

**Fifty Ways to Love Your Liver**  
**A Hard Drinker's Reflections on**  
**Moderation**



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**Moderation**

**Rick Gehrke**



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**“Day by day, what you choose, what you think and what you do is  
who you become.”**

**—Heraclitus**



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## INTRODUCTION

“Childhood is like being drunk: everyone remembers what you did,  
except you.”

—Unknown

The memories are fading, but I think I started drinking around age ten or twelve. Not a lot at first, but it goes way back. When did you start drinking? What was going on in your life at the time, and how did you respond to it? Please keep your earliest experiences with alcohol in mind as you read through this book.

Both of my parents drank. Not much. I don’t remember ever seeing them drunk or even close to it, but there was always some kind of alcohol in the house. Beer, wine, or liquor, or any combination thereof. Mom made wine when I was a kid, and it was an easy trick to sneak a bottle out of the basement and hide it in my room. There was liquor in the kitchen cabinet, and thinking myself a genius, I’d drink some and add water to the bottles to bring the levels back up. I don’t remember anyone ever challenging me on this. My parents were educated, responsible, loving, supportive, and protective. They tried for seventeen years to turn me into a good Lutheran, and while it never really stuck, I have to give them credit for the effort. They had integrity and worked hard to take care of me and my sister and brothers.

Compared to many people in this world, I had a good childhood, but problems started early. I’m going to tell you about some of them and ask you to consider your own early life and experiences, and to think about how you got to be who you are today. This book is not a confession. I’m not revealing any secrets here. I’m telling you some personal things because I hope it might make it easier for you to relate to the material. I also want to point out that so many of our pains and traumas that drive alcohol abuse are way more common than we sometimes believe. No matter how bad it seems, you are not alone!

I’m telling you this story from the perspective of a middle-aged man, while keeping in mind that not all of you readers are also middle-aged men. As you read my historical anecdotes, please translate them as you like, and

consider how your own experiences and those of your parents have shaped the way you think and behave. Parents play a critical role in their children's emotional and cognitive growth. Research shows that both parents are important, but from my perspective the father's role is by far the most influential on the developing character of a boy, so I'll tell you a little about my father.

First and most important, Bob Gehrke was a great man. He worked hard all his adult life taking care of his family, leaving little to himself in terms of time, comfort, or possessions. He was a pinnacle of integrity, and he taught me the values of persistence and responsibility, which have served me well throughout my life. Dad had it rough growing up. When he was a young child, Grandma divorced my grandfather, Emil Gehrke, and poisoned Dad's mind against him. From what I know now, Emil was also a good man, but my dad grew up thinking that his father was a lowlife, and that he had died by suicide. Both were untrue. Think about that for a minute and about how it would have affected you.

Grandma took in boarders at her house to make ends meet. When Dad was in high school, one of the male boarders sexually assaulted him repeatedly. This abuse continued until the night before he married my mom and left the house. He carried that awful experience, hidden, for most of his life. Much later, when Mom was fighting for her life, battling breast cancer, she went into a deep depression. Part of her own quest for healing was telling Dad she couldn't go on living with his rage, and that she wanted him to get help. Initially he refused. Mom entered a psychological treatment center in Arizona to help her sort out her own emotional challenges, and during her stay there, Dad visited for a week as part of the program. That's when his secret finally came out. At last, he found help. At last, he found some happiness. Sadly, this happiness wouldn't last. In January of 1994, after a long, nasty fight with cancer, he was gone.

I'm not saying that the unfortunate events with the boarder defined him, but it did impact the rest of his life. Though he never repeated that behavior himself, the anger burned in him always, and affected everyone around him. He wasn't violent or cruel, just angry and unhappy. For forty years Dad carried that secret, which continually ate at him, and when it finally came to light, the way we grew up made more sense. I'm not throwing all my own behavior problems at my dad's feet, or at those of his

assailant, but if you've had a similar experience yourself, you know it's like a contagious disease. For your own sake and for the sake of the people around you, you must find help.

According to what my mom tells me, I caught the brunt of Dad's anger. As I recall it, most of my own anger fell on my brother Alan, and he took his out on himself. The relationship with my brother would turn into a giant source of guilt and regret later in my life. There was a lot going on under the surface in our home. We were a dysfunctional family, although I don't think that term existed back then. I got into trouble often—petty theft, vandalism, trespassing, mouthing off to teachers, two arrests—it's a long list. I had a short and raging temper. I was the first in the family sent to a psychiatrist. With all that was going on, the adults identified me as the problem. I needed counseling, I needed medication, I needed fixing.

I got picked on and bullied a lot, all the way from elementary school through junior high. Kids can be mean, and I somehow made myself an easy target. We were new in the small town of Nappanee, Indiana, most of the kids were long-time natives, and they may have seen me as an outsider. I'd never learned to fight, and I was raised on advice such as "Don't get in fights," "Turn the other cheek," and, among the worst advice I've ever heard, "Ignore them and they'll stop." Believe me, they won't. I didn't fight back, so the bullying continued.

Here's my advice to you parents, big brothers and sisters, and other guardians: Teach anyone under your care to fight, to stand up for themselves, and to stand up for others. This doesn't have to be through violence, but I wouldn't rule that out as a last resort. Yes, we want our kids to be good members of society. At the same time, we need to teach them not to take any unsolicited shit from anyone.

I dreaded seeing the sunrise and made up any excuse I could to ditch school. I discovered at a young age the comforting feeling of an alcohol buzz. It was like magic. Instant peace. At the beginning of junior high school, we moved to Mansfield, Ohio and I transferred to an inner-city school. The social scene there was mostly divided between the "haves" and the "have-nots", and I didn't fit in with either. Making things more fun, I was going through puberty. The gulf between Dad and me was getting wider and deeper, and I had no close friends or other guiding figures to help me sort out the whole girl thing. At this point, the bullying became

more physical. Daily, I came face-to-face with “kids” who did heroin and carried knives. I hated it. Life sucked.

During my first year of high school, we moved out to Ontario, a nearby suburb of Mansfield. I joined the junior varsity football team, and the bullying stopped. My drinking behavior was moderate until my last year in high school. I'd been on the football team for a season and a half, I ran track for a season, and I was strong and healthy. One day during a late summer two-a-day football practice, I told the coach I needed to leave early so my mom could use the car. He told me if I left not to come back. I left. He later apologized and asked me to rejoin the team, but I'd already gone out and gotten a job.

I was washing dishes in restaurants and working as a theater usher when the parties started. Everyone I worked with was older than me, and most had access to alcohol. I had also recently discovered cannabis, which would play a role later. I was lonely and depressed, and on my way to becoming a delinquent. I'd drifted away from the friends I'd made playing football, my grades went to hell, and I had no direction, no dreams, no light on the horizon. Drinking was rising higher on my list of problems, providing enough relief to become a habit. I began to engage in dangerous combinations of activities—involving, for example, alcohol, cars, and guns.

The closest thing I ever had to a girlfriend turned out to be an illusion, a lie that inflicted lasting damage on my psyche. I won't go into details here, but what it boils down to is that I was a lonely, naive, lovestruck teenager and she was a married woman in her forties who needed professional help. This would leave me with lasting trust issues, cuts that still haven't healed. That was my first experience with love and using alcohol to dull the pain.

I was sick of high school, so I packed all my classes into three years. When I was a senior, an Army recruiter came to our school and I got an unexpected invitation to talk. I went home that day all fired up about joining the Army and told my dad. He gave me some of the best advice I ever got in my life, and that was to meet with an Air Force recruiter before I signed anything. Nothing against the Army, but in hindsight, I can see it wouldn't have been a good fit. Joining the Air Force was a major turning point. The emotional problems followed me, as did the growing drinking habit, but the experience was priceless. I'd had a couple of semesters of Spanish in high school, and this led to my entry into service as an airborne

linguist. That turned out to be better than I could have imagined, and although it didn't end gracefully, as I'll describe later, my Air Force service remains to me a source of gratitude and pride. My parents gave me a suitcase for my seventeenth birthday. After I graduated from high school, in June of 1980, I went straight into Air Force basic training. At that point, the bar was open.

Buying alcohol at age seventeen in my home state of Ohio was illegal. Buying it on a military base in Texas was a whole different story. The legal drinking age was eighteen there, but I never got carded at stores or bars. At the time, it was legal to drink and drive in Texas. I mean drink while driving. After basic training, my friend Troy and I rented a car just so we could try that. We didn't go out and get wasted, just drove around sipping beers in San Antonio. Can you imagine doing that now?

After basic training and some English refresher school at Lackland Air Force Base, I transferred to the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterrey, California, for basic Arabic school. Why Arabic? Luck, I guess. When we were in basic training, someone came to the barracks one day and asked those of us bound for language school to list three languages that we'd like to learn. I wrote down Arabic, Russian, and Spanish, in that order. Like a gift from the universe, I got my number one pick. It turned out to be the best possible choice at the beginning of the eighties. Things in the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia were heating up at that time. It was interesting, to say the least. These were the years leading up to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Desert Storm, and events that followed.

DLI was a great experience. We were, for the most part, single and straight out of high school. All we had to do was go to class for eight hours a day, take care of any homework, and party. There was competitive drinking at the post Enlisted Club. We had all-nighters in the barracks and parties on the beach. There were beer machines in the day rooms. Out-of-class studying didn't eat up much of my time. Not all of us partied hard, but many did, and we who did naturally sought each other out. Language school was tough. The attrition rate was high, and less than half of my class graduated. The booze helped me to relax and bury the past, to let go of my childhood and adolescence (or so I thought).

After that first year at DLI, I transferred to Goodfellow Air Force Base in San Angelo, Texas, for airborne school, along with the rest of my linguist

classmates bound for flight duty. More training, more partying. During the time I was in California and had turned eighteen, Texas had raised the drinking age to nineteen. It didn't matter. The stores and bars never carded me, and I had plenty of friends who were old enough and willing to get me whatever I wanted. I had means, motive, and opportunity. I'm not saying that all I did with my free time was drink, but yeah, I drank every day and usually a lot. As with language school, I took my training seriously, worked hard, did well, and graduated. From Goodfellow Air Force Base, I went to Spokane, Washington, for survival school, then finally to my first real duty station in Athens, Greece. It was April of 1982.

Athens was a dream assignment. My orders took me to the 6916th Electronic Security Squadron, part of the Air Force Electronic Security Command. I had hit the jackpot with my chosen field. I was an airborne cryptologic linguist, now known as an airborne cryptologic language analyst. It's high-intensity, high-stress work. Airborne operations are dangerous by nature and we flew day and night in airspace that could turn hostile at any time. Awful things were happening to people down there on the ground. It was our job to know about them, and it wasn't the kind of stuff I could just forget about after the mission debrief.

The more I learned about what was going on in the world, the darker and more cynical my moods became. I started having nightmares. I couldn't sleep without getting loaded. I'm not blaming my drinking on the work I did. There were people doing the same job who didn't live like that, but for whatever reason, that was how I dealt with things. Does any of this sound familiar? We worked hard, we partied hard, and we bonded hard. I performed well on the job, and I learned quickly that good performance led to more forgiveness when we screwed up. I was still a problem child in some ways—emotionally immature, impulsive, and undisciplined. I was a challenge for my supervisors, first sergeants, and commanding officers. Article 15 for breaking a video game (while drinking), a Letter of Reprimand for vandalizing a communist political display and causing an international incident (while drinking)—basically most of the stupid things I did back then were alcohol-related. OK, technically, in alcohol's defense, this may have been sheer coincidence. I was a good operator though, and they kept me around. To a point, which I'll get to in a minute.

As I saw it then, being young and single meant that the only thing I had to take seriously was my job. Things were going well overall, and I reenlisted in 1984 for six years. For a year between 1985 and 1986, I had the opportunity to return to Monterrey for intermediate Arabic school. I attended more classes, more parties. The nightmares continued. After that, I went back to my squadron in Athens, back to my brothers and sisters in arms. I got better at my work, held a leadership position, and in 1989, I was the first in my class to get a line number for promotion to E-6, or technical sergeant. I was actually starting to take the whole military thing seriously, wearing better uniforms, maintaining a regulation haircut, and trying to act like an adult. Through the years though, I was becoming lonelier and chronically depressed. This only fueled more drinking and careless off-duty behavior.

