

# Treatment Procedures:

Readings and  
Conceptual Framework

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# **Treatment Procedures: Readings and Conceptual Framework**

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## Treatment Procedures: Readings and Conceptual Framework

The use of readings in guided self-management treatment serves multiple functions. Some of these functions have been briefly mentioned in previous chapters:

- They communicate the treatment approach in an understandable and consistent way.
- They provide a framework that clients can use to evaluate and change their own behavior.
- They are constantly available to the client.
- Providing clients with the first reading at assessment helps to capitalize upon the self-change momentum that started when the client called for an appointment.
- The readings and the associated homework provide the “running start” for treatment (see Chapter 6).
- The readings provide background information so that the session time can be spent on assessing the client’s understanding of the treatment approach rather than explaining the approach.
- Compliance with the readings and homework can indicate the client’s commitment to making serious efforts to change.

The readings, which are reproduced in this chapter, are not copyrighted and may be used freely without charge or permission.

Two aspects distinguish these readings from other self-change readings (e.g., Miller & Munoz, 1982; Sanchez-Craig, 1987; Vogler & Bartz, 1982). First, they are considerably shorter. Some bibliotherapy materials go into extreme detail and include relatively complicated skills-training exercises. As discussed earlier, the evidence suggesting that even a single session of advice can produce benefits calls into question the value of skills training as an exercise for all alcohol abusers, especially problem drinkers.

Second, these readings were written with the help of a professional journalist (a newspaper columnist). The reason this was done was to produce readings that would be comprehensible to persons

who had at least some high school education. Thus, the readings were purposely written to be nonscientific and nontechnical. They have been well received by a wide range of clients.

In the formal evaluation of guided self-management treatment, two versions of the treatment were compared, one that incorporated relapse prevention components and one that was limited to behavioral counseling (Sobell, Sobell, & Leo, 1990). The readings for the two conditions differed in that the relapse prevention sections were not included in the behavioral counseling readings. For this book, the only version of the readings provided is the complete version (i.e., the version that includes the relapse prevention sections).

## Reading 1

Reading 1 (Appendix 8.1) explains that the purpose of the treatment is to help people help themselves, and it presents a general behavioral analysis of drinking. It also emphasizes that recovery is a long-term goal, an approach intended to help the client persevere in efforts to change if difficulties are encountered. A dieting analogy is used to communicate the main point that a slip need not lead to abandonment of efforts to change. In explaining the importance of setting events, referred to as “triggers,” and of short- and long-term consequences of drinking, it is stressed that each analysis must be tailored to the individual—the configuration of each client’s drinking problem is different. The notion of “risk” of consequences is also introduced. This is particularly relevant for problem drinkers because such individuals may find it easier to identify risks than actual consequences of their drinking because by definition problem drinkers are individuals whose drinking difficulties are not severe. Reading 1 ends with an introduction to Homework Assignment 1. This homework complements the self-evaluation that will have begun at assessment by instructing clients to systematically summarize and elaborate on factors related to their own drinking.

Since an understanding of Reading 1 is necessary for satisfactory completion of Homework Assignment 1, and since the reading conveys the basic treatment approach, it is important early in treatment (i.e., the first treatment session) to determine that clients understand the material and feel the approach is suitable for them. A technique that often works well is to ask the client to paraphrase or summarize the major points of the handout. For example, the therapist might say: “Please tell me what

you think are the main points in the reading and how they apply to you?" The key is to ascertain whether the client understands the important concepts and issues. If not, the therapist should attempt to guide the client to such an understanding. In cases where the approach does not fit the client's perception of his or her problem, alternative approaches should be considered.

The discussion of Reading 1 provides a good opportunity to discuss the rationale for short-term treatment with aftercare. The objective is to create a situation in which clients feel comfortable with the brevity of the formal treatment but also know that they can request additional sessions. The following is an example of content that could be used in a discussion of the treatment. This narrative was prepared as part of therapist training materials for the guided self-management treatment. It was not prepared as a "script" to be used with all clients, but rather as a way of communicating to the therapists how they can facilitate clients' understanding of the main points of the treatment. Thus, it reads as though it were a communication from the therapist to the client.

