

# How To Enjoy Life Without Alcohol:

Routes to a Healthier Existence

By Dr Bruce Trathen MBBS MRCPsych,  
Consultant in Addiction Psychiatry

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*Publisher's Note:*

This book gives practical and sensible advice on the understanding and treatment of alcohol addiction.  
It is to be distributed with the understanding that it be used as a guide and that the user seek the services  
of a competent professional for treatment.

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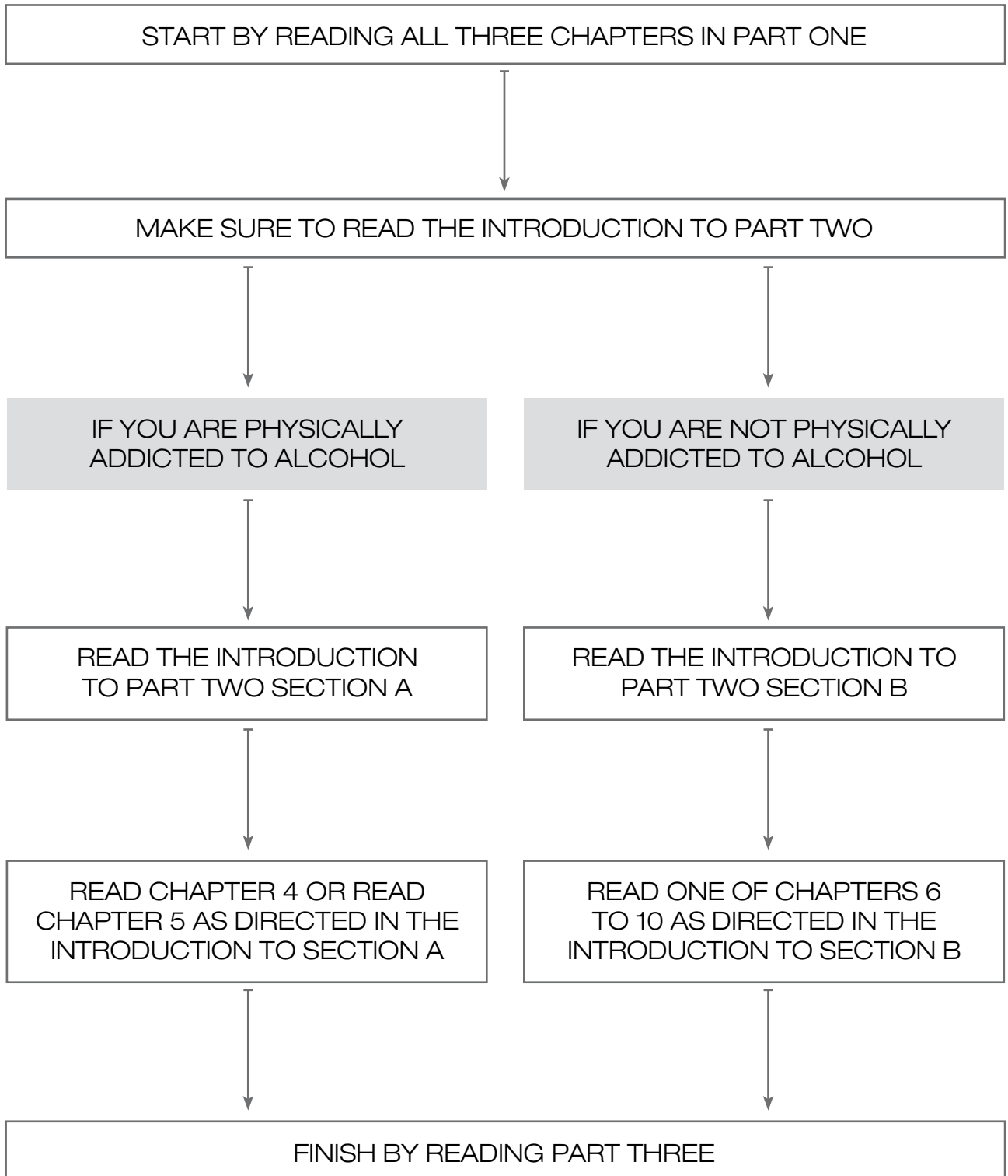
# INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

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- This book is divided into three main parts.
- The first part helps you to make the decisions you will need to make in order to plan your route through treatment for your alcohol problem.
- The second part consists of a number of chapters which describe the best route through treatment for you (according to the research evidence), and tells you how to find all local help contacts (generated from your postcode). You should read only one of the chapters in Part II; you will know which one to read after you have finished Part I, and read the Introduction to Part II.
- The third part tells you how to increase your chances of success to the absolute maximum.
- Whatever you do, do not read through the whole of Part II. The chapters in Part II are similar, but also contain vital differences which depend on things like whether or not you are physically addicted to alcohol, and whether you plan to continue to drink in the long term or to stop drinking forever. Part I will help you to make these decisions.

Now, have a look at the next page before you start reading – this should help you find your way through the book.

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# INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

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Part 1 of this book is aimed at helping you to make three vital decisions. When you are clear in your own mind about these decisions, you will be in the best position to plan your route to a healthier life, either through abstinence from alcohol, or by controlling your drinking within healthy limits. Of course, you may choose to skip this section and proceed straight to Part II, but if you do, please be very sure indeed that you are certain of the facts as they are relevant to you.

The three decisions you will need to make in advance of planning your route to health are:

1. AM I PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL, OR DO I JUST DRINK TOO HEAVILY?

2. AM I GOING TO TRY TO STOP DRINKING COMPLETELY FOREVER, OR DO I PLAN JUST TO CUT DOWN MY DRINKING?

3. AM I REALLY READY TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT MY DRINKING, OR DO I NEED TO THINK ABOUT THIS A LITTLE MORE BEFORE DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT?



# CHAPTER ONE



ARE YOU PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL?



# CHAPTER ONE

## ARE YOU PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL?

### MAIN QUESTION: ARE YOU PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL?

There are many different forms of help for people with alcoholism. We can break these down into four categories:

- **Medical help**
- **Psychological help**
- **Social help**
- **Spiritual help**

When you are planning your route to a life free from the disease of alcoholism, you will need to make a judgment about which kinds of help you need, and in which order you get them. Making a good decision about this depends on a number of different factors, and I will help you to make these good decisions in later sections.

For the moment, it is vital to make a single, central decision, by answering a question which will set the basic course towards your recovery:

- **Am I physically addicted to alcohol?**

If you are physically addicted to alcohol, then this means two things:

- 1. At some point you will require a medicated detoxification in order to cease drinking safely.**
2. The research evidence shows that **you are highly unlikely to ever be able to drink any alcohol again**, without relapsing to alcoholic levels of drinking. In other words, your aim should almost definitely be to become tee-total/abstinent/permanently dry. (More on this in Chapter Two).

Now this may well come as disappointing news, but these are the hard facts of the matter:

Let's consider point 1 – the need for a medicated detox:

- **To cease drinking suddenly without a medicated detox if you are physically addicted can be fatal.**
- **To cease drinking suddenly without a medicated detox if you are physically addicted may lead to permanent brain damage, and permanent memory loss.**
- **To cease drinking suddenly without a medicated detox if you are physically addicted to alcohol may lead to epilepsy and fits.**
- **Approximately 50% of all alcoholics have evidence of brain damage, and this has probably been mostly caused by trying to stop drinking suddenly on occasions during their lives.**
- **The provision of a medicated detox reduces the risks of all these things happening to almost zero.**

### WHY DO ALL THESE PROBLEMS OCCUR, JUST BECAUSE I'VE BECOME PHYSICALLY ADDICTED ALCOHOL?

*In alcohol withdrawal the brain is in an overactive state which results in the whole body (including the brain) being triggered into a state of emergency - similar to that which occurs if you have a great fright - sweating, trembling and tremor, high heart rate, high blood pressure, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea etc. When the person is heavily alcohol dependent, the overactive brain state may be so severe that epileptic fits occur (discharged electricity in the brain). Fits can sometimes lead directly to death, and in other cases cause fatal injuries. Apart from fits, the overactive state may become*



*so severe that the brain is no longer able to understand properly what is going on around it, and delusions (e.g. paranoid thoughts), and hallucinations (seeing things that aren't there) may occur. If this syndrome occurs (Delirium Tremens), then death occurs in 10% of cases that go untreated. Additionally, the overactive state of the whole body results in more energy being burned up; this in turn can use up vital supplies of vitamins which are essential for brain functioning. In some cases, loss of these vitamin supplies can lead to death, and in other cases to devastating permanent memory loss (Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome).*

## AM I PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL?

In this modern day world of theory and technological advance, many specialists seem to have forgotten the central importance of a vital distinction in addiction – that of psychological addiction versus physical addiction. For people with alcoholism this distinction has huge practical implications – if you are physically addicted to alcohol to cease its use suddenly may be fatal. If you are not physically addicted, but are psychologically addicted it would be safe for you to stop drinking suddenly, and you are also more likely to be able to achieve on-going ‘controlled drinking’ in the future – more on this later.