I'd also developed a taste for hashish. In case you're not familiar with it, it's a concentrated form of cannabis. I mentioned earlier that I'd first tried it in high school, and I used it on and off pretty much the whole time I was in the Air Force. It wasn't a lot, and it wasn't all the time (and never on duty), but zero tolerance is zero tolerance. In the military, you can get drunk and wreck your car, and there is still forgiveness and your career can go on. Smoke a little weed though, and they catch you—even just once, you're done, period. I knew what I was doing but beginning not to care.

By the end of the eighties, I'd started hanging out with some civilians. Some people who knew other people. One of the other people got busted by the Greek cops for dealing coke. They pistol-whipped him until he talked, and he named a close friend of mine, an American, whose name the Greek police then provided to the American military authorities. That close friend, under threat from the U.S. authorities to turn him over to the Greek cops, named me. The dominoes fell. It was all hearsay and I passed my urinalysis (I'd had lots of them and never failed one), but I confessed, in writing. To make things worse, I unwittingly cooperated with the OSI (Office of Special Investigations) and confirmed their accusations against some other people. After the dust settled, any damage I caused them was more or less mitigated, and I was the only one who got the boot.

Word of advice: Polite society teaches us to cooperate with law enforcement. That doesn't mean be stupid. If someone reads you your Miranda rights—you know that part that says “Anything you say can and

will be used against you”’—well, don’t say another word until you have a lawyer. Not only will the cops use anything you say against you, they will use it against everyone you know, in every way they can, and you will be sorry. It’s taken me thirty years to forgive myself.

Anyway, there I was. Wings clipped, security clearance gone, finished. It was a giant shitstorm for everyone involved, and for me an awful end to a promising start. In February 1990, a few months short of halfway to retirement, I was out, never to return.

I flew back to the States and hung out with some very cool people in Maryland for a month or so, licking my wounds. Then, with a gentle push from my friends, I went south to face my parents. Having grown a lot while I was away, they welcomed me back into the fold and started teaching me what they’d learned. During my ten-year absence, they’d started dealing with my dad’s past, my brother’s drug addiction problems, a bad situation in my sister’s young family, their own marriage challenges, and how to heal. They’d learned much about the concept of a dysfunctional family, worked with professional counselors, and were better prepared to deal with me than they had been when I left home ten years before.

And yes, they knew I had a drinking problem. At this point, the valuable questions started coming. Back in the seventies, it was criticism for drinking. “Don’t drink” and “Drink less.” Now, it was “Why do you think you’re doing this to yourself?” See the difference? Have you been asking yourself that question? If so, for how long? As far as I can remember, up until that point, the thought had never crossed my mind. But it started to. Going from Athens, Greece, to Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1990 was one hell of a comedown. Chattanooga is a cool place to live now, but back in 1990 it was a tired, ugly, boring post-industrial town. I didn’t know anyone besides my immediate family and the night life was crap, especially compared to what I’d left in Athens. Life in general was bleak, lonely, and cold. Going from conducting adventurous military airborne operations in the Middle East to selling jewelry off a kiosk at the local mall was dismal. That first year in Tennessee was the only time in my life that I contemplated suicide. Alcohol meant comfort, and I drank it when I had it. The only thing that slowed me down was money. My job didn’t pay much, and that may well have kept me from drinking myself to death. I was hitting bottom, and I’ve been bouncing ever since.

In late 1991, things took a turn for the better. I'd learned a lot from the retail job but was ready to move on. I decided to go to college, studying environmental science at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. I started making some friends and learning how to socialize again. I was broke, so I started looking for an evening job as a waiter. The first opportunity came in the form of the Santa Fe Steakhouse, a startup Mexican restaurant on South Broad Street. That's where I met her. Jennifer. Hot, smart, seven years younger than me, and as I'm wrapping up this book, my wife of twenty-seven years.

We've hit some challenges like all couples do, but our relationship is a major ongoing success, and we keep getting better. We have two grown kids and they're a dream, especially compared to what I put my parents through. I have meaningful work doing environmental, health, and safety training, consulting, and auditing. The money's good, I work with great people, and I have a lot of freedom. I'm active in my community and have a fulfilling social life.

One thing that started hitting me gradually over maybe the past ten years is this: I'm generally happier now, or at least have every reason to be. My life is great, or at least would look that way to an objective observer. I'm a fortunate guy and I have everything that counts. But the booze, although much better controlled now, is still causing problems. I might be out of the woods, so to speak, but the darkness there still calls me. My family, especially my wife, all give me space to work it out, but my drinking occasionally continues to cause trouble. Why am I still sometimes drinking to the point of mindlessness, trying to turn my brain off? The answer that came to me is this: sheer, mindless habit and deep, stubborn, unresolved issues. Why am I telling you all this? Read on!



## **WHY THIS BOOK?**

“Writing is a lonely job, unless you’re a drinker, in which case you always have a friend within reach.”

—Emilio Estevez

I’ve been writing song lyrics and playing guitar in hard-rock bands since 2007. We mostly play our own originals, but once in a while, someone tosses out an idea for a cover song. One day Eli, a former band mate, bassist, guitarist, and all-around cool dude, suggested a hard-rock cover of “Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover” by Paul Simon. We played around with it for a while and it never took off, but I got that song stuck in my head, bad, for weeks. Hold that thought for a minute.

I go to Unity of Chattanooga, a sort of church for people who don’t do church, volunteering a little time to do sound and camera work on Sunday mornings. Unity of Chattanooga’s ringleader, Jon Scott (titles such as minister or pastor don’t quite fit this guy), is a spiritual heretic on a mission to help people recover from their messed-up religious indoctrination. In 2019 he added a theme about taking care of our bodies titled “Do You Have the Guts to Change?” The first topic he brought up on a Sunday morning in January was about loving our livers. I have no clue why he started with the liver, but there it was. Now hold that thought, too.

The next Sunday, Jon asked the congregation if anyone had experienced any thoughts about the topic of loving their livers. Unable to keep my mouth shut, I blurted out in a loud, steady voice that I had discovered that there must be fifty ways to love your liver. That got a good laugh, and Jon said, “Man, you need to write a book!” I didn’t take the idea seriously initially—first because I was already working on another book, and second because I didn’t think I’d be able to come up with fifty different ways.

That same evening, while sitting in my easy chair with a book about writing books (*The Art of Writing a Non-Fiction Book* by Bryan Collins) in one hand and a glass of wine in the other, I had an idea. If I could actually come up with fifty different ways to love my liver by drinking less, I would write the book. I started writing a list of ways using Evernote on my iPhone. Within a few days I had my list. The thought of writing a whole

book was daunting. Luckily, I'd recently read another book called *So Good They Can't Ignore You* by Cal Newport, in which he describes meeting an entrepreneur (for drinks) who handed him a dare. Cal talked about writing a book, and this guy told him, "Don't just talk about it. If you think it would be cool, go do it." That's one of the best reasons for doing something that I've ever heard.

Initially, I planned to keep the topics bite-sized and light-hearted, like Jon Winokur's *Zen to Go*, only about alcohol. As I got into it though, and started getting some feedback from friends, family, and editors, I realized that I still had a lot of work to do. Just writing the first draft and getting editorial feedback took a year, and I'm glad it did. A lot happened during that year, which not only gave me a bunch of ideas, but helped me work some more things out for myself. This has been a self-help project for me that I hope will resonate with you. This book is about working toward and maintaining moderation in drinking and enjoying alcohol more mindfully and responsibly. You might be able to apply some of it to other addictive or potentially addictive habits.

I don't have a PhD or an MD, and I'm not a doctor of any kind. You could tell if I were, because I'd say so in big letters on the cover of this book. According to my various counselors and doctors, however, I have ADHD, severe Generalized Anxiety Disorder, PTSD, and Bipolar II on my list of credentials, so I bring you that perspective. I'm just a guy with experience and ideas. If you think you might need professional help, then go get it, okay? I've been doing this for years, and it always helps. Incidentally, all of these "disorders" that we have can also be superpowers when we learn how to harness the energy in them and put it to good use.

I've grouped the fifty ways into three categories, with the aim of making it easier to locate material relevant to your life at any given moment. The first part is about making deliberate positive changes in our lives, especially improving our minds. I lead with this because many of us turn to heavy drinking as a coping mechanism. We try to drink away our pain, our fears, our memories, our faults, our regrets, our disappointments, our insomnia—you name it. Until we get at the underlying problems, the real ones, wresting any lasting control over our drinking will be an uphill battle.

The second part is about loving, appreciating, and caring for our bodies. Whatever our age or condition, we can still improve our physical strength

and health. The time to start is now! The better care we take of our bodies and brains, the better we will feel, and the more capable we will be of improving ourselves in every way.

The third part contains some simple awareness and control practices specific to drinking that I hope you'll find useful. I divided them as best I could between things to practice at home and things to try when we're drinking socially. These are all tactics I've tried personally and have found to be effective on some level at different times. Keep in mind that they are only for managing our behavior. If we want lasting success, we need to treat the underlying causes of problem drinking—by using, for example, the methods described in the first two parts.

I'm not advocating drinking or not drinking, just throwing some suggestions out there. As you read, think back to your own first experiences with alcohol. What has compelled you to drink along the way? How has it impacted your life and the lives of others over the years? Bring that awareness of your relationship with alcohol to this book. If you think you've tried everything and not gotten results, read on. I hope you'll find that some of the following Fifty Ways work for you. Cheers!



“The problem human beings face is not that we aim too high and fail, but that we aim too low and succeed.”

—Michelangelo



**PART I**

**MIND**



# **1. FORGIVE YOURSELF**

“The sun don’t shine  
The moon don’t move the tides,  
To wash me clean”

Bridge of Sighs—Robin Trower, “Bridge of Sighs”

Guilt is a powerful motivator for excessive drinking and other forms of mind-deadening self-abuse. My friend, I can tell you from personal experience that you need to learn to forgive yourself. Whatever you’ve done, no matter how bad it was, you are not damned forever, and you need to let yourself off the hook. We all make mistakes, little ones, and big ones. Make a sincere apology, do whatever you can to set things right, and move on.

You might have hurt someone who is dead, or who has cut you off. In this case, maybe you can’t make amends directly. You can still atone and heal; it will just be with someone or something else. Some situations—in military combat and law enforcement, for example—put us face-to-face with “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” choices. We make the best choice we can based on the best knowledge and training we have in those moments, and we live with the consequences; but we don’t have to continue to suffer. Take the lessons you learned from your experiences, apply them to the situations you have now, and keep doing it!

I’ve racked up a pretty big list of serious mistakes over a good number of years, and some from decades ago still haunt me. Does this sound familiar to you? Here’s an exercise you might want to try. I’ve been talking with my counselor about this issue of guilt over old, old mistakes. Why do I attack myself over things I did wrong, especially when nobody else even cares about them anymore? As we often find, the treasure is in the question, not the answer. My counselor suggested that I ask myself what I’m getting out of it. What reward is there for me in revisiting things that are now ancient history and continuing to feel bad about them? For me, that question was a key to a new way of thinking, a new technique to untangle the snarl of old, useless, negative memories.

Instead of feeling regret, shame, and anger over your own past behavior, start asking yourself every time one of these pesky demons pops up in your mind: Why are you here, little monster? Do you have an invitation? What is it about feeling bad that somehow comforts me? What am I getting out of this self-persecution that makes me keep doing it? Try asking yourself these questions to turn your mind away from reliving the experiences, away from punishing yourself, and toward living happily based on the valuable things you've learned. Work toward loving yourself and forgiving yourself. This may sound trite and too often repeated, but I've found that it's vital to my mental and emotional health. Seriously, you can stop beating yourself up now!

## **2. GROW YOUR MIND**

“The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem.”

