

# It's an inside job

This 30-something man had spent a lifetime of feeling alone and adrift until AA showed him where he belonged in the world.

I am an alcoholic, and through the course of sobriety and Alcoholics Anonymous I've learned what that is, what the problem is, and what the solution is. The problem started long before my first drink. Personally, I believe I was born an alcoholic. I had alcoholic tendencies not just in regards to alcohol, but in my thinking and acting throughout my childhood.

I grew up in a different country but with a good, loving family. I had a normal school upbringing, wasn't bullied, wasn't abused, joined clubs, good grades in school, got on with everyone and throughout it all without realizing it, I just had this nagging feeling that something wasn't right.

And it's taken me a long time in sobriety to understand what that really was. But it was just a general feeling that I didn't fit in anywhere I went and that I was just not quite right. And it carried on through my childhood into my teen years. I discovered that there were things that would ease that feeling a bit and I still remember my first drink.

I was a big drinker from the start but I couldn't drink every day and there was that thought in the back of my head that alcoholics drink every day. But I'm not going to do that; I'll just drink on the weekends like a normal person. But I never drank like a normal person I always drank to blackout. I always drank to obliteration. I was always drinking the strongest drink as fast as I could. Me, this little five foot seven 70 kg, kid just pounding away drinks and having a great time doing it.

## That first drink...

I believe I was about 11, only a few years older than my son is now, when I had my first drink. I travelled away for an overnight concert with some teenagers. You know, that was cool enough already; that got me feeling a bit better. And they offered me and my friend some beers. We each had one of those and asked for another one and yeah, okay, and they tried to cut us off after that and I don't have a super clear memory of it. I just remember going back to the cooler a couple more times and dipping in my hands into that cold ice water and pulling it out and popping the top and just that - you know, you hear the can go fshhhht!. And it was the same feeling in my head. I didn't know what was going on, but just every time I drank more of the stuff, I felt better and better.

And I probably only had three or four, but it was quite a lot for someone my size and I went away into the concert that I'd been so nervous about for weeks before. You know, I don't know these people. I don't know this band. I've never been in a big crowd of strangers and here I am at the front dancing with my friends and having a good time. And I remember waking up and just going, "I'm going to do this as often and as much as I can."

But throughout high school, alcohol wasn't really the scene and I found other things that I could smoke that gave me a sense of relief and fitting in.

I went off to university and that's where it really took off. Here I am, 17 years old in a place with a permitted drinking age of 21 and it wasn't too hard to find places to drink and people to buy me booze.

And sometime in those years, I went from having fun with my drinking to having problems with my drinking. I didn't think anything of it at the time because they must happen to everyone else that drinks. Right? I'm waking up not remembering what happened. I'm waking up with bruises. And then I started waking up not in my house and waking up in cars or on the lawn and didn't think too much of it. I just carried on at university, got my degrees and had some troubles in relationships and families.

Often my solution was - well, I'll just leave and keep drinking - because the alcohol was making those insecurities and all those feelings of apartness go away. So, that can't be the problem. It must be, oh, you know, it must be my parents just don't get me. So, I'm not going to talk to them, and my partner doesn't get me so I'm going to leave her and get another one. And then it turned into - oh, this country doesn't get me, so, I'm going to go to the other side of the world because that's really what's been this under underlying problem for all these years. It's where I live, you know, it's the whole culture.

And I have a big, big blow out the week before and the night before I was due to leave the States and I'm out till 4 a.m. before my 6 a.m. flight to New Zealand. And I start swearing off on the plane. It's gonna be a new life here and I'm gonna start over and not get into all this trouble I've been getting into. And I made it 36 hours before I picked up another drink and I was off again.

And in no short time, I found myself a New Zealand resident with a kid on the way and a job I wasn't happy with. And I was just drinking my problems away. I got to that place our literature talks about of pitiful and incomprehensible demoralisation. I found myself becoming more and more abusive by the week to the mother of my child.

There were lots of times I moved the goalposts - like I'm not going to drive drunk. And I'm not going to go to work drunk and I'm not going to drink in the morning and all those things got ticked off the list. But this was the thing that really broke me. I never came from that household with abuse and neglect, and I didn't want to create one in my own. So I swore off drinking and I had quite a good go of it, made it almost a year without a drink.

### When you just can't stop

I had looked at the AA website and read some of the questions about how you might be an alcoholic if you tick some of these boxes and I didn't answer them too honestly. I still think I got a pretty high score, but didn't think much of it. And it's too far to go to these meetings. It's too much trouble. And I'll just be right on my own and made it for quite a while. And I was going madder and madder by the day. And you know, that day came when I was offered a drink and without much hesitation, I picked it up and I was right back where I started that year before, and it took me another six months of starting and quitting and starting and quitting, and blackouts and just all the chaos that I had lived for all those years.

So I got to that point where I no longer enjoyed it. And I found myself sitting at home, heavily intoxicated, lots of alcohol on board and my head just as stressed and strained as it was before I picked up that drink and then I really, really wanted to stop and that's when I found I couldn't.

