

What is the Spiritual Malady?

Compiled by Barefoot Bill

"Negative feelings and emotions, remorse, guilt, shame, shattered self-esteem, self-doubt, even self-loathing; loneliness, alienation, apartness, isolation, depression and feelings of hopelessness, futility and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness of life."

I found the above description in a psychology magazine a few years ago. This is a definition for a psychopath. I can't remember where it's from specifically but what struck me was that this is the exact same inner experience of an alcoholic (drinking or not) before finding and growing toward a spiritual solution. The only difference between the alcoholic and the psychopath is that alcohol doesn't give THEM any relief (by bringing about ease and comfort for this inner turmoil) like it does for the alcoholic. No wonder why psychopaths sometimes end up going to the roof of a building and shooting college students. Then I realized that when we prevent new members of AA from getting into the Steps right away, this is still going on inside their heads except that the ONLY thing that has EVER helped them with this inner turmoil/discomfort/unmanageability has been taken away, and that's booze. I think it's something to think about. I sometimes start a speaking commitment by reading the above quote without saying who it is talking about, and then asking if anyone in the room does not relate. When I reveal what it describes and where I got it from, I've had some pretty interesting responses. I hope it's opened some eyes.

The following are statements that I think capture the inner and outer experience of the alcoholic for what is called in the Big Book, "the spiritual malady". The disease of alcoholism has three parts: physical, mental & spiritual. The spiritual part of the puzzle is the deepest part and is sometimes called untreated alcoholism (whether we are drinking or not). These are manifestations of being blocked off spiritually (whether we are drinking or not) & they are basically caused by self-centered fear ("Selfishness - self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles." - page 62. But remember: "When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically." - page 64.) That's why if we just stop drinking and DON'T grow spiritually, our inner life gets worse because we haven't dealt with the root problem yet. If you can relate to the following as part of your CURRENT experience, you are headed toward or closer to your next drink than you want to be. - Barefoot Bill

The difference between a problem drinker and an alcoholic is that when the alcohol is taken away from the problem drinker, the problem goes away. But when the alcohol is taken away from the alcoholic, the problem begins.

Once you take alcohol away from an alcoholic, all that's left is the ic (pronounced "ick").

I wanted to be able to have some integrity but I was not who I wanted to be. And this ties back into that seemingly hopeless state of mind & body because what I'm talking about now is discovering some of my own truth. One of the things that I had to finally discover was I do not have the power to be what it is I'd like to be. No matter how much I might wish to be that way, I don't have the power. And the conflict that arises as a result of having the grandest intentions but not having the power to live up to those intentions creates more discomfort than I can bear. And so the alcoholic has no choice but when you get into that conflict, ultimately you have to drink. If my life is lived in such a way that I can't stand it & I don't like the truth about who I am, then I have to have some kind of solution for that, & the solution was simply to drink. It was absolutely necessary to take a drink. The alcoholic mind was just a predisposition to drinking. So the insanity was already there. What I want is oblivion. That's where the dis-ease of alcoholism untreated will carry you to. It's not that I don't want to be HERE, it's that I don't want to be here - anywhere else either. So unless I can experience an entire psychic change, there is little hope that I am ever going to recover. - Jerry E.

If you can't handle drinking & you can't handle not drinking, then AA's for you. - Clancy I.

To recommend just sobriety is just about impossible for an alcoholic. The reason we drink is because we can't stand living sober. It hurts too much - it's too confusing. When I'm filled with self, there's nothing but suffering. - Don P.

Alcohol-ISM: I, Self, Me // I Sponsor Myself // Internal Spiritual Malady (or Maladjustment)// Incredibly Short Memory // InSide Me // I Sabotage Myself.