- First, let's discuss the self-management approach, and how you can prevent slips from occurring. The focus is on learning to recognize situations where you are at risk of problem drinking and to develop other ways of dealing with those situations. You may already use an approach similar to this in dealing with other problems you encounter or in giving advice to others. If this is the case, it will be even easier to extend the approach to dealing with your drinking problem.
- Although we will be discussing specific aspects of your drinking problem to illustrate how to apply this approach, these are just examples. What is important is that you apply this general approach on a regular basis—as a way of thinking about and dealing with potential problem drinking situations.
- An important point is that beyond this general approach, everything about the self-management program is individualized—tailored to your case. The situations in which you drank, the consequences you experienced, and what you can do to avoid future drinking problems are all specific to you. There are no right or wrong answers, except for you. What works for you may not work for others.
- We will also be emphasizing the need for you to identify and use your own strengths and resources in dealing with your drinking problem. People who qualify for this program, although they have a drinking problem, often are quite effective in dealing with many other areas of their lives. Examining how you deal with problems that do not involve drinking can help you identify what works for you. Many of the ways in which you deal effectively with

other problems in your life may be applicable to dealing with your drinking.

- Our starting point is to identify the types of situations in which your problem drinking has occurred or is likely to occur. Problem drinkers do not always drink, and even when they drink it is not always to excess. We will call those situations in which you have a high likelihood of problem drinking “risk” situations. As discussed in the reading, various features of risk situations can be thought of as “triggering factors,” since they tend to trigger your drinking. The first step in dealing with your drinking problem is to identify those factors that tend to “trigger” your drinking.
- In many cases, it is not difficult to understand why these factors tend to trigger your drinking. Most behaviors serve a purpose, and drinking is no different. So if you give it some thought you can usually identify certain situations in which you find drinking helpful. Drinking may not be the best way to respond to these situations, but it works to an extent at the time. The problem is that excessive drinking also tends to produce negative consequences, although many are delayed.
- In addition to identifying triggering factors, it is important to identify the results of drinking. This is not difficult, but since drinking often produces several results, it can be somewhat complex. Understanding the positive consequences of drinking and what drinking does for you is helpful in understanding why you drink. Understanding the negative consequences of drinking, which often occur at some time later than the drinking, is very important because they are what makes drinking a problem for you. It is the likelihood of suffering these negative consequences that gives you your best reason for not drinking to excess or for not drinking at all. When you are at risk of problem drinking, thinking about the negative consequences that might occur can be a useful way of reinforcing your commitment not to drink.
- As discussed in the reading, overcoming a drinking problem seldom happens overnight. However, research has also found that over time many people resolve their drinking problems. For some, the change is abrupt, and they never have drinking problems again. For many, however, the change is more gradual, but the outcome is the same: They successfully overcome their drinking problem. Although it would be most desirable that you never have any further drinking problems from this day forward, in many cases the road to recovery is a bit more bumpy. In this self-management program our approach is to hope for the ideal outcome, no further drinking problems, but also to recognize that for many the road to recovery will have some problem periods, commonly called slips or relapses.
- If you should have some bumpy periods, these can be very critical occasions, because how you react to slips can affect whether you continue to strive to change your behavior. Much of what we will be doing in treatment is intended to help you avoid slips by identifying when they



are likely to occur and taking actions to prevent them. However, we also must deal with the possibility that a slip might occur.

- The most important thing is that you have a successful outcome over the long run. The dieting example, as presented in the reading, makes this point. You set yourself a long-term goal, and you work toward it. If you encounter problems along the way, don't become discouraged and give up your goal. This does not solve anything. In the case of drinking problems it usually makes things worse since the risks you take by drinking excessively are far more serious than those of overeating. You should think of your recovery as a long-term goal. The sooner you get there the better, but even if delays and setbacks occur, you still want to get there. This kind of outlook is crucial if you encounter some bumps in the road. You can accept them as a temporary setback, or you can let them defeat you. More accurately, you can defeat yourself. This can be a very sharp two-edged sword. If you view a slip as a temporary setback, there are things you can do to minimize the impact it will have on you. If you see a slip as a defeat, such thinking will often feed into the slip to make it worse, such as "everything's already lost so I might as well blow it." If you let a slip become a defeat, recovery may be more difficult. Too much is at stake to let a temporary setback defeat you.
- This is where your Goal Statement can come into play. Your goal represents the rules that you have set for yourself. When you do not follow your rules, that is what we mean by a "slip." (For clients whose goal allows drinking, it should be stressed that this is why the rules must be well specified). Whether or not a slip occurred should not be a matter of judgment.
- If a slip occurs, you should view it as an unfortunate but surmountable and temporary setback. The reason you should view a slip in this way is simple. It lets you do something constructive, to make the best of the situation. It also helps you get back on track as quickly as possible.
- A problem that occurs for many people who are attempting to deal with their drinking problems is that if a slip occurs, they consider it to be a serious personal failure that indicates that they cannot deal with their drinking. This provides the easy explanation that they are not capable of doing what they think is best for themselves over the long run. This kind of thinking is self-defeating. It provides an excuse for giving up. A much healthier way of dealing with a slip is to just consider it what it is: a setback and nothing more. Dwelling on the slip is self-defeating because there is nothing you can do to change it, and the bad feelings will just increase. The important thing is to get back on track and put the slip behind you. This may involve riding out the bad feelings. They are natural, and they will disappear. And over the long run, you will feel better that you did not let them get the better of you.
- If you take the approach of viewing the slip as a temporary setback, but not a catastrophe, there are two things you can do to make it a constructive experience. First, even while in the midst of drinking, you can limit a slip's seriousness. If you slip, you slip, but there is no need to roll