—Captain Jack Sparrow

“Grow Your Mind” is a bit nebulous, but I want to offer some general thoughts about living better by thinking better. Getting our lives together isn’t a singular event, but an ongoing practice of better habits. When we adopt a growth mindset, we can start every day with more confidence and strength, and deeper awareness of our ability to improve.

Many of us drink more than is healthy because we don’t have our lives together, or maybe our lives seem roughly intact, but we’re still dragging that old habit around like a ball and chain. Good habits are the foundation of mindful, successful living. If you’re reading this book, you’ve probably figured out that you, or maybe someone you know and care about, would benefit from drinking less. This is a good sign that someone in your life doesn’t have it together, and you’ve decided that something needs to change. Good call!

Let’s establish some basic goals: increasing self-awareness, recognizing forces of impulse and habit, and shifting daily habits toward health and fulfillment. Habits are stubborn. To change them, we need to change our minds. To change our minds, we have to believe that we can, and we have to want to do it. Dr. Carol Dweck, a leading psychologist, coined the terms “fixed mindset” and “growth mindset.” In a fixed mindset, we believe that we are all we can be, and the mind we have is all we’re going to get. We avoid challenges, do just enough to get by, give up easily, don’t respond well to criticism, and are envious of other people’s success. We’re stuck, we think we can’t improve ourselves, and we convince ourselves that things won’t get better. We might find ourselves thinking “This is as good as it gets.” That’s not a recipe for success, and it’s only true if we fool ourselves into believing it.

With a growth mindset, we believe that it’s possible to develop and improve our minds. We want to learn, we like challenges, we’re persistent even when things are tough, we enjoy putting in an effort, we learn from

criticism, and we see other people's success as inspiration. The growth mindset itself is something we can develop, and from there the rest will follow. Modern science has demonstrated that we can change the way our brains work through something called neuroplasticity or brain plasticity. In other words, the brain changes continuously throughout a lifetime, and we can control that process through deliberate practice. The downside is that we can change it for the worse through poor practice, and the upside is that we can change it for the better through good practice. Check out *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* by Rick Hanson for an enlightening read on this topic.

Here's one more thought on habits before we move on. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey states, "The ability to subordinate an impulse to a value is the essence of the proactive person." What are your values and impulses? Being financially responsible and secure is a value for me. It means getting up early in the morning with my mind and body rested and ready to do my work with joy and enthusiasm. That's a value. Getting up off the couch to pour another drink when it's past my bedtime is an impulse. Every time we subordinate an impulse to a value, we win! Speaking of winning, let's look at how we can give ourselves more power by eliminating excuses from our skill set.

### **3. TURN EXCUSES INTO POWER**

“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

—Anaïs Nin

In November 2019, I went to a trade show, the Safety Leadership Conference, in Dallas. I really didn’t want to go. In the middle of a long string of back-to-back business trips, I was physically and emotionally exhausted, and feeling totally whipped. I felt trapped in my job, unable to get my life under control, and on the edge of a serious breakdown. Then I met a couple of people who gave me a priceless gift. The first one was Vinny Murphy, a fellow hard-rock musician, environmental health and safety professional, and Tennessean. He stopped by our booth to talk, the subject of conversation eventually drifted to music, and we hit it off. Super guy, very wise, and very cool. I’ll get back to him in a minute.

The second person was a guy named Lee Shelby, the keynote speaker for the event. Lee used to be a lineman for the Memphis area electric utility, and in the early 1990s he had a work accident that cost him both of his hands. In his presentation, Lee talked about the accident and his recovery, and about how he refused to give up. He went straight back to work, learned how to take care of himself, learned how to drive a truck again, learned how to fly an airplane and got his pilot’s license, how to change his children’s diapers with prosthetic hooks, and got on with his life. Afterward, I had a chance to talk with him and was immediately impressed. The man is unsinkable. Lee wrote a book which I highly recommend called *No Hands and No Excuses! Living a No Excuses Life . . . No Matter What Happens to You!* In it, he describes seven different types of excuses we tend to make, where they come from, how they stop us from being our best, and how to get past them.

Okay, back to Vinny. After Lee’s talk, I went back to my company’s booth. A few minutes later, Vinny walks up, hands me a copy of Lee’s book, and says, “Here, I want you to have this.” It was as if he knew I desperately needed it. I stood there for a little while pondering the theme of Lee’s talk, Vinny’s gift to me, and the serendipity of the situation. Suddenly, as if a switch flipped in my head, I felt my power come back. It

was the best I had felt in months, and the feeling has stayed with me ever since. After I read Lee's book and got back to work on this one, I started thinking about the ways that excuses drive adverse habits, including my own drinking. This extends to other habits, such as being unwilling to say no when it's the smart answer.

When we make up excuses, we give away our power. Once we have the will, we can change this habit. Here's an exercise: Next time you think you "have to" do something but don't want to, instead of saying "I can't," try saying "I won't." Instead of saying "I need to do this," try saying "I want to do this." When was the last time you told yourself "I need a drink"? Or how about "I can't slow down"? Try changing that to "I want a drink" and "I will slow down," making it a choice. We know that habits tend to be compulsive, meaning they make us feel powerless to do anything else. In other words, it feels as if someone or something else is making us do something. This means we're giving up our own power, but we can change that any time we want to by choosing to own our decisions and honor them.

Try this game for a while: Every time you feel something negative, stop and ask yourself, "Where is my excuse here?" Now, to help us remember to ask ourselves that question, let's look at meditation and mindfulness.

## 4. MEDITATE

“A positive attitude may not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort.”

—Herm Albright

Most of what I'm writing about in this book is related to, and supported by, being mindful. This means being aware of what we're thinking, what we're doing, how we feel, and how our behavior affects people around us. We can use meditation to increase mindfulness. It's free, doesn't take a lot of time, is easy to learn, and can help us live better lives. Sometimes we need a crisis to force us to try things that we wouldn't otherwise consider.

In the space of a year between 2002 and 2003, I lost a brother and three close friends. Three suicides and a plane crash. This was at a time when my travel job was becoming more than I could handle psychologically, my wife and I were struggling, and there was just too much going on. It added up to insanity. I was melting down hardcore, having auditory hallucinations and nightmares, coming apart at the seams. Yes, I was drinking a lot. In desperation, I started looking around for some way to get my head together. I'd already given the religious route a decent try when I was younger, but I needed something else, spiritual but without the dogma. What I found was the Bodhi Center, a Tibetan Buddhist group that met at Clear Spring Yoga on the North Shore in Chattanooga. I met a bunch of cool people there, including the center leader, Tenzin Tharpa (aka Larry Joe Hall), a monk ordained by the Dalai Lama. It was a formative time for me. Tenzin taught us a lot of good things, and the peace I got from going to the classes and training retreats has stayed with me.

You don't have to be an avowed Buddhist or follower of any particular practice. There are numerous types of meditation practices, organized and otherwise. I still begin every day with at least thirty minutes of meditation (with coffee) to get my mind in the best possible place, before I do anything else. No email, social media, checking the news, texting, talking, nada, until I've had my morning attitude calibration. My daily mantra is a mixture of what I've learned in Buddhist practice and read in *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz, along with a few other stray bits. That mental

centering is available all day long for me now. All I have to do is take a breath and reach out and touch it. If you start practicing mindfulness meditation and stick to it, you'll have less stress and anxiety, better sleep, improved attention span and focus, better self-awareness, and more. Chanting is optional!

## **5. CHANGE YOUR FRIENDSHIPS**

“Who needs friends when you can sit alone in your room and drink?”

—Unknown

This is a tough one. Two friends who tend to overdrink usually drive each other to further excess. We drinkers seek each other out. All it takes is for one person to say, “Just one more.” I’ve had many friends like this, and I’ve been one too. There are plenty of reasons we do this. One of them is that we like hanging out with people who approve of us. These friends aren’t going to get on our case about excessive drinking or any other bad habits.

If your life isn’t successful, look at the people you choose for company. Are they really happy? Are their relationships good? Are they successful in their work? There’s an old saying about how we’re known by the company we keep. An extension of this is that we can know ourselves by the company we keep. When I was a kid, I was kind of an outcast. As a result, I would hang out with anyone who would have me. Looking back, I made some pretty bad choices. My mom told me many wise things when I was growing up. She was always loving and concerned about my well-being, happiness, and future. One thing she told me when I was in my early teens is that it’s better to be alone than in bad company, and she was right. Let’s explore that a little. What does “bad company” mean? Lots of things, of course! For me, it’s people who encourage me to do things that I probably shouldn’t. It’s being in relationships where people have a negative influence on other people. As you’ve likely deduced already, I’ve also been bad company for other people plenty of times. More specifically, in my case, it was hanging out with friends who were racist, misogynist, sarcastic, abusive, maladjusted, and enjoyed destructive behavior. I could go on all day, and you may have similar experiences. To their credit, they taught me truly useful things, lessons I may not have learned otherwise, and for that I intend to be grateful. The thing is, that state of being alone doesn’t have to last. More and more, the people I’ve hung out with, the ones who have become and stayed my real friends, are simply better for me. That makes

me better for them. So, what does “better” mean? Let’s explore that a little too.

First, a borrowed thought on good versus bad. Shakespeare told us “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” That’s a great point if we’re pondering moral relativism, and I’d love to discuss it with you at length some evening over a philosophical glass, but for the sake of simplicity, let’s just take “better” as the opposite of “bad company”. In this case, better friends are the ones who have a positive influence on me, and on whom I can have a positive influence. We encourage each other to be responsible, take care of ourselves, do fun, productive things, and focus our minds on the positive.

Take a hard, clear-eyed look at the people in your life. Think about how you affect them, and how they affect you. If your friendships aren’t healthy for you, change them! That’s probably an oversimplification, so let’s unpack it just a little. It’s not as easy as ditching bad friends and finding better ones. We can work on strengthening friendships that might be a mixed bag but are still important and worthwhile. As we live and learn, our own behavior can be a positive influence on our friends, and vice versa. Our own improving lives will attract new friends into them. These changes that we make to better ourselves won’t sit well with some people, and they may try to draw you back into habits you’ve outgrown. When you refuse to go along, they will naturally drift away.

## **6. PARTNER UP**

“We’re all a little weird. And life is a little weird. And when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall into mutually satisfying weirdness—and call it love—true love.”

—Robert Fulghum

Teamwork helps almost every endeavor—it’s that simple. A friend who’s also working on controlling their drinking is a valuable resource, especially if you deliberately work on it together. Some programs call these people “recovery partners.” Don’t freak out by the thought of having a recovery partner. It’s just a person you like and trust, who wants to help you and whom you can help. There’s nothing clinical about it; it’s just partnering up with someone reliable and positive who wants what you want. A recovery partner is the opposite of an enabler, a friend who encourages you to drink more. You and your partner can talk about anything, at any time. For some people, a partner might be a professional counselor, or a close friend. I have both, and they each have their purpose. I give to them, they give to me, and everyone benefits. It’s just another building block in a whole, solid lifestyle that encourages better choices. Partnering up with a like-minded individual or two might be a good option for you if you’re not comfortable working with groups.

## **7. GET HELP FROM YOUR PEEPS**

“I only drink a little, but when I do, I turn into another person, and that person drinks a lot.”

—Unknown

As with many lifestyle changes—such as quitting smoking, losing weight, swearing off the Kardashians, or whatever—it can help to get support from your social circle. Tell your friends and family that you’re on this quest for enjoyable and responsible drinking, and that you would sincerely appreciate their support. If there’s any specific way that you’d like them to help, ask them. When my wife notices me drinking fast, she offers me a glass of water. Ask your friends not to pressure you to drink. You can make it fun. For instance, ask your friends to bomb you with a water balloon any time you start slurring your words. Be ready for their help!

