

ALCOHOLISM FOR DUMMIES: A VERY DIFFERENT 12-STEP PROGRAM

Julia Smillie

Step 1

First, try to resist your genetic legacy. In middle school, swear that you will never, ever drink. In high school, join SADD and pity the poor, foolish students who are killing their brain cells and think they're having fun doing it. Be pious and righteous and No Fun Whatsoever. (You are never invited to anything. This is not coincidence. You are Suffering for Your Beliefs.)

Loneliness and desperation trump all. Change your mind big time junior year. Soldier through the bitter taste and discover that with the right amount of Bacardi 151, you are suddenly much, much funnier, more outgoing and, somehow, thinner. You have deep, deep feelings when you drink. It's how you discover that everything that is wrong with you is your parents' fault. Alcohol is your permission to hate them.

Step 2

College is a revelation. You are surrounded by people whose sole purpose in life is to get shit-faced on the weekends. For the first time in your life, you may actually Belong. Dive into it. Realize that once you start drinking, you seem incapable of stopping. Consider this evidence of your dedication. Consume large quantities of highly inadvisable concoctions: White Russians, Purple Cows, cheap red wine with screw-top caps. No matter how sick you are, how often you feel like hell, remember you are having A Great Time.

Dabble in drugs. It's only natural. Smoke pot, eat a handful of bitter mushrooms, drop a few tabs of acid and inhale the glorious floral fumes of opium. Give them all up when they interfere with your drinking.

By the time you graduate, you will have earned the nickname Sponge and certainly not for your ability to soak up knowledge. You will have found a group of Writers and you will drink with them, discussing literature and writing and running yourself down so that they can tell you how great you are. Remind yourself that People with Drinking Problems don't get college degrees.

Step 3

College has ended but your drinking has not. The problem, then, is likely St. Louis, with its beer-centric culture. Escape to the mountains of North Carolina for a non-profit job you hate and misery that fuels your writing. Find a perfect fit in a town where Disenfranchisement is a

way of life. Become a daily drinker. Make friends. Run a bar tab. Discover that alcohol not only makes you a much more careful driver but it also makes you an excellent pool player.

Take up smoking dope again and learn to sensibly manage it along with your drinking. (This is Maturity.) There is plenty of room in your life for both. There is not, however, much room in your life for your job. It is interfering with your drinking. Your boss annoys you. People and their expectations annoy you.

You have no furniture in your apartment. You sleep on a sofa bed mattress the previous tenant left behind. When they come back to get it, sleep on the floor. Write in your diary that you know you're not an alcoholic because you haven't had a drink in three days.

Step 4

Things will start to fall apart. You'll have fights with your drinking buddies and discover the strength of small-town viciousness. You'll be told your job's being cut back to part-time. You are doing plenty of writing, but it is all illegible. Remind yourself what a failure you are. Start to realize that your life is falling apart and that it must be this place, not good old St. Louis. Crawl back.

Step 5

Live off the kindness of strangers and friends who are nearly done with you. Park your car in out-of-the-way places to avoid repossession. You are unemployed. Your credit cards are heading for collec-

tions. You are wearing out your welcome and your arsenal of excuses. There is always money for beer and cigarettes. You are in a desperate place. There is simply no choice but to do exactly what you've always sworn you wouldn't: get a job in Public Relations.

Step 6

Now you are a professional. With a near-criminally-low salary you've been told you're lucky to have. Become roommates with a guy you don't really know. He will smoke dope, drink your coffee and remove all the furniture from the living room one day to feed his soul. You will hate him. He is Immature. He is The Problem. Move out.

Move in with a great friend, someone who loves to drink as much as you do. Realize that the rest of your friends are not drinking that way. They are No Fun. Start hanging out with people who are largely illiterate and barely employable. Date pizza delivery boys just so you don't have to sleep alone at night.

Step 7

Then the panic attacks start. Your heart races, suspended in mid-air for a beat or two. You shake and sweat. The fear is insidious and indescribable. On your 25th birthday, you're sure this is The Big One. You know you're going to die. When the paramedics arrive at your office, they ask how many drinks you had the night before. Cut the number in half and watch as they still raise their eyebrows. You've ingested nothing but alcohol, caffeine and tobacco in the past 24 hours. Cry the

entire way to the emergency room in the ambulance. Your life is so hard.

Tell the doctor that you drink too much and smoke too much and weigh too much. He will tell you not to be so hard on yourself. Decide he has a point. He gives you Xanax. Take two and feel well enough to go out drinking. It's your birthday, after all.

Step 8

The great friend has slept with the pizza delivery boy. The job is getting worse. Miraculously, you get another job with more money. You get your own apartment. You quit smoking for 10 minutes. Everything will be so much better. Even if you are now working in direct mail.

The people at your new job drink at lunch. They go out for two-for-one cocktails on the Rock Road at the end of the day. They are a dream come true.

Step 9

Oversleep for work twice in the first week. Lie about having meetings, avoid eye contact. Begin to wonder if something might be wrong with you.

Step 10

Understand it might be time to make a change. Tell yourself every morning that you are not going to drink that day. Fail. Every. Single. Time. Never look at yourself in the mirror. When the light bulb burns out above the bathroom sink, leave it. It's better that way.

At work, you are skating on thin ice. Out-

side of work, your friends don't want to see you. You haven't bathed in days. Everything is too much. Something is wrong with your life but you can't quite figure out what it is.

Step 11

Start telling the man at the corner liquor store that your husband has a drinking problem. Worry that he can smell your breath. It's important that he like you. He's the only person you've spoken to in days.

The panic attacks kick in again. Call your doctor in the middle of the night. She will call you back and tell you that you are not going to die. Two fingers on your pulse, feeling the rapid thud of your heartbeat threatening to break through the delicate skin on your neck, you ask her, are you sure? Are you sure I'm not going to die?

Step 12

Your internal organs ache and your bones are exhausted. Your cat still loves you, which is perhaps the most heartbreaking thing of all. Put your head in your hands and cry. Cry not because you drink too much. Cry because you're terrified of never, ever drinking again.