all the way down Mount Recovery! One obvious way to lessen the impact of a slip is to stop drinking as soon as possible. Find a way out of the situation. Perhaps you can get others to help you, such as having someone drive you home or stay with you. If you are at home, you might consider throwing out the remaining alcohol. There are many things you can do to make the slip less serious, and you will feel better in the long run for having intervened early. Needless to say, if you do this, the negative consequences are also likely to be fewer, or perhaps will not occur at all. Later, although you may still regret the setback, you can take pride in having done something constructive about it.

- Another constructive thing you can do if a slip occurs is to turn it into a learning experience. What was different about this time, as compared to other occasions when you did not slip? How could you deal more constructively with the same type of situation if it occurred again? Were there any warning signals that you failed to notice? Sometimes the triggering factors, when taken separately, are not that apparent. Perhaps, a series of small events added up until you finally drank. Sometimes people can inadvertently set themselves up for a slip, structuring their life so that they have the opportunity to drink excessively or find various reasons to excuse their drinking. When this occurs, we refer to drinking that occurs as the result of seemingly irrelevant decisions. Each decision, in itself, contributed only a small increase to the likelihood of drinking to excess, but together the decision to drink excessively was a collective result. If this happens, how could you recognize the warning signs in the future?
- Also, a slip can signal that your motivational balance or commitment to change is shifting dangerously. Thus, a slip suggests it would be valuable to review your commitment to long term change. Is your commitment being challenged? If so, why is it being challenged now? How can you recapture the strength of commitment you had earlier?
- In summary, rather than putting yourself down for having slipped, do whatever you can to minimize the effects of the slip and see what you can learn from it. Turning a slip into a learning experience can have an important effect on your long-term recovery. If you have a piece of chocolate cake while on a diet, you need not give up the goal of losing weight, and you certainly should not let the initial slip be an excuse for having more cake!

Probing for high-risk situations can also be used to examine the client's understanding of relapse management concepts and the importance of how one might handle a relapse. The following are some examples of ways of probing the client's understanding of high-risk situations and whether a relapse prevention approach might be useful:

- Ask the client to describe how he or she has reacted to slips in the past.

- Ask the client to discuss any feelings of guilt that have been associated with prior slips.
- Ask the client to describe what kinds of events could lead to a slip and how he or she would handle a hypothetical future slip.
- If clients are defensive, ask them to discuss how others they know have handled slips.
- Ask clients to describe how others they know have reacted to their slips. How does the reaction of others affect their reaction to their own slip?
- Analogies, such as dieting, may be particularly useful for helping clients understand the basic treatment approach.

Finally, the discussion of Reading 1 provides an opportunity to discuss the client's answers to Homework Assignment 1 and to introduce Reading 2. The therapist could say:

“Let's take a look at your homework answers and see what we can learn about what triggers your problem drinking. Of course, identifying the triggers and being motivated to avoid problem drinking may not be enough. The trick is not so much 'wanting' not to drink as putting that wish into action. That is where your evaluation of your problem drinking all comes together. Action is the topic of the second reading and homework assignment.”

## Introducing Reading 2

When presenting the client with Reading 2, it can be helpful to provide a very brief summary of the reading's content. We present this, as we did for Reading 1, in the form of a communication from the therapist to the client.