Whether you’ve asked for it or not, be open to and appreciative of their feedback about your behavior. Hopefully you’ve surrounded yourself with people who feel safe telling you when you’re over the line. If they don’t feel safe telling you that, it’s another kind of problem you need to work on. If the next morning someone asks, “Do you remember . . . ?” and you can’t, ask them to fill you in. It could be what you need to hear. Many people will laugh it off and say it’s all good, as long as it wasn’t something too heinous. If you’re serious about drinking more moderately, you really do want this information. If you want it, you need to prepare yourself for it, and to behave in a way that encourages people around you to give it to you straight.

## **8. JOIN A SUPPORT GROUP**

“To some it’s a six-pack. To me it’s a support group.”

—Leo Durocher

Support groups take many forms. You probably know about some of the well-established ones, especially those related to problem drinking and sobriety. Alcoholics Anonymous, Women for Sobriety, SMART Recovery, and the list goes on. If you’re not interested in quitting and just want to get your drinking under control, there are alternatives. An example of this is Moderation Management ([moderation.org](http://moderation.org)), which helps connect people who are on this shared quest. They have a Facebook page that’s very active and helps people share their experiences and tips.

Think about your life holistically and how excessive drinking is fueled by your state of mind, your past, what you have, and what’s missing. Consider support groups that aren’t specific to substance problems. I found a couple of these where I live in Chattanooga, Tennessee—or you could say they found me. My friend Roger Rahor is a Vietnam War veteran, one of those guys who was right down in the proverbial shit. Knowing that I’m a songwriter, guitarist, and military veteran, he suggested I check out a group called Freedom Sings USA ([freedomingsusa.org](http://freedomingsusa.org)). Based in Chattanooga, Tennessee, this group helps distressed veterans deal with their issues by getting their stories out and transforming them into songs. These are then performed, recorded, and engineered by music professionals in Nashville for publication. I thought I’d show up there and offer to help, but they helped me instead. Al Jarvis, treasurer, and a fellow Air Force linguist referred me to another group, Summit for Soldiers ([www.summitforsoldiers.org](http://www.summitforsoldiers.org)). Al introduced me to Steve Redenbaugh, a U.S. Army officer who spearheaded Summit for Soldiers in Tennessee. This group provides support to veterans and their families through outdoor adventure sports. Joining these two groups was a great opportunity for me, a life improvement, which spoke to me more than an addiction support group would have.

According to CDC data analyzed by the Delphi Behavioral Health Group, the military is the hardest-drinking industry in the United States.

After serving for ten years, I can believe it. The drinking habit follows us when we get out. What gets to a lot of people is isolation. Often when we separate from our units, it's like having our whole family ripped away, our identities shaken—the works. The suicide statistics are heartbreaking. Joining one of these groups can be like getting your family back. Whether you're a veteran or not, there's a group out there for you. If the concept of "therapy" bugs you, just think of it as a way to grow your social circle. You don't have to go it alone!

## **9. WORK WITH A COUNSELOR**

“My psychiatrist told me I was crazy and I said I want a second opinion.

He said okay, you’re ugly too.”

—Rodney Dangerfield

A friend once described me as “good in a crisis, except when it’s your own.” She had that right. We can’t always think our own way out of a jam. Some of us don’t want to believe this. We avoid getting help, especially for psychological and emotional problems. I’ve had this tendency beaten out of me by circumstances, by situations that got so bad that I realized I couldn’t handle them on my own. I don’t have a problem with it anymore. Seeing a professional counselor isn’t a sign of weakness. It’s just admitting that maybe someone knows more about something than we do, and that refusing to take advantage of their expertise is just dumb. A word of caution here: There’s a thriving trade in false memories, and going with the wrong therapist can be real trouble. If you’re up for a deep read and want some protection from adverse psychological meddling, I recommend *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan.

Yes, you’ll have to open your mind to a stranger, dirty laundry and all. A counselor or therapist will ask uncomfortable questions about your past, your childhood, your parents, your siblings, your love life, and your kids. They’ll help you rip the lid off that nest of demons in your head and expose them to the light of day. That’s their job. Go to a counselor and get help. Think of it this way: If your wisdom teeth were impacted, would you go out in the garage and get a utility knife and some pliers and take them out yourself? Hell no. Find a good counselor and get to work!

## **10. CONSIDER A PRESCRIPTION FOR DEPRESSION**

“In the Sixties people took acid to make the world weird. Now the world is weird, people take Prozac to make it normal.”

—Damon Albarn

Depression, or some form of it, is often at the root of people’s drinking problems. I struggled with depression for most of my life. I had some good times, especially when I was under the influence, but underneath all that was the absence of well-being. In the late ’90s, my wife and I hit a rough period in our relationship that forced me to change or fall. No matter how good my life seemed, I couldn’t feel happy or free from anger and depression for any meaningful period of time. It had a bad effect on everyone around me. My wife and I tried working through the issues on our own—together and individually—with occasional and temporary success, but nothing lasted.

By the mid-2000s, things went from bad to worse. I was awful to have around, and was having panic attacks daily. The end of our marriage and a secure home for our kids was imminent. My mom suggested a local family systems therapist, Bill Dwyer, who helped us turn our home life around. In addition to the counseling and individual work, the subject of medication came up. I had stubbornly fought this idea for at least a decade, worried that if I tried it, I wouldn’t be me anymore.

Looking back, medication was exactly what I needed, because the clinically depressed version of me was just not acceptable. Not for me, not for anyone. Anyway, after a few rounds of experimentation, we landed on a light dose of an SSRI (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) that worked. The effect was fast and life changing. No, it wasn’t instant bliss, it just let me calm down enough to be able to start thinking straight and work on my problems.

If your excessive drinking might be related to depression or anxiety and you’re being stubborn about trying medication, please talk with a qualified professional and think about it some more!

## **11. LIMIT LATE WORK**

“By working faithfully eight hours a day you may eventually get to be boss and work twelve hours a day.”

—Robert Frost

If you're an entrepreneur and stand to benefit personally and equitably from working like a fiend for crazy hours, go for it. However, if you're on a salary and feel obligated to work nights and weekends, year after year, to satisfy someone else's priorities, ask yourself why, what it's doing to you, and if it's worth it. Yes, you need to provide for yourself and others in your care. You can do that without killing yourself. Late work in the evening is going to cost you sleep, which is going to cause you physical and mental stress and rob you of your relaxation time. Also, the more you do it, the worse you'll perform, and the quality and quantity of your work will suffer, negating any gain from the extra work. This is a time-proven fact.

For a good employer or client, we go that extra mile when necessary and we feel good about it when exceptional situations demand it, but habitually working late hours can be taken too far. It can easily turn into a bad habit. Corporations have a natural drive to maximize the use of their personnel, but some overdo it, sometimes without even knowing it's happening. Don't be afraid to push back. Be careful not to assume that your supervisor or manager knows when you're overloaded and burning out. They probably have a lot on their minds too but will listen if you approach them with your concerns, a solution, and a good understanding of your own capabilities and your need for boundaries. Too many people don't raise these concerns until their exit interview, if they even have one, and then it's too late.

It's been my experience that we often want to think, and to prove, that we're invincible, indestructible, and unstoppable. We're not. Sometimes it takes a full-on crash to prove that to ourselves. Sometimes we let the pressure build up day after day, week after week, becoming exhausted and resentful, without even trying to proactively make positive changes in our work situation. Good people are hard to find and harder to keep, so you may have more power than you realize. There's usually some

wiggle room, and remember that we don't get what we deserve, we get what we negotiate. Don't let your job drive you to drink!

## **12. GET A NEW JOB**

“Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.”

—Dalai Lama

We can't run from all our problems, but there are some situations where nothing else makes sense. We need to face our problems to correct them, but if the workplace is toxic and not worth fixing, it's time to move on. There are reasons we have a highly developed fight, flight, or freeze response. It's about survival. If you have the influence, you can fight, in a peaceful way. Set boundaries and hold them, and be willing to say no to get what you want. I made some suggestions in the previous section about the power of boundaries, specific to working late hours, and you might be able to use some of those to help with other parts of your job that aren't working for you.

Think back to what we went over in section 3 about how excuses can paralyze us, and ask yourself if there are any excuses that are either keeping you stuck in your current job, or preventing you from changing it for the better. Freezing isn't an option if the work situation is making you miserable. That leaves flight. If you're doing everything you can to improve your work situation and your job is still eating you alive, something better is waiting. Especially if you have coworkers who encourage overdrinking and your work situation is causing depression or stress responses that you're treating with alcohol. You may have to stick it out longer than you want, because you still need to take care of your financial responsibilities. Start building a strategy to get yourself unstuck. Get advice from successful people you know and trust. They'll help you figure it out. Maybe it's time to start that remodeling company you've been dreaming about, go back to school and finish that degree or study something new that interests you, join Habitat for Humanity or the military, whatever you think you'd love, but haven't really tried. Your skills are portable, remember that! Sometimes people stay in jobs they hate because they've been in them for a long time, they're “invested”, and they think it will be just as bad somewhere else anyway. In logical terms, this is known as the “sunk cost fallacy”. Continuing a behavior or endeavor, simply because we've spent resources

on it, and putting more value on what's been spent than on what we might accomplish if we can let go and move on. Caution and responsibility are one thing, but staying where we are because we're afraid to take chances will lead to misery and regret. This is your life we're talking about here! We each get one, this one is yours, so own it and make it great! If it's time to go, get busy on your new plan. Simply beginning this process will make you feel better, and less tempted to escape into a bottle.

## **13. SEEK INTIMACY**

“A sea of whiskey couldn’t intoxicate me as much as a drop of you.”

—J. S. Parker

I originally wanted to title this chapter “Get Laid More” but after thinking about it for a while and getting some advice from friends, I learned a couple of things. First, some people just don’t like that phrase. Second, physical intimacy, including sex, isn’t the foundation of beating dependency or having meaningful relationships with other people. This has more to do with being healthy and being in healthy relationships than just having sex. Excessive drinking, depression, boredom, and loneliness are closely related. Each one feeds the others, and more intimacy can break us out of that cycle, if we approach intimacy mindfully, respectfully, and positively. Some people don’t need affectionate physical relationships with others to feel good, but I’ve never been one of them. Is that natural, healthy behavior, or just another addiction? It can be either and both, and part of our progress towards living better is figuring that out. The search for balance.

Intimacy—including hugs, kisses, sex, and orgasms—can bring both emotional and physical benefits. Intimacy, emotional and physical closeness, reduces stress, boosts our immune systems, and helps us live longer. Researchers have determined that being touch-deprived leads to stress and depression. Too much booze not only affects our behavior, often leading us to take unwise risks, but also has negative physiological impacts on our emotional and sexual responses. This can affect anyone. Notice that I said “too much.” How much that is varies from person to person, but each of us can benefit from figuring out how much “too much” is and not exceeding it. We’ll look at that some more later.

Incidentally, and I’m going off on a tangent for a moment here, if you ever feel yourself drawn toward the “incel”—the “involuntary celibate” online subculture—do yourself a favor and stay far away from it. This is a group of people, usually young men, who define themselves as unable to have a romantic partner and act accordingly. It’s generally populated by people who feel entitled to sex because they “deserve it” and blame the

other sex for their lack of intimacy. There's nothing in it but negativity, and who needs more of that? Don't stick that label on yourself or let anyone else stick it on you!

If we want intimacy, and that is a choice, we're going to have more of it if we take good care of ourselves and those around us. It's not an inherent right or something anyone else owes us—not our spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, or whatever. I'm talking from the perspective of a garden-variety cisgender heterosexual male, but for those who identify as anything else, please translate for yourself. What makes you attracted to another person? Health. Self-control. Respect for you and your friends. Success. Confidence. Care for their appearance and hygiene. All these things make us more appealing to others, and they're good for us anyway even if we don't care about appealing to others.

Shabby clothes, poor manners, sloppy drunk behavior, bad breath, insecurity, jealousy—all these negative things can and should be deal killers. Yes, a moderate buzz helps us let go of awkwardness, nervousness, and inhibitions. This is good, only up to the point where our judgment and behavior start slipping. Here's a tip: You can't drink enough to make yourself more attractive.