Now, there is a medically safe alternative to detox, which would prevent all these problems and risks. That alternative is – to cut your drinking down slowly but surely over a period of several weeks. The problem is that you are highly unlikely to manage to do this, if you’ve already become physically addicted to alcohol. That’s the Catch 22. It is in the very nature of addiction, that you will probably not be able to cease drinking in this manner, if you have already become physically addicted to alcohol.

In my NHS practice, I do not advise people who are physically addicted to alcohol to try this (slow but sure cut down of drinking over several weeks) unless they are very determined that they wish to give it a go. And simply because I know that we’ll all be back to square one in several weeks time; I routinely include a medicated detoxification as part of the plan, as long as the patient is prepared to go along with this (most are).

Having said that, as a doctor, I do not advise you against trying this (slow but sure cut down over a period of at least several weeks) – it IS a medically safe alternative to a detoxification – if you want to, then give it a go – a few of you will succeed, but the large majority will not. If you choose this route to dry out, and you succeed, then I congratulate you. If you find after several weeks that you have made no progress, then please start reading this book again at that point.

But please remember this – do NOT attempt to stop drinking suddenly without a medicated detoxification – to do so will almost definitely fail (you will start drinking again), and may cause you irreversible damage in the meantime.

The presence of physical addiction to alcohol is ascertained by the occurrence of ‘withdrawal symptoms’ when you have not had a drink for a period of time. If you suffer from ANY of the following when you have not had a drink for a period of time, then you are likely to be physically addicted to alcohol:

**If you can answer yes to ANY of the following then you are likely to be physically addicted to alcohol:**

- **I get sweaty if I go without a drink for too long.**
- **I get a tremor, or shake if I go without a drink for too long.**
- **I feel sick or vomit if I go without a drink for too long.**
- **I feel panicky, anxious and agitated if I go without a drink for too long.**

## WHAT DOES ‘WITHOUT A DRINK FOR TOO LONG’ MEAN’?

Withdrawal symptoms typically commence somewhere between 6 and 24 hours after the last drink.

*Some people who are physically addicted may have their last drink at say midnight, and then be able to go the whole of the next working day without drinking. By the time they get home they*



*are feeling agitated and in need of a drink. If they do not drink, their levels of agitation increase. Within 15 minutes or so of their first drink the levels of agitation decrease and they will then continue to drink for the rest of the evening until they go to bed. The pattern will be repeated the next day... and the next day... This pattern of physically addicted drinking is typical of those with a relatively minor level of physical addiction – however, such a person will probably NOT be able to cease drinking without a detox, and to do so would place them at risk of memory loss and other damage. Equally, in time, their level of drinking is likely to slowly but surely increase, gradually increasing the degree of their physical dependency to alcohol.*

*At the other end of the spectrum, a person might have their last drink at midnight and then be awake by 6am sweating profusely. If they haven't had a drink by 8am, their hands will start to shake and they will feel nauseous. If they haven't had a drink by 10am they may be vomiting, and by 3pm they will be starting to have hallucinations of insects walking on the walls. By 5pm they will have lost touch with reality, and by 7pm they may have suffered an epileptic seizure. If at any time during these events they find a supply of alcohol and start to drink, then all the above symptoms will calm down and disappear within an hour or so of continued alcohol use. This pattern is typical of people who are severely physically addicted to alcohol.*

Most people who are actively seeking help for their problems are nearer the milder end of the spectrum (i.e. the first example), or somewhere between the two. This is because such people still have their faculties about them and are able to actively seek help. Those who have let things develop to the extent of the second example rarely seek help for themselves – by the time things have progressed this far the mind is only able to focus on one thing – finding a supply of alcohol to stay OK for the next few hours. Occasionally I will see such patients in casualty when they have turned up in 'crisis'. Usually they are severely depressed and suicidal at such times, and it is such feelings of desperation that have led them to turn up.

Of course, those lucky enough to have concerned relatives (or relatives that can no longer tolerate their behaviour), may be referred for help at any time in the progression of this disease. It is usually the case that others recognise the existence of a problem developing before the individual themselves. The important point to take away is that wherever you are along the spectrum of development of addiction to alcohol, it is ONLY LIKELY TO GET WORSE. This again is part of the addictive process – one slowly drinks more and more to get the same effect (an effect known as 'tolerance') – levels of drinking slowly but surely build up. The only meaningful response to dealing with this situation is to SEEK HELP – and of course, if you are still reading by this time then that is exactly what you are doing, right now.

## OTHER WAYS OF ESTABLISHING WHETHER OR NOT YOU ARE PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL

Now, if you remain uncertain whether or not you are physically addicted to alcohol there are two further means of attempting to establish this:

### **ALTERNATIVE 1: THE SEVERITY OF ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE QUESTIONNAIRE (SADQ):**

Completing this questionnaire results in a score delivered on its completion. Scores above 4 indicate likely physical dependence to alcohol, scores above 10 indicate definite physical dependence to alcohol and scores above 30 indicate severe physical dependence to alcohol. Any total score above 4 should lead you to

include a medicated detoxification as part of your plan to cease alcohol use. You can use the table below.



**Q1: Please indicate below the physical symptoms that you have experienced first thing in the morning during typical periods of heavy drinking.**

<b>ZERO POINTS</b>	<b>ONE POINT</b>	<b>TWO POINTS</b>	<b>THREE POINTS</b>
<b>I wake up feeling sweaty:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>My hands shake first thing in the morning:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>My whole body shakes violently first thing in the morning if I don't have a drink:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I wake up absolutely drenched in sweat:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>TOTAL SCORE for Q1:</b> .....			

**Q2: The following statements refer to moods and states of mind you may have experienced during these periods of heavy drinking.**

<b>ZERO POINTS</b>	<b>ONE POINT</b>	<b>TWO POINTS</b>	<b>THREE POINTS</b>
<b>I dread waking up in the morning:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I am afraid of meeting people first thing in the morning.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I feel at the edge of despair when I first wake up.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I feel very frightened when I wake up.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>TOTAL SCORE for Q2:</b> .....			

**Q3: The following statements refer to morning drinking habits during any recent period when you were drinking heavily, and periods like it.**

<b>ZERO POINTS</b>	<b>ONE POINT</b>	<b>TWO POINTS</b>	<b>THREE POINTS</b>
<b>I like to have a morning drink:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I always gulp my first few morning drinks down as quickly as possible:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I drink in the morning to get rid of the shakes.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I have a very strong craving for a drink when I wake up.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>TOTAL SCORE for Q3:</b> .....			

**Q4: The following statements refer to a degree of alcohol consumption during any recent period of heavy drinking and periods like it.**

<b>ZERO POINTS</b>	<b>ONE POINT</b>	<b>TWO POINTS</b>	<b>THREE POINTS</b>
<b>I drink more than a quarter of a bottle of spirits per day i.e. 4 doubles or 1 bottle of wine or 4 pints of beer/lager.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I drink more than half a bottle of spirits per day or 2 bottles of wine or 8 pints of beer/lager.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I drink more than one bottle of spirits per day or 4 bottles of wine or 15 pints of beer/lager.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I drink more than two bottles of spirits per day or 8 bottles of wine or 30 pints of beer/lager.</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>TOTAL SCORE for Q4:</b> .....			



**Q5: Imagine the following situation. You have been completely off drink for a few weeks and you then drink very heavily for two days. How would you feel the morning after those two days of heavy drinking?**

<b>ZERO POINTS</b>	<b>ONE POINT</b>	<b>TWO POINTS</b>	<b>THREE POINTS</b>
<b>I would start to sweat:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>My hands would shake:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>My body would shake:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>I would be craving for a drink:</b> Almost Never <input type="checkbox"/> (0)	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> (1)	Often <input type="checkbox"/> (2)	Nearly Always <input type="checkbox"/> (3)
<b>TOTAL SCORE for Q5:</b> .....			

