstinence alone cannot make the body's undernourished cells healthy again; to repair themselves adequately, the cells need nutrients (vitamins, minerals, proteins, fats, and carbohydrates) in therapeutic amounts and proportions. Thus, a balanced diet and vitamin and mineral supplements are an essential part of both treatment and recovery.

In addition to malnutrition, the great majority of alcoholics experience blood sugar problems both when they're drinking and when they're sober. Why they have these problems has not yet been proven, although alcoholism has a devastating impact on precisely those organs (the pancreas, liver, adrenal glands, brain, and intestinal tract) involved in blood sugar control, and alcohol itself is a sugar-rich liquid that interrupts the normal flow of blood sugar (glucose) to the cells. Although the precise causes are not yet known, we do know what to do about the symptoms of low blood sugar, which range from "minor" symptoms such as anxiety, insomnia, and mood swings to the more serious problems of persistent depression, mental confusion, craving for alcohol, and even suicidal tendencies.

To counteract hypoglycemia, the recovering alcoholic must avoid, whenever possible, sweets, stimulants (caffeine in coffee, tea, and colas) and stress: take daily supplements; and faithfully follow a diet rich in complex carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables, and whole grains).



While comprehensive nutritional therapy is essential to your continued good health, diet and supplements are not the only elements involved in keeping your body (and mind) functioning at peak level. Exercise is crucial for several reasons. First, exercise will strengthen the body, promote circulation, and help ensure a steady supply of nutrients to your cells. Second, regular exercise makes you feel better, both physically and mentally.

Ironically, exercise doesn't sap you of strength, but actually increases mental and physical vitality, giving you more energy and clearing up your mind so that problems seem to come into perspective.

By becoming aware of your body - how it moves and how it works - you also become aware of your power to make you body feel better. That's a good feeling. And, finally, by exercising you are developing a new way of living, a stark contrast to your alcoholic lifestyle. No matter how athletic or sports-minded an alcoholic may once have been, he eventually gave up just about everything involved with moving his body vigorously: it simply hurt too much when he had a hangover or when he was craving a drink. Besides, a drinking alcoholic always has something better to do, and we all know what that is. When you were drinking, there simply wasn't much time left for other "leisure activities".



But in sobriety you will have more time on your hands, and much of that time should be spent in making you feel good, making your body strong and healthy, and letting your whole self take joy in your sobriety. Taking a walk or a run outside in the fresh air, participating in a dance or aerobics class, playing softball or volleyball, working out in the weight room - any of these activities will help make you feel alive. Which is, thank God, exactly what you are.

Another factor crucial to your physical health is relaxation and avoidance of stress. For alcoholics, prolonged or profound stress can erode the foundation that keeps the addiction under control. Stress, can, in other words, undermine sobriety and cause a relapse.

Most of us think of stress as a "mental" condition - something outside ourselves that rattles our thinking or causes worry and tension. But stress has profound effects on our inner physical health and well-being and is particularly dangerous for anyone already suffering from a chronic illness. Stress aggravates heart conditions, ulcers, even cancer. In a recent laboratory experiment, two groups of rats were subjected to the stress of electric shock. One group could not escape, the other group had an escape route. The rats with no escape became listless, demonstrating a sort of "I give up" syndrome. When each group was then injected with tumour cells, every one of the rats in the no-escape group contracted cancer, while the rats who were allowed to escape were resistant. In another experiment, researchers at the Pacific Northwest Research Foundation injected two groups of mice with cancer-causing cells and placed one group in a cage that rotated in a disorienting manner. Two-thirds of these mice died of cancer, compared to less than one-tenth from the group in undisturbed cages.

For alcoholics, stress has the same physical consequences in reactivating the disease as it has for people with cancer, heart disease, or diabetes. A man with a weak heart, for example, may suffer from irregular heart rate or even have a heart attack after hearing of his son's death. A diabetic will have difficulty regulating his blood sugar while working through the stresses of a divorce. A recovering alcoholic trying to cope with the pressures of a high-powered job may experience a change in blood pressure or pulse, disturbed sleep patterns, or general anxiety.

These are all examples of how our inner physiological workings are profoundly affected by external stresses. The alcoholic under stress is also prone to a disturbed blood sugar response due to hypoglycemia, which in itself aggravates stress. With these imbalances in inner chemistry, the alcoholic's addiction may be reactivated. The dormant addiction begins to gain strength not because the alcoholic succumbs mentally to stress and simply can't cope with it, but because his body is weakened physiologically by stress.

