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The Dry Drunk Syndrome

Revised Edition

HAZELDEN

INTRODUCTION

Who is this pamphlet for?

If you've arrested your alcoholism or other chemical dependency, this pamphlet is for you. It's also for your family and friends. My aim is to explain the dry drunk syndrome in simple, everyday terms. I make no claim to a scientific approach, but rather to my years of experience as a chemical dependency counselor.

The term *dry drunk syndrome* was first used a long time ago, when treatment programs focused exclusively on alcoholism. This pamphlet, however, applies to *any* chemically dependent person who wants to stay clean and sober. The information is not just for alcoholics, so instead of writing just about drinking, I often apply the term *using*. This word embraces any chemical we take to get drunk or get stoned or alter our mood.

Dry drunk: Intoxication without chemicals

To understand what this pamphlet is about, focus on two words. *Dry* refers to the fact that we've stopped drinking or using other drugs. *Drunk* means that using a chemical has left us powerless and our lives unmanageable. These words suggest intoxication without alcohol or other drugs.

Intoxication comes from the Greek word for poison. That fits well, since *dry drunk* refers to attitudes and actions that poison our well-being. We keep acting "drunk," even when we're "dry." What's more, these attitudes and actions often show up *after* we've

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been sober for a while. They're a sure sign that we're experiencing discomfort in our lives.

Sobriety has ups and downs

Sobriety has its ups and downs, its good times and bad times. Changes, shocks, and setbacks are normal, and when we address these with the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), we can still stay sober. Dry drunk syndrome, however, is different; it's not a catch-all term for every bad day we have or every bump in life we may hit. A dry drunk is far more serious than that.

No shame, no blame

When reading about the dry drunk syndrome, leave your feelings of shame or blame at the door. Remember, *dry drunk* describes a problem, not a person. The point is not to condemn ourselves but to admit the truth and move on. The thoughts, feelings, and actions that come with a dry drunk don't have to linger. We can develop new patterns of thinking and feeling. We can make a fresh start in life. Through the miracle of the Twelve Step program, we can change. If you've stayed clean and sober for even a short time, you already know that.

Remember, too, that dry drunk behavior can happen to anyone—including people who will never be chemically dependent. A business executive caught in a traffic jam leans on her car horn in a frenzy of irritation. The single parent resents doing the family wash and blames his children for getting their clothes dirty. Both examples show beliefs and behavior that are neither realistic nor appropriate. Dry drunk behavior just goes a few steps beyond these examples.

A look at dry drunk attitudes

Whenever we experience a full-blown dry drunk, we leave the world of sobriety. Our mental and emotional homes become chaotic, our approach to everyday living unrealistic. All this is reflected in our attitudes and actions.

Let's start with some dry drunk attitudes—the way we think. People in Twelve Step programs use some key words to describe these attitudes.

Grandiosity

Grandiosity simply means exaggerating our importance. It can apply to our strengths or weaknesses. Either way, it puts *me* at the center of attention—the “big me” who has all the answers or the “poor me” whose cup of self-pity runneth over.

Judgmentalism

Judgmentalism and grandiosity go hand in hand. The result is that we feel we have the right to size up others as either good or bad. Sometimes these judgments contain a kernel of truth; often they are simply off base. At the same time, we judge our own using harshly, and others can usually sense how unworthy we feel.

One way to disguise this feeling of unworthiness is to judge our families, friends, colleagues, and employers as harshly as we judge ourselves. We find faults in others. Even as we admit our own shortcomings, we catalog the sins of family, friends, employers, and people in authority. This is one way to get off the hook and avoid change—by saying,

"Look, I am not so different from anyone else."
These people may dismiss our criticism, which is not surprising.

Intolerance

Intolerance means that we want to satisfy every desire *now*. When we're intolerant, our priorities get confused: we give more attention to whims or passing fancies than to genuine personal needs.

Impulsivity

Impulsivity *follows* intolerance. When we're impulsive, we ignore the consequences of our behavior. For example, we buy things we can't afford. Grandiosity gets mixed in here, too—such as having a new car in the driveway when we really can't afford the old one.