Stay with me here. If you're not getting the physical intimacy you want or need, masturbate more. Yep, I said it. Masturbation is a doctor- and psychologist-approved stress reliever that can help us get to sleep and releases endorphins that lower blood pressure and just make us feel good. Get that energy out, release those hormones, feel good. In case any of this sounds weird or uncomfortable, don't take my word for it. Psychology Today, WebMD, U.S. News, Healthline, and a slew of other sources will back me up on this. The point is to make ourselves aware of the connection between drinking and intimacy, how each affects the other, and act accordingly.

## **14. CREATE**

“Many people die with their music still in them. Why is this so? Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it, time runs out.”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

Creating in some form is effective for cultivating our inner lives and increasing self-awareness. Whether you're a songwriter, musician, painter, dancer, sculptor, juggler, fire artist, or whatever, it doesn't matter. Artistic creation is good for your brain, and you don't have to be a professional. Don't let the word “amateur” discourage you. People have gotten into the habit of using that word to mean things like incompetent, unprofessional, inept, and clumsy. This is unfortunate. The word comes from *amator*, Latin for “lover.” I'm an amateur musician. I do it because I love it, not because I'm good at it!

Making art, no matter your medium or skill level, can reduce stress and promote relaxation. According to the article “Reduction of Cortisol Levels and Participants' Responses Following Art Making” by Girija Kaimal, Kendra Ray, and Juan Muniz, *Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* May 23, 2016, the results of their experiment showed that forty-five minutes of creative activity (visual art in this study) significantly lessened stress, regardless of people's artistic talent or experience. It doesn't matter if you think you're good at it or not. It especially doesn't matter if other people like it or not!

Typically, creative activities keep our minds and hands busy, which can reduce our drinking. Writing a book, at least for me, is harder than reading a book. It's more mentally demanding. It's easier to put down a computer or notepad with my own book draft on it than an entertaining sci-fi or fantasy novel. I know when I just can't write any more. For example, staring at a blank page or a half-finished sentence with my mind going in circles is more noticeable than reading unconsciously and remembering nothing. Writing requires greater awareness. I've had enough of the day and the writing work, and it's time to hit the sack.

I usually carry a guitar with me when I travel for work. I have a compact seven string electric guitar (Strandberg Boden 7, for my fellow guitar geeks), amp modeling software on my smart phone, a digital interface to connect my guitar to the phone, and a decent set of in-ear monitors. Plane delayed? No worries! There is no such thing as a boring layover or an evening in the hotel with nothing to do. Anyway, because I carry that thing around, I often meet people who say they've been thinking for years about learning guitar, or piano, or whatever. Listen, stop thinking about it and do it already! Spend some money and get good equipment and any training you need, whether it's a musical instrument, painting supplies, carpenter's tools, dance lessons, or whatever. Trust me on this: good gear and proper instruction will make it easier and more fun. Find your art form and create!

## **15. AVOID BOREDOM WITH HOBBIES AND VOLUNTEERING**

“Until you value yourself, you won’t value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it.”

—M. Scott Peck

I’ve heard that an idle mind is the devil’s workshop. Religious implications aside, letting yourself get bored is its own form of self-inflicted abuse. It opens us up to all kinds of negative behavior. If we entertain ourselves with bad habits, like beating up our livers with booze, we’re just not looking hard enough for better things to do.

If you enjoy being around other people, you might get involved in positive social activities like volunteering. In recent years I’ve had opportunities to do volunteer work in some local organizations, and it’s been rewarding on multiple levels. For one of them, I get up early on Sundays, which means I want to get to bed early on Saturdays, which is better for me and my liver. Be careful not to overcommit or you’ll probably burn out. If you find the right activity, it will be a net gain for you and the people around you. It will keep you entertained and improve your self-esteem and sense of well-being. Again, less reason to overdrink.

Hobbies are activities that come naturally to you and help you relax. I’ve had a string of them, some that lasted and some that didn’t. One of my favorites, music, goes hand-in-hand with drinking. Another favorite is rock climbing, which does not mix well with alcohol. Same goes for mountain biking. The point is to have some kind of activity to keep the hands and the mind busy. If you don’t already have a hobby that connects you with people who are, or could be, your friends, there’s a big opportunity for you. Unless you live alone in a cave or on a deserted island, there’s probably a group of people near you doing something cool together. Go check it out. No, not the old gang slamming shots at some crappy bar. That’s what we want to avoid, remember?

## **16. LOWER YOUR GUARD**

“The first glass is for myself, the second for my friends, the third for good humor, and the fourth for my enemies.”

—Sir William Temple

Fight, flight, or freeze. Our brains and bodies are hard-wired with defense mechanisms. A central part of our survival ability is the limbic system, sometimes called the center of emotions. This system responds to threats, real and imagined, through the autonomous nervous system. Autonomous means it runs itself so that it can respond without us having to think. That’s not always good. The limbic system stores fear-based experiences. It assigns emotional interpretations to what we perceive and tells the body what to do. If it sees what it thinks is a threat, it tells us to fight, run away, or freeze. There are some problems with this. One is that it’s not always right. Another is that some of us just can’t turn it off.

People who are in dangerous jobs or have been in them, such as in the military, firefighting, and law enforcement, tend to collect lots of fear-based experiences. If you’re a vet, no matter how long you’ve been out, you might still be struggling with the transition to some kind of “normal” civilian life far from the conflict zone. But you don’t need to have been in combat to experience PTSD. Other life situations—childhood emotional trauma, sexual abuse, and other forms of violence—can also train our limbic systems to overreact. What happens to many of us is that we’re on high alert all the time. Our fight, flight, or freeze response is stuck on Readiness Condition One. Some people, like me, can’t walk into a room without seeking out the dragon position: back to a wall, with a clear view of everyone else and all of the doors and windows, choosing the seat that commands the room, and then sitting on the edge of it, head on a swivel and eyes moving.

What does this have to do with excessive drinking? Here are my observations based on my own behavior and that of people I’ve known with similar backgrounds. Living with the limbic system stuck on high alert is stressful. It’s not conducive to relaxation, and it makes other people nervous. For some people, like me, alcohol calms us. For others, it can make things worse. Either way, the stress can be a trigger for overdrinking.

The limbic system controls our stress response. Everyone has stress, but our responses to it are different. Understanding how our brains work, what causes PTSD, what triggers our negative reactions, and getting control will help bring us happiness. Part of that is being able to open up to it. Many people, including those I've met through my association with veterans' groups, have put their traumatic experiences in mental lockdown, sometimes for decades. These demons might be out of sight, but the damage continues. We don't have to live like this! We find, for example in Freedom Sings USA and Summit for Soldiers, that when we're in the company of our brothers and sisters in arms, even if we served in different conflicts and different eras, we're safe telling our darkest stories, because they understand and they can take it. They can give us a reality check, and help us by sharing their perspectives, experience, and wisdom.

We can change how our minds work through deliberate practice and turn down the intensity of our negative emotions. I've included some practical methods in this book, for example meditation, counseling, self-forgiveness, better sleep, and the other ways described in the Mind and Body sections.

## **17. BE HAPPY ANYWAY**

“May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.”

—Nelson Mandela

Don't carry the weight of the world and all its problems on your shoulders. Until human nature evolves far beyond its current state, reality will serve up a bottomless supply of horrors: poverty, starvation, abuse in every form, environmental destruction, injustice, racism, hatred, endless war, everything that makes us angry and scared. The more I pay attention to what's going on, the more things I find that piss me off. I've also found that one of my knee-jerk reactions to feeling upset is to slap that negative emotion down with a shot of something strong.

It's natural to avoid psychic pain. We do this in many ways. We can ignore what's going on, displace it as someone else's responsibility, pray for peace, desensitize ourselves with alcohol and drugs, or whatever, but we need to do something. Thoughts and prayers? Not enough. But drowning our sorrows isn't the answer either. We can't selectively numb our emotions. The same drink that numbs the pain also numbs the pleasure. What numbs sadness numbs happiness. What numbs fear numbs excitement. Shame and pride. Hate and love. Don't throw out the good with the bad! We need to act on our better instincts and face the world we have while we work toward the world we want. The best way I've found to lighten the existential load is to take action. To combat helplessness, we can contribute to our communities through acts of kindness, work to protect the environment, volunteer to help others, and yes, participate positively and decisively in politics.

My wife, Jennifer, introduced me to the concept of a growth mindset, which we looked at in section 2, Grow Your Mind. She's been a guiding light to me since the day we met. She once wrote the following saying on a sheet of paper and stuck it on the refrigerator: “Be happy anyway.” This is one of the wisest things I've ever heard, but I had to be ready for it to appreciate it. Yes, being happy is far easier said than done. So how can we choose happiness when it doesn't seem like a viable choice? Jen and I got into a heated discussion about this once. She's always been the more upbeat

and spiritually connected half of our relationship, and she has encouraged me throughout our marriage to just let things be okay and feel good in spite of any temporary circumstances. During this memorable discussion, I just didn't want to hear it anymore. After hearing things like "Everything is fine" and "You're doing great and you're successful," I finally snapped at her. What I meant to say was "I'll believe it when I see it" but what came out was "I'll see it when I believe it." She just cocked an eyebrow knowingly and said "Exactly!" I didn't have a comeback for that one.



**PART II**

**BODY**



## **18. LOVE YOUR BODY**

“If I knew I was going to live this long, I’d have taken better care of myself.”

—Mickey Mantle

Short of quitting drinking, what can we do to take the best possible care of our livers? And our guts in general? First, we can appreciate them. As with most of our internal organs, we don’t think about the liver unless it malfunctions. The liver has a lot of work to do. It cleans the blood, helps maintain blood sugar levels, produces bile that digests fat, stores vitamins and minerals, and does a whole bunch of other stuff. Love your liver and protect it. Keep it safe from inflammatory diets, dehydration, and too much booze. Don’t get punched, stabbed, or shot.

Also, take care of your gut, literally. Excess alcohol not only damages the gut wall, but also disrupts the natural population of microbes that live in your intestines, aka your gut microbiome. The more and longer we drink, the worse it gets. There are trillions of living microbes in our guts, and they’re vital for keeping us healthy. Research also shows that the connection between the gut and brain works both ways, each affecting the functioning of the other. Things that hurt our guts also hurt our brains, and vice versa. Stress causes gastrointestinal problems. Gut microbes produce neurotransmitters, including GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), which helps control anxiety and fear. The biochemistry is complex.

Learn about the physical and mental health effects of overdrinking. When I was younger, I never gave it a thought beyond the self-evident pain of a hangover, but that has changed. If you’ve been around as long as I have, you know that it takes longer to recover from a night of hard partying. Educate yourself well on the subject of excessive drinking and its effects on the body and mind. Pay attention to how you feel. Love, appreciate, and care for your body!

## **19. EXERCISE**

“Stay busy, get plenty of exercise, and don’t drink too much. Then again, don’t drink too little.”

—Herman Smith-Johannsen

Physical exercise is good for you, whether you drink or not. Exercise is good for every organ in your body, including your liver. It also reduces the negative impact of some of our adverse habits, such as drinking too much. There is no downside. If you’re an athlete of any kind, and a drinker, you’re probably acutely aware of how you feel getting out to do your favorite sport with a hangover. Trust me, it will get worse with age. Fortunately, exercise helps to counteract the negative impacts of drinking. A study by Nicholas Szary et al. published in *Biomolecules* in 2015 suggests that aerobic exercise can protect us from liver damage and metabolic dysfunction. Okay, fine, they were using lab rats, but look around you. I’ve known many people who drink a bunch, some who love exercise and others who think it’s just plain silly. The ones who like exercise enjoy activities such as running, mountain biking, weightlifting, hiking, rock climbing, tennis, and martial arts. They are also in way better shape than people who drink like they do but lead more sedentary lives. If you’re going to drink, find some vigorous activity that’s fun and enjoy it regularly!

## **20. PRACTICE YOGA OR A MARTIAL ART**

“Yoga is the practice of tolerating the consequences of being yourself.”