While stress prompts a response in many areas of the body, one set of biochemical chain reactions is particularly important for understanding the alcoholic's sensitivity to stress. Under stress, the body releases adrenaline, a hormone designed to help the body "gear up" to meet the demands of an urgent situation. Adrenaline then triggers the release of glucose, which stimulates the release of insulin, which allows the energy-rich glucose into the cells. Severe or prolonged stress can chronically upset the body's glucose-regulating mechanisms. Alcoholics, because of their hypoglycemia tendencies, are particularly sensitive to these changes. Chronic drinking also tends to damage the adrenal glands, which control the body's reactions to stress.

People with chronic, "incurable" illnesses should avoid unnecessary stress because their bodies are more vulnerable and less able to withstand the physical shocks associated with stress. Unfortunately, human beings simply cannot avoid all stress, and alcoholics in the first year or two of recovery have to put up with some extraordinary stress situations. The disease has impacted virtually every part of the alcoholic's life, including the family, career, finances, reputation, self-image, and confidence. While a heart attack or cancer victim emerges from treatment to sympathetic, caring, helping family and friends, an alcoholic frequently faces anger, resentment, misunderstanding, and distrust from both friends and family. Even if his family is intact and his job is waiting for him, he still must deal with the shame and disgrace of all those years of drinking, the blackouts, drunken brawls, neglect of family and friends, belligerent words, and physical and verbal abuse. Even early- and middle-stage alcoholics face severe stress in trying to pull their lives together and mop up after the insanity of the addiction.

Knowledge of the disease will help protect you against much of this stress -knowing that you were not responsible, that your behaviour and even your thoughts and emotions were manipulated by your addiction. But you will find that knowledge outside of the treatment setting is imperfect, that many people will be wary of you and unsure, that others will find it difficult to forgive, and that some will never be able to think of you as anything but a drunk and a bum. You must do what you can and learn that it is not within your power to do everything.

You must, in other words, learn your limitations and grow within them. During the first year of sobriety, it's particularly important to protect yourself from stress. Don't move out of your house, if you can avoid it; don't even move your furniture around. Don't change jobs, don't make any major purchases, don't attempt to "fix" everything that was devastated by your addiction.



Be patient, take it slow, and know that time will heal much. And don't expect life to be perfect; it never is, not for anyone, and at times it is very far from perfect. But believe in change, believe in time, believe in yourself, and believe, most of all, in your sobriety.

It will help you immeasurably to develop meaningful and trusting relationships where your problems and concerns can be heard and understood. This is where the AA program comes to mean so much to so many recovering alcoholics. In dealing with your family, friends, and business relationships, it's important that you learn how to communicate your thoughts and feelings, instead of repressing them. Learning how to listen is also an important art that will help to open up the lines of communication with the people around you.

Above all, don't settle for a perpetually stressful relationship or environment: your body, like all bodies, cannot handle stress forever. You may have to ease out of a high-stress, demanding job or seek counselling for a troubled relationship. But you should also protect yourself from the "little" stresses in life. If you find yourself in situations that make you anxious or afraid - leave. You do not have to go to parties, you do not have to cook fancy dinners, you do not have to prove yourself to anyone. All you have to do is stay sober; and if you stay sober and take care of yourself, soon enough everything else will fall into place. Insulate yourself from stress, recognize the signs, learn to relax, treat yourself as if you were a small, fragile child taking baby steps. They may seem like tiny, insignificant steps forward, but they are all giant steps because they are all going in the right direction - away from the power of addiction.

The Second Level: Mental

In the physical plane of your house of sobriety, you do; in the mental plane, you think. What you think, of course, affects what you do; all these levels are interconnected and interdependent. Thus, you will have to become aware of how your thinking affects your health, your life, and your sobriety. You have to be willing to take your thoughts apart, dissect them, and then rearrange them in healthy ways. This requires knowing what sorts of thoughts are dangerous to your sobriety, and it also requires knowing how to go about changing them.

"I am an alcoholic." Whenever you begin to doubt that statement, you are in trouble. Suppose you're walking down the street and you see a smelly old drunk (that's how you view him) passed out on a park bench, using an empty bottle for a pillow. You sniff a few times, make a face, and think, I was never that bad. This happened to alcoholic and syndicated Chicago Sun columnist Paul Molloy, who describes the experience in his book Where Did Everybody Go?