- This second reading concerns how to make and carry out plans to avoid problem drinking. First, you identify those factors that tend to trigger your drinking along with the results or consequences that the triggering factors tend to produce. It is easier to avoid problem drinking if you can anticipate in advance when a triggering situation is likely to occur.
- Knowing the positive consequences of your drinking is also important because finding a satisfying alternative to drinking will be the first big step. This may not always be possible, however, and sometimes you may just have to tough it out and refrain from drinking to avoid problems. On many occasions, though, you will probably find that you can do something

other than drinking to deal effectively with the situation.

- The second step is to think of other possible ways you can deal with the risk situation. We call these your options, because there usually is more than one thing you can do.
- The third step is to evaluate your options in terms of the outcomes they are likely to produce and the likelihood that you will be able to carry them out. On this basis, you then decide which options are best for you.
- The final step is to put the best option into practice. This is not always as easy as it may sound, but the effort is worth it when you consider the alternative of continued problems. Developing alternative ways of dealing with problem drinking situations will be a central topic of our discussion.

## Reading 2

Reading 2 (Appendix 8.2) focuses on problem-solving skills and on actions related to relapse prevention. Although the homework assignments focus on particular types of problems, it is important to emphasize to clients that while relevant examples are considered in the sessions, they do not represent all the ways in which clients can deal with high-risk situations. In other words, the purpose of the reading is to impart a general strategy for dealing with a part of the client's life that has gotten out of hand. It is expected that after the formal treatment sessions, clients can continue to expand on and improve the specific methods they use for avoiding problem drinking. Thus, what is important for clients to learn is a strategy for developing effective ways of dealing with high-risk situations. The individual examples in Homework Assignment 2 are relevant to the client's problem, but they are intended as exercises to help the client learn how to apply the rules.

Since Homework Assignment 2 is an exercise in applying problem-solving rules, it usually is most convenient to combine probing of the client's understanding of the problem-solving approach with a discussion of the client's answers to Homework Assignment 2. Since part of Reading 2 stresses that clients can take an active role in preventing relapse, a review of the major points of the relapse prevention approach can be helpful.

A good way to lead into a discussion of the client's answers to Homework Assignment 2 is to briefly review the problem-solving guidelines. As with Reading 1, a good way to assess the client's

understanding is to ask the client to paraphrase the main points of the reading. The following examples, used in training therapists to conduct guided self-management, illustrate some points that can be covered in the review. As before, it is in the form of a communication from the therapist to the client.

- Typically, when you encounter a high-risk situation, many options or ways to deal with the situation are available. What you want to avoid is a harmful outcome. In most cases, you will need to think not only about how you can avoid excessive drinking but also about what else you can do to handle the situation. There are no “right” answers. You need to consider what is best for you. You can do this in the following way:
  - List a set of realistic options for yourself.
  - Evaluate the options in terms of their feasibility and what you judge to be their likely overall outcomes.
  - Decide upon your best option and have at least one backup plan.
  - Think of the steps needed to put your option into practice. A series of small steps will allow you to better monitor your own progress.
- The problem-solving strategy can be applied in two types of situations. First, you can use it to deal effectively with high-risk situations. It is best when you can anticipate the situation well in advance because this gives you more time and usually greater freedom to develop alternative plans. However, every time you find yourself ready to take a drink, you are potentially in a risk situation. Even if you did not anticipate the situation developing, however, you can still apply the strategy when confronted with a drink. The stakes are too high to make hasty or impulsive decisions. It is always possible to stop and think—to buy some time before taking the drink.
- As noted earlier, to avoid making impulsive decisions, some people have found it helpful to commit themselves to waiting some period of time, preferably at least 15 to 20 minutes, between when they decide to have a drink and when they actually begin drinking. This assures that the decision is not impulsive. During this “time-out” period, a person can evaluate the potential risks in more detail and can reverse the decision if he or she decides that the risk is too great.
- A second use of the problem-solving strategy is if you have a slip. In such circumstances, you can still apply this strategy for cutting off the slip as early as possible. Evaluate your options for stopping the slip as quickly as possible, and do whatever you need to achieve that goal.

Chapter 9 discusses how to review the homework assignment answers with clients, and Chapter 10 covers how the various components fit together to become an integrated treatment. This is followed in Chapter 11 by the presentation of case examples, which will illustrate how the various procedures and assignments “hang together” in practice.

## APPENDIX 8.1.

### Reading 1

#### Understanding Your Drinking Problem

You are now in a self-help treatment program. The “self-help” means that although we’re here to help you in every way, the success of the treatment will depend on you.