And that's when I got on that AA website and found a meeting around the corner from me the next night. Drove around, parked outside, had a look, drove home, thought about it for another day, found another meeting, same location, two nights later, drove around. Finally got up the courage to go in, hair down my back, beard growing out, sweatpants, hood pulled up tight over my face, didn't want anyone to see me.

And before I could even get to my seat, two people saw me coming in the door and welcomed me and asked me if it was my first meeting and what brings me here. And I don't remember much about what I said or what they said. I know I said I drank too much and I can't stop. They told me I was in the right place and told me to keep coming back. I sat in that meeting and heard people sharing the exact same experience I had just lived for the last 8, 9, 10 years, day after day, week after week, more alcohol, more problems, and no way to deal with them, other than to drink more alcohol, which was causing more problems.

And then they went on to talk about sobriety and I didn't understand any of it at the time, but it was attractive to me because this was the first time in my life. I heard people speaking about the way I thought and the way I lived, because I had never talked to anybody about these things.

When I was at university when people said they got drunk, I assumed that they meant they went into a blackout, and they didn't remember what happened, because that's what always happened for me without fail. And I heard it shared in this meeting that that's not normal, but it's normal here, and you're in the right place, and learned quite a few other things about my drinking years, and so I took their advice, and I kept coming back, and I didn't have much going on at the time, so I went to five meetings a week.

And after a few months, I started getting restless, irritable and discontent again because I had hadn't had a drink, but I also didn't have a solution to replace it. And I heard specifically one member coming back to the same meetings every week and talking about the same things and just talking about regular meetings, getting a sponsor and working these 12 steps with them, which was still a pretty foreign concept to me. But I approached him after one of the meetings and I said, 'I want what you have, how do I get there?' And that man agreed to sponsor me and started taking me through the steps. He'd already been taking me through that first step without realising it, by talking to me after meetings for quite a while.

And the first part of that first step talks about a powerlessness over alcohol, which I understood to be having a mental desire not to drink anymore and still finding a drink in my hand night after night and swearing off it, even when I'm on it and not being able to put it down. I understood that. Alcohol taught me that. But there was more to the first step – there was the unmanageability of my life...

My sponsor took me through the first three steps and then I got on with an inventory in the fourth and fifth step where I wrote down, all those defects of character that drove me to drink and, and dug and dug and dug and found all those memories that I pushed down with alcohol and brought those up and shared those with another human being.

And it was another one of those things in AA where it seemed like such a contrary action. How is talking about this stuff going to make me feel better? Make me forget about it? Every time I think about it, I just run it over in my mind again and again and again.

But the first three steps worked, and I'd been sober this time longer than I had been before and happier than I'd ever been before without a drink, so I took it on faith that this might work for me as well. And after sharing those defects of character with my sponsor, I felt a relief that I'd never felt before and felt like I was in the right place finally, like I belonged in AA, I belonged in the world.

And moving on with the steps when I got to my amends, I got to start making amends for those things that I had written in my inventory, those people I had hurt - my parents and my siblings and my partners and children. Because the people I cared about the most tended to get hurt the worst by me.

But what my sobriety is like today on a day to day basis seems simple. A lot of the hard work was in that early sobriety because it was incrementally getting better and it's much easier to see in hindsight now but it's hard when you're newly sober.

I was using alcohol as a solution for so many years and it takes more than a drink to feel better. You know, it took lots of meetings and lots of step work with my sponsor. But I have a higher power in my life today that allows me to go out without a drink without a substance and be a part of the world and just be a son, a father, a partner, and just be a normal person. Because that's where this all started - in childhood - and that feeling of - something's just not quite right. The aliens are going to come and take me away one of these days. I don't belong here. And alcohol was the only thing for so many years that helped with that a little bit.

## Finding a higher power

My sponsor taught me about unmanageability, which was all those things that started long before that first drink when I was a child - not being able to deal with criticism or rejection or just life on life's terms or just struggling with the day to day things and was always being full of self-pity and anger and jealousy and all these things that drove me to drink without me realising it.

He took me through that first step and onto the next couple of steps, which was finding this higher power that I heard about.

I still remember at my second meeting, I asked him about it and I had some preconceptions about what a higher power or God was and heard some people share about it in their own terms. And I thought I wouldn't mesh with this AA thing, because I had some different beliefs and, and he said, you just have to find what works for you and ask that higher power to help you on a day to day basis. And beyond that, it's your business. And for whatever reason it was enough for me. And I started asking this higher power to help keep me sober day by day and help me with the rest of the steps - which he has to this day, so far.

And today I get to do a little bit of work on a daily basis. It seems like now, a few prayers, a few meetings, working with newcomers and some service, and I get to have that normal life that I craved. It's an inside job and it's an inside job in AA. And it's fixed my insides where I can feel good from the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep.

And when I don't feel good, I know what the problem is and I know what the solution is and it's in the 12 steps and it's just my willingness to do them or not. So. That's my hardest struggle today, is staying willing, staying open minded. I've got to be willing to do some things that make me a little bit uncomfortable in the short term in order to get indescribable comfort in the long run.

Alcohol was always a quick fix with a long, long problem trail end and AA seems to be the other way around and they're pretty minor consequences compared to waking up in another country with my passport gone or all the craziness of drinking, so I'm very grateful to be sober today.