The Mental Obsession

The four ways the thought gets in, in the Big Book's own words — H&I readings to keep

STEP ONE — WHAT IT MEANS

The Doctor's Opinion, pp. xxviii–xxix

POWERLESS — because of the allergy: once we start, the craving decides the amount.

UNMANAGEABLE — because of the mind that cannot remember it has the allergy. All it can remember is *"the sense of ease and comfort which comes at once by taking a few drinks"* pp. xxviii–xxix ¶4

Powerless over the body and powerless over the mind where alcohol is concerned. **We are screwed.** Nothing human fixes that — which is exactly why the doctor says what he says next:

> *"...once a psychic change has occurred, the very same person who seemed doomed, who had so many problems he despaired of ever solving them, suddenly finds himself easily able to control his desire for alcohol, the only effort necessary being that required to follow a few simple rules."* — The Doctor's Opinion, p. xxix ¶1

> *"This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it—this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish. ... So we shall describe some of the mental states that precede a relapse into drinking, for obviously this is the crux of the problem."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 34 ¶2 · pp. 34–35 ¶3

THE OBSESSION IS AN IDEA

A.A. and N.A.

> *"The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this illusion is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 30 ¶1

> *"Obsession — that fixed idea that takes us back time and time again to our particular drug, or some substitute, to recapture the ease and comfort we once knew."*
>
> — NA Basic Text, We Do Recover, p. 70 ¶1

> *"The mental aspect of our disease is the obsession, or overpowering desire to use, even when we are destroying our lives."*
>
> — NA Basic Text, How It Works, p. 17 ¶2

WITHOUT DEFENSE

the power of choice

> *"The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so-called will power becomes practically non-existent. We are unable, at certain times, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against the first drink."*
>
> — There Is a Solution, p. 24 ¶1

> *"...If these thoughts occur, they are hazy and readily supplanted with the old threadbare idea that this time we shall handle ourselves like other people. There is a complete failure of the kind of defense that keeps one from putting his hand on a hot stove."*
>
> — There Is a Solution, p. 24 ¶2

THE SENTENCES THE HEAD SAYS

three of the four are in one paragraph

> *"The alcoholic may say to himself in the most casual way, 'It won't burn me this time, so here's how!' Or perhaps he doesn't think at all. How often have some of us begun to drink in this nonchalant way, and after the third or fourth, pounded on the bar and said to ourselves, 'For God's sake, how did I ever get started again?' Only to have that thought supplanted by 'Well, I'll stop with the sixth drink.' Or 'What's the use anyhow?'"*
>
> — There Is a Solution, p. 24 ¶3

	THE SENTENCE	THE BOOK SAYS IT AS	THE BOOK'S MAN	PAGES
1	This time it'll be different	*"It won't burn me this time, so here's how!"*	Jim, whiskey in the milk	35–37
2	This time it'll be worth it	*"...qualified him to drink as other men"*	the man of thirty	32–33
3	F*** it	*"What's the use anyhow?"*	the deliberate drink	37
4	No thought at all	*"That was all. Nothing more."*	Fred, the mental blank spot	39–43

THE FOUR DISGUISES · 1 & 2

How the Thought Gets In

a man for each — the Book met you before you got here

1 · "THIS TIME IT'LL BE DIFFERENT"

Jim, whiskey in the milk · pp. 35–37

THE HEAD SAYS *It won't hurt me this time. I'll be careful. I've got a system.*

> *"He agreed he was a real alcoholic and in a serious condition. He knew he faced another trip to the asylum if he kept on. Moreover, he would lose his family for whom he had a deep affection."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 35 ¶3

> *"I had no intention of drinking. I just thought I would get a sandwich. … Still no thought of drinking. … Suddenly the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk it couldn't hurt me on a full stomach. … The experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk."*
>
> — Jim, More About Alcoholism, p. 36 ¶1–2

> *"…parallel with our sound reasoning there inevitably ran some insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink. Our sound reasoning failed to hold us in check. The insane idea won out."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 37 ¶2

THE TELL a system — beer only, weekends only, "it's prescribed," milk. Jim had a system. The system was milk.