This is the first of two readings you should study carefully because they outline the program you’ll be developing—a program based on your own strengths and resources. For although problems with alcohol have affected your life in various ways, there are obviously many aspects of daily life that you cope with quite effectively.

These readings, therefore, will help you realize when you’re in danger of problem drinking and help you plan other ways of dealing with these situations. But only you can make sure these plans are put to use. It is your life that will benefit most by overcoming your problems with alcohol or drugs.

\* \* \*

Generally, a person’s alcohol problem does not develop overnight. And seldom does it disappear overnight. While a few people may never have further problems with alcohol from the day they decide to do something about it, for most people the solution takes some time. Resolving an alcohol problem can often be compared to a hike up a bumpy hill. Your goal is to get to the top. Most of the time you make steady progress. But sometimes you may hit dips in the path—sudden slumps in your recovery. This type of pattern is shown in the drawing on the next page. If you follow this pattern, then the way in which you react to these dips is vital to your future improvement.

It is much the same as dieting. If you break your diet during one meal, it could affect you in one of two ways:

1. You could consider your entire dieting attempt a failure and decide you don’t have the determination to continue. So you simply give up and return to your old ways of eating. If you follow this pattern, then obviously your goal will not be reached.

OR

2. You could consider it a momentary slip that sets you back only slightly in reaching your goal. But then you press on, determined to lose weight. If this is your attitude, you'll be better able to achieve your goal.

*Mount Recovery — Hill of Decisions, Decisions, Decisions!!!*



Exactly the same kind of thinking can be applied to your drinking problem. Ideally, you will never use alcohol to excess again. But there's always the possibility of a slip. And if you do slip, the way you react to it is



important. You can look at how far you've come and what lies below, take a deep breath, and continue your climb uphill. If you're prepared to accept the slip as only a temporary setback, and then press on to your goal, you are far more likely to achieve your goal. Or you can get discouraged, forget how far you've come, give up on your goal, and turn back. If you let the slips get the better of you, and simply give up, you won't get to Mount Recovery. And the next time the climb may be even more difficult.

Treat your recovery as a long-term goal, and accept a slip for what it is. One slip, and nothing else. What counts is getting to the top of Mount Recovery. Dips along the way may slow you down. But they never have to stop you.

\* \* \*

The purpose of this first reading is to **IDENTIFY YOUR PROBLEM**. Presumably, none of us acts without a purpose. And, although we don't always act in our best interests, or the way we think we should, there are usually reasons for our behavior. Generally these causes fall into two major categories. We will call the first **TRIGGERING FACTORS** because they consist of things which "trigger off" your desire to drink. They are events that set the scene for drinking, events that lead to the final decision to drink—although they sometimes continue triggering while you're using alcohol.

The second category is the **CONSEQUENCES**, or results, of your drinking. Some consequences occur while you're using alcohol (immediate results). Others occur later on (delayed, or long-term, results). Yet drinking usually results in several consequences. Some are admittedly helpful. Most of us, in fact, would probably say we use alcohol to get happy or carefree, ease tension, forget our problems, socialize more easily. But many other consequences are obviously harmful, and it is these harmful consequences that make drinking a problem. In other words, when your drinking is having harmful consequences, then it's a problem.

With most drinking, however, there's a direct relation between the **Triggering Factors and the Consequences**. For instance, some people drink at a party (a triggering factor) when they feel ill at ease (another triggering factor) in order to become more relaxed (an immediate result). Yet such drinking, of course, can also lead to hangovers and remorse about our behavior (delayed results).

But it's important to realize that the events that trigger your own drinking problems are not necessarily the same as someone else's. Some of you may have serious family problems, others do not. Some may have problems at work, others are pleasantly employed. There are no right or wrong answers to fit us all.

You must think only in terms of **yourself**, and your own problems. And don't be embarrassed to face or discuss **anything** you feel is relevant to your use of alcohol. Don't judge it—simply confront it. If it's causing you problems, then you need to deal with it.

At this point, just so we know we'll be talking about the same things, the following are some basic terms and definitions that we'll be using in the program.

