

POCKET POWER

SERENITY



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Hazelden

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SERENITY

Have you ever looked at a recovering alcoholic in A.A., who for many years made a career out of drinking, and noticed how relaxed and self-assured he or she seems to be? Perhaps you've even asked yourself, "How can a person who has been such a hopeless alcoholic all of a sudden look so serene and self-confident? I wish I could look like that."

This serene person has the God-given gift of serenity, probably the alcoholic's most powerful tool for staying sober. You can achieve that state by following Step Eleven of Alcoholics Anonymous. Prayer and meditation are the keys that open the door to serenity.

What is Serenity?

Serenity is most succinctly described as a feeling of well-being. Serene people are unhurried, unharried, and unworried. They live in the here and now, not dwelling on the unhappiness of yesterday, not projecting unpleasant uncertainties into the future. Serene people are characterized by hope, love, patience, faith, humility, and honesty; praying often and enjoying feelings of self-worth and euphoria. Life for them

is simple and uncomplicated.

Serene people don't get boxed in by quotas, schedules, and deadlines. They try to meet them, but they don't take the attitude that the world will come to an abrupt halt if they do not produce so much, in such and such a time. Serene people take the world as it comes. They are relaxed. They participate in sports, either as spectators or as players; they read a lot; play some musical instrument; take courses at the local school or library; do volunteer work; or visit with friends. They take ample time to engage in hobbies; go to museums, to concerts, or to the park or beach; they take long walks and observe the pleasant things. Serene people's interests are as diverse as they want them to be, and they always find time for the things they want to do.

Serenity and Resentment

Without serenity there is a fertile field for the growth of self-centeredness, resentment, depression, anxiety, despair, fear, anger, self-delusion, and withdrawal from society. Any one of these can drive an alcoholic back to the bottle. But the two most dangerous conditions are self-centeredness and resentment.

Resentment destroys more alcoholics than

anything else. Once planted, the seed grows and festers like a sore on the body. It is a constant irritant, diluting or diverting attention from more constructive or more pleasant thoughts and activities. If left unresolved, it can be ruinous.

We must learn to recognize resentments and make it a point to get rid of them, not to harbor or nurture them, lest they fester and get blown up out of proportion. By dispelling resentments, we are taking the first step on the road to achieving a serene state of mind.

Without serenity the chances are great that we may suffer from resentments and self-centeredness. And the chances are just as great that these conditions can drive us back to the bottle for physical and mental reinforcement. But worry and tension over countless problems can also hit us. Rev. Vernon Johnson categorizes these problems as legal, family, marital, financial, occupational, physical, social, and spiritual. All are potentially fatal for alcoholics who, lacking serenity, are not able to put them into proper perspective.

Prayer and Meditation

How, then, do we achieve serenity? Does it just come upon us all of a sudden? No way. We

have to consciously work for it. We have to condition our minds to it. And the best way of doing that is through prayer and meditation.

Many people are self-conscious about praying. The macho man may relegate it to women and children, but let danger threaten him and he will inadvertently say, "God, please help me." A great many people who pray ask their God for material things, or, possibly out of fear, for forgiveness for their sins. Prayer may be either formal and prescribed, as in public worship, at the celebration of the mass, in convocation or thanksgiving; or it may be purely personal, free, and spontaneous. Public and private prayer supplement each other. But the true purpose of prayer is to establish a close relationship with a Higher Power. It need not necessarily call for falling down on our knees, clasping our hands, and bowing our heads. Most people get more out of prayer directed to a God who is standing beside them; the devout person thus enjoys a communion with God that is not possible through ritual.

Meditation? There is nothing mystical about it. It need not follow a prescribed pattern like Zen, sensory awareness, or transcendental meditation. It does not require any props or ritualistic preparation. It can be learned quickly and easily. It can be practiced on a bus, while doing

the dishes or the housework, while waiting for a plane or a train in the terminal, or while waiting in line for almost anything. But the most satisfactory method of meditating is some variation of the following.

Find yourself a quiet place with subdued light. Make sure your family knows you are not to be disturbed during this time of meditation. Sit in a comfortable chair and get into a comfortable position. You may find it helps to have soft, unobtrusive music in the background. No brass. No vocals. Something like Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun." This helps, but it is not absolutely necessary. Take a few deep breaths and exhale. Eyes closed, completely relaxed. Let your mind go blank. You will find that gradually you become wide awake inside without being aware of any particular object or idea. Keep allowing your attention to be drawn inward. Many objects and thoughts will cross your mind. Allow them to pass freely. Do not try to hold on to any one of them. If you think of a problem that is bothering you, don't try to solve it. Let it go. You will find that you become aware of being aware, of the absence of objects or ideas which can demand your attention. You will not be asleep, but you won't be aware of anything in particular. Your feelings will be euphoric. You will find yourself drifting.