2 · "THIS TIME IT'LL BE WORTH IT"

the man of thirty · pp. 32–33

THE HEAD SAYS *I've earned it. I've been good long enough. I can handle it now.*

> *"He made up his mind that until he had been successful in business and had retired, he would not touch another drop. An exceptional man, he remained bone dry for twenty-five years and retired at the age of fifty-five… Then he fell victim to a belief which practically every alcoholic has—that his long period of sobriety and self-discipline had qualified him to drink as other men. Out came his carpet slippers and a bottle. In two months he was in a hospital, puzzled and humiliated. … Then, gathering all his forces, he attempted to stop altogether and found he could not. … Though a robust man at retirement, he went to pieces quickly and was dead within four years."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, pp. 32–33 ¶2

> *"But here is a man who at fifty-five years found he was just where he had left off at thirty. … If we are planning to stop drinking, there must be no reservation of any kind, nor any lurking notion that someday we will be immune to alcohol."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 33 ¶1

THE TELL time as a credential — thirty days, ninety, twenty-five years — and a lurking "someday, when…" you haven't said out loud.

EVERY SYSTEM IS ALREADY ON THE LIST

find yours

> *"Here are some of the methods we have tried: Drinking beer only, limiting the number of drinks, never drinking alone, never drinking in the morning, drinking only at home, never having it in the house, never drinking during business hours, drinking only at parties, switching from scotch to brandy, drinking only natural wines, agreeing to resign if ever drunk on the job, taking a trip, not taking a trip, swearing off forever (with and without a solemn oath), taking more physical exercise, reading inspirational books, going to health farms and sanatoriums, accepting voluntary commitment to asylums —we could increase the list ad infinitum."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 31 ¶2

> *"I'll do it all myself. This time I'm off of it for good. I'll just take a few beers now and then."*
>
> — Fitz M., Our Southern Friend, p. 213 ¶1

> *"As long as we could stop using for a while, we thought we were all right. We looked at the stopping, not the using."*
>
> — NA Basic Text, Who Is an Addict?, p. 3 ¶4

"…confidence began to be replaced by cocksureness. … One day I walked into a cafe to telephone. In no time I was beating on the bar asking myself how it happened." — Bill's Story, pp. 5–6 ¶6

The Deliberate One, and the One With No Story

the Book concedes the feeling — then it takes away the excuse

3 · "F*** IT"

the deliberate drink · p. 37

THE HEAD SAYS *What's the use anyhow?*

> *"In some circumstances we have gone out deliberately to get drunk, feeling ourselves justified by nervousness, anger, worry, depression, jealousy or the like. But even in this type of beginning we are obliged to admit that our justification for a spree was insanely insufficient in the light of what always happened. We now see that when we began to drink deliberately, instead of casually, there was little serious or effective thought during the period of premeditation of what the terrific consequences might be."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 37 ¶3

> *"As the whisky rose to my head I told myself I would manage better next time, but I might as well get good and drunk then. And I did."*
>
> — Bill's Story, p. 6 ¶6

> *"...always that horrible feeling 'What's the use—nothing is worthwhile.'"*
>
> — Jim B., The Vicious Cycle, p. 225 ¶1

THE TELL a feeling offered as the reason. The Book doesn't argue with the feeling. It puts the reason next to what happened and asks whether it covers it.

4 · NO THOUGHT AT ALL

Fred, the mental blank spot · pp. 39–43

THE HEAD SAYS *(nothing)*

> *"He was positive that this humiliating experience, plus the knowledge he had acquired, would keep him sober the rest of his life. Self-knowledge would fix it."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, pp. 39–40 ¶2

> *"...it would be only a matter of exercising my will power and keeping on guard. ... I had no trouble refusing drinks, and began to wonder if I had not been making too hard work of a simple matter. ... Physically, I felt fine. Neither did I have any pressing problems or worries. ... It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud on the horizon."*
>
> — Fred, More About Alcoholism, pp. 40–41 ¶2–3

> *"As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind that it would be nice to have a couple of cocktails with dinner. That was all. Nothing more."*
>
> — Fred, More About Alcoholism, p. 41 ¶1

> *"Not only had I been off guard, I had made no fight whatever against the first drink. This time I had not thought of the consequences at all. ... I saw that will power and self-knowledge would not help in those strange mental blank spots."*
>
> — Fred, More About Alcoholism, pp. 41–42 ¶2

THE TELL a perfect day and no story. No villain, no bad day — the scariest one in the Book, and they saved it for last.