### **Triggering Factors**

This expression refers to those situations which are usually associated with your heavy drinking. Yet many circumstances may qualify as Triggering Factors. For instance, they could include:

1. **Unexpected Situations:** You're on a plane, and the flight attendant offers you a drink. Or, after a meeting, your boss suggests you join him in a bar.
2. **Situations You Seek:** Dropping into your local pub. Going to a party where there's heavy drinking.
3. **Emotional Situations:** The aftermath of an argument or a heavy business negotiation. Bumping into an old friend.
4. **Personal Problems:** Frustrations over debt. Anxiety about a job interview or court appearance.

Situations, as you see, can vary enormously. Sometimes a single Triggering Factor may set off your heavy drinking. To use an extreme example: Learning you need auto repairs doesn't usually result in drinking to excess. But, if you learned your brakes were shot at the same time that you had to renegotiate your mortgage, and you sprained your back and heard you may be laid off work, that cluster of situations may form a Collective Triggering Factor that sets off your drinking.

It's rare, of course, that such misfortunes would strike all at once. But problem drinking is often

preceded by more than one triggering factor.

## Consequences

As stated earlier, some **Consequences** occur during or shortly after drinking or using drugs (immediate results), while others occur later on (long-term results). But the difference between them is important.

We often overlook the immediate results of our drinking, which are often viewed as helpful. These can range from a desired change in your mood (from tense to relaxed) to breaking down one's inhibitions (feeling more comfortable in company) to simply having a good time. If the immediate results of your drinking tend to be beneficial, this is important. Research shows that immediate results usually have a stronger effect on a person's behavior than long-term results. Unfortunately, sometimes the longterm result can be quite serious.

But long-term results are often hard to identify. We often fail to link them with the drinking that actually caused them. For instance, liver disease can be a long-term result of heavy alcohol use that goes unnoticed for years because it develops over time. Loss of a job could be another long-term effect of drinking; although it may not be directly related to any single drinking episode, the quality of your work may have gradually declined. Also, because of drinking your relationship with family or friends could slowly deteriorate.

Thus, when analyzing the consequences or results of your drinking, it is vital to include those things that **could** have occurred or **may** occur in the future. We call these "**RISKS.**" As an example: You drove home from a bar intoxicated, yet the police didn't stop you. But although you made it, the risk of arrest, or having an accident, was substantial. You risked serious consequences.

Finally, a bad consequence to you may not be considered bad by someone else. Or you might consider a consequence bad at one time and good at another time. For example, a hangover on New Year's morning can be considered the result of a once-a-year celebration, and you can sleep it off. Yet the same hangover on a Monday morning, which makes you miss work, could have a far more harmful result.

So when we speak of the “**OUTCOME**” of a drinking episode, we mean **all the combined consequences** that occur. In short, we must look at the overall picture. When the consequences are generally more harmful than helpful, that’s a drinking problem.

\* \* \*

### **Identifying Consequences and Triggering Factors**

By now you’re no doubt aware that identifying Triggering Factors and their Consequences might be more difficult than it first appeared. The key to this program is being extremely **careful and specific in your definitions**. For example, the expression “feeling depressed” is often used by people as a reason for excessive drinking. But the definition is not specific enough. You need to know what kinds of events and circumstances make you feel depressed. And again, they vary widely. You might feel depressed “after losing an argument” or “realizing you said something stupid” or “losing your temper.” But it’s easier to avoid a feeling of depression if the reasons that cause it can be identified. Analyze yourself and get to know the specific factors that most affect you.

The same is true for identifying Consequences. “Feeling better” is not specific enough. What happened to make you feel better? Was your change of mood (feeling better) associated with your drinking? Again, make a careful analysis.

\* \* \*

### **Put Your Understanding into Action**

By now you should be ready to identify the major Triggering Factors and Consequences of your drinking. Set aside a few hours in the next 2 or 3 days to carefully analyze the causes and effects of your problem. Then write them down seriously and honestly. Make lists of your Triggering Factors and of your Consequences—both good and bad, short-term and long-term. Often, you’ll find that a particular group of Triggering Factors is closely associated with a particular group of Consequences.

If at this point you feel eager to get on with the task of developing alternatives to problem drinking,

that's natural. But for your alternatives to have any meaning, it is essential to first identify your Triggering Factors and Consequences. Do not rush through this exercise. Take your time. Your drinking problems are complex. Give them the thought and consideration they deserve.

After you're satisfied with your analysis, complete Homework Assignment 1 and bring it to your next session.

