

Praise for This Book

This wonderful handbook on alcoholism is the best, most concise text I have ever come across in the more than forty-five years I have worked in the field in the United States and Southeast Asia. It is accurate, hopeful, and instructive for both the person with addictions and their family members. I was particularly impressed with the information on interventions, which is useful for both families and professionals.

*Marjorie Nixon, LCSW,
Addiction Specialist
and in Recovery a Day at a Time*

This book will bring help to people having trouble with their alcohol use by explaining the concept of alcohol addiction and showing a way to recover from this devastating disease so they can regain life to its fullest. More important, it provides a roadmap for family members, loved ones, and friends of the person addicted to alcohol to help him or her. It gives great hope and explains how family members can live life without the devastation that a loved one can bring to a family when alcohol takes over.

Br. Gerry Patin, CSSR

Alcohol Abuse

RECOVERY FOR THE CATHOLIC FAMILY

FATHER TED LAWSON, CSSR

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Preface

Anger, fear, and despair reign when alcohol abuse is in charge. Chaos is the constant state of life of alcohol abusers and their loved ones. Life may feel hopeless. It is not. There is help. If you are mired in the morass of alcohol abuse, either as the drinker or as his or her loved one, this book is for you.

Different words are used to discuss and define alcohol abuse and the people who abuse it. While “alcohol use disorder (AUD)” is the name that professionals today attach to the disease, I will use the more common terms—alcoholism and alcoholic.

I write from a solid Catholic perspective. I am a long-time Catholic priest with extensive education in addiction counseling. My aim is to define the crippling disease of alcoholism, describe its impact on the family, and offer ideas for how to get help. My book is not a definitive presentation on alcoholism. I pray that it’s useful.

People struggling with alcoholism (or other addictive behaviors) may be the last to realize they have a problem. Alcoholism can destroy the lives of everyone living with or dealing with an alcoholic, who can be of any age, race, gender, societal class, religion.

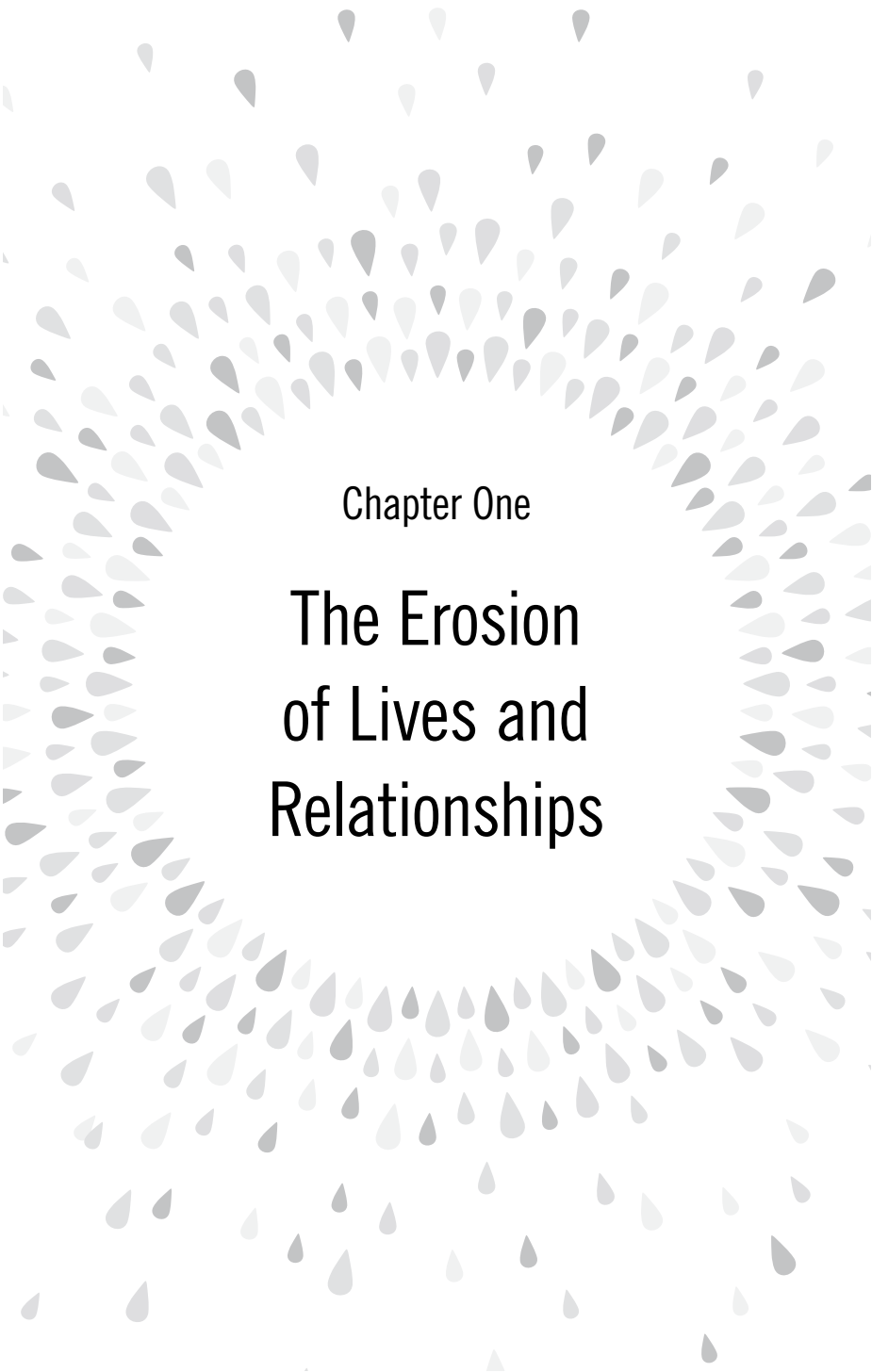
Those addicted to alcohol and those who live with them wonder, “What’s going on? I’m afraid. I’m angry. What can I do? I’m not living, I’m surviving.” If that’s you or someone you care about, your next job is to find HELP. This beautiful prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr outlines a helpful path.