Now, add up the total scores from questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The maximum possible score is 60. Scores above 4 indicate probable physical dependence to alcohol, scores above 10 indicate definite physical addiction and scores above 30 indicate severe physical dependence to alcohol. Any total score above 4 should

lead you to include a medicated detoxification as part of your plan to cease alcohol use.

**TOTAL SADQ SCORE**  
**Q1 + Q2 + Q3 + Q4 + Q5 =**

**ALTERNATIVE 2: MAKING AN ESTIMATE BY CALCULATING THE NUMBER OF UNITS OF ALCOHOL YOU ARE DRINKING IN A TYPICAL WEEK:**

This is a relatively unreliable way to determine whether or not you are physically addicted to alcohol. However, it can provide further confirmation for you if you remain a little uncertain regarding your need for detoxification. The reason it is a little unreliable is because people's bodies vary so much from one to another. One person may be able to deal with less alcohol than another, just because of the way they have been born. In particular, there is no doubt, that on average, women more easily suffer from the adverse effects of alcohol use than do men – including becoming physically addicted more quickly and with less regular alcohol use than men.

As a rule of thumb, a man drinking more than 100 units of alcohol weekly is likely to become physically addicted in good time, and a woman drinking more than 70 units of alcohol weekly is likely to become physically addicted in time.

You can work out your daily units of alcohol consumption by using the following calculation:

**(Litres of drink consumed in a day) TIMES ('% abv') of the particular drink EQUALS (units of alcohol).**

The % abv is the alcohol content of the particular drink you are consuming – it is always recorded on the label of the can or bottle of the drink – have a look. 'abv' stands for 'Alcohol-by-Volume'. To work out how many units of alcohol you are drinking you may need to convert pints to litres, and you will also need to know the '% abv' of the different types of alcohol you are drinking.

As a rough approximation, 2 pints = just over 1 litre (1.13 litres to be precise).

- Beer varies from 3% abv to 16% abv.
- Wine is typically 12% abv.
- Spirits are typically 40% abv.
- Liqueurs are usually in the region of 15 - 20% abv.

**EXAMPLE 1:**

*So for example, if you are drinking 4 pints of Stella Artois daily, and nothing else, then your total units will be:*

*4 pints = 2 litres (plus a little extra). % abv of Stella = 5% (in fact 5.2% to be precise). Thus total **daily** units = 2 TIMES 5 EQUALS 10. Thus total **weekly** units = 70 units. As such you are unlikely to be physically addicted if you are male, although you will doubtless cause yourself damage if you continue to drink at these levels for a period of time.*

**EXAMPLE 2:**

*If you are drinking 1 bottle of spirits daily, and nothing else then your total units will be:*

*1 bottle EQUALS 3/4 litre. (Sometimes 1 litre). % abv of spirits usually equals 40%.*

*Thus, 3/4 TIMES 40 = 30 units daily. Thus total weekly units will be 210 units – you are highly likely to be physically addicted drinking at these levels.*

**There are two important points to take away when calculating units:**

**1 As far as your physical health is concerned, there is no known difference between drinking spirits and drinking wine or beer.**

It is nothing to do with the type of drink you use. It is everything to do with the total amount of actual alcohol that you consume – this is calculated by units. Don't fall into the trap of telling yourself that you "only drink beer/wine" and thus are not alcoholic – what kind of drink you use has absolutely nothing to do with it.

**2 Don't fall into the trap of underestimating your units by using the old fashioned estimates.**

The old estimates of units – "one unit = half a pint of beer or one glass of wine" are completely out-of-date. The reasons for this are due to the 'drinks industry'. There has been a slow but sure increase in the amount of alcohol in commonly drunk beer and wine (% abv), and a slow but sure increase in the size of wine glasses in pubs and wine bars/restaurants. Whereas in times-gone-by a typical pint of bitter was 3% abv, it is now the case that commonly

consumed lagers (Stella and Kronenberg) are in the region of 5% abv. Equally wine has increased from 8 or 9% abv to 12 or 13% abv. In the meantime, wine glasses have increased in size. If you go out these days and order a large glass of wine, you are probably drinking approximately 3 units per glass (a large difference from the old 1 unit per glass). In effect if you are female and are drinking more than 3 large glasses of wine per night, then you are at risk of becoming physically addicted to alcohol in due course. If you are male and are drinking more than 5 pints of Stella or Kronenberg per night, then you are at risk of developing physical addiction to alcohol in due course.

**SO IN SUMMARY:**

*1. Determine whether or not you are physically addicted to alcohol by considering whether or not you suffer from alcohol withdrawal symptoms. If you are clear you suffer from such symptoms you will need a medicated detoxification.*

*2. If you remain in doubt, then complete the questionnaire above (SADQ) and calculate your score. Scores greater than 4 indicate probable physical addiction to alcohol and the need for a medicated detoxification.*

*3. If you need further convincing, then calculate your weekly alcohol consumption in units: greater than 70 units weekly for a woman, and 100 units weekly for a man, is likely to lead to physical addiction to alcohol in due course (remember this is a rough estimate only and varies from individual to individual).*

*4. Don't fall into the trap of under-estimating your units.*

Chapter Two looks at another point raised above: If you have become physically addicted to alcohol you are unlikely to ever be able to drink again without relapsing to damaging levels of alcohol consumption. Bad news... but not to be ignored... if you wish to avoid ending up back at square one.



## CONCLUSION

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You have now reached the end of this chapter and should be able to answer the question:

### **'ARE YOU PHYSICALLY ADDICTED TO ALCOHOL?'**

**If you are, then you must plan for alcohol detoxification** at some point in the future. Alcohol detoxification is NOT a cure for alcoholism in itself – it is a way of getting from drinking to NOT drinking safely and effectively. It is highly unlikely that you will achieve this safely without a detoxification. Once you have ascertained the need for a detoxification, there is more work to do. This work is mainly about 'how to stay stopped ' rather than how to 'get stopped '. Some of the following chapters address this in more detail.

**If you are NOT physically addicted to alcohol,** then from a 'medical perspective' you do not need a detoxification to stop alcohol use. By this, I mean that you would be unlikely to cause yourself physical damage by ceasing alcohol use suddenly. However, you may choose to use detoxification as a way to stop alcohol use comfortably and effectively, especially if you have tried but failed to cut down your drinking.



# CHAPTER TWO



SHOULD YOU DRINK LESS OR STOP COMPLETELY?



## CHAPTER TWO

### SHOULD YOU DRINK LESS OR STOP COMPLETELY?

*“Doctor, I know I need a detox, but I’m sure I can have just an occasional drink afterwards – what harm could that do?”*

Well none... if it was just the occasional drink. In fact, to drink a small amount on a few days per week may actually be healthier than drinking nothing at all. And this leads us on to the main question for this Chapter:

#### MAIN QUESTION TWO: DO YOU PLAN TO CONTINUE DRINKING (BUT LESS) OR TO CEASE DRINKING ALTOGETHER?

#### POSSIBLE ANSWER 1: I PLAN TO CONTINUE DRINKING – BUT LESS.

OK – fair enough – but how much do you plan to drink?

The World Health Organization has published guidelines on what it considers to be the maximum levels of alcohol use that an individual can tolerate in the long term without causing damage to the body.

These guidelines state the following:

#### FOR MALES:

- A maximum of 21 units should be consumed in any one week.
- Within a period of one week there should be at least two drink-free days.
- No more than 4 units should be consumed in any one day.

#### Effectively this means the following:

- *You should drink no more than 2 pints of 3-4% lager/beer (Carlsberg/Heinekin) or 1½ pints of 5% lager/beer (like Stella/Kronenberg) or 1/3 bottle of wine or 1/9th bottle of spirits on any one night.*
- *You should have at least two days in the week when you drink no alcohol at all.*
- *You should drink no more than 9 pints of 3-*

*4% lager/beer **per week** or no more than 7 pints of 5% lager/beer **per week** or no more than 2 bottles wine **per week** or no more than 2/3 bottle spirits **per week**.*

#### FOR FEMALES:

- A maximum of 14 units should be consumed in any one week.
- Within a period of one week there should be at least two drink-free days.
- No more than 3 units should be consumed in any one day.

#### Effectively this means the following:

- *You should drink no more than 1.5 pints of 3-4% lager/beer (Carlsberg/Heinekin) or 1 pint of 5% lager/beer (like Stella/Kronenberg) or 1/4 bottle of wine or 1/10th bottle of spirits on any one night.*
- *You should have at least two days in the week when you drink no alcohol at all.*
- *You should drink no more than 6 pints of 3-4% lager/beer per week or no more than 4½ pints of 5% lager/beer per week or no more than 1½ bottles wine per week or no more than ½ bottle of spirits per week.*

Now, for someone who is used to drinking heavily, these **guidelines may seem rather mean**.