**APPENDIX 8.2.**  
**Reading 2**  
**Dealing with Your Drinking Problem**

Now that you’ve identified the **Triggering Factors** and **Consequences** related to your drinking, the next step is to learn to use **this information** to avoid drinking problems in the future. This section is intended to help you develop **Options**, or **Alternatives**, to excessive drinking. Again, the issues are probably more complicated than they first appear; otherwise, far fewer people would have drinking problems.

\* \* \*

**Types of Options**

The following diagram shows four ways in which you might react to various Triggering Events (situations):

OPTIONS	EXPECTED OUTCOME
1. Drinking to Excess	⇒ HARMFUL
2. Drinking, <b>BUT</b> Not to Excess	⇒ BENEFICIAL
3. <b>NOT</b> Drinking, <b>AND</b> Acting Constructively	⇒ BENEFICIAL
4. <b>NOT</b> Drinking, <b>BUT</b> Still Acting Unconstructively	⇒ HARMFUL

**Option 1** is the most familiar, and its outcome is obvious.

**Option 2** may, or may not be, a reasonable alternative for you. It involves drinking in limited amounts—in order to avoid harmful results. But it usually means **not drinking** when in the midst of those Triggering Factors or situations associated with your drinking problem. Some people drink at certain times and experience problems, while at other times they are able to drink without problems (for

instance, a glass or two of wine with dinner). But whether or not any drinking is a reasonable option for you depends on your evaluation of three things.

- A. How seriously the Triggering Factors will affect your drinking. For example, you may feel at ease when with friends but anxious when asking for a raise—a situation causing stress.
- B. An honest appraisal of the Triggering Factors, and your ability to handle them. Can you drink in certain situations without it resulting in problems?
- C. What are the possible Consequences you will risk by drinking? The more serious the risks, the less likely it is that any drinking is a reasonable option.

**Option 3** is, naturally, a harder course to follow, but it is by far the most beneficial. We'll discuss this in more detail in a moment.

**Option 4** means that although you refuse to drink in the midst of strong Triggering Factors, you may behave in other ways that result in equally harmful consequences. For instance, instead of drinking, you may lose your temper and abuse someone—for which you later feel remorse.

As seen in the preceding diagram, just because a person responds to certain **Triggering Factors** by not drinking, it doesn't mean the results are always positive. Since we've seen that nondrinking options can be both "beneficial" and "harmful," it's important to understand these terms. The "**appropriateness**" of any alternative to drinking is **determined by the outcome** it is likely to produce.

Again, there are no absolute answers for everyone. Any single option may be appropriate only to you, but not to someone else. For example, if your boss is constantly critical of your work, you may drink as a frustrated, angry reaction. If your boss will listen to reason, however, one option may be to discuss the problem with him or her. Ask your boss what's wrong and how you might correct it. It could be something very simple. Or your boss's criticism may be totally undeserved, in which case you can explain it to him or her.

On the other hand, if your boss is simply stubborn or arrogant, such a discussion might cause him or her to fire you. In such circumstances, it might be wiser to start looking for another job, complain to a higher authority, or simply quit. These are extremes, of course. But the point is: Consider not only the

alternatives but their **likely outcomes**.

\* \* \*

### Comparing Options

At this point, having identified the **Triggering Factors** and **Consequences** related to your drinking, the next step is to decide on the **best options** for you. Some of them might involve things you do; others may involve ways of **coping**, such as learning to relax, or to accept things you can't change. The main thing, though, is to **forget about making value judgments** at this time. Simply consider all the feasible options that you have.

By "feasible," we don't mean they won't take work to accomplish. We simply mean options that are **realistically possible**. For instance, you may have marital problems. But instead of constant bickering or fighting (which drives you to drinking), how about considering alternatives such as seeking therapy, talking to your clergyman or clergywoman, discussing the problems with your spouse—or even considering separation or divorce. The options may be simple, or harsh. But the main thing is to consider **all realistic options**. It helps to list them. **Then evaluate the options in terms of their overall outcomes**. This is where value judgments come in.

When you've done that, you're in a position to make the best decision. How effective, in the long run, are the options likely to be? What will it take to reach them? Will it be worth it? and why?

The final step in choosing your best options is planning how to use them. For instance, you must consider:

1. Are you ready to see them through?
2. Are some easier to accomplish than others?
3. What personal costs will they involve? (Example: Will avoiding every drinking situation cause greater problems than simply learning to say "no thanks" with polite, but firm authority?)

These questions require serious thought, and it's little wonder we only tend to consider them when



we have to.