IT HAPPENED TO THE FOUNDERS TOO

Fred has company

> *"Shortly afterward I came home drunk. There had been no fight. Where had been my high resolve? I simply didn't know. It hadn't even come to mind. Someone had pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it. Was I crazy?"*
>
> — Bill's Story, p. 5 ¶5

> *"This dry spell lasted for about three weeks; then I went to Atlantic City to attend several days' meeting of a national society of which I was a member. I drank all the scotch they had on the train and bought several quarts on my way to the hotel."*
>
> — Dr. Bob's Nightmare, p. 179 ¶2 — three weeks after he met Bill. The drink after that one, p. 180: "That was June 10, 1935, and that was my last drink."

"But there happened to be a liquor store between the post office and the mill, and I stopped to get that one drink. Of course the kid never got the Easter outfit." — Jim's Story, p. 242

WHERE IT LANDS

Nothing Human Stops It

not what you know, not how hard you try, not how long it's been, not who's watching

> *"Once more: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. Except in a few rare cases, neither he nor any other human being can provide such a defense. His defense must come from a Higher Power."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 43 ¶3

WHAT WILL NOT KEEP YOU SOBER

the packet's four things, and a fifth the Book adds

- **What you know.** *"...absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge."* p. 39 ¶1
- **How hard you try.** *"Our so-called will power becomes practically non-existent."* p. 24 ¶1
- **How long it's been.** *"...his long period of sobriety and self-discipline had qualified him to drink as other men."* p. 32 ¶2 — twenty-five years.
- **Who's watching.** *"...he has probably placed himself beyond human aid."* p. 24 ¶4
- **Hiding from it.** *"...any scheme of combating alcoholism which proposes to shield the sick man from temptation is doomed to failure."* p. 101 ¶2 — read the condition with it: *"Assuming we are spiritually fit"* p. 100 ¶4 and *"be sure you are on solid spiritual ground before you start."* pp. 101–102 ¶4

WHERE THE DEFENSE COMES FROM

page 24's hot stove, answered on page 84

> *"But the program of action, though entirely sensible, was pretty drastic. ... But the moment I made up my mind to go through with the process, I had the curious feeling that my alcoholic condition was relieved, as in fact it proved to be."*
>
> — Fred, More About Alcoholism, p. 42 ¶2

> *"We will seldom be interested in liquor. If tempted, we recoil from it as from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally, and we will find that this has happened automatically. ... We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us."*
>
> — Into Action, pp. 84–85 ¶2

> *"We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition."*
>
> — Into Action, p. 85 ¶1

THE ASK

Step One, out loud

> *"We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion that we are like other people, or presently may be, has to be smashed."*
>
> — More About Alcoholism, p. 30 ¶2

> *"...when one alcoholic had planted in the mind of another the true nature of his malady, that person could never be the same again. Following every spree, he would say to himself, 'Maybe those A.A.'s were right . . .'"*
>
> — Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Step One, p. 23

- **Name your pattern.** Which of the four sentences has your voice? Say it out loud to one human being before you leave here. Out loud counts — the innermost self doesn't come along for a silent one.
- **Write the sentence your head says** — the milk, the "someday, when," the f*** it, or the nothing — in your own words, and hand it to a sponsor. That paper is the first draft of Step One.
- **Do the count.** When did you first see consequences? When was your last use? How many times in between?

The thought is going to come. That's the diagnosis. Whether it walks straight in is the only question left — and you don't answer it alone.

Readings from Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th edition, and, where marked NA, the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text, 5th edition. Page and paragraph numbers follow the printed books (¶ = the paragraph beginning on that page).