—Bhagavad Gita

Physical and mental stress and related inflammation encourage excessive drinking. There was a time when I would down a couple of muscle relaxers and ibuprofen, then chase them with a shot of bourbon because my neck was killing me, all the time. I went in for a consultation with an orthopedic surgeon and had an MRI done. The doctor told me I had degenerative disc disease in my cervical vertebrae and would soon need surgery. In my early forties. Great. Google “anterior cervical discectomy and fusion” sometime. Yuck. I put surgery off and kept on with my self-medication.

Not long after that, I got into a conversation on fitness with a couple of my clients, and the subject of neck and back problems came up. I told them about my diagnosis, and they asked me if I’d ever tried yoga. I hadn’t, and they suggested I try it before I let anyone start cutting on me. I found a great class going at ClearSpring Yoga in Chattanooga, and I started practicing. I kid you not, after a month of weekly classes and brief daily routines, I felt like I had a new neck. That was about fifteen years ago, and I’ve had no problems with it since.

The point is that a discipline like yoga or a martial art that promotes flexibility, strength, regular stretching, deep breathing, and mindfulness can reduce inflammation and prevent injuries. This reduces physical pain, which also reduces mental pain, which reduces reasons for seeking escape from pain. If you’re drinking extra to help relax those knotted muscles or kill the ache of some old injury, try tuning up your body with yoga or a martial art. It will give you an excuse to sport some of those cool yoga pants. Go ahead, you know you want to!

## **21. EAT FIRST AND EAT WELL**

“Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall die.”

—Imhotep

Imhotep, if nothing else, had things in the right order. Don't drink on an empty stomach. How many times have we heard it? Without going into a detailed physiological analysis, here are some reasons not to: First, the alcohol will hit you harder and faster. I don't know about you, but I like a nice buzz to last and contribute to a long, enjoyable experience. We'll look at that some more later. Don't flame out early. Second, being hungry can encourage bad drink choices. If your blood sugar is crashing, you might be tempted into a big, sweet drink just to get fast calories and energy. That can be bad, for reasons we'll soon discuss. Third, getting tipsy can lead to unhealthy food choices. If it takes any discipline at all for you to pick out healthy foods over junk, drinking first and then ordering or cooking could easily throw you off the better path.

Various sources, including Healthline, the American Liver Foundation, and Today's Dietitian, have recommendations on how to eat for better liver health. My review of these showed that a liver-healthy diet is closely aligned with a generally healthy diet. There's no reason not to eat healthy, but if you drink, protecting your liver (and brain) is just one more incentive to eat right. If you drink a lot, you're probably around other people who drink a lot. If you've been around for a while, you may have noticed that not all your drinking friends are aging the same way. Some of that is determined by genetics, but from my perspective at age fifty-seven, it's more about lifestyle. Mindless eating is no better for us than mindless drinking. Improve one, and we can more easily improve the other.

I once had this idea that drinking red wine instead of beer would help me lose weight—you know, the bad kind of weight that tends to settle in around the middle. Less carbs means less fat gain, right? So, for my go-to evening drink, I'd stock some Cabernet and sip on it, imagining the flab melting away. The problem was, I didn't change anything else.

After an annual physical showed my blood sugar was dangerously high, I went on a ketogenic diet for the better part of a year. If you haven't heard of it, it's high fat, moderate protein, and minimal carbs. That meant no

beer, so I was drinking nothing but water, dry red wine, and hard liquor. My blood sugar went down immediately. It's taken some practice and flexibility to determine how long to stay on keto to enjoy its benefits without the bad side effects that can come with it. Word to the wise: For most people doing keto, the alcohol hits harder and faster than it will when we're on a standard diet, even when we eat first.

Whatever eating habits you adopt, be deliberate and mindful!

## **22. WATCH OUT FOR SUGAR**

“The only way that I could figure they could improve upon Coca-Cola, one of life’s most delightful elixirs, which studies prove will heal the sick and occasionally raise the dead, is to put rum or bourbon in it.”

—Lewis Grizzard

Think about drinks that mask the taste of alcohol. Mixed drinks are extremely popular. I know lots of people who prefer mixed drinks because they can’t stand the taste and the bite of straight spirits. Masking the taste makes it harder to be aware of how much we’re drinking. Also, mixed drinks are often sweet. We’re genetically programmed to like sugar, in any form. This was once a beneficial survival adaptation when sugar was harder to find, but now it’s easy, cheap, and a health liability. For some, it’s an addiction all by itself. Mix sugar with alcohol, and it’s a double threat, encouraging more consumption of both.

SugarScience, developed by health scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, is a source for scientific evidence about sugar and its impact on health. According to the SugarScience website, excessive fructose, or fruit sugar, can damage our livers just like excessive alcohol consumption. Many soft drinks have lots of added fructose, and even wine contains some residual fructose. My favorite cola mixer is loaded with it, so I avoid it now except as a special treat. Do some fact-checking on your favorites cocktails and see how much sugar is in them, then check out [sugarscience.ucsf.edu/the-toxic-truth](http://sugarscience.ucsf.edu/the-toxic-truth). I’m not saying this to trash anyone for their drink choices or to demonize the manufacturers; it’s just information to be mindful of when we choose what to drink.

## **23. KEEP YOURSELF HYDRATED**

“I never drink water because of the disgusting things that fish do in it.”

—W. C. Fields

In Athens, Greece, during the summer of 1987, we experienced one of the worst heat waves in modern history. I wasn't going to let the heat kill my buzz though. I was becoming a tequila fan at the time. One night at the bars it occurred to me to drink a big glass of water for every shot of tequila I had. At least for the duration of the heat wave, it worked well. I drank less, suffered less from the heat, and woke up feeling better. Whatever your non-alcoholic drink of choice is, try having one between each alcohol drink. I recommend good old H<sub>2</sub>O.

While soft drinks will at least slow down your alcohol consumption, I don't recommend them because of the sugar unless you like diet sodas. They will dehydrate you and possibly cause a range of sugar-induced health problems. Dehydration, in addition to a slew of other bad things, thickens the blood, which impairs liver function. Even mild dehydration can affect your mental health. More water and less alcohol equal better health overall.

My wife is a smart drinker. She likes the same kinds of wine, beer, and liquor that I do, but I can't remember ever seeing her overdo it—not once. She doesn't like the feeling of being even mildly drunk. I guess I kind of envy that, but it's not me. A few years ago, she started cutting her wine fifty-fifty with purified water, and she likes it better that way. When she drinks bourbon, which we both like, it's always mixed and reasonably measured. I'll do the wine-and-water mix too once in a while—for example, if I'm doing something outdoors when it's hot. The practice of diluting wine with water is ancient, going back to Biblical times and the classic Greek philosophers. Depending on the type of wine and how much water you add, you may find that reducing the alcohol burn can bring out more of the complex flavors and aroma of the wine. Remember those goofy “Riuniti on ice—that's nice!” commercials from the seventies? As the saying goes, don't knock it 'til ya try it. Diluting your alcohol of choice with water or ice might work for you if you like the taste but want a lighter buzz.

## **24. SET A BEDTIME AND STICK TO IT**

“If you’re going to do something tonight that you’ll be sorry for tomorrow morning, sleep late.”

—Henny Youngman

Unless you’re one of those rare people who can get by on just a few hours of sleep a night, you probably need at least a good seven or eight hours of high-quality sleep to be at your best. That’s the way I am, and I do everything I can to protect my sleep time. I like to tell the following story to people when the subject of sleep deprivation comes up.

The first week of December 2012, I was on a solo work trip at a factory in the village of Ubly, Michigan. On the last day of the job, I started early to observe and interview some people at the end of third shift. It was freezing and pitch-black. I’d stayed up late the night before doing paperwork, emails, catch-up stuff, and ended up getting maybe three hours of sleep. On my way to the factory, I pulled up to a three-way intersection with a flashing red light. A big, beautiful buck walked serenely across the road in front of me, so I slowed down to watch as he crossed. Distracted and thinking, mistakenly, that the light was also flashing red for everyone, I came to a full stop, looked both ways, and pulled out to make a left turn. I glanced up to my left and saw with horror that a big white pickup truck, the size of a Ford F-350, was headed straight at me. I stomped on the gas and he slammed on his brakes, and with tires screeching we missed each other by maybe a couple of feet. If either of us had been any slower to react, that truck would have smashed my little rental car like a beer can, and that would have been the end of me, and maybe him too.

I’ve had plenty of close calls, but this one woke me up. The fatigue was avoidable and it damned near got me and somebody else killed. Have you ever had an experience where sleep deprivation led to a close call? Since that morning, I’ve done my best to plan my evenings around being in bed a minimum of eight hours before the alarm is set to go off. Having a set bedtime is another awareness factor that can help us hold to a limit.

In addition to sleeping enough, we need to have high-quality sleep. Excessive drinking and good sleep don’t go together. For most healthy people, a little nightcap can help us nod off more quickly and sleep deeply

for a while, but it reduces REM sleep, which is the most restorative sleep state. It also can interfere with our circadian rhythms, a kind of biological master clock. Circadian rhythms regulate vital body processes such as metabolism, immune functions, sleep, sex drive, moods, and our ability to think straight. Our livers function according to this rhythm too, so excess alcohol hits the liver in more than one way. Alcohol also impacts melatonin and other natural substances in our systems that regulate sleep.

If, like me, you sometimes tend to reach a certain level of buzz before you're ready to flop down and go to sleep, try starting early and finishing early. Research shows that the best time of the day for the body to metabolize alcohol is in the early to middle evening hours, aka happy hour. Getting to bed earlier is generally better anyway. Staying up late always costs me sleep, unless I can afford to sleep in the next day, which is rarely the case. Set a bedtime and plan your evening around it instead of letting the evening determine your bedtime. Being well-rested leads to better decisions and better health.

## **25. ENGAGE YOUR SENSES**

“Close your eyes and turn your face into the wind. Feel it sweep along your skin in an invisible ocean of exultation. Suddenly, you know you are alive.”

—Vera Nazarian

Staying physically engaged is a good way to keep the mind from wandering. Some people think better with something in their hands. Some feel that they think better with a drink in their hand, and they might be right, to a point. For example, I did much, if not most, of the work on this book with a drink in my hand (except when I was typing). There’s something calming and focusing about swirling a glass of cabernet sauvignon, maybe at the same time thinking myself a suave and sophisticated cognoscenti of bouquet and aeration technique. That’s fine, until I’ve had too much and it’s no longer a grounding form of tactile stimulation, but just another derailment into mindlessness. Think about a monk with a mala, a Greek man with his worry beads, a student with a highlighter to twirl, a congregant praying with a rosary, or any contemplative practice that keeps your hands busy. Likewise, consider the peace of mind that comes from gardening, hiking, painting, or some repetitive physical activity (“wax on, wax off”). Tactile stimulation is the activating of nerves under the skin that inform us of texture, temperature, and other sensations of touch. Tactile stimulation and other types of physical stimulation can increase mindfulness, which reduces mindlessness, including mindless drinking.

If you’re into meditation, yoga, or some type of mindfulness practice, you might include incense, music, singing bowls, malas, candles, or other “props” to make the practice more enjoyable and effective by engaging your senses. Those things aren’t just for show—they enhance the experience. Have you wondered why fidget spinners got so popular? People are using those for meditation too. If your excessive drinking is being caused or exacerbated by anxiety or any kind of excess mental energy, these simple forms of stimulation can help bring you out of your head and back into the immediate world, into the moment.

## **26. TRY A FITNESS TRACKER**

“From the ages of eight to eighteen, me and my family moved around a lot. Mostly we would just stretch, but occasionally one of us would actually get up to go to the fridge.”

—Jarod Kintz

I started wearing a fitness tracker after I saw some of my clients wearing them. Mine is a Fitbit Charge 2, a midrange model. It can track heart rate, stairs climbed, exercise, the amount and quality of one’s sleep (REM, light, deep), water intake, food intake, and weight. My Fitbit app also gets data from my exercise app, Fitbod, so in addition to steps, it also tracks workouts like weightlifting. Garmin, Samsung, Fossil, Apple, and other manufacturers also offer stylish and capable options that will do the job for you, depending on your budget and preferences.