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.

Serenity means finding peace of mind and a healthy perspective. That comes about when we **accept** or understand that we are powerless in certain areas of our lives. Finding **courage** to change comes with realizing we are not always powerless and we can act to make a difference. **Wisdom** is growing in our ability to make healthy choices and ask for help.

The Serenity Prayer is true. It comforts. Pray it daily. It’s an important ingredient in the recipe for the recovery God wants for you.

Alcoholics will find their best starting point is the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, a program I discuss in these pages. AA opens the door to a fulfilling life without alcohol. Similar help is available to the loved ones of the alcoholic. With the help of God and resources like this book, recovery can be yours. Let’s begin.



Chapter One

The Erosion of Lives and Relationships

The Erosion of Lives and Relationships



*As for me and my
household, we will
serve the LORD.*

JOSHUA 24:15B

What would it be like to have an active volcano one hundred yards from your home? You would never know when the volcano will erupt and destroy everything you own and everyone you love. You live with this constant threat that life as you know it could drastically change at any time. You might respond by developing various plans to minimize the inevitable impending disaster. Eventually, however, you would see that plans are useless due to the strength of the volcano. You might try to ignore it and live as if it didn't exist. This approach wouldn't work because, deep down, you'd know this omnipresent specter of destruction remains. How long could you live with the uncertainty?

The tension of this scenario is like that experienced by an alcoholic and members of his or her family. It describes the silent, unwanted third party that has infiltrated the family, controlling everyone it encounters. The name of this third party? Alcoholism. Left unchecked, this disease kills. This killer can be stopped, but first it must be known.

Alcoholism Defined

Defining the disease of alcoholism is difficult. The key word to remember is *disease*. Unchecked, the disease of

alcoholism is chronic, progressive, and fatal. Here's a definition:

Alcoholism is a chemical dependence, a chronic disease characterized by an individual's inability to control his or her intake of mood-altering chemicals. That uncontrolled intake causes dysfunction in all facets of the alcoholic's life.

Let's consider each part of this definition separately.