From one perspective, I agree; if you find drinking



enjoyable then you may think it is acceptable to take some risks with your health in order to enjoy life more. May be you like to 'live for the moment' rather than spend all your time planning to stay alive as long as possible. After all (you might say to yourself), **"I could find myself walking across the road tomorrow and be knocked over – why not enjoy today for today?"**

In general, there is nothing wrong with that argument at all. **What is wrong with it in your case is that you are already experiencing problems caused by alcohol; if you weren't there is no way you would have read this far.**

SOME SOCIAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY HEAVY DRINKING:

- **Relationship difficulties e.g. divorce/separation, aggression & violence, lowered sex drive/impotence.**
- **Work difficulties e.g. redundancy, long-term unemployment, difficulty getting in on time, drinking whilst working, disciplinary procedures, generally poor performance, difficulty with reemployment. Financial difficulties arising from work difficulties e.g. meeting mortgage payments & repossession orders, maintenance payments, savings running low or running out, debts.**
- **Pleasure difficulties i.e. replacement of previous pleasurable activity (hobbies, exercise, EATING etc.) with drinking; inability to take pleasure from such activities even if you try.**
- **Legal difficulties e.g. drink-drive charges; assault charges.**

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY HEAVY DRINKING:

- **Depression.**
- **Irritability.**
- **Anxiety & panic attacks.**
- **Paranoid feelings & ideas.**

- **Sleep problems.**

- **Memory loss.**

- **Difficulty with concentration.**

SOME PHYSICAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY HEAVY DRINKING:

- **Permanent memory loss.**
- **Dementia.**
- **High blood pressure.**
- **Stomach ulcers.**
- **Strange sensations in feet and hands – typically pins and needles.**
- **Loss of all sensation in feet and hands.**
- **Wasting of thigh muscles.**
- **Skin complaints such as psoriasis and dermatitis.**
- **Impotence and erectile failure.**
- **Road traffic and other accidents (often fatal).**
- **Liver disease (sometimes fatal).**
- **Pancreatitis (sometimes fatal).**
- **Fertility problems and foetal malformations (often fatal for the foetus).**
- **Brain damage (sometimes fatal).**
- **Epilepsy and fits (sometimes fatal).**
- **Heart attacks (often fatal).**
- **Vascular disease and amputations (sometimes fatal).**
- **Vomiting blood (sometimes fatal).**
- **Bleeding from the rectum (sometimes fatal).**



Now that's a long list, and you will never experience all of these problems at any one time. Only you can decide how many risks you want to take. Remember only this: the more you drink, the more likely you are to experience an increasing number of these problems. The healthy drinking limits apply to all of us, whether or not we require detoxification. However, there is an additional problem for you over and above the immediate health risks if you have already become physically addicted to alcohol. This problem is known as:

### “REINSTATEMENT AFTER ABSTINENCE”.

“Reinstatement after abstinence” is the technical term for almost immediate relapse to drinking at the same old extremely damaging levels if you try to start drinking again. For the purposes of translation it means the following:

#### **Situation: You have become physically addicted to alcohol, and then spend a period of time completely dry from alcohol:**

- If you have just one drink again at any time in the future, you will automatically start to consume large amounts of alcohol, rather than small (healthy) amounts of alcohol.
- The large amounts of alcohol you consume will be similar in quantity to the amounts you were drinking before you stopped drinking.
- It will take only a matter of days to progress from drinking nothing to drinking at those same old damaging levels.
- This will be an automatic process beyond your control.

*You may have spent over a year without drinking. One day, you are stressed, the sun is shining, and you see people relaxing and enjoying themselves in the pub garden. One drink cannot do any harm. In fact two drinks cannot do any harm. You are correct – they cannot. However, there is a problem here – your brain has at some time in the past become used to drinking at extremely high levels (“tolerance”). Your brain also has an extremely long memory.*

All of us have a natural tendency to adapt to our environment. In this modern day world with its rapid changes, if we didn't have this natural tendency we would simply not survive. All animals have to adapt to their environment in order to survive, and human beings are no different. This ability to adapt is a good thing. Without it you and I would not be here today. But in some cases, this automatic ability to adapt can lead to unwanted side-effects. In the specific example we are talking about at the moment (an environment full of alcohol) this adaptation will lead to an automatic, subconsciously motivated, return to alcoholic levels of drinking.

Why? Because the very fact that you have become physically addicted in the past means that you have changed – permanently. All addictive drugs (including alcohol) interact with the brain in order to cause some kind of pleasurable experience (such as getting drunk). As you drink more and more, your brain re-sets itself so that you get less and less drunk at a particular level of alcohol use. Eventually, your brain accepts that this level of drinking is now what it can expect every day, day-in, day-out. The nerves in the brain alter their response to alcohol. Effectively they try to function as though you were not drunk, even though you may have drunk large amounts.

Now this is great in the short-term. You can drink more and more without making a fool of yourself – adaptation.

The problem occurs when you stop drinking – the nerves in your brain are no longer used to this, and now send messages to your body telling you that something is very wrong – an emergency message is sent, and the body reacts accordingly – it gets ready to respond to an emergency. Your heart rate goes up, your blood pressure goes up, you sweat in order to get rid of all the excess heat you will generate in fighting or fleeing, you tremor in fright etc.etc.. In the process of your body reacting to this, you experience alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

After several days, your body realises that in fact there is no emergency to deal with, and things return to normal – the withdrawal period is over.

However, your brain never forgets.

It has adapted to alcohol permanently.



*However long you leave it (years in some cases), the next time you have a drink, your brain remembers the smell, the taste and the sensation of alcohol. Whereas before it took months and years for the adaptation to heavy alcohol use to occur, **this time it immediately readjusts itself in less than a moment. As it readjusts, you will find yourself drinking more than you intended to. The next day your brain will send you messages to drink even more – simply because it remembers that this is how it was in the past. The brain never forgets addiction.***

**Within several days, you will be drinking as you were before.** You will not have planned or intended to do this; and you will almost definitely feel devastated that this has happened to you. But it is beyond your personal control.

At some point along the line, if you are to overcome alcoholism, you will accept that this disease (alcoholism) is more powerful than you are – except in one case – that is that you decide never to drink alcohol again

– ever. If you truly decide this, then you have beaten alcoholism. If you hanker after the idea of being able to drink again in months or years to come then you will relapse.

Now this permanent change in the brain only occurs if you have become physically addicted to alcohol. If you do not experience withdrawal symptoms on cessation of drinking, then your brain has not reached this point of permanent change. But, if you have become physically addicted at some point in the past, then it is highly unlikely that you will ever be able to drink again without relapsing to damaging levels of alcohol use.

Of course many of you will give it a try – drinking again. And just a few will succeed in proving me wrong. I have known people who have done this – returned to healthy drinking when they have been physically addicted in the past.

Maybe you will need to try this out for yourself. After all someone has to win the lottery – it could be you. It really could be you, there is no way I can say it will not be. What I can say, without a doubt, is that the odds are stacked against you. Just as many people play the lottery, many alcoholics try having just that one drink.

## CONCLUSION

You have now reached the end of this chapter and should be able to answer the question:

### **DO YOU PLAN TO CONTINUE DRINKING (BUT LESS) OR TO CEASE DRINKING ALTOGETHER?**

If you DO plan to continue drinking at some point in the future, then this may be possible to achieve, especially if you have not yet become physically addicted to alcohol. It is certainly not my place to tell you that you will not manage to drink within healthy limits at some point in the future. That can only be your decision.

# CHAPTER THREE



ARE YOU READY TO ACT NOW?



# CHAPTER THREE

## ARE YOU READY TO ACT NOW?

If you have read Chapters One and Two of this book and come to a conclusion about the main questions asked (1. Are you physically addicted alcohol? 2. Do you plan to become abstinent from alcohol or to continue to drink?) you will have made the necessary decisions in order to form a basic plan for how to proceed. I will discuss the various routes forward in later chapters.

However, for the moment, there is a final 3rd main question to ask:

### MAIN QUESTION 3: ARE YOU READY TO ACT NOW?

Now that might seem like an obvious question with an obvious answer – **“Of course I am, I wouldn’t be reading this if I wasn’t ready to do something about it.”** Well yes, you may well be ready, and the fact that you are still reading bodes well. To have found this book, and to still be reading by Chapter Three demonstrates that you are taking this seriously and have a commitment to addressing the problems you are experiencing.

