



## Recovering alcoholics receive the gift of choice

In describing alcoholism, the authors of "Alcoholics Anonymous" ask us to imagine a person with a passion for jaywalking. This person lives for the thrill of skipping out in front of fast-moving vehicles. Friendly warnings do not dissuade him. Eventually he runs out of luck and is injured. He promises his family he'll stop jaywalking.

One week later he's on the street again. This time he is hit by a car and ends up in the hospital with a fractured skull. He promises to stop jaywalking for good. But in a few weeks, after another bout of jaywalking, both of his legs are broken.

Now he's desperate. His wife divorces him. He no longer can work. He's constantly ridiculed. He enters an asylum, hoping that this will forever erase thoughts of jaywalking. On the day he gets out, he jaywalks in front of a fire truck and he breaks his back.

Substitute drinking for jaywalking in this story and you've got a picture of alcoholism.

Alcoholism is by definition the compulsion to drink, despite serious consequences, and the inability to stop drinking. Once alcoholics start drinking, they can't *choose* to stop.

As a result, alcoholics and other addicts risk their families, jobs, sanity and their lives. For some, the cycle continues until the fire engine breaks their backs.

People recovering from addiction receive the gift of *choice*, because they're no longer ruled by their addiction. Their behavior becomes more flexible. They learn to deal with obligation, and feelings of resentment and shame are dethroned.

All of this has special meaning for the holidays, as one recovering alcoholic explains:

"Before I started working the Twelve Steps, Christmas was a difficult time for me. I was with my family, who were nondrinkers. If I wanted a drink, I'd sneak out with a friend, but I'd have to be very careful around all those teetotalers. And I always wished I could be somewhere else--other than with my family--so I could be free to drink. I felt preoccupied and frustrated. I was isolated and unhappy. I just didn't want to be there.

"At the same time, there was a safety factor in being around my family. After all, I wouldn't drink while I was with them. But that's not what my disease of alcoholism wanted to do. The other side of me was feeling defiant and rebellious, feeling forced into abstinence.

"What's more, there was pressure. Ours was a very traditional family, with lots of pressure to be together and create a Norman Rockwell Christmas. That never really existed, but it was important to try.

"There was the traveling, too. My wife had her family and her grandparents, and I had my larger family. So we'd end up going to three different places on Christmas Day, zigzagging across the county for three different meals. It was insane. But everybody was very disappointed if we didn't show up. It was Christmas, and you're supposed to do that.

"Today I spend my holidays the way I choose. I really think that the greatest gift of recovery is choice, and that you can really live the life that you choose to live. We can choose whom to be with. We can

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choose what's important.

"Today Christmas is a quiet time with my own nuclear family, and we really just enjoy a gentle time together. We don't have any delusions about how it must be or should be. Instead, we let everybody be where they are. We just get together and enjoy each other's company. It's very simple, but it's what we choose to do.

"I have grown daughters now; one of them is married. We never put too much pressure on her or say, 'You have to be here during the holidays.' We want her to choose. And if she needs to be someplace else, we can always have Christmas dinner another time. That makes the winter holidays sort of free and easy. With choice, there's a sense of conscious participation in the season. We're not just reacting to each other.

"Another way of saying it is that obligation and compulsion don't rule anymore. Holidays--just like recovery--mean making choices and really feeling good about them. Anybody who's been an addict understands the significance of that."

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).