Indecisiveness

Indecisiveness and impulsivity are close kin. When we're impulsive, we don't consider the results of our actions; when we're indecisive, we often fail to take *any* action. We exaggerate the negative things that *might* happen. We waver between all the options. Usually nothing gets done.

Attitudes have results

When any of these attitudes take over our thinking, we may find certain things happening to us:

- Our moods swing. Often these have nothing to do with the events we're upset about. The real reason for our moods can go much deeper than those events—or it can be the most minor irritation. As a friend of mine says, "The sugar is

too sweet or the doughnut is too round." Any excuse will do.

- Our feelings get dull. We lose our "spark," the ability to express our emotions freely and naturally.
- We find it hard to look inside ourselves. It becomes difficult to examine our thoughts and feelings, something vitally important to Twelve Step recovery.
- We become aloof and withdrawn. We're indifferent. We don't care one way or another about anything, and we express no special likes or dislikes. Nothing really matters to us anymore.
- We dwell on ourselves, calling attention to our accomplishments. To put it bluntly, we act like pompous asses.
- We fail to enjoy activities that can bring us pleasure, such as music, reading, conversation, athletics, and art. Nothing satisfies us. Joy and fulfillment elude us.
- We become disorganized, distracted, and bored. Nothing seems to fit for us.
- We become nostalgic. We yearn for a past that seemed free of cares—an *illusion*. We long for the drinking, the bars, and our drinking or drug-using companions; we miss the soft music, blue lights, and tinkle of the ice cubes in a glass at the neighborhood saloon.
- We become desperate for escape. We fantasize, daydream, and get lost in wishful thinking. In the process, we slip farther and farther from the real world.

- We narrow our options. We do and think the same things over and over again, locking ourselves into predictable patterns.

A look at dry drunk behavior

The dry drunk syndrome affects not only how we think but how we act. Let's look at the details.

Denying

In the midst of a dry drunk, we're often uneasy without knowing why. The discomforts of the past hover about us and cloud our present feelings. We agree with society that certain behaviors are selfish and destructive, yet we do not control such behavior in ourselves. Rather than face reality, we guard our self-esteem, telling ourselves, "That behavior was not and cannot be true of me."

This strategy of denial fails us time after time. We still brush up against feelings and thoughts that trouble us. We still sense, however dimly, memories and wishes that we'd prefer to silence.

It's hard for anyone to hold up under this kind of inner conflict, so we do what we can to protect ourselves. Much of the time, we simply deny or downplay the truth. "Yes, I've been in the AA program for three years now, and it's really done a lot of good for me," we say, even though we may still be drinking at the time.

Rationalizing

Like denial, rationalizing boosts our self-esteem for a little while. When we rationalize, we derail criticism and justify ourselves at every turn. We even find reasons for avoiding AA or other Twelve Step programs.

Our reasons sound so logical, but they only sidestep our need for help.

Projecting

Projection means finding in others the things we can't accept about ourselves. We may accuse others of being highly critical, although this describes our own attitude toward ourselves and others. We accuse others of wanting to get us drunk, or we accuse a Twelve Step friend of drinking or using. We even suspect that others suspect us of using. All of these are ways to get around the thoughts and feelings that trouble us.

Overreacting

One hallmark of the dry drunk is overreaction. We get worked up over minor events or resent others for no apparent reason; we may get violent after losing a hand at bridge or missing a phone call. Friends and family members may brush off our behavior and say that we're just blowing off steam. But overreacting often keeps us from facing a bigger problem in our lives. What's more, overreacting can be dangerous to us and others.

Complying

When we are experiencing a dry drunk, we seem to know all the answers. We're rarely at a loss for words. Our knowledge sounds impressive, our insight convincing. We become compliers—people who comply, who *seem* to play by the rules.

In truth, however, our words and deeds grow farther apart. We seem to accept criticism and even speak at length about our defects. Others sense that

we're about to change for the better. Yet we're unable to translate words into action. Our performance still falls short of our promises.

Again, we do these things to avoid feeling discomfort and making decisions. We slide onto the path of least resistance, both at home and at work. We know what we *could* do—what would be constructive, what would really help us. Yet our old attitudes and actions still win out.