Alcoholism is a chemical dependence, a chronic disease. It can be compared to diabetes. The diabetic's body cannot deal with sugar properly. It never will be able to deal with sugar properly. A diabetic will always be a diabetic. With a proper diet and, in some cases medication, the person can live a healthy life. Likewise, the alcoholic's body cannot process alcohol in the same way as someone who does not have the disease. Despite all resolutions and attempts to set limits on his or her drinking, without intervention, the alcoholic constantly breaks these limits.

The drinker is unable to *control his or her intake of mood-altering chemicals, causing dysfunction in all facets of the alcoholic's life.*

For example, after a few drinks, Jim is the life of the party. Lately, he finds he consistently has more drinks

than he intended to have. Before the office Christmas party, he had decided to have only two drinks. But a couple of hours into the party, Jim is not sure how much he has had to drink. While he is the life of the party, he has far exceeded the limit he set for himself. After several incidents like this, Jim realizes deep down that he cannot control how much he drinks—or even when he drinks.

Note that the definition of alcoholism uses the phrase “mood-altering chemicals,” not alcohol. Alcohol (technically, ethanol or ethyl alcohol) is a drug that the body can become dependent upon. There are, of course, many drugs that a person can become addicted to, but alcoholism is one of the most common addictions and continues to grow.

Joan, through her use of another drug, realized she was an alcoholic. Under pressure about her drinking at home and at work, she admitted she had a problem and decided to quit drinking. While abstaining from alcohol, Joan found that stress still mounted in her life. Her doctor prescribed Valium (diazepam), a drug whose effect on the body is similar to that of alcohol. On her own, she soon began to increase the dosage her doctor had specified. For a period of time, Joan failed to realize or admit that she was looking for something to take the place of the alcohol she had given up.

While addiction to drugs such as Oxycodone, heroin,

and PCP is a major, growing problem in our society, this book will focus on alcohol. The number of alcoholics in this country shows that for too many it is a drug of choice.

One form of alcohol is no more or no less addictive than another. Many think alcoholics only drink hard liquor (whiskey, gin, vodka, etc.), but beer and wine drinkers are still drinking alcohol and can still get addicted.

It helps to know that alcoholism is a biopsychosocial disease. “Bio” refers to the body’s physical response to the chemical. “Psychosocial” refers to the effects of the disease that are not purely physical. Four different areas of the alcoholic’s life are affected: physical, psychological, social, and spiritual. These are what are referenced as “facets of the alcoholic’s life” in the definition.

Alcoholism: A Snapshot

In a 2019 study by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 25.8 percent of persons ages eighteen and older reported engaging in binge drinking and/or “heavy alcohol use” in the past month. If these people are alcoholics, each one has a direct impact on the lives of at least four other people. Mathematically, 25.8 percent of a group of 1,000 people brings the total number

of alcoholics to 258. Thus, they are affecting about 1,000 persons with this destructive disease.

Alcoholism does not discriminate. The alcoholic can be a mother, father, daughter, son, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandparent, or friend. Not every family fits into the mold of a traditional nuclear model. More homes today are headed by single parents, comprised of blended families, or multiple generations. While this book will discuss the traditional family structure, my primary focus is on the erosion of lives and relationships due to alcoholism. No matter how a family is constructed, no household with an alcoholic is exempt, and the effects are, devastatingly, the same.

Facets of a Disease

An alcoholic's body cannot handle alcohol. The chemical alters his or her physical makeup. The alcoholic's body absorbs alcohol more easily than it absorbs essential nutrients. The human body can only take so much. After a time, it breaks down. This physical difference in the ability to absorb alcohol is difficult to observe. For all practical purposes, the alcoholic may appear to drink in the same way other people do. In fact, in the early stages of the disease, the alcoholic will be able to drink more than others. This is called "increased tolerance."

He or she can drink everyone else “under the table” and appear completely sober. Alcohol is a powerful drug that can kill if someone takes too much at one time. Withdrawal from alcohol also can be life-threatening. The “shakes” that alcoholics suffer when they quit drinking is a withdrawal symptom.

Medically, alcohol is classified as a depressant. It slows or numbs the body’s central nervous system. The first response of many people in a crisis is to have a drink to settle their nerves. In movies, it’s common to see a character go for the bottle when times are tough. In life, after a certain number of drinks, the resulting numbness or a related state becomes the status quo. As the brain’s operations are dulled, impaired thinking sets in, adversely affecting the psychological facet of life.

