

How to Become an Old-Timer

The Simple Secret: Don't Drink and Don't Die.

They say when an Old-timer dies, a library burns down. At 57 years of sobriety, I am still opening the doors to my library for anyone willing to walk in. We are all destined to learn one of two ways: by the mistakes of others, or by being the mistake others learn from. You get to choose which one you are today.

This handout is a collection of "irreverent essentials," the highlights of a half-century spent in the rooms.

A Note on Growth: What you know to be true at one year is not what you will believe at five. The "absolute truisms" of a decade sober change dramatically by year twenty. I can attest that the ideas I thought were sagacious at twenty years were humbled again when I crossed the fifty-year mark. We don't just stay sober; we evolve.

How to use this Handout

Print the following pages double-sided to use a single handout in group or with your sponsees. Keep one for yourself too, in your Big Book or your car for quick reference.

One on One Tool:

1. **Program Expert.** When your client or sponsee thinks they "know" exactly how everyone should work the Steps, be a sponsor, or what they should say at a meeting, hand them this exercise to read. Ask them which lesson they might be learning right now.

2. **For the Resentment Rant:** When someone is stuck on what "that other person" did, have them locate the lesson on this sheet that they are currently being invited to learn.

Group Participation Tool:

1. During group have each participant read the lessons aloud going in a circle until all are read. Then ask them to discuss:
 - a) Which lesson from this Old-timer surprised them the most?
 - b) What can they identify with as a lesson they might need to learn? Why?
 - c) Reading this, are they less likely to judge others who work a program they think is lacking? Will they be able to be a little more tolerant by understanding we all grow at a different pace?
 - d) Have each participant (or sponsee) list 3 lessons they have already learned in sobriety, regardless of the amount of time they have—3 days, months, or years.

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED IN RECOVERY

*Some of us learn by other people's mistakes.
The rest of us have to be the other people.*

Day one in the program: I learned that 12-Step programs were filled with jovial brain damaged people who actually appeared to be happy to go to those stupid meetings.

Seven days: The best diet in the world was to take Step One. A hundred pounds was lifted from my shoulders after admitting I was powerless over alcohol and other drugs. The meetings didn't seem so stupid after all.

Three weeks: I learned that the "they" who caused me to drink and drug too much, drive too fast, work too little, be on the FBI's most wanted list, and my family's least wanted list actually resided in my head. It was a dangerous place to go alone.

Thirty days: I learned that I can't stay sober if I take a drink or other mind-affecting, mood-altering chemical. Wow, what a concept!

Ninety days: That people who say you can't talk about drugs in A.A. are usually on them.

Six months: That sponsorship was pretty neat. I told the other guy what to do and if it worked, I tried it.

Seven months: I learned I wasn't ready to be a sponsor, yet.

Nine months: I learned that the only time you should look down on others is when you're bending over to help them up.

One year: I found that once you get your Fourth Step just exactly the way you want it, your sponsor makes you throw it away and do it over again.

Thirteen months. I learned that my sponsor is psychic. She said that an example of rationalization is when you tell yourself, "If I can stay off alcohol and other drugs for a year, I may not really have a problem, after all." *How did she know what I was thinking?*

Two years: I learned that when I talk, I can only say something I already know but that when I listen, I may learn something somebody else knows.

Three years: I learned that religion is for people trying to stay out of hell and that spirituality is for people who have been there.



Four years: I learned only some of us learn by other people's mistakes. The rest of us have to be the other people.

Five years: I learned everything there was to learn about recovery and how to work the 12 Steps. I knew how people should work their programs and what all the traditions meant. I told others what their mistakes were and what they needed to do to work the program properly.

Five and one half years: I learned how to piss off my sponsor: Tell her what I learned at five years.

Nine years: It occurred to me that smoking pot wasn't such a bad idea. After all, it wasn't alcohol and it wasn't addictive. Then I remembered what I had learned at ninety days. Bingo. I knew why in my heart of hearts I must say "I *am* an alcoholic. I *am* an addict."

Ten years: I learned that I was ten years away from my last drink and Twelve Steps away from my next one.

Twelve years: I learned that I would rather have someone sober and hating me for telling them the truth, then drunk and liking me because I told them what they wanted to hear.

Thirteen years: I learned that members of N.A. who say, "Being clean means never having to say you're sober." have forgotten where they came from. I pray for them.

Fifteen years: I learned that I do not believe in miracles; I *rely* on them.

Twenty years: I learned there is such a thing as the "twenty year syndrome," meaning that we never stop growing and we only claim progress, not perfection.

Thirty years: Those who say "Long-timer" instead of "Old-timer" wear their fear on their sleeve.

Forty years: I found out that no matter how long I've been clean and sober, no matter how hard I've worked the Steps, and no matter how many people I've worked with, I will never rise above the level of human being.

Fifty Years: The best way to become an Old-timer is not to drink or to drug and not to die.