I learned that the disease of alcoholism affects me physically, mentally & spiritually. Once I crossed the line from problem drinking into alcoholism, then my alcoholism affected me ALL the time - when I was drinking and when I was NOT drinking. It was important to find out that there was a psychological, emotional, spiritual aspect of the disease. It just baffled me because I knew there was something more going on than a drinking problem, and when I walked into AA that's what they told me. They said that my drinking problem was a SYMPTOM, not the PROBLEM. That just startled me that AA told me that drinking was NOT the problem. They said that what we do in AA once we've taken our last drink of alcohol is we use the Twelve Steps of the recovery program of AA to find a different way to live. A way to live that's

sufficiently better than the way we lived before so we don't have to go back to drugs or booze to do something for us that we are unwilling or unable to do for ourselves. Because of the way we were living, we had a profound dose of immaturity. If we don't find another way to live, we're going to go back to booze because we don't know how to live without it. I don't know if I've EVER been told a truer thing. Then the discovery I made is that there is an awful lot of people in the rooms of AA who drank an awful lot of booze & I thought that if I EVER had to quit, my life was over. I didn't like people who didn't drink, I didn't like hanging out with them either. Those forced periods of sobriety before AA were pretty tough periods. But I listened to those AA's who worked the Steps &, although they quit drinking, their lives were not over. There was zest, a vitality, an energy & a sense of humor that I've loved ever since I walked into the doors of AA & it started giving me a sense of hope. - Bob B

"Above everything I must be rid of this selfishness. I must or it kills me." Start bringing this up in AA meetings. Ask the question, "What does this mean?" Do you see the connection between this sentence and dying an alcoholic death (mentally & spiritually)? If the SELFISHNESS does not go, it'll create a condition within us called the spiritual malady that is so uncomfortable that at some point in time my mind will remember something that will treat that called alcohol. And I will pick up a drink of alcohol and activate a phenomenon called craving. So this is my problem – my selfishness, my self-centeredness. My name is not in the next sentence, nor is my sponsor's, or my group, or this book (the Big Book): "God makes that possible." That's what you're up against! That's why we spend a lot of time on inventory - to show you what you're up against, that which you don't even KNOW you're up against. Your up against this SELFISHNESS, this SELF-CENTEREDNESS. It says, "God makes that possible and there often seems no way to get rid of SELF without His aid." I have moral and philosophical convictions galore. I cannot live up to them even though I'd like to. Neither can I reduce my self-centeredness much by wishing and trying on my power. I had to have God's help!" Now I'm starting to get clear on this Third Step decision, aren't I. Now I know why I need this. It hooked me all the way back to that glass of whisky. Do you have to have God's help? Do you understand that those sentences (referring to selfishness and self-centeredness and needing God's help to rid that from me) are tied to a glass of whisky? Do you need God's help? Go into your own experience. Is there anything you've ever been able to do to get rid of your selfishness? No. And that is what I'm going to die from - drunk or sober. Why? Because that isn't how the Universe works, that's why. The Universe works along the will of the CREATOR, not along the will of ME. When I am into selfishness and self-centeredness I am going against how the Universe works - and I will always be in turmoil. ALWAYS. - Mark H.

I am maladjusted to life, in full flight from reality & an outright mental defective (thanks Dr. Silkworth). That means (drinking or not):