For example, consider Karen. She has a stress-filled job as a sales rep for a large corporation. Financial worries about her upcoming wedding hang over her head. Her fiancé often tells her she should find a way to relax. Karen is convinced that the best way to relieve her tension is to have a few drinks. That decision may plague her. Later in life, Karen may find alcohol is the only way she has to deal with life’s struggles.

When an alcoholic is actively drinking, the people he or she interacts with notice the change. They may show concern, nag, or express anger and resentment. The alco-

holic will begin to associate with people who don't care about his or her drinking or may even affirm it. Sometimes these may be people the alcoholic would not otherwise interact with. Companions who value drinking and have no regard for its consequences reinforce the alcoholic's behavior. In this way the social facet of the alcoholic's life is altered by the disease.

For example, Jack likes to drink with the guys from the office. Every day after work they stop at a bar across the street to have "one for the road" before heading home. Jack, however, has a few more than one, and his friends challenge his behavior. Rather than put up with their objections, Jack steams and finds a different place to go after work where he can drink as much as he wants without judgment. There, Jack becomes loud, and the management looks unkindly toward him. Eventually, he finds the best place to drink is at home in the privacy of his basement workroom. Little by little, Jack cuts himself off from other people so he doesn't have to worry about others questioning his drinking.

Isolation, which accompanies many drinkers, affects the spiritual facet of an alcoholic's life. Spirituality is not necessarily connected with formal religion. The spiritual aspect of life is wherever people—including alcoholics—look for strength, help, or solutions to the realities of life.

For instance, Patti is in her early forties. For as long as

she can remember, she has received praise for her leadership skills. When she was in school, she was active in student government. At home, her five younger brothers and sisters always looked to her for help and guidance. When she began her career, it didn't take long for her employer to see that she was hard-working and responsible. Through the years she was rewarded with several significant promotions.

As her brothers and sisters reached adulthood and moved out on their own, they continued to turn to Patti for help. Patti believes she should be in charge and have the answers. At the same time, she has found she is unable to solve every problem or always offer direction.

Patti finds she cannot erase her sister's pain when she experiences the tragic death of her husband. Patti cannot dissuade her employer from selling the company to a larger corporation. Patti cannot make the man she is in love with love her back. She feels powerful when she is in charge, and alcohol seduces her, relaxing her so she can delude herself into believing she is in charge. Her go-to way of dealing with realities outside her control becomes more frequent drinking. When her power mindset does not fit a particular life situation, the only thing she can turn to is alcohol.

Cause and Effect

The spiritual facet of alcoholism, the most difficult to recognize and define, is responsible for an individual's will to live. We accept or deny values, goals, and limitations in the context of our spiritual facet. Life can be a mere survival of daily events, or it can be an exciting gift to be relished, depending upon the extent to which we are in touch with our spiritual facet.

For alcoholics, the need to drink is more important than being with other people. In the case of some alcoholics, that need also will determine what kind of people the alcoholic will associate with. Alcohol can give the alcoholic the illusion of power or control. The alcoholic knows that if she or he drinks enough, a desired state of consciousness will be achieved. The illusion of life-sustaining strength is found in the bottle. It is difficult, if not impossible, to deal effectively with the spiritual facet of life under these circumstances.

The spiritual facet of life includes handling as best we can the daily realities that are outside of our control. As the alcoholic struggles to cope with human limitations, daily problems, and questions with no cut-and-dried answers, a drink becomes the starting point for an attempted resolution. Use of the chemical provides the primary means of dealing with life. It's a crutch.



Fr. Ted Lawson, CSsR, is the director of the Redemptorist Retreat Center in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. While in graduate school, Fr. Ted received addiction-counseling education at the Clinical Training Program for Addiction Counselors. He never ceases to be amazed by the inspiring stories of the people he encounters when he is called to direct retreats, offer days of recollection, and preach parish missions and novenas nationwide. Fr. Ted is particularly devoted to making known Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the “Window to the Gospel.”