Having said this, in my NHS practice, I see many patients who think they are ready, but who I know are 99.9% likely to relapse to drinking either immediately after detox or within a matter of weeks. How do I know this? Because I’ve seen it happen again and again and again. These are not people who are uncertain about whether or not they need help, and they are not people who are uncommitted. These are people who are honestly motivated to stop drinking – they are experiencing serious and multiple problems due to alcohol, and they want these problems to go away. So why do they return to drinking? Where does it all go wrong?

There are a multitude of technical explanations for relapse to alcohol occurring, and I will touch on some of these below. But for the moment, they can really be summarised in one simple statement. **You must remind yourself of this statement constantly, again and again and again:**

**“ THE DETOX IS THE EASY BIT – STAYING OFF IS MUCH HARDER”**

*And again:*

**“ THE DETOX IS THE EASY BIT – STAYING OFF IS MUCH HARDER”**

*And again:*

**“ THE DETOX IS THE EASY BIT – STAYING OFF IS MUCH HARDER”**

The bad news is that its all too easy to convince yourself that all your problems will be over once you’ve managed to stop drinking. I’m sorry to bring you this news, but the truth is that to stay off the drink (or to stay drinking within healthy limits) is very hard work – and its hard work for a long, long time. **By this I do NOT mean physically hard work** – the detox takes care of that – and if the detox is carried out professionally it will be a painless experience throughout. **I do mean mentally hard work.**

If you can answer yes to ALL of the 10 questions below, then you are most likely ready right now to go ahead and prepare to implement your plan. If you cannot honestly answer yes to all these questions, then I suggest that you think very hard indeed before progressing further at this stage\*. Read the remainder of this chapter carefully, and then take some time out to think about it all a little more. Come back to this chapter and read it again when you think you may be ready. Now, if you don’t follow this advice that’s fine by me, and of course some people always prove me wrong; and when they do that’s great – one – because they’re leading healthy lives again, and – two – because they’ve beaten the odds that are stacked against them. And, in a way, this is all about beating the odds.

**The more of these questions you can honestly tick off, the more likely I think you are to beat alcoholism in the long term.**

Part of my role as a doctor specialising in alcoholism is to help people to lower those odds against them as



much as possible before proceeding with their plan. That way more people succeed and less fail in the longer term. There are three main things I consider:

1. How determined is the person to follow this through in the long term?
2. How realistic is this person in terms of what it's going to involve?
3. How does the person relate to him/herself and others?

So, here are the questions I suggest that you should ask of yourself before continuing to read this book. If you can tick yes to all of them, then proceed further. If you cannot, please think hard before progressing.

*\* There are some circumstances when you should try to proceed straight to detox, even if you have not prepared for this. See Part III of this book for more information on this.*

	Question	Tick here
<b>Q1</b>	Have you made a completely honest commitment to yourself to totally cease all alcohol use for at least a period of months after detox?	
<b>Q2</b>	Are you prepared to suffer disturbed sleep, feelings of agitation and to resist sometimes overwhelming cravings for alcohol for many months after your detox?	
<b>Q3</b>	Are you prepared to keep on working at staying dry or drinking at safe limits for the rest of your life?	
<b>Q4</b>	Do you honestly believe that the gains you will make by ceasing alcohol use by far outweigh the losses?	
<b>Q5</b>	Are you absolutely 100% convinced that your overall quality of life will be improved by stopping drinking?	
<b>Q6</b>	Are you aware that for the rest of your life you will remain at high risk of relapsing to damaging levels of alcohol consumption within a matter of days after taking you first drink?	
<b>Q7</b>	Are you prepared to be on guard for the rest of your life against the repetitive thought that will enter your head when most unexpected, saying: “ Go on – just one drink can’t hurt – how could it?”	
<b>Q8</b>	Are you prepared to do whatever it takes to stay off alcohol in the long term, and give this absolute priority over everything else in you life?	
<b>Q9</b>	Are you planning to stop drinking because you want to do this for yourself, and not solely for the benefit of another person?	
<b>Q10</b>	Do you take full, personal responsibility for all the problems in your life, whether or not you believe they are caused by drinking?	





So what's your score? If you ticked yes for all questions you may wish to skip the rest of this chapter and continue straight to Part II of this book. If it's less than 10 out of 10 I suggest you continue to read the rest of this chapter. When you have finished reading this chapter, answer the questions again. If you still score less than 10 seriously think about taking a break from reading this book, and come back when you have reconsidered. As I said above, sometimes people will prove me wrong and that's fine by me – they've beaten the odds. **What is clear though, is that the more ticks you can put in the boxes above, the greater your chances of staying healthy and avoiding relapse.**

Let's take a more detailed look at each of the ten questions.

### QUESTION ONE: HAVE YOU MADE A COMPLETELY HONEST COMMITMENT TO YOURSELF TO TOTALLY CEASE ALL ALCOHOL USE FOR AT LEAST A PERIOD OF MONTHS AFTER DETOX?

If you have become physically addicted to alcohol then the decision most likely to prevent a return to alcoholic levels of drinking is that of committing yourself to complete abstinence in the long term – for life. However, some people who have become physically addicted in the past will manage to control their drinking in the future without a return to previous damaging levels of drinking – these people are in the minority.

*Whatever your decision and even if you are not physically addicted but are drinking at damaging levels, I recommend that you should make a commitment to at least six months completely dry following detoxification. Why is this?*

Well firstly, statistically, the longer you are abstinent the less likely you are to start drinking again at damaging levels. That's the plain fact – a simple matter of observation by researchers who have observed people who have stopped drinking and have remained dry for up to a number of years. Those who start drinking again, shortly after detox has been completed, are more likely than those who don't, to relapse to alcoholic levels of drinking.

There are several ways of trying to understand why this occurs.

From the physical point-of-view this is explained by the gradual changes that take place in your brain both before and after you have given up drinking. The brain has a natural tendency to try to keep things stable for you, a natural tendency to adapt and change itself so that you continue to experience things normally despite changes in the world and the environment around you. A brain that has been bathed in alcohol every day for years-on-end slowly develops methods of trying to ward off the effects of this, so that you can continue to function as normally as possible. These methods involve the occurrence of long-term changes to the structure and functioning of the brain which enables it to become less responsive to the effects of alcohol over time – it does this in an attempt to keep everything normal despite the alcohol infusing it. One example of this occurring is the phenomenon of tolerance – whereby more and more alcohol has to be consumed before you get drunk. However, there are many other changes that occur in the brain in response to drinking heavily for a number of years.

When you stop drinking, the brain is unable to get used to this new world free of alcohol in a matter of days – after all it has taken it years to adapt to a world full of alcohol, and so it is likely to take a long time before it gets used to a world without alcohol. At first, your brain will tell you to carry on drinking because it thinks (incorrectly) this is the best way to keep things stable. Messages from the brain are sent to your consciousness in the form of thoughts and feelings and result in the experience of craving for alcohol. This is the brain's way of trying to make you drink again. If you continue to resist these cravings and do not relapse to drinking, the brain will slowly start to adapt to this 'new' world without alcohol; over the months it slowly gets used to the fact of the matter that it no longer has to deal with excessive alcohol use, and that the world is quite stable now without it. Slowly, the changes that occurred in its structure and function in the past start to reverse, and as this occurs the experience of craving diminishes in intensity and frequency.

However, if at any time within these early months you drink again, your brain receives urgent messages that it must readjust immediately back to its old state, the one which it became used to for so many years. Because of this, to have just one drink does not relax the craving you have felt, it intensifies it, and having had the one drink you will almost definitely progress to the next and to the next.....



**Secondly**, from the psychological point-of-view the tendency to return to drinking heavily can be understood in terms of habits. To develop the habit of drinking heavily on a regular basis probably took you a matter of years. The person who has their first taste of alcohol at the age of 10 or 11, very rarely continues to drink in increasing quantities from that day on. More usually, the habit of drinking develops over a number of months and years, until it starts to cause problems in all areas of your life. Equally, when you cease drinking, there is a new habit to learn – the habit of staying off alcohol. After one week of detox, there is no way that you will have developed the **habit of NOT drinking**; but you will easily recall the habit of drinking. After a matter of months, this new habit of not drinking will slowly start to become established. To start drinking before this time will almost definitely re-awaken the old pattern of drinking daily. Thinking about things from this perspective, for the habit of not drinking to become the predominant way of behaving, you will probably have to stay dry for as long as you were drinking heavily – how long were you drinking heavily for? I will wager with you that it has been at least five years. Are you prepared to stay completely abstinent for at least five years?