... near where the skid-row pavement starts, a vagrant accosted me as I looked for a taxi. He had bloodshot eyes and dirty clothes, gave off an odour of whisky and vomit, and looked as if he had slept in a doorway that night. All he wanted was change for a drink.

Once in the cab, I put a few drops of Murine into my eyes and a couple of mints into my mouth. I thought of the plight of the poor devil I had left on the street. How could a man let himself go to waste like that? How could he abuse his body and mind and live in degradation? Then it hit me like a thwack in the ribs: "***My god, I'm in worse shape than he is.***"

I looked on him as a shiftless moocher with a filthy coat, three-day whiskers and a monumental hangover. A lowlife. A derelict. I saw myself as a regular citizen, bathed and shaved, with a nice suit, shirt and tie, doing what all decent men must do to feed their kids and keep them in college. I was respectable; he was a bum. A parallel came to mind; I tried to shrug it off but it persisted. And I winced when I reflected that the good-for-nothing out there and I were really fellow travellers; the difference was that he had reached his destination before I had.

Molloy credits this incident with cutting through his rationalizations and denials and helping him to realize that he couldn't handle his drinking alone. This was the beginning of his "surrender" to his disease and thus the beginning of his recovery. But what if he had used the incident instead as an excuse to continue drinking, with rationalizations like "if he's an alcoholic, then I'm certainly something different", or "I've got a problem, maybe, but I can handle it", or "I'll never let myself get like that". These are thoughts that occur to both drinking and recovering alcoholics, and they indicate that the alcoholic has not accepted or surrendered to his disease. He may be sober now, but his mind is preparing his body to take a drink.



Thoughts like "I wasn't that bad", or "I never really was addicted to the stuff", or "Now that guy, he's what I'd call a real alcoholic", are extremely dangerous because they show a mind setting the stage for the physical act of taking a drink. If you ask an alcoholic who relapsed what he was thinking about when he took that first drink, and whether he struggled with it, the answer is often, "I just did it; I didn't really think about it. It wasn't a struggle at all". Why? Because his mind had already struggled with the idea and fought out the battle in the mental arena. It was all decided before the alcoholic physically lifted the drink to his mouth.

"Stinking thinking" is what AA members call these kinds of thoughts, and for good reason: when you think these thoughts yourself or hear someone express them, you can almost smell the growing and increasingly powerful addiction. "Stinking thinking" is absolute evidence that the addiction is attempting to take over once again and establish control. All the hallmark symptoms of the addiction - rationalization, denial, minimizing, projecting - can be found in the spoken or unspoken thoughts of an alcoholic on the verge of a relapse. Listen:

- "My wife is really the cause of my problems; how can I live with this woman and expect to stay sober?"
- "The psychiatrist told me my real problem was with my mother, and now that she and I are on good terms, I don't see how a drink every now and then would hurt."
- "My kids are coming home for the holidays. What possible damage could it do to have a drink or two with them?"
- "Why do I have to be an alcoholic; I never drank in the morning, and I never had a blackout."
- "I've been sober for three years, and I feel great; how could one drink hurt me?"

Chances are you won't express these thoughts to others because you know (actually, your addiction knows) what their reactions will be. So you must learn to identify these warning signs as the whisperings of the addiction and take immediate steps to protect yourself. You must understand that this is not the logical you talking, but that these thoughts are the addiction's way of trying to call you back and reestablish its power over you.

What reactivates your addiction? Your body's stability can be undone by stress, illness, mounting frustrations, grief, or guilt. Perhaps you neglected your diet and drank too much coffee or loaded up on sweets. Perhaps you just became complacent - everything was going along so well that you became lazy and stopped going to AA meetings or decided to take that high-pressure job with the long hours spent travelling and the dinner parties to entertain clients. Maybe you figured you could do without your supplements, or you began working so hard that you just couldn't find time for breakfast and often skipped lunch, too.

When you don't hurt anymore, when the memories are dim and unreal and seem strangely out of touch with your life as it is now, then you can get sloppy and give up on the disciplines necessary to stay healthy and

sober. This is the nature of all human beings, not just alcoholics. Heart attack victims who figure that surgery fixed them as good as new and who slip back into eating fatty foods or neglecting their exercise program; diabetics who sneak sweets; cancer victims who skip their routine checkups; high blood pressure victims who work in high-stress jobs - these are all victims of chronic disease who "forget" how sick they once were and who become lazy now that the trauma and horror of their disease are no longer fresh in their minds. And these people, because they suffer from a chronic and incurable disease, risk a dangerous and potentially fatal relapse.

