

## NO MAJOR CHANGES IN YOUR FIRST YEAR OF SOBRIETY

Early sobriety can feel very good, and in the first year of recovery many alcoholics, convinced we can handle anything, have a strong desire to make big changes, to get on with our lives. But no matter how compelling these feelings are, we should avoid making big changes until we've got some time under our belts.

### Q: What's wrong with changes, anyway? Isn't getting sober all about change?

Yes, but not *external* change. As you may have heard, sobriety is an "inside job." If you start thinking that external changes are the keys to your happiness (or sobriety), you are falling back into old habits.

External things will fail you in sobriety just as they did when you were active. For alcoholics, lasting happiness is only possible in sobriety, and sobriety comes from doing the work to improve your *spiritual* condition.

### Q: What if the change is really good?

Getting sober is a difficult process, and early sobriety is fragile. Even objectively positive changes can jeopardize that process, because change is almost always accompanied by some of the following things, all of which can be hard for newly sober people to handle:

**Expectations** – the conviction that a change will be good is based on expectations of a certain outcome. Your ego tells you that the results will be all good, but that is rarely the case. Step 4 will help you learn to identify and temper your expectations.

**Stress** – Any change brings stress, and you should not add unnecessary stress to your early sobriety.

**Elation** – If everything goes fantastically, you may be faced with a situation where you feel ecstatic and celebratory. Sounds good, right? But experience shows that overelation can be harmful, too.

**Failure** – Most alcoholics have experience with making promises and failing to come through. This pattern doesn't stop just because you quit drinking. Learning to show up is a process. Give it time.

### Q: But why a whole year?

Newly sober alcoholics are like newborn babies. We have to learn how to walk again, gathering sober experience of just *living* before we start tackling the more complicated aspects of normal life. You can't become a surgeon without learning anatomy. Think of the first year as an introductory class in sober living.

A year is not just a nice round number. After a year you should be well on your way to completing the steps. Read the 9<sup>th</sup> step promises – *that's* the state you want to be in before you start making major changes.

Few changes are so urgent that they can't wait a year. It may sound like forever, but if the change is really a good idea, it will still be an option when you're ready. Give yourself a chance to meet life's big changes fully.

### Q: But I really think this change is a good idea.

Yes, *everybody* thinks *their* changes are a good idea. Ignoring suggestions or thinking you know best is **self-will**, one of the main symptoms of your disease. Thinking you are a special, unique exception is a form of **grandiosity** typical to the alcoholic ego.

If none of the logic above sways you, following this suggestion is one of those leaps of faith where you get to trust 70 years of AA experience rather than your own ideas. Remember what they say: your best thinking got you here.

**IN SUMMARY!** Don't place your hope in external changes. Keep your focus on getting sober through the steps. Even good changes can impede your progress. Wait until you are healthy enough to handle major changes.

### Test any change with this checklist. Will this change...

- ... add stress to my life?
- ... decrease my free time?
- ... make it harder to attend meetings?
- ... increase my responsibilities?
- ... tend to draw my primary focus away from my sobriety?
- ... place me near situations or people dangerous to my sobriety?

If the answer is yes to any of those questions, the change can probably wait until you have a year AND have done Step 9.

### The classic major changes to avoid in the first year:

- Don't quit your job
- Don't move to a new place
- Don't start a serious relationship
- Don't get married
- Don't have a baby

### To which I would add:

- Don't start a new business
- Don't go to grad school
- Don't start a band

### Some specific situations or activities to avoid:

- Avoid bars and intoxicated people
- Avoid spending too much time with your family
- Avoid performing in front of large groups of people
- Avoid activities likely to result in serious injury
- Avoid traveling alone, with family, or with drinkers
- Don't host big parties
- Don't start training for a marathon
- Don't drastically increase the amount you exercise

### Talk to your sponsor about these possible exceptions:

- Leaving an abusive relationship
- Quitting a job that surrounds you with booze/drugs
- Quitting smoking
- Starting/stopping certain medications