**Thirdly**, from a social point-of-view the longer you remain abstinent from drinking, the more likely you are to have replaced your drinking with an increasing number of other activities. If you persevere and choose the right kind of activities for you (something I discuss in Part II), you will eventually start to experience pleasure and satisfaction from these. Equally, other things will improve in time. Relationships may improve, finances may improve and your work situation may improve. None of these things will happen over night – the positive results of a cessation of drinking will only slowly become clear over a matter of months and years. When you have re-established the social side of your life, the benefits you experience from this will act to protect you from a return to drinking – you are more likely to think twice about what you have to lose, and if your time is full, you will tend to dwell less on the temptation of a return to drinking. Equally, the longer you stay dry the more situations you will have encountered where you have been tempted to drink but have succeeded in not doing so – you will learn from these situations and hopefully will be able to implement the same or improved tactics in the future when faced with a similar situation. Psychologists refer to these learned tactics of avoiding relapse as ‘coping skills’ – more on this later.

So, in short, the longer you stay dry, the better your chances of avoiding a return to alcoholic levels of drinking.

## QUESTION TWO: ARE YOU PREPARED TO SUFFER DISTURBED SLEEP, FEELINGS OF AGITATION AND TO RESIST SOMETIMES OVERWHELMING CRAVINGS FOR ALCOHOL FOR MANY MONTHS AFTER YOUR DETOX?

Some doctors talk of two distinct phases of withdrawing from alcohol – ‘early withdrawal’ and ‘protracted withdrawal’. Early alcohol withdrawal lasts a matter of days (at most two weeks) and is characterised by the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal discussed in Chapter One – i.e. sweating, tremor, nausea, vomiting, raised blood pressure and pulse etc.etc. Early alcohol withdrawal is potentially life threatening and requires treatment with a medicated detoxification. If detoxification is performed professionally it is a painless experience and the large majority of people will successfully complete detox and attain abstinence.

The phase of ‘protracted alcohol withdrawal’ commences following completion of detoxification, and may last for many months. This on-going low-grade alcohol withdrawal syndrome is not life-threatening and has no direct potential to cause damage to your body or brain. However, its unpleasant nature places you at high risk of relapse to alcohol, for the simple reason that drinking will relieve it immediately.

The ‘symptoms’ of protracted alcohol withdrawal include marked difficulty with sleeping, intense feelings of craving for alcohol, and a general feeling of restlessness and agitation. These symptoms may continue for many months in some people; however, some lucky individuals do not experience any of these effects. As you may not be one of the ‘lucky ones’ it is important to prepare yourself for the possibility that you will have to put up with poor sleep and an irritating feeling of restlessness for a long period of time after detoxification. In good time these feelings will diminish and then disappear - if you persevere without drinking. Don’t underestimate the power of lack of sleep and frustration - together with strong cravings for alcohol they act to make the first few months after detox the highest risk time for relapse.



### QUESTION THREE: ARE YOU PREPARED TO KEEP ON WORKING AT STAYING DRY OR DRINKING AT SAFE LIMITS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

To stay dry or to control your drinking within healthy limits, and to keep this going will require you to change your outlook on the world. This is a long-term, life-long project, whether you choose abstinence or controlled drinking. People who have become addicted to alcohol (whether physically or psychologically addicted) have become used to the availability of 'the quick fix'. Whatever you use this 'quick fix' for (to feel high, to socialise better, to relieve feelings of depression, to relax, to quell boredom etc. etc.) it is simply not going to be available to you after you have given up drinking. (That is, unless you decide to replace alcohol use with the use of another addictive drug or destructive activity such as addictive gambling; this often occurs when someone has not prepared themselves adequately for how they are going to feel when they are dry.) In the modern day world there are very few healthy options that can completely replace the unhealthy quick fix of heavy alcohol or drug use. In times gone by, when human beings literally had to fight for survival on a daily basis, this 'fix or rush' may well have been supplied by activities necessary for survival such as hunting or escaping from a life-threatening situation. As our lives have become safer and more comfortable these natural activities have all but disappeared from our daily lives. Of course there are activities undertaken by some that provide the equivalent of this – mountain climbing, rally car driving, bungee jumping and extreme sports such as snowboarding down dangerously steep mountainsides. The common theme with all these activities is their potential to produce an adrenaline rush due to the risk involved; it is also the case that heavy exercise causes the release of a natural (and healthy) form of heroin in the brain. So, it seems, there is some potential to replace addictive drinking or drug taking with other forms of healthy activity, and if you are interested in involving yourself in such activities then they really could help you to stay off the drink.

However, there are two main problems with this – firstly heavy exercise, high risk leisure activities neither appeal to nor are practical for many people who have a drinking problem. Secondly, there is a subtle difference between all these activities and drinking. That is, they all require some form of planning in order to implement

them; they are not immediately available on demand. **The only planning necessary to take a drink is to plan to lift the bottle towards your mouth.**

The bottom line for most people reading this book is that you will need to readjust your expectations and desires. Everyone who drinks heavily has become reliant on the availability of an 'activity' that both makes them feel better (even if just for a short while) and that is available immediately. There are very few (if any) healthy activities that offer the potential to replace this exactly. In short, if you are to overcome your reliance on the immediate fix of a drink, you will have to replace your desire for short-term immediately available rewards with an acceptance of the long-term rewards that come from committed work on your life as an adequate replacement. You must aim for a sense of fulfillment and peace rather than a life of spontaneous fun and immediate relief.

**For many people, the need to change their outlook and expectations in this way is the single most difficult part of staying dry. I will discuss ways of helping you to achieve this in Part II.**

### QUESTION FOUR: DO YOU HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT THE GAINS YOU WILL MAKE BY CEASING ALCOHOL USE BY FAR OUTWEIGH THE LOSSES?

If you are not completely convinced at the time of reading this sentence that the gains of giving up drinking will outweigh the losses, then you are almost definitely going to relapse shortly after detoxification. More about the reasons for this in the discussion of question five. For the meantime, if you have any lingering doubts there is a simple exercise you may wish to perform. This involves considering all the positive things about drinking as well as the negative things. In fact this exercise may be useful for three reasons. Firstly, to create a list of all the reasons you want to give up drinking may be helpful for you now, but also in the future after you have stopped drinking. The memory can be very short – to be able to look back at the reasons you wanted to stop drinking may be a useful reminder for you in the future of just how bad things had become. Secondly, by creating a list of all the things you enjoy about alcohol, or that you use it for, will be useful when it comes to planning how you are going to stay dry. When it comes to planning to stay dry, one important thing to do will be to plan to replace as many of these positive aspects of drinking



with other healthy activities that will go at least some way towards offering similar pleasure or relief. **Thirdly**, you will be able to compare all the positives and negatives about drinking and see if you are clear that the negatives clearly outweigh the positives.

I've given you a start by including some of the common reasons people wish to continue drinking. But not all the reasons I have given are good reasons for continuing to drink. For example, drinking alcohol is only healthier than not drinking if you limit yourself to one unit of alcohol per day. Equally depression and anxiety are very often the long-term effects of heavy drinking – unfortunately both tend to be relieved in the short-term by drinking. But if you think these are good reasons you will probably

continue to drink. **An important aspect of planning for detox or cessation of drinking is to get some of these basic facts sorted out before you go any further. The list of possible misunderstandings is so long that it would be impossible to address them all in this book. This is where it is important to get personal advice about your particular situation from a professional in the field.**

OK, let's start by considering the possible reasons that you find drinking an enjoyable or helpful activity. Tick off those things on this list that apply to you, and add items of your own as you think of them. If you wish to record this for the future, I have included an empty table for you in the appendix of this book.







Now, give one point for each reason for continuing to drink, and one point for each reason you would like to stop drinking. Tot-up the points for and against. Is your score in favour of stopping drinking at least twice that of your score for continuing to drink? If it's not, then you should think very hard before planning any further. Read on to question 5, and I'll tell you why. In the meantime, remember that some of the reasons you have given for continuing to drink may be there because of a misunderstanding about how alcohol works on your body and brain. To truly convince yourself of the need to give up drinking you should sort out the facts at an early stage. You can do this by talking to a professional in the field, and I will tell you how to do this in confidence and for free at the end of this chapter.

### QUESTION FIVE: ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY 100% CONVINCED THAT YOUR OVERALL QUALITY OF LIFE WILL BE IMPROVED BY STOPPING DRINKING?