For the alcoholic, AA is one of the best ways to keep in touch with his disease and to maintain his discipline. AA helps the recovering alcoholic develop and grow as a human being by keeping him in constant touch with his disease and with others who suffer from it. Every time you introduce yourself at an AA meeting by saying, "I'm George (or Georgia or John or Joan) and I'm an alcoholic," you are reaffirming the fact that you have a chronic disease. When you hear other people's stories you remember your own, and you know that you are not alone. When you meet new AA members who are struggling to get sober, you are reminded of what it was like for you. You can unwind at AA meetings, speak all your secrets, and nobody will recoil, nobody will put you down. Instead, you'll feel caring, friendship, allegiance, even love.

Many alcoholics give up on AA, reasoning that they don't need it anymore or that they are too busy and don't have time for it. Many others argue that AA is not for them, that they are too shy or the program is for religious fanatics, or that the meetings are too smokey or too crowded or too loud. Surely, many alcoholics have been able to stay sober without AA, but that is not to say that they couldn't have used AA and benefitted from it in their sobriety.

If you have difficulty with AA for any reason, try to think out the roots of this difficulty. Is it because you are, truly shy? If so, there's no rule that says you have to speak at AA meetings; just sit and listen. Is it because the smoking or the back-slapping or the coffee drinking offends you? You can find AA groups that consist primarily of lumberjacks or meetings made up of demure wealthy women, gay groups, black groups, physician groups, all-men or all-women groups - within this great variety you can find a group that fits your needs and your personality. Is your reluctance due to what you perceive as the religious aspect of AA? Then remember that the "higher power" AA members talk about is whatever you want it to be - it is God to some, love to others, the laws of nature to others. Again, some groups are more classically religious than others, and by attending various meetings you will be able to find a group of people who share your philosophies and concerns.

It's essential in your present and future life that you do not allow yourself to become isolated or to forget what your life was like as an alcoholic. AA will keep you in touch with your disease, your past, and yourself; and in the process it will help you to live happily sober for all the natural years remaining to you.

The Third Level: Emotional

Just as what you think affects your sobriety, so does what you feel. And what you feel has been mucked up by years of living with alcohol. Many alcoholics label their drinking years as "emotionally anaesthetized". Everything may have seemed normal on the outside, but within the family unit all the feelings of love, affection, trust, and caring were bottled up. Here's how one recovering alcoholic describes her life as it used to be:

I call my disease "slow burn alcoholism". I can't describe how damaging that type of alcoholism is. No one in my family ever appeared drunk or out of control and yet everyone drank daily and in large amounts. The major symptom was the absolutely inability to feel. Generation after generation of my family stood physically sound, yet emotionally empty. My dad, who drank a fifth a day, never took the time to be involved in anything I did. He never saw me ski, and I was on the national ski team two years in a row. The word love was never spoken at our house. The price for me, in the end, was total emotional isolation.

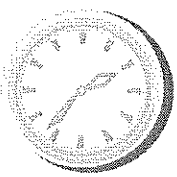
Total emotional isolation - what you feel is never communicated to anyone. It all stays inside, turning rancid, changing to bitterness and loneliness and hatred, until inevitably all feeling withers, and you are drained, empty, dry. Most of you spent your adult years - those years that for most people are spent growing up, getting to know yourself, and learning to communicate with others - with alcohol. You grew up, essentially, with alcohol as your best friend, and your allegiance to alcohol turned everyone away until it was eventually just you and alcohol in a hostile world.

Now that you are sober and cut off from alcohol, what are you left with? Fear, loneliness, immaturity, resentments, guilt, and shattered relationships. You don't know how to communicate with others, you don't

even know yourself, and you probably don't like yourself. Who are you? How do you learn how to feel and communicate again? How do you forgive yourself and begin the process of liking yourself?

In the final weeks of treatment you will learn some basic information and skills designed to help you begin to answer these questions. In sobriety you will have to learn to feel emotions once again and to let them out, communicating them to others so that the feelings can grow and flower and be felt outside yourself. Not all these emotions will be happy ones, of course, but to feel, to experience, to live life with all its joys and sorrows. If you anaesthetize yourself to pain and sorrow, you are also numbing yourself to happiness and joy.