I’ve also found it useful to track my heart rate in relation to the amount and quality of my sleep over time. I notice that my resting heart rate goes up when I drink more, when I don’t get enough sleep, and when I get dehydrated. Can’t remember what time you went to bed last night? Check your tracker data. I kept a simple log for a while, in the interest of science. Just using the Notepad app on my phone, I’d write an entry every morning recording what and how much I drank the night before, when I went to bed, how many hours of sleep I got, the sleep quality, my resting heart rate, and how I felt. The correlations are pretty simple and obvious. The point here is to increase awareness of how our lifestyle choices are affecting our health.



**PART III**

**TACTICS**



## **27. KNOW YOUR LIMIT AND TRACK YOUR INTAKE**

“It takes only one drink to get me drunk. The trouble is, I can’t remember if it’s the thirteenth or the fourteenth.”

—George Burns

A good limit on drinking can be a moving target. It depends on multiple factors, such as how much we’ve had to eat, how tired or rested we are, what we are doing and planning to do, where we are, who we are with, and everything else that affects how we feel. Our limit can change over time. Be aware of these factors, and be aware of how you feel. Keep a log. I know that smacks of discipline and organization, but we’re talking about managing a habit here. Management is best done by organization.

You have a smart phone, right? There’s a raft of drink-tracking apps, and if you want to systematically control your drinking, you can get one that works for you. Depending on what platform you’re using, you might try IntelliDrink, BAC Alcohol Calculator, R-U-Buzzed, AlcoDroid Alcohol Tracker, Drinking Buddy, or others. The prices for these apps range from free to cheap, and considering what they can help us do, they are a good investment. These are powerful tools that will help you find and stick to your limit.

Whether you use an app or a simple note pad, keeping track of how much you drink, what you drink, and how you feel will give you more awareness and control over your drinking. Hint: If you’re too hammered to keep track of your tracking, you’re past your limit! Raising our awareness through behavior tracking can help us get a grip on any kind of addictive behavior.

## **28. TRACK YOUR SPENDING**

“War and drink are the two things man is never too poor to buy.”

—William Faulkner

This is another awareness exercise. Drinking can be an expensive habit. Want to improve your waistline and your bottom line? Drink less! Try tracking how much you can save by reducing your drinking for a month, or some other period of time, and how much you'd enjoy reallocating that money for something cool like a vacation, a new bike, or paying off a credit card. If you're worried about money, start keeping track of how much you spend on alcohol. Count everything—tax, tips, taxis, everything related to drinking.

You may even want to account for the amount of time you spend on drinking. Just figure out your hourly wage from your job, and how many hours you spend in a month drinking without getting anything else accomplished. Add that up at the end of the month and write down the total amount on a sheet of paper with all of your other expenditures, such as rent or mortgage, utilities, car payments, and all of that. I'm not suggesting that any special number or percentage is good or bad, only that doing the math can offer some vital perspective. FYI, according to [costsofcare.org](http://costsofcare.org) (checked 5/19/20), the average cost of a liver transplant is \$577,000. According to [transplants.org](http://transplants.org) (checked 5/19/20), it's \$812,500 with a 20 percent co-pay of \$162,500. Who has that kind of money lying around?

## **29. GIVE YOURSELF AN ALLOWANCE**

“I went on a diet, swore off drinking and heavy eating, and in fourteen days I had lost exactly two weeks.”

—Joe E. Lewis

Having big containers of alcoholic drinks makes it way too easy to lose track of how much I’ve had. For example, I tend to buy the kind of wine that comes in a five-liter box for twenty bucks. What happens sometimes, especially if I’m playing video games, watching movies, or reading a good book, is that I just keep getting up and refilling my glass. I’m basically on autopilot. In the context of an evening, that box is practically bottomless. When I get past the point of being mindful, I tend to go overboard, past my safe limit, and sometimes regret it.

I’ve found it’s better to get my wine in 750 ml bottles. Deciding in advance that this one bottle is my treat for the evening makes it a little more special. I mark it with a fancy little stopper so everyone in the house knows it’s mine. I can limit myself to one bottle of wine in an evening, not feel like I’m depriving myself, and not have a hangover. For the frugal-minded, you can get an acceptable bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon for three bucks at Walmart. There’s no shame in it!

## **30. THROTTLE THE BOTTLE**

“I always see adults pour a glass of wine and only fill it halfway and I’m like okay, one of us is doing it wrong and I think that’s you.”

—Unknown

For some of us, it might be routine to sit down in our favorite chair with a guitar, a book, or a movie to watch, and a bottle of our favorite liquor. It may also be routine to finish that bottle in one evening and experience the usual consequences. Blech! Just another example of mindless drinking.

Now, I keep that bottle in the kitchen, sometimes up on a high shelf. If I want another drink, I have to get up and go refill the glass. When the goal is moderation, every little bit of deterrent helps! We can also just keep on hand what’s within our limit for an evening. A bit more extreme, but if that’s what it takes, do it. I don’t like this tactic for myself, but it might work for you. Just don’t give yourself a reason to go back out and drive your car to the store after drinking what you’ve already established as your limit.

I like bourbon. A lot. Especially strong bourbon. My current favorite is Knob Creek Single Barrel Reserve, which is 120 proof. That’s high-octane by most standards. I love the taste and the way it burns going down. I don’t like to cut it with water, put it on ice, or mix it with anything—that’s just my preference. The same goes for high-end tequilas and other mezcals. I found the best way to enjoy these in moderation is to drink them out of a miniature brandy snifter. This method worked so well that I bought a bunch of them and installed a little steel rack under the kitchen counter that holds an even dozen. I use them for my wine now too. Putting a shot into a tiny glass makes it look like more. The snifter glass enhances the bouquet, which means I get more enjoyment out of every sip. It also means that if I want more, I have to get up and refill my glass. This gives me and my liver a chance to think about whether we really want it.

Here’s another idea. This might be a desperate move, but try stocking something you don’t really like. When I was stationed in Greece, I used to keep a bottle of ouzo under the kitchen sink, next to the cleaning supplies. Some people love it, but ouzo for me is what you drink when you run out

of Sterno. There is no way to mask the taste of that stuff. It doesn't mix with anything. I have to be desperate to drink it; the taste is a major deterrent. I love high-quality India pale ales, the expensive, high-gravity ones. However, if I keep Natural Ice in the fridge instead of something super yummy like Stone Ruination IPA, I guarantee you I'll drink less. And spend less money.

## **31. RETHINK THAT KEGERATOR**

“I feel bad for people who don’t drink. When they wake up in the morning, that’s as good as they’re going to feel all day.”

—Frank Sinatra

Speaking of big containers, I had a kegerator in the basement for a while, which I always kept stocked with a half-barrel of good IPA. That’s fifteen and a half gallons. If you haven’t seen one, a kegerator is basically a refrigerator that contains a keg of beer, a cylinder of carbon dioxide, and a regulator, with a tap installed on the door. This is potentially dangerous! And expensive, especially when your friends also like good IPA and don’t put any money in the coffee can you put on top of the fridge with a big label that says “Beer Fund.” The kegerator was nice, and a cool thing to have, but in addition to (1) spending lots of money on high-quality, high-gravity ale, and (2) drinking too much, I put on almost twenty pounds of beer gut in six months. That alone was enough reason to get rid of the thing. A better method I found was getting my beer in twelve-ounce bottles or cans. This way, I can more easily keep track of how many I’ve had and limit myself to a few in an evening. Please recycle your empties!

## **32. CUT SMOKING, CUT DRINKING**

“I wish to live to 150 years old, but the day I die, I wish it to be with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other.”

—Ava Gardner

This book isn't for or against smoking tobacco (or anything else). I smoked heavily for decades and don't personally advocate it, but everyone has to make their own choice. I have noticed, however, that tobacco and alcohol go together very well. For me, the two habits encourage and support each other. My wife and I quit smoking in the house when our first child was born, and we stuck to that. It meant going outside any time we wanted a cigarette—rain or shine, summer heat or winter cold. I noticed a cycle that started up for me. I'd go outside and have a smoke, then come back in the house and think, “Okay, one more drink, then off to bed.” Then I'd finish the drink, and think, “Okay, outside for one more smoke, then off to bed.” Another mindless, vicious circle.

Nicotine is a stimulant that can keep you energized for more drinking. Alcohol numbs the senses, blocking the negative physical feelings that come from smoking, and saps our self-control. It's a self-feeding loop, leading to more of both. You get the idea!

Okay, now what? If you've ever developed the tobacco habit, especially if you kept it up for a long time, then tried to quit, you know it's far easier said than done. In addition to cutting down on our drinking, there are other things we can try. Some of us have enough will power to say “I'm done!”, and never light another one. I've tried that approach, and it doesn't stick, especially when I'm around other people who smoke and there are always cigarettes close at hand. You might try prescription medications, for example Varenicline (Chantix). I tried that, but it made me so nauseous, I had to go off it. If you don't have those bad side effects, or you can tough it out long enough to get off the tobacco, Chantix might work for you. You might also try nicotine replacement therapy, like gum, lozenges, and patches. Of those three, the gum has worked the best for me. There's also hypnosis, and smart phone apps like Smoke Free that can help you stop and get through the withdrawals. Whatever method you choose, I hope

you can get off the cigarettes. I wish I'd never started, but we'll keep trying, right?

### **33. GET OFFLINE**

“An intelligent man is sometimes forced to be drunk to spend time with his fools.”

—Ernest Hemingway

You’ve probably already heard that the bluish light that comes from a TV, computer, tablet, and cell phone screen is disruptive to human sleep. There are apps and gadgets that filter the light, but they don’t change the content. For me, the biggest problem with TV (my dad called it “the idiot box”) and video games is that they encourage me to stay up longer. If I stay up longer, I’ll probably drink more and will definitely short myself on sleep. One more level. One more episode. Gotta finish this movie before I go to bed. I’ll literally zonk out in the middle of a fight with some electronic foe, Xbox controller in hand, way past my bedtime, with nothing to show for it. Combine that with a cigarette habit like we just discussed, plus mindless drinking, and you’re in for a sleep-stealing, time-wasting triple whammy.

I’m not going to stop playing video games, but it’s another thing I’ve had to limit. We can enjoy TV and video games responsibly, same as alcohol, by managing them with discipline.

If you’re online much, you’ve read or heard advice about limiting screen time. All the news, social media, games, movies—whatever your poison—can keep you up at night and encourage more drinking. For me, it’s about staying up later and having some external stimulus (much of which is crap, anyway) keep my mind speeding and reaching out for alcohol in self-defense. Please, knock me out now so I don’t have to process this anymore! How often have you caught yourself checking the news, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or whatever when you’re too tired to care what’s on it?

Even worse, at least in my case, is getting into endless, expanding online arguments about politics. If that’s also a problem for you, I recommend *Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* by Ben Sasse. Reading that book brought me a ton of calm, enabled me to enjoy social media again, and to stay up to date on the news without losing my peace of mind.

Electronic entertainment is scientifically and diabolically designed to grab your attention and keep it. Forever. Especially TV shows and websites. Anything with advertising content will try to invade your mind, nag at your fears and hopes, and steal your money. This invokes excitement and anxiety, which won't help you sleep. Our subconscious minds may try to quell this negative energy with more alcohol.

Anyway, the point here is to make sure your online activities aren't contributing to sleep deprivation, stress, and more drinking. Use that smart phone to educate yourself on what's happening in the world, but then turn off all notifications except for your alarm clock and get to sleep!

## **34. READ A BOOK**

“When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading.”