**If you are not completely convinced at the time of reading this sentence that the gains of giving up drinking will outweigh the losses, then you are almost definitely going to relapse shortly after detoxification.** Why? Because right now you are actively experiencing the negative effects of drinking; if you have doubts at the very time that you are actively experiencing these problems, then you will certainly have much stronger doubts when these problems start to recede and diminish. As the problems caused by drinking start to resolve, you will start to remember all the good things about drinking – how it helped you to relax, how it helped you to socialise etc. etc. In addition, for the period after detox, you will be experiencing the problems caused by NOT drinking such as sleeplessness, agitation, frustration, boredom and craving. The balance between gains and losses will seem to shift towards the overall advantage of a return to drinking.

If you do not believe that your overall quality of life will be improved by a cessation of drinking at this stage, when you are serious enough about giving up to be reading this book, then you will **never believe it at times of craving** after you have given up. At these times you will convince yourself that you'll be better off after all with a return to drinking. Now, in your present state this may seem unlikely to occur to you

– you may not believe that it would be possible for you to start thinking in this way. But don't underestimate the power of your subconscious to overwhelm what may seem totally logical. It's an incredibly powerful force that you're fighting against – the force of the subconscious – the force of the more primeval parts of the brain that lead to craving. Most people happily lead their lives imagining that they are personally in control of all their thoughts and actions, and that when they do something it's because they have thought about it and made a decision to do it. In fact, at many times in life nothing could be further from the truth. Think about this – you can control the rate of your breathing by saying to yourself "I'm going to take a few deep breaths in rapid succession", or "I'm going to hold my breath for one minute". Does that mean that you are totally in control of your breathing? Do you breathe by thinking about it? No – you don't – you probably haven't thought about your breathing all day until reading this. Moreover, if you did breathe by thinking about it what would happen when you go to sleep? – well, none of us would have made it past our first night on this earth. To give a harsher example, have you ever heard of anyone committing suicide by holding their breath? I doubt it, because it's impossible – if you tried it you would faint after several minutes and then start to breathe comfortably as the subconscious part of your brain took over. This is one simple demonstration of the power of the subconscious to overcome your conscious thoughts.

I was told about another example by a colleague of mine who works as a psychiatrist. His work at that time was on a general psychiatric ward looking after many seriously suicidal patients. His patients had all recently made very serious attempts on their lives, and some of them were being held in special padded rooms due their continuing attempts to kill themselves. One such patient managed to start a small fire in the corner of his room. As the fire caught hold and grew he started to panic and banged on the door of his room to be let out. As the door was opened the rush of air into the room fanned the fire, and smoke started to fill the whole ward.

Now remember we are talking about a group of people who were very serious about wanting to kill themselves.

Not a single patient attempted to stay in the building as the smoke spread. Not a single patient attempted to harm themselves in any way as they left the ward.



All patients gathered outside the building to wait for the fire brigade to arrive. Some of them rushed there in panic. No patient took the opportunity to 'escape' from the hospital grounds once outside even though many were held there against their will under the Mental Health Act.

What is the explanation for this? Simply that the rudimentary, ingrained fear of fire caused the subconscious to take over and all the patients to save themselves, including the one that started the fire in the first place. For this short period of time the intensely depressive thoughts that led these patients to try to take their lives were overcome by a more primal need to escape and survive. If any of them had been able to think through the situation and control their behaviour by their thoughts, then some of them would have died that day. None did.

Now my point here is that the subconscious can be very powerful, and is quite capable of overcoming rational, conscious thought. So how is this related to alcoholism?

It is these same subconscious, primeval parts of the brain that have become all powerful in people who are addicted to alcohol (and other drugs). In particular there is one area of the brain that acts as a 'reward centre'. When you are healthy, this part of the brain provides you with feelings of satisfaction and pleasure when you do things that are necessary for survival, such as eating, or having sex (necessary for survival of the human race). In the process of addiction, the brain's reward centre literally gets hijacked by the addictive drug (alcohol in this case). After years of heavy drinking, the reward centre no longer responds well to activities such as eating, and sex; it increasingly responds only to drinking alcohol.

*The problem when you cease to drink is that your brain has by now become convinced that you need to continue to drink alcohol in order to survive. It sends messages to you telling you to find alcohol at all costs. Imagine yourself without water in the desert for several days – how strong would your desire for water be? Is there anything that you would not do in order to get just one glass of pure, cold water? You may be prepared to do things that you would never do in any other situation. You may even be prepared to kill to get that glass of water. This is the power of the*

*survival instinct. And this instinct is controlled by subconscious parts of the brain. This is my final example and for a good reason. The craving that the dying person in the desert feels when thinking of water is the same sensation that you will experience when you crave for alcohol. It is caused by the same brain mechanisms; in your case these brain mechanisms have been hijacked by alcohol. If you were that person in the desert and I placed a glass of water in front of you, could you refuse it? Probably not – but what if you had been given advance notice that the water was poisoned?*

To refuse it you will have to be in no doubt that to drink it will actually be more damaging for you than to turn it away. To refuse that drink, especially in the early days following detox, your conscious thought processes will have to overcome the powerful drive of your subconscious. You will not achieve this unless you are completely, 100% convinced that the advantages of turning down the drink outweigh the disadvantages.

#### QUESTION SIX: ARE YOU AWARE THAT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE YOU WILL REMAIN AT HIGH RISK OF RELAPSING TO DAMAGING LEVELS OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION WITHIN A MATTER OF DAYS AFTER TAKING YOUR FIRST DRINK?

Question one asked whether you were honestly committed to a total cessation of alcohol use for a period of months following detox. I noted that researchers have discovered that those who stay dry for longer are less likely to relapse to damaging levels of alcohol use than those who have their first drink shortly after detox. Unfortunately, that's not the whole story. Now, I am not one of those doctors who say 'You absolutely have to stay off alcohol for ever, otherwise you will definitely return to drinking at alcoholic levels'. However, if you do have another drink at some point in the future, remember this – **you will always be much more likely than someone who has never had a drink problem to start drinking at dangerous and addictive levels.** I can say this with certainty for two reasons. Firstly there is a very simple rule of thumb that you can use when trying to predict what is going to happen to someone in the future; that is – 'The best predictor of the future is the past'. Someone who has become depressed in the past is statistically more





likely than an 'average' member of the population to become depressed again in the future. Someone who has been divorced in the past is more likely than an 'average' member of the population to find their second marriage ending in divorce. Equally, someone who has had a drink problem in the past is much more likely than someone who has never had such a problem, to start drinking heavily again.

The second reason is due to the brain changes that occur following extended periods of heavy drinking. I talked above (Question 1) about the brain adapting to a world full of alcohol. I also mentioned that some of these brain changes will slowly but surely start to reverse in time. The problem is that they will never completely reverse – your brain will never be exactly the same as it was before you started to drink heavily. And because of this, it will always be more difficult for you than others who have never experienced a drink problem, to avoid a relapse to alcoholic drinking. Yes, this gets less likely to occur the longer you go without drinking, but it will always be more likely to occur to you than to others.

It is probably because of your permanent high risk of a return to heavy drinking that many doctors will tell you that you must never drink again. Personally, I prefer to give people the facts and then let them make their own decisions, and I would be lying to you if I said that you will 100% definitely return to alcoholic drinking if you ever have another drink again. So in summary here are the facts:

- The longer you go without drinking after detox, the less likely you are to relapse to heavy drinking.
- However, you will always (for the rest of your life) be much more likely to return to heavy drinking if you have a single drink, than someone who has never had a drinking problem.
- Probably only 25% of people who have been detoxed are still dry after one year.
- Many of those people who have relapsed have been through several detoxes already.
- **The only way to be sure that you will never return to heavy drinking is to commit yourself to never drinking again.**

## QUESTION SEVEN: ARE YOU PREPARED TO BE ON GUARD FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE AGAINST THE LITTLE VOICE THAT WILL ENTER YOUR HEAD WHEN MOST UNEXPECTED SAYING: "GO ON – JUST ONE DRINK CAN'T HURT – HOW COULD IT?"

Under Question Five I talked about the power of the subconscious to overcome your determination. Craving (triggered by subconscious mechanisms) will remain a threat to you always. It will occur less frequently as time passes by, but in a way this makes it even more dangerous for you – you may have lowered your guard by then. When you are craving you will find yourself thinking "Go on – just one drink can't hurt – how could it?" Psychologists talk about 'cues and triggers' that in an instant lead to thoughts like this. There are probably an infinite number of possible triggers for craving, and they range from feelings such as depression and excitement, to thoughts such as the memory of a friend you used to drink with, to situations you find yourself in such as a wedding where there is drink readily available, or just walking past an off-license or pub. The things that cause craving in one person will not have the same effect in another.