You will also learn in treatment that you are not an alcoholic because you are immature - you are immature because you are an alcoholic. Your long association with alcohol stopped, cold, the maturing process that leads to self-identity, self-determination, and self-liking. You will learn, too, that your reactions to people and to events may be slightly askew in the first weeks or months of sobriety. You may be touchy, tender, temperamental, and thin-skinned. Everything you feel may seem enlarged, intensified. All your nerves feel exposed. These feelings, of course, are compounded and exaggerated by the physical changes going on inside you.



What can you do about your raging, sometimes uncontrollable emotions? First, learn to give yourself time. You suffer from a disease so powerful that it threatened your life. You need to heal, and sometimes the healing goes slowly. Be patient. Pace yourself. Don't expect too much too soon. Keep a journal so that you can track your emotional progress; be sure, however, to measure this progress in weeks and months, not hours or days. Be proud of yourself for the strides you do take and don't despair when things seem to slide backward and you feel out of control and incapable.

Learn to accept the fact that you cannot handle by yourself all the early stresses of this new life. Whenever you feel the need, use the support system that has been built up through treatment - out-patient counselling, aftercare programs, lectures, and AA. Don't be afraid to admit to any problems you have and to share your fears and anxieties with your counsellor, family, friends, or AA members.

Reaching out to others is not easy for many people, and alcoholics have a particularly tough time because they have had so little practice. But you will learn, once you admit your need for help, that it is not difficult at all to reach out, and that you are not less of a person for admitting to someone else that you are troubled or afraid. All human beings are periodically troubled or afraid; all human beings need help and support throughout their lives. Being able to admit that you are in need is actually a sign of internal strength and growth, and it begins the "connectiveness" that binds you to others, initiating friendship, affection, and love.

Learning to communicate with others is actually like learning a new language. Think of it this way: you've moved into this house of sobriety, you're living in a new and foreign place, and you will have to learn some strange rules, different codes of behaviour, and innovative ways of communicating with others. All this may seem utterly strange and unusual, but with practice, and with time, you'll begin to feel at home.

There are many types of therapies designed to help people communicate effectively, and one very useful therapy used in alcoholism treatment is rational emotive therapy (RET). Basically, RET is aimed at turning around the observation made by the philosopher Epictetus in the first century A.D., that "men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them". An event outside ourselves (rain, for example) causes us to think certain thoughts (I hate rainy days), which then create specific feelings or emotions (anger, sadness, depression). Most of us think that the event itself causes the feelings. But the feelings come from the way we think about the event ("Stinking thinking" again!), not from the event itself.

Using RET, alcoholics are taught to identify their ideas or beliefs, challenge what is irrational about them ("Why should rain make me feel sad?") and create a new, more realistic appraisal of the event ("Since it's raining, I'll stay inside and read a book"). The point is to take responsibility for your own emotions, realizing that you actually created them inside yourself, and understanding that putting the responsibility on other people or outside events is both unrealistic and self-defeating. You must learn to act, not just to react.

One final note on emotions: You will have to learn to let go of your guilt and deal with your grief. When you were drinking, you said and did a lot of things that you may be ashamed of now, or that you agonize over, wishing you could go back and change the past. You may have been verbally or physically abusive to your spouse and your children; your drinking may have destroyed your family, your finances, your career. You feel responsible, now, and at times feel overwhelmed with guilt and grief.

But realize this: what you did and what you said back then were part of your disease. Your behaviour was manipulated by your addiction, and you had no more control over your actions than a heart attack victim has over the abnormal beating of his heart. Give up your guilt, realize that you were not responsible for your behaviour, reconcile what you can, and go on with the art of living. As you learn to deal with your grief over your personal losses, you must also learn not to agonize over the past; you have too much to think about in putting this new life together.

The Serenity Prayer has special meaning to alcoholics and works as both a reminder to let go of the past and a challenge to work toward improving the future: *"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*

Your responsibility begins now - now that you are sober and understand what your disease is and what you must do to keep it under control. Once you understand this disease, knowing it from the inside out, you will have to take responsibility for your actions, committing yourself, body and soul, to the recovery tools that will build your house of sobriety. Without this commitment, you leave yourself vulnerable to your addiction and thus to the ultimate destruction of your life and the lives of everyone you care about.

Sobriety is your first and foremost priority, for without it, you will lose everything. Always remember the catechism: If you don't give your sobriety number-one priority, you will drink again. And if you drink, you will die. Death is the end point of all lives, but it is every alcoholic's responsibility to make sure that it does, indeed come at the end and not somewhere in the middle.

Having been through treatment and learned about your disease, you now have the knowledge and the power to live, or to die. Using that knowledge and learning how to wield that power will take commitment, patience, and persistence. As AA members say, "Recovery is simple, but it is not easy".