We can even use our Twelve Step program to become compliant. Using the “correct” jargon, we can speak loudly about our “moral inventory” or “conscious contact.” We pay lip service to the program’s principles, and that frees us, for the moment, from *doing* anything about them.

Take a moment to reflect

Have any of the attitudes or behaviors described so far played a role in your life? If so, write down two or three recent examples. What did you think, say, or do that can be called a dry drunk characteristic?

1.

2.

3.

OUR FAMILIES NEED HELP

We're not in this alone. This drama plays out in our families, too. What we say and do can lead to more discomfort in those we love. And we, in turn, sink further into a dry drunk.

Playing by unspoken rules

Think of families as obeying certain rules. For families with an addicted or alcoholic member, says therapist Claudia Black, those rules boil down to this: *Don't talk. Don't trust. Don't feel.* The problem is that we're often not aware of how these rules affect us—or even that the rules exist.

Rules have a payoff: they help everyone in the family feel better, *at least for a while.* As a result, we can deny our discomfort, and our families can deny *their* discomfort in adjusting to us. What's more, everyone involved can *deny their denial.* No one sees anything unusual going on.

Soon our discomfort and denial become the axis around which the family revolves as its members adjust to our unrealistic demands. Family members are slowly “sucked” into our problem, just as surely as they were when we were drinking or drugging.

The need for outside help

Taken together, these attitudes and behaviors make it hard for us to view ourselves realistically. We fail to see ourselves as others see us. And it's easy to hold ourselves blameless, the victims of events beyond our control. The more firmly we hold on to these beliefs, the more clever we become in resisting help. To us, life seems manageable again, our sanity beyond question. We see little need for a Higher Power, and we consider personal inventories unnecessary. After all, we are seldom in the wrong and have outgrown the embarrassing need to make amends and ask for forgiveness.

Fortunately, we can start to see beyond all this. We who have made this remarkable "recovery" realize we are still unmanageable, still powerless. Stripping away our mask of denial is painful. Yet it's also positive, since it can lead to a sincere desire for change.

It's hard for family members to understand all this clearly. They desperately need the viewpoint of someone who's not caught up in the family fray, and outside help can give them that.

Where to go for help

Any family that wants help has several options.

Twelve Step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous are probably the best source of immediate help. To find them, look in the local Yellow Pages under "Alcoholism."

County human services divisions are excellent resources. They are often staffed with people trained to help families cope with the dry drunk syndrome.

Many treatment centers offer help for those affected by the dry drunk through programs for the

chemically dependent person and the family. These usually last three to five days, and family members are expected to take part in all sessions.

Al-Anon provides ongoing support for families struggling with a loved one's chemical dependency. Families who get the most out of this program may attend Al-Anon meetings as often as a recovering alcoholic would attend AA. In addition, Al-Anon works best when members realize that the work of recovery is forever—for the family as well as the chemically dependent person. That person's sponsor can also be a powerful source of help.

In any case, it's essential for the family to get involved. *Before any relapse, there is a dry drunk that goes untreated.* This statement is not intended to frighten anyone; it just points out the consequences of doing nothing.

Some of us become aware of our dry drunk tendencies and decide to step up our involvement in AA or another Twelve Step program. Families or friends may oppose this idea at first. They can help us most, however, by letting us work out our own relationship to the program. We deserve every encouragement to consider long and hard whether the Twelve Steps are still valid for us.

THE SOLUTION: LONG-LASTING SOBRIETY

Early in our recovery, we learn that humility and a power greater than ourselves are the bedrock of our sobriety. Accepting these ideas calls for self-discipline and a little ego-deflating. At first, honesty, patience, and responsibility can be irksome as we take on a way of life that seems arbitrary and difficult.

But the work pays off. With sustained effort, we can accept the short-term discomfort, even the pain. The tools we need are already in our hands. We've learned them through working a Twelve Step program. Admitting our powerlessness, turning to a Higher Power, taking inventory, making amends, praying and meditating—these are some of the skills that will take us beyond the dry drunk. Now's a perfect time to move from reading to action. Please take a few minutes to list three things you can do this week to recharge your recovery program. And come back to this pamphlet from time to time whenever your program batteries need a little recharging.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous*

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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