### **Putting Options into Effect**

Now that you've picked your best options, the question is **how to achieve your goals**. The best way is to set up a logical **Action Plan**. If your goal can only be achieved over a period of time, that time span will enable you to check on your progress. For instance, if your goal is getting out of debt (because financial worries are strong Triggering Factors), you might develop an **Action Plan** of reducing your debt by paying all your bills on time, consolidating your debts, making no unnecessary purchases, and keeping a financial ledger. Whatever your choice, an **Action Plan** will help you reach that goal.

With an **Action Plan**, if the going gets tough, you can look back and see how far you've progressed. At the same time, you can assure yourself that your efforts are worth it.

One problem that often arises when we seek solutions is the feeling that there's nothing we can do to make things better. Unfortunately, sometimes this may be true. Yet mostly, we're simply not aware of all the possible options available to us. Or we may be unwilling to take a course of action that offers long-term benefits. Thus, we sometimes get frustrated, and give up.

But there are often reasons for our reluctance to act. We may feel we lack the skills to get things done. Or we may feel the effort will cause anxiety. Yet, when evaluating options, it is important to consider all reasonable alternatives—even if you don't feel ready as yet to put them into action. If you allow yourself to feel helpless, it can lead to a sense of self-defeat or to a feeling that things won't change no matter what you do. If you find yourself feeling helpless, the first step in breaking it is to outline those things you can do if you are able. Don't limit your options only to things you feel comfortable doing. Often, experiencing some discomfort in the short run can lead to a valuable long-term payoff.

\* \* \*

In summary, the self-help program involves:

#### **PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION:**

1. *Identifying* the Triggering Factors *and* Consequences related to your drinking problem.

#### **PROBLEM SOLVING:**

2. Listing a set of options that are **feasible alternatives** to problem drinking.
3. Evaluating each option in terms of its overall outcome, and in terms of what is necessary to accomplish it.
4. Deciding which options are best—with at least one backup plan.
5. Stating your options as goals as specifically as possible.
6. Developing an Action Plan to accomplish these goals. Allow a reasonable period of time. Your problems did not develop overnight. It is not realistic to think they will disappear overnight.
7. Monitoring your progress. If your plan isn't working, try and find out why—and consider alternatives. If your plan is working, take the credit you deserve because changing one's behavior is not easy.

\* \* \*

#### **HANDLING NEW PROBLEM-DRINKING SITUATIONS**

Although future problems can't be specifically dealt with until they arise, we can consider the possibility of them. Generally, you can do this beforehand by following the sample Action Plan described above.

Remember the drawing of Mount Recovery in the first reading. Think of possible dips that might lie ahead. Develop Action Plans to avoid them. There's no sense going downhill, even briefly, if you can find a better path. Scout the trail and make the climb as easy on yourself as possible. Think seriously about Triggering Factors that **might** occur and also what is likely to happen (the Consequences) if you drink to excess. Having done that, you should be able to devise an Action Plan to head off problem drinking in the future.

Of course, you may not foresee every obstacle that lies ahead. It would be great to encounter no

obstacles on your hike, but if you do encounter obstacles—dips in the path—how you react to them can be some of the most important decisions you will ever make. Put them in perspective. You can flatten out the dip by **taking early action** (for example, by stopping drinking). The sooner you stop the slide, the quicker you will be back on the trail to Mount Recovery. There are always ways of reducing the impact of problems. **Do not let your problems build up.** Put the incident behind you as a minor setback. And use it as a learning experience: How did the slip happen? And how can you prevent a similar slip from happening again? Even when things don't go right, you can still make the best of the situation. And then put it behind you.

Hopefully, these plans will only be an exercise in thinking ahead, but the possibility of problem drinking always exists. The best way to deal with problems is to **prevent them from occurring—by anticipating them.** But if that doesn't work, you are still not out of options. The quicker you resume your climb, the faster you will reach the summit of Mount Recovery.

\* \* \*

## YOUR TURN

Having weighed the **Triggering Factors** and **Consequences** you listed in the first Homework, now is the time to develop realistic Action Plans that are most likely to help you. Follow the steps outlined in this reading, then put your chosen options into practice. **Use your own strengths and resources.** You use them in countless situations every day without resorting to excessive drinking. Those same resources are your most effective alternatives.

But an Action Plan is not enough by itself. The way to overcome your drinking problem is by putting the plan into practice. **It's up to you.**

After you have decided upon your Action Plans, complete Homework Assignment 2 and bring it to your next session.