Although I look like a full grown adult, I remain childish, grandiose & gravely emotionally immature. As a going human concern, my natural state is one of growing anxiety, depression & fear, coupled with an intense desire for excitement. A condition of being which is exacerbated with & complicated by an obsessive, compulsive, impulsive, excessive, controlling, demanding need for attention, acceptance & unqualified approval. A condition of being which renders me restless, irritable & discontented with life. Mentally, my thought life is controlled by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking & self-pity; all of which drive me to live my life according to selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, inconsiderate, resentful & frightened motives, motives which left unattended in me arouse & engage dangerous & life threatening levels of lust (I try not to make eye contact). Pride, anger, envy, greed, sloth, gluttony, I turn into a pig, I want it all - that renders me emotionally a bit sensitive. Which means I have a strong tendency toward taking everything I see or hear personally. I don't like criticism & I'll be damned if I can stand praise (I don't believe you). When it comes to suffering emotionally, I don't like to suffer emotionally. I don't suffer well & I don't suffer alone. Socially, I'm a bankrupt idealist & brooding perfectionist who lives defensively & guarded in fear of being found out. As such, I tend to rationalize, minimize, justify & deny all of my actions while casting blame upon innocent people in a vigorous attempt to avoid attention. When it comes to my fellow man & woman, I demand the absolute possession & control of everybody & every circumstance that enters my arena of life. My response to you is that I am quick to anger, I'm slow to virtue, & I get a distinct & succinct delight & twisted pleasure out of judging & criticizing everybody I see. My outstanding characteristic is defiance, & rebellion dogs my every step. Now, as a child of God, that is a list of my finer qualities (anybody want a date?). You'll hear this at every meeting you go to, but from newcomers, this is how you hear them: "I don't fit in, I don't belong, I'm not a part of, my God what's wrong with me - I must be different." And the only thing that satisfies that restless, irritable, dissatisfied nature in me is alcohol or drugs. In "A Vision For You" it tells me that there's a sufficient substitute & it is vastly more than that. So I don't have to drink & I don't need to run away anymore. - Wayne B.

They are restless (which is that sense that something's missing), irritable (which means "easily annoyed") and discontented (which means "never satisfied"), unless they can again experience the sense of ease and comfort which comes at once by taking a few drinks. - Big Book page xxvii-xxviii

But soon the sense of His presence had been blotted out by worldly clamors, mostly those within myself. – Big Book page 12

...plagued by waves of self-pity and resentment. – Big Book page 15

But not so with the alcoholic illness, for with it there goes annihilation of all the things worth while in life. It engulfs all whose lives touch the sufferer's. It brings misunderstanding, fierce resentment, financial insecurity, disgusted friends and employers, warped lives of blameless children, sad wives and parents - anyone can increase the list. - Big Book page 18

We were in a position where life was becoming impossible...go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could. - Big Book page 25

Nervousness, anger, worry, depression, jealousy or the like. - Big Book page 37

We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn't control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn't make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn't seem to be of real help to other people - was not a basic solution of these bedevilment's more important than whether we should see newsreels of lunar flight? - Big Book page 52

Our friend was a minister's son. He attended church school, where he became rebellious at what he thought an overdose of religious education. For years thereafter he was dogged by trouble and frustration. Business failure, insanity, fatal illness, suicide; these calamities in his immediate family embittered and depressed him. Post-war disillusionment, ever more serious alcoholism, impending mental and physical collapse, brought him to the point to self-destruction. - Big Book page 56

The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good. Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. If his arrangements would only stay put, if only people would do as he wished, the show would be great. Everybody, including himself, would be pleased. Life would be wonderful. In trying to make these arrangements our actor may sometimes be quite virtuous. He may be kind, considerate, patient, generous; even modest and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, he may be mean, egotistical, selfish and dishonest. But, as with most humans, he is more likely to have varied traits.

What usually happens? The show doesn't come off very well. He begins to think life doesn't treat him right. He decides to exert himself more. He becomes, on the next occasion, still more demanding or gracious, as the case may be. Still the play does not suit him. Admitting he may be somewhat at fault, he is sure that other people are more to blame. He becomes angry, indignant, self-pitying. What is his basic trouble? Is he not really a self-seeker even when trying to be kind? Is he not a victim of the delusion that he can wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world if he only manages well? Is it not evident to all the rest of the players that these are the things he wants? And do not his actions make each of them wish to retaliate, snatching all they can get out of the show? Is he not, even in his best moments, a producer of confusion rather than harmony?

Our actor is self-centered - ego-centric, as people like to call it nowadays. He is like the retired businessman who lolls in the Florida sunshine in the winter complaining of the sad state of the nation; the minister who sighs over the sins of the twentieth century; politicians and reformers who are sure all would be Utopia if the rest of the world would only behave; the outlaw safe cracker who thinks society has wronged him; and the alcoholic who has lost all and is locked up. What ever our protestations, are not most of us concerned with ourselves, our resentments, or our self-pity?

Selfishness - self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.

So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so. - Big Book pages 60-62.