You will learn the common causes of craving for you in time, as you experience them. Each time you stay dry and resist the temptation to drink, you will have the opportunity to see how you managed to do this, and to learn how to either avoid the same situation in the future, or how to deal with it if it occurs. Some forms of counselling for alcohol problems concentrate specifically on strengthening your skills in dealing with the situations, thoughts and feelings that trigger craving. I will tell you how to access such counselling in your area in Part II of this book.

In the meantime it is important to remember that craving may strike you completely unawares, even many years after you last had a drink. There are so many drinkers out there who will tell you their story – the story of how they hadn't had a drink for years and years, and then one day they found themselves in the pub on their sixth pint. **They found themselves there because they had let down their guard against the little voice.**



**QUESTION EIGHT:  
ARE YOU PREPARED TO DO  
WHATEVER IT TAKES TO STAY  
OFF ALCOHOL (OR CONTROL IT)  
IN THE LONG TERM, AND GIVE  
THIS ABSOLUTE PRIORITY OVER  
EVERYTHING ELSE IN YOUR LIFE?**

If you have read the comments beneath the previous seven questions, you will see that I personally think that you are going to have to be very determined indeed if you are going to avoid a relapse to heavy drinking. Maybe you will be lucky and find it a breeze, but if you do, you will be in a very small minority of those that go through detox and try to remain abstinent. Sometimes being determined to achieve something involves making difficult choices. None of us can do everything, and none of us can keep everyone pleased, all at the same time. For example, you may have decided that you are interested in education of some kind, and this may involve having to sit an exam. You know the exam is going to involve a lot of preparation and study if you are going to pass it, and you may need to pay for the course which involves doing extra hours at work as well as studying. You know that you don't stand a chance of passing the exam unless you put in the required amount of study, and you can't even start the course unless you work harder to pay for it. On the other hand you may have other responsibilities in your life such as children, and you may have friends that expect to see you on a regular basis. You know that if you carry on giving as much time to your children and friends, there's no way you will be able to afford the course and pass the exam. Equally, you know that if you want to pass the exam your children and friends will have to see you less. What are you going to do? Pass the exam or give as much time as usual to your children and friends?

Now this is a difficult decision, and different people will make different choices in this situation. If you choose to do the course some people would consider you selfish, and I would agree with them as the meaning of selfish to me is that you are doing something just for you, and putting other people second – forwarding your education and career is primarily about you, although there may be long term benefits for others in your life such as an increased salary. **But that doesn't automatically make it the wrong decision.** Maybe its time you did something just for you; maybe others expect too much from you and have started to take you for granted – it

might even do them good to learn that you are not always there for them.

When it comes to making a decision to give up drinking and stay dry you will be faced with many decisions like this. People you have known for years and who you enjoy drinking with will expect you to still be there with them. You may get invited to a wedding, or a party; you may usually see your relatives at Christmas – all these situations will usually involve readily available alcohol. Are you going to place yourself in a situation surrounded by people who are drinking, and who may be trying to persuade you to have a drink? Or are you going to give your apologies and not turn up? I know what I would advise you to do – especially for the first few months following detox – I would definitely advise you to be 100% selfish about the matter. Politely give your apologies, and don't turn up. Think about you first.

Why am I so clear about this? **Because if you have become addicted to alcohol, the only way you stand a realistic chance of being selfless and giving and helping in the longer term, is to be totally single-minded and selfish about what you have to do (stay dry) in the short term. I call this 'healthy selfishness'.**

Giving up and staying dry (or drinking within controlled, healthy limits) is such a hard task, that if you are to achieve it then everything else must take second place for at least the first period of months after you have become dry. This doesn't mean that you always have to be thinking just about yourself, or that you can never do anything for anyone else. But when certain situations arise and you are faced with a difficult choice of either letting someone down or keeping yourself safe from a relapse, then you must put yourself first and avoid the high risk situation such as the party or wedding.

And don't expect them to understand either. Most people have no idea what a difficult task you are undertaking. You may lose some friends along the way; your relationships with family may actually get worse for a while rather than better. Are you prepared for that to happen? I think you need to be. And if you persevere, you will be stronger and have stronger relationships in the long run.



## QUESTION NINE: ARE YOU PLANNING TO STOP DRINKING BECAUSE YOU WANT TO DO THIS FOR YOURSELF, AND NOT SOLELY FOR THE BENEFIT OF ANOTHER PERSON?

Sometimes people seek help for their drinking problem because someone else has told them to. If I see someone in my clinic and they tell me the reason they have come for help is because they have been sent by someone else, I know immediately that the odds are stacked high against this person giving up drinking successfully. There are two reasons for this; the first reason is related to Question Eight ('healthy selfishness') and the second reason is related to Question Four (Do the gains of giving up for you outweigh the losses of giving up drinking?).

Giving up drinking and staying dry is such a hard task, that however much you would like to do it for someone else's benefit, you probably won't achieve it. Maybe you think I'm cynical, but my observation of most people is that they are much more likely to achieve something if they are doing it for themselves, rather than for someone else. I mean, do you really go to work to make your boss richer? No, you go there so that you get paid. Would you rather go out for the evening to do something that you enjoy doing, or go out for the evening to do something your partner or friends enjoy doing?

Now I'm sure there are some exceptions to this, and if you are desperate to give up drinking just because your partner wants you to, then good on you. Having said this, even if you are truly motivated to give up drinking for someone else's benefit, there's a second problem here. Under Question Four I talked about weighing up the pros and cons of giving up drinking. If the only reason you want to give up drinking is that you would like to do it for someone else who has asked you to, then there's going to be a large imbalance in your list in favour of keeping drinking. This is a bad sign, and really means that when it comes down to it, beneath it all you have some doubts about whether you really do want to give up. If this is the case you stand a high chance of relapsing to heavy alcohol use in due course.

There will be many people who list one of their reasons for giving up drinking as improving their relationships, and that's great. The problem arises if this is your **only**

reason for giving up. Equally, it's fine to take **advice** from others that you really should give up drinking; BUT, the actual **decision** to do something about it really should be yours and not someone else's.

## QUESTION TEN: DO YOU TAKE FULL, PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL THE PROBLEMS IN YOUR LIFE, WHETHER OR NOT YOU BELIEVE THEY ARE CAUSED BY DRINKING?

You accept that you have problems in your life otherwise you would not be reading this book. Some of those problems you will attribute to drinking. And if you are still reading by now, then you are probably prepared to take responsibility for those problems, rather than blame someone else for them. After all, it's your arm lifting the bottle. However, I suggest to you that you should put yourself in a state of mind, whereby you take full personal responsibility for all the problems in your life, whether or not you think they have been caused by drinking. When I say this, I do not mean that you should blame yourself for these problems, or that they are your fault. Everyone has problems, even though some might like to convince you otherwise. Problems are simply a part of life. And there is no need to blame yourself for them, or put yourself down about them. More importantly, there is no need to blame others for your problems, and to do so may actually be damaging for you and reduce your chances of staying off alcohol.

The reason for this is that if you blame others for problems in your life, this is really the same as saying "I can't do anything to change that problem; I can't sort it out because it's their fault – it's them that must do something about it, not me." This approach to things means that you will get stuck with some problems because you are always waiting for someone else to sort them out. And if you're thinking about changing that person's mind and getting them to behave a little more reasonably, you're probably best to forget it. It is very difficult to change other people – it is difficult to change yourself, but not nearly as difficult as changing someone else.

**But why should you be taking responsibility for sorting out problems that may not be yours when they are not even caused by your drinking?** You accept that heavy drinking has caused problems in your life. You are probably also aware that problems



in your life have led you to drink more heavily, or to relapse to drinking in the past. If you fail to take personal responsibility for sorting out problems as best you can, then in time these problems will build up and place you at risk of a return to drinking as a means of escape.

The only person you can really rely on to sort things out in the way that is in your best interests is you.

Why not **empower yourself** to change your life for the best?

## CONCLUSION

You have now reached the end of this chapter and should be able to answer the question:

### ARE YOU READY TO ACT NOW?

If you remain uncertain about this, I suggest that you take a few days to think about it, and then come back to read Chapter Three again. If you are convinced that you are ready to make a plan, then please continue to Part II of this book.