Level Four: Spiritual

Alcoholics can be sober, physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy, and still be the most wretched, desolate people on earth. What's missing? In this prolonged metaphor of the house of sobriety, many recovering alcoholics neglect or disregard the final addition: the roof. This is the "spiritual" part of the house, and without it the entire structure is dangerously vulnerable to erosion and decay.

The word spiritual involves two essential components: the spirit and spiritual values. The spirit is something inside each of us, a sort of personal essence that is ethereal and invisible. Yet it is of us, a vital, animating force that is the heart of who we are, the very core and center of our being. Some people think of this spirit as "God". Other people add an o and think of it as all that is "good" within us and within the world we inhabit. For others, the spirit is love, peace, joy, and happiness. You will come to understand the "spirit" in your own individual way, but you must also accept the power of whatever it is you believe in and your relative powerlessness before it.

Take love, for example. You feel and respond to love, but you did not make it or manufacture it. Feeling love for someone else is part of you and yet is much, much bigger than you. Whatever this essence of love is, whatever the presence of God or good is, it is stronger than you and larger than you. Its power encompasses the world, and it cannot be manipulated, sabotaged, or destroyed by any one person. It grows within you and is part of you, but it existed before you and it will exist after you.



The building blocks of this essence called the spirit are "spiritual values", and they include trust, caring, love, courage, honesty, humility and forgiveness. Every one of these values has been taken over and crushed by the disease of alcoholism. Every one must be built back up again to ensure the fullness of life and sobriety. For these are values that every human being on this earth can connect to. They are, in fact, the values that bind us all together, and they are as vital to healthy life as air, food, and water. As an alcoholic, these spiritual values are the final timbers that will solidify and secure your house of sobriety.

The rebuilding of the spirit begins with a process called "surrender" - a surrender to a strength and power beyond yourself, an admission that comes from the very core of your being that you cannot control this disease, that it is not the power of your will and strength that can fight the addiction. This surrender is not a giving up in defeat - it is, in fact, the very root of your future strength. By surrendering to your powerlessness, you are opening the door to receiving help outside yourself. By humbling yourself, you actually enlarge yourself and begin the process of becoming involved in lives outside your own.

It might be difficult to understand how such ethereal concepts as "spirit" and "surrender" can have much significance for alcoholics grappling with the very real and visible problems of trying to live sober in a complicated world. How can you be concerned with humility when you've got to worry about legal fees stemming from a drunk-driving charge when you were drinking? How dare anyone speak to you about courage when you're trying to patch together a shattered marriage and make peace with your children, who have only to look at you to show their pain and distrust? And you've had it up to your ears with words like honesty, trust, and forgiveness. Let someone else work on those while you try to find a job and piece together some semblance of self-respect and self-confidence from the fragments that were your life. Just living this new life takes everything you've got - how can you be expected to reach deeper still? And, really, what good could it do?

These are the questions that trouble many recovering alcoholics, and they are not easily answered. The only honest answer is that by rebuilding the spiritual part of you, everything else will seem less difficult. You will have something within you that cannot be destroyed by pain, grief, or suffering. This dynamic of life - the spirit - will make it easier for you to smile at strangers, to laugh at yourself, to give up your resentments and hostilities, and to come out of yourself and reach out to others.

Rebuilding the spirit is not a selfless process, for in reaching out, much is returned: self-knowledge, self-confidence, and self-liking. What's amazing is that once you have these qualities, you then have the ability to be selfless. The spirit is dynamic; by growing spiritually, you grow both inward and outward, and your concerns embrace the world.

But how do you go about the job? Every alcoholic will have a different answer to this question, depending on his own personal definition of the word "spirit". Some alcoholics find much of what they need in AA, or in church, or in the Bible. Some seek it within themselves and spend time every day meditating and reflecting. Others need to escape every once in a while to a remote cabin in the woods, to listen, read, and think. And still others become involved in caring for the poor, the sick, or the elderly - or other alcoholics struggling to get well.

Your house of sobriety will not look like anyone else's; it is yours, you alone can live in it, and it should reflect your individuality. Use the tools that you are given in treatment; build it strong, construct it with patience and persistence. Make it comfortable. Make it sturdy. Make it a place that you will want to live for the rest of your life. And then keep working on it, patching the holes, fixing the leaks, painting the walls. Care for it, protect it, take pride in it. It is, after all, more than a house: it is your life.