Suppose we fall short of the chosen ideal and stumble? Does this mean we are going to get drunk. Some people tell us so. But this is only a half-truth. It depends on us and on our motives. If we are sorry for what we have done, and have the honest desire to let God take us to better things, we believe we will be forgiven and will have learned our lesson. If we are not sorry, and our conduct continues to harm others, we are quite sure to drink. We are not theorizing. These are facts out of our experience. - Big Book page 70.

More than most people, the alcoholic leads a double life. He is very much the actor. To the outer world he presents his stage character. This is the one he likes his fellows to see. He wants to enjoy a certain reputation, but knows in his heart he doesn't deserve it. The inconsistency is made worse by the things he does on his sprees. Coming to his sense, he is revolted at certain episodes he vaguely remembers. These memories are a nightmare. He trembles to think someone might have observed him. As far as he can, he pushes these memories far inside himself. He hopes they will never see the light of day. He is under constant fear and tension, that makes for (or leads to) more drinking. - Big Book page 73

The alcoholic is like a tornado roaring his way through the lives of others. Hearts are broken. Sweet relationships are dead. Affections have been uprooted. Selfish and inconsiderate habits have kept the home in turmoil. - Big Book page 82

The less people tolerated us, the more we withdrew from society, from life itself. As we became subjects of King Alcohol, shivering denizens of his mad realm, the chilling vapor that is loneliness settled down. It thickened, ever becoming blacker. Some of us sought out sordid places, hoping to find understanding companionship and approval. Momentarily we did -- then would come oblivion and the awful awakening to face the hideous Four Horsemen -- Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, Despair. Unhappy drinkers who read this page will understand! Now and then a serious drinker, being dry at the moment says, "I don't miss it at all. Feel better. Work better. Having a better time." As ex-problem drinkers, we smile at such a sally. We know our friend is like a boy whistling in the dark to keep up his spirits. He fools himself. Inwardly he would give anything to take half a dozen drinks and get away with them. He will presently try the old game again, for he isn't happy about his sobriety. He cannot picture life without alcohol. Some day he will be unable to imagine life either with alcohol or without it. Then he will know loneliness such as few do. He will be at the jumping-off place. He will wish for the end.

We have shown how we got out from under. You say, "Yes, I'm willing. But am I to be consigned to a life where I shall be stupid, boring and glum, like some righteous people I see? I know I must get along without liquor, but how can I? Have you a sufficient substitute?" - Big Book page 151 & 152.

Requiem For An Alkie

We don't have to drink to die of alcoholism. We buried him yesterday. The County Coroner had published the required notices for next of kin and nobody had claimed the body. It was just myself, and his sponsor. Not even a preacher - the county doesn't pay for those.

Not much of send-off, and not the one David had asked for. A cheap coffin, a backhoe digging a hole, and that was it - another old AA gone.

He had been sober over 20 years and in AA over 30, a stern and rigid man who tried to soften his edges and never could. He was a loner, a finger, an isolated man at the edge of life's good things. He hung in there...and in the end hung himself.

I don't know why; I can't know. I know there had been a diagnosis of senile dementia, and I know that the doctor had added cancer to the list. But, I've seen AA's deal with such things before... I don't know why David decided he couldn't.

It isn't the first time I've been through this in Alcoholics Anonymous. I've known several over the years who just up and walked out life's door one day. Sober, but not happy. Sober, but not at peace. Sober, but they died of alcoholism. Our disease doesn't need us to drink in order to kill us. I wish more folks knew that, and appreciated it.

Alcoholism is the only disease that is entirely capable of fighting back, of taking care of itself, and of emerging in new places and new forms when it isn't properly treated, whether we are drinking or not. That's because of the spiritual malady. Most people think that has something to do with prayer or with God. It doesn't. It has to do with 'our spirit'...that force which animates, motivates and propels us. There are aspects of alcoholism that are mental, psychological and spiritual, which need to be healed with more than just not drinking. That's why there are TWELVE Steps, not just the first one.