Allow this state of mind to continue for ten or fifteen minutes. Do not look at your watch. It will not hurt the meditative period if you run overtime. As you progress, you will find you will rise up and become alert at the appropriate time. When you arise, you will feel like you've had a long and restful sleep. You will be invigorated and alert. You will be serene.

As time goes on, you will find you are meditating constantly. All through the day there will be brief moments when your mind will drift, when you think about nothing in particular, but pleasant thoughts pass through your subconscious. Enjoy these precious moments. They may be happening now, but you may not be aware of them until you are aware of the benefits of meditation.

Changing Our Ways

Another way to achieve serenity is to make a conscious effort to keep from being self-centered. When we think of self, we can't help but project: "What if I'm not able to pay the rent?" "What if I get sick?" "What if I lose my job?" We entertain all kinds of destructive thoughts when we think only of ourselves. It is unhealthy. Conversely, it is healthy to think of others. What are their problems and how can

we help them? We can visit them in the hospital when they are sick, take them to A.A. meetings if they are alcoholics; run errands for them if they are incapacitated. We can listen and sympathize when they are troubled and need a shoulder to cry on.

We can also achieve serenity by planning how we will spend our time. Going through the day without some sort of a schedule in mind is much like sailing on a rudderless ship. We keep going around in circles. One moment is just like the next. And this lack of purpose can be frustrating, bringing on a situation in which we are far from serene.

We must avoid the needless worry about performing some unpleasant task, making a difficult phone call, being friendly with a person we don't particularly like. Such things can nag us to death. If they are on our agendas, we should get them out of the way before we do anything else. This will pave the way to serenity.

Write that long-neglected letter, straighten out that jumbled closet, rearrange that messy drawer. All of these tasks are constructive and rewarding. We will think good thoughts as we do them. Our minds will be off of ourselves. We will achieve serenity. This may sound like a truism, but you will find that it does work.

Humor is also helpful in achieving serenity.

We've all heard the old adage, "Laughter is the best medicine." This certainly applies in converting the blues and worries into serenity. Most of us have someone who makes us feel warm all over, who makes us laugh. This person doesn't have to be a comedian, but just someone with a sense of humor who sees something funny in almost any situation and who can transmit that lightheartedness to us. If you have such a friend, cultivate him or her. If you don't have such a friend, seek one out; there are plenty to be found. And look for the humor in grim situations yourself.

Achieving Serenity

A.A. speaks of a spiritual awakening as a prelude to serenity, of a personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism. This spiritual awakening need not be signaled by a startling vision. Instead, the change may be gradual, hardly noticeable. Our peers may see it happening, but we may not be conscious of it. But there will come a moment when we can say, "I feel good about myself." This is our spiritual awakening, our prelude to serenity.

Once we achieve serenity, we no longer live in the past, no longer project into the future. There are no more "what ifs" or "maybes." We

will live relaxed in the here and now.

After we achieve serenity, and as we go through each day, we will pray from time to time. We may say the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

Alcoholics Anonymous has a number of slogans that its members use to remain sober and serene. Slogans like *One Day At A Time*, *Easy Does It*, *Live And Let Live*, *Turn It Over*, *Go For It*, *If It Works — Don't Fix It*, and *This Too Shall Pass*. To the uninitiated they may sound trite. But they work. By constant repetition they become part of the subconscious, and they crop up at appropriate times to remind us that all things change and we have only our sobriety to concern us.

But one of our greatest freedoms is the freedom of choice. We can choose to drink or not to drink, to eat or not to eat, to be good or bad, to be happy or miserable. And if we choose to think good thoughts, we will feel good. We can, through a conscious effort, ban doubt and fear by looking on the bright side. It is just as easy to be optimistic as it is to be pessimistic. And a happy outlook will take us a long way on the road to serenity.

One word of caution. It is possible to think

we have too much serenity and become careless. We can carry it to the point where we become complacent, and that can lead back to drinking. Remember, we have to grow. We have to take a few calculated risks. But we must temper our serenity by contemplating small challenges and small problems we meet as we go along. There's still much to be done.

With this kind of balance, tempered with patience and tolerance, life will be more complete than we ever dreamed possible.

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