

Is recovering alcoholic destined for failure and irritability?

Q: After years of heavy drinking that no doubt contributed to finding myself an unemployed lawyer, I can't say that I'm a happy or grateful recovering alcoholic. At AA meetings (and virtually all gatherings, for that matter), I have to try to keep a lid on my feelings of irritability and frustration.

I often hear a degree of hypocrisy, sanctimoniousness or self-delusion in what others are saying, and at times feel the need to confront them. I have not really made any friends since I stopped drinking, and my many efforts to get hired at a law firm (which happened readily years ago when I graduated from a fine law school) have had no effect. Am I destined to a future of crankiness and failure?

A: Certainly not — there are all kinds of paths toward recovery, and you've actually managed to stay away from a drink for a number of months despite your grouchy state of mind. Another positive sign is that, though you feel annoyed by other people, you seem aware that the origin of the reaction is within yourself.

The irritability that you describe can be viewed as falling somewhere within the

clinical syndromes of depression and/or anxiety. In either case, consultation with a prescribing psychiatrist (psychopharmacologist) might result in a trial of an SSRI antidepressant. Antidepressants, despite the title, are also sometimes useful for anxiety and other moodiness, and they are not addictive.

By the way, if you've tried these antidepressants before without much effect when you were still drinking, it's much more likely that they will have a useful impact now that you are sober. Your sobriety also means that you are in a better position than in the past to benefit from psychotherapy, to help you understand the sources of your bristly reactions to other people.

You may well identify real flaws in their reasoning, or simply disagree with their belief systems, but this need not cause you to write them off, and it does not rule out the possibility that they have something to offer you.



For example, if you are reacting negatively to someone trying to “force feed” you the 12 steps, that does not mean that you might not find at least some

benefit in the themes, such as acceptance, honesty with self and ways to deal with lingering guilt that are embodied in these steps (which tend to foster a non-“cranky” attitude). Rather than zeroing in on the flaws in what you hear, you may be able to learn to focus on what ideas do speak to you in a helpful way.

If, for example, someone were recommending Buddhist or Transcendental Meditation to you and you found the mystical/religious aspect of the process a turn-off, you could still choose to go with the meditative stance and breathing, and you would ultimately see a reduction in a variety of manifestations of stress (such as muscle tightness, blood pressure and weakened immune system). In fact, such relaxation techniques (such as those taught at LCL's free, weekly Stress Reduction

Group) could also help you reach a more peaceful, less argumentative state.

With regard to the difficulties you are experiencing finding work — it's tough out there. (We have a group for that, too.) While your alcoholism probably helped derail your career, ceasing your drinking doesn't guarantee employment — it only puts you on more or less even footing with your many professional peers who are in the same boat.

Sustained efforts at recovery (from mood and personality problems, as well as addiction) will open the door to positive change, however it comes; giving up on yourself certainly will not take you anywhere you want to go.

Questions quoted are either actual letters/e-mails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking assistance from Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers.

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