As an alcoholic, parts of my spirit are blocked off. It is left unconscious, unrealized. My character, or basic nature, doesn't work right. At its root, it is a fundamental and seemingly irresolvable insecurity...a hole that can't ever be filled. It is an instinct run rampant, a desperate need for acceptance and love that cannot be met. It hurts. It fills one with fear. The selfishness and self-centeredness of the alcoholic lies here...we are totally preoccupied with what is going on with ourselves on the inside. The slings and arrows of experience warped by this need drive us to the fringe, and the voices of the committee in our head keep us there.

We are obsessed with ourselves, and from this condition of mind...the insanity of feelings gone haywire, we become self-medicators eventually. We discover alcohol or something else...and the stuff quiets the voices, provides the relief we've never been able to find in any other way. It isn't any wonder we drink, or drug, the way we do. And some of us don't develop an addiction...in attempting to meet these crying demands of our blocked spirit, we develop other malformations of behavior, and suffer in a hundred different ways.

God broke David's obsession to drink. But, I don't think David ever truly understood his disease. I say that because I watched him struggle with those old unresolved issues of his heart for years. His rigidity, coldness, aloofness, isolation

and difficulty with other people were a reflection of the pain in his heart...of the disease of alcoholism gone deep inside, still active even though he hadn't had a drink in many years.

Alcoholism didn't need David to drink in order to continue trying to kill him, and in the end...it succeeded. In the end, instead of self abandoned...David abandoned hope...and discovered a bitter end.

Our recovery from alcoholism through the Steps must be a three-fold process. It is not one-dimensional. When we say, in AA, that our solution is like a triangle...recovery, unity, service...we mean it. In working the Steps, I clear a pathway for three purposes...first, to come into a group of human people and away from the fringe of society where I have spent most of my emotional life. Secondly, to awaken spiritually to the parts of our spirit that have been blocked off and left unconscious. And thirdly, discovering "belonging" and continued spiritual growth through service to the people within that group. It is only this entire, threefold process that heals.

It is especially true for alcoholics, since we have suffered from the spiritual malady to a great degree. Perhaps the 12th Step says it best: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps (recovery), we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics (service) and practice these principles in all our affairs (unity).

You see, I cannot hold back. I must not continue to suffer that shyness, aloneness, that overwhelming sense of separation in the different aspects of my life. I must get involved in a group of people to practice these principles in all my affairs.

Only the total approach is healing.

Anything less is little more than driving my disease deep...and if I do that...it will continue to eat away, trying to destroy me.

It destroyed David. This is a memorial to an old AA who gave it his best shot, but there were a lot of old ideas about self that David never fully dealt with by using ALL of the solution AA has to offer.

He is at rest now. But it says somewhere that "no matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others." David cannot speak to his experience any longer; I am speaking in his memory.

And I think that if David could talk to us today, he'd say "Understand your disease thoroughly, and work the complete program of recovery!"

Anonymous

What About Members With Long-term Sobriety?

(Excerpted from Akron Intergroup News, December 1998)

For all the good and right reasons, we pay a lot of attention to AA newcomers. They are the lifeblood of our fellowship, and tradition says they are the primary reason we have meetings. But what about members with long-term sobriety?

We're taught the seeds of relapse are found in attitudes that precede the actual picking up of that first drink.

While these might be easier to spot with new people, they seem much more difficult to detect in our friends with long-term sobriety.

Telling a new AA member to call us before picking up the first drink is excellent advice. But it almost never works for those who no longer have deep cravings for alcohol, because in a subtle, insidious way, they have entered into a private period (weeks, maybe even months) of irrational thinking about their lives, work, this program, loved ones, hobbies, the government or other drivers!

In other words, a dangerous form of alcoholic insanity has emerged. With nothing in its path to prevent it, drinking is the natural, instinctive reaction. Fortunately, we have ways to prevent this from happening. The bond of trust we establish between each other in AA is a powerful ally. If we confront those fellow members closest to us suspected of having difficulties, and if we do this with compassion and a willingness to listen and help in a true 12th Step Spirit, the outcome may be lifesaving. Following is a checklist of relapse symptoms we can watch for - and help a troubled friend explore in a sort of short-form 4th and 5th Step process.

1. Exhaustion - Allowing oneself to become overly tired; usually associated with work addiction as an excuse for not facing personal frustrations.

2. Dishonesty - Begins with pattern of little lies; escalated to self-delusion and making excuses for not doing what's called for.
3. Impatience - I want what I want NOW. Others aren't doing what I think they should or living the way I know is right.
4. Argumentative - No point is too small or insignificant not to be debated to the point of anger and submission.
5. Depression - All unreasonable, unaccountable despair should be exposed and discussed, not repressed: what is the "exact nature" of those feelings?
6. Frustration - Controlled anger/resentment when things don't go according to our plans. Lack of acceptance. See #3.
7. Self-pity - Feeling victimized, put-upon, used, unappreciated: convinced we are being singled out for bad luck.
8. Cockiness - Got it made. Know all there is to know. Can go anywhere, including frequent visits just to hangout at bars, carry out's, boozy parties.
9. Complacency - Like #8, no longer sees value of daily program, meetings, contact with other alcoholics, (especially sponsor!), feels healthy, on top of the world, things are going well. Heck may even be cured!
10. Expecting too much of others - Why can't they read my mind? I've changed, what's holding them up? If they just do what I know is best for them? Leads to feeling misunderstood, unappreciated. See #6.
11. Letting up on disciplines - Allowing established habits of recovery - meditations, prayer, spiritual reading, AA contact, daily inventory, meetings - to slip out of our routines; allowing recovery to get boring and no longer stimulating for growth. Why bother?!
12. Using mood-altering chemicals - May have a valid medical reason, but misused to help avoid the real problems of impending alcoholic relapse.
13. Wanting too much - Setting unrealistic goals: not providing for short-term successes; placing too much value on material success, not enough on value of spiritual growth.
14. Forgetting gratitude - Because of several listed above, may lose sight of the abundant blessings in our everyday lives: too focused on # 13.
15. "It can't happen to me." - Feeling immune; forgetting what we know about the disease of alcoholism and its progressive nature.
16. Omnipotence - A combination of several attitudes listed above; leads to ignoring danger signs, disregarding warnings and advice from fellow members.

THE INSANITY

From the movie "My Name Is Bill W."©
Hallmark Hall of Fame
April 30, 1989
© 1989 by Warner Brothers
Starring James Wood as Bill Wilson

The scene is a living room. Bill is just down from another drunk and Lois comes home from work and sees him peering out a window. Hanging up her coat, she walks into the room and asks:

"Does it have anything to do with me...your drinking?" asks Lois.

"No, it's not you. It's me."

"Why? Why do you do it to yourself?" she asks.

"I've been standing here all afternoon asking myself the same question. I look out the window and I watch all the normal people walking by. It's funny, I don't think I've ever felt really normal all my life, I mean like other people. I feel different somehow, like I don't really measure up. Ever since I can remember, I've had this feeling, deep down in my gut...scared. I see people laughing, at ease with each other. I'm on the outside looking in, afraid that I won't be accepted. And then overseas, I found that a drink...a few drinks...makes me feel comfortable, like I always want to feel. It gives me courage...to be with people, do things...to dream. The money, the success, the respect...it was all good for a while, but it never seems enough. I always want doubles of everything to make me feel alive, worthwhile inside. And then, it all began to slip away. I feel cheated, angry, always so full of fear...so I drink. More. And it makes it OK for a while. I convince myself that things will turn around, tomorrow, soon. That I'll make it all up to you. But it only gets worse. I...I keep promising you, others, myself...That's it, no more, going on the wagon. THAT'S IT!" And I think I mean it. But the guilt and the depression...I can't look in the mirror, or at you...especially at you. I've stopped believing in everything, people, God, myself. I know it sounds insane, Lois, but in spite of all this, what I want right now more than anything else...is another drink."