—Henny Youngman

Yes, reading a book in the evening has its risks. For me, the main one is that I’m tempted to read past my bedtime. I choose my books carefully, as you probably do, so they’re always good (like this one!). The later I stay up, the better the chance I’ll get up and pour that next drink, miss more sleep, and watch the cycle continue. One advantage of books over TV, movies, and video games is that they engage our brains in a healthy way. A few years ago, I started reading most of my entertainment books, usually sci fi/fantasy, in Spanish. I get them on my Kindle, so I can use the built-in dictionary to look up words and help expand my vocabulary. If you’re so inclined, I highly recommend learning other languages. I had a couple of semesters of Spanish in high school, which led to my work in the Air Force as an Arabic linguist. I got to live in Greece for seven years, so had the opportunity to learn some Greek. I had friends in language school who were studying Russian, so picked up a little of that. In martial arts schools, learned a bit of Korean and Japanese. All of these have come in handy from time to time. Extensive research has proven that learning additional languages improves brain health. I don’t know about you, but I can use all the extra brain health I can get!

## **35. BEWARE OF ALCOHOL CONTENT**

“Wine is fine but whiskey’s quicker  
Suicide is slow with liquor”

Blizzard of Ozz—Robert Daisley, John Osbourne, Randy Rhoads,  
“Suicide Solution”

Watch out for alcoholic drinks that are extra strong, especially the kind that hide the taste of the alcohol. I learned about high-gravity beers from some of my rock climbing and mountain biking friends during the early 2000s. When I say high gravity, I’m talking up to 12 percent alcohol by volume (ABV). These tend to be super tasty Belgian-style ales. If regular beers are your normal—American lagers, for example—these high-gravity beers will ambush you.

Same thing goes for all the sweet, fruity drinks. Just try cutting the amount of alcohol you add to the mix. Instead of pouring liquor from the bottle straight into the glass, try using a shot glass or a jigger, one of those hourglass-shaped measuring cups that bartenders use to measure the amount of alcohol they put in drinks.

A friend of mine introduced me to session IPAs. These are still India pale ales, but they run around 4 percent alcohol. I started drinking them for our band sessions and found that I play better. They still have that welcome hoppy bite and plenty of flavor, but they’re easier on the brain (and the liver). Challenge yourself to seek out drinks that you can enjoy but with lower or no alcohol content.

## **36. PLAY GAMES WITH CARE**

“It does not matter whether you win or lose, what matters is whether I  
win or lose!”

—Steven Weinberg

Drinking games are fun, and dangerous. I learned how to play quarters when I was seventeen, hanging out at the NCO club at the Presidio of Monterey in California during basic language school. There are multiple ways to play this game. One version we played was to order pitchers and fill up a glass with beer. The idea is to bounce a quarter off the table and land it in the glass. If you sink one, you point to someone at the table then they have to down the glass and hopefully catch the quarter in their teeth. If you have three people playing, two can gang up on one, and deliberately get them drunk. Another version is where you spin the quarter on the tabletop, slam your hand on it, and call heads or tails. If you're right, you make someone else drink. If you're wrong, you drink. There are plenty more drinking games out there—all very entertaining, and pretty much a guarantee of getting someone or multiple someones hammered. This can be great fun, but that fun is going to encourage you and your pals to drink more. So how can we play games in moderation? Is it even possible? Would it be better just to avoid them if we're planning to control our intake? Again, it's about mindfulness and making deliberate, informed decisions. For example, if you usually play a game that involves shots of whiskey, try using shots of beer. If you usually play a game that involves beer, and you play with beer that has a high alcohol content, try playing with something with a low alcohol content like a super-light lager or some session IPA. Use your imagination and keep your moderation goals at the top of your priority list!

## **37. DON'T DRINK YOURSELF INTO A STEREOTYPE**

“I don't fit into any stereotypes. And I like myself that way.”

— C. JoyBell C.

Society often rewards us for being bad, or at least looking and acting bad. Pick any rebel Hollywood star and watch their movies. From the time we first gained the admiration of our grade school classmates for smarting off to a teacher, bringing cigarettes to the playground, and being socially disruptive in any number of ways, there have been rewards. Even if it's just attention, including negative attention, the perceived rewards for this type of behavior can reinforce it into habit over time.

When your friends praise you (or seem to) for how much booze you can put away and still walk, how does that affect the way you think and drink? Many of us pick up this positive reinforcement when we're young and carry the feeling with us even when nobody is encouraging us anymore. Sometimes we associate rebellious, badass behavior with youth and vitality. There's an image association, but it doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Anyone with any judgment won't buy it; they'll just see someone trying too hard to fit a dumb stereotype.

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, my drink of choice was Jack Daniels—good old Jack Black. I had the T-shirt, the hat, the engraved Zippo lighter, the JD Zippo case on my belt, the JD key fob, all of it. Besides stupidly spending my own money to be a walking billboard, I made whiskey-drinking part of my public persona and attached myself to it, often to excess. Don't live out some bullshit stereotype and hurt yourself and others in the process!

## **38. BE MINDFUL OF PEER PRESSURE**

“The universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.”

— Eden Phillpotts

Peer pressure can be good and bad, and sometimes it's hard to tell which is which, especially when our judgment is impaired. Resisting negative peer pressure is a good way to take care of ourselves, including our livers. Peer pressure can affect us all, at any age. Know the difference between constructive peer pressure and destructive peer pressure.

Have your friends ever told you “Do it, bro! One more won't kill ya!” “Don't be a wimp!” If you're a moderate drinker hanging around people who overdo it, you might hear these types of comments from your friends. Their intentions might be good, but the outcome can be bad. Maybe they miss you. Maybe they don't want to party alone. Whatever their motivations, you are your own boss. Be sure you decide what you want to do, when you want to do it, where you want to do it, how much you want to do it, and with whom you want to do it.

Remember that peer pressure to drink can be direct or indirect. Direct is when someone is actively trying to get us to drink more. Indirect can be when we do it just to fit in. We can deal with this through avoidance—just staying away from friends who are drinking—but sometimes that's not an option. We can also deal with it by setting boundaries and respecting them. Set your limits in advance, learn to use the power of saying no, and recognize that the choice to say yes is yours alone. Keeping that in mind is self-empowering. Take control and keep it!

## **39. CHANGE HANGOUTS**

“I went to the worst of bars hoping to get killed but all I could do was to get drunk again.”

—Charles Bukowski

When I first moved from Athens, Greece, to Chattanooga, Tennessee, in early 1990, the quality of my nightlife took an abysmal fall. I was still in my twenties, single, a Yankee transplant, out of my element. The places I went to were nothing but dismal watering holes, and the people I met there were like me: social ghosts with the same negative tendencies who encouraged more of the same.

After I started college at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in '91, things started to change. People I hung out with were mostly college students, motivated and going somewhere, and they showed me around, offering me better environments, better influences, and an improvement in overall quality of life. Sure, we partied, but it was less about drowning our sorrows alone and more about enjoyment and bonding. We formed real friendships and looked out for each other. I stopped frequenting those depressing dive bars and haven't been back much since then. When I am—to play or watch a show, for example—I see in every drunk bar fly a reflection of my past self. I don't miss that guy!

I found that, for me, some bars are bad places to drink, and that goes double for airports. They're more tolerable if I happen to bring some friends with me. Even then, I'd rather have a group of people I know and like meet at my house, their house, at a campsite in the woods, or some other place where we control the environment. The vibe is better, I know I'll be around people that are cool, and I can at least crash on the floor instead of having to pay for a ride or risk that DUI, or worse. Some bars are just depressing places, and in depressing places I want to drink more. I travel a ton for my work. In the past, I'd pick a hotel with a bar in it or nearby. After my workday, I'd spend a little time in the exercise room, eat, and inevitably end up in a different version of the same old place. There would be the standard bunch of businessmen optimistically hitting on the

attractive bartender, imagining somehow that she's been longing for them to blow into town for a couple of days and sweep her off her feet. Pitiful. The same crap on the bar TV, the same lame talk—boring, boring, boring. Another reason to drink more. Just what I needed.

Now, when I'm on the road, I usually have a guitar with me and some good books to read. I'll get a bottle of wine or some beer and finish the day chilling out in my room, reading, or playing with my headphones on, and no annoying distractions. Better for my liver, better for my brain. If you find yourself feeling bored and bummed out at your current hangouts, find some new ones!

## **40. UNDERSTAND DRUG INTERACTIONS**

“I’ve never had a problem with drugs. I’ve had problems with the police.”

—Keith Richards

If you’ve ever had the experience, you know that alcohol interacts with other drugs, including recreational drugs of fluctuating legality and others like caffeine, antihistamines, painkillers, muscle relaxers, and sleeping pills. Alcohol drinks containing caffeine will tend to make us drink more. Adding sugar to that mix (cola to bourbon, for example) increases the effect. There is no combination of alcohol and drugs that I’ve experienced or heard of that doesn’t make things more intense and potentially dangerous for the mind or body. If you’ve used any of these other drugs in combination with alcohol, you already know how they interact for you. If you’re thinking about it, do yourself a favor and do some research before you get in a situation where it might happen. A party with your friends may not be the best place to educate yourself on the topic. The interaction side effects can range from uncomfortable to embarrassing to lethal. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** If your prescription pill bottle label, for example sleeping pills or painkillers says “Do not take with alcohol”, take the warning seriously! Sometimes we joke about it, but that combination can easily stop your breathing, and it doesn’t take much. Get educated and protect yourself and your friends!

## **41. PRACTICE SELF-SURVEILLANCE**

“Why is it when the sun blacks out on a Monday afternoon it’s an ‘amazing natural phenomenon’ but when I do it’s a ‘problem?’”

—Jenn Quinn

We can literally watch our own behavior, thanks to the miracle (and curse) of modern technology. Our lives in general will benefit from anything we can do to increase our self-awareness. This in turn will give us more opportunities for self-appreciation. Self-appreciation will help us appreciate others. Greater appreciation of ourselves and others will increase our value of ourselves and others, which will lead to better treatment of ourselves and others.

I’m eternally grateful that there were no smart phones and few camcorders around in the 1980s. If you want to get an honest look at your behavior when you’re drinking, set up some video cameras and record yourself. Ask your friends and family to make a video of you when they can see that you’re over the line. Video cameras don’t lie, and they don’t give a damn what you think or how you feel. Watch those videos and decide if you admire that behavior. Yep, that’s me falling down, throwing up on the bar, hitting on the bride at a wedding reception, or whatever. Be fearless when you look at yourself. When someone did as you asked and recorded you, and there you are looking like an idiot, show appreciation! A while back, I missed an opportunity to use this technique. I’d started my day in a terrible mood. I then broke my own rule and started drinking on an empty stomach, and before long went over the line and mouthed off bad to my best friend, right in front of a motion and sound activated security camera. After checking for the footage later, we discovered that there was none, because the camera was dead. Pro tip: Keep your batteries charged!

## **42. SHOW SOME CONSIDERATION**

“Tequila: it’s not even a drink, it’s just a way to get the police round without using a telephone!”

—Unknown

Think about how excessive drinking is affecting the people around you. Aside from the obvious stuff like driving drunk, falling down and breaking things, and failing our families and coworkers, there are less severe but cumulative behavior problems that hurt other people. Snore more when you drink? Who are you keeping awake? Crank the music up extra loud when you drink? Who are you disturbing? I was bad about this in my twenties. I lived in apartments and answered the door more than once to the cops knocking because a neighbor had, very reasonably, complained. About the music, not the snoring. I was being inconsiderate. This is another part of the awareness exercise. Being more mindful of how our behavior is affecting others gives us more reasons to keep our drinking down to an acceptable level. Don’t let it be a problem for other people!

## **43. PROTECT YOURSELF**

“I wouldn’t do anything for a Klondike bar, but I’d do some shady shit for some whiskey and good tacos.”

—Unknown

We can easily become victims of our own drinking. Some harmful things we do to ourselves, and some may be done to us by others, either deliberately or not. There are obvious violations, such as sexual abuse, mugging and robbery, kidnapping, and other direct assaults that we can make easier for an assailant by overdrinking. Some harmful acts are less obvious, and the perpetrator may even be a friend.

Here’s an example from my own experience. I went on a trip once with a couple of friends, one male and one female. Real friends, and still friends. The thing was, the other guy and I were both attracted to the lady, and she was attracted to both of us. I’m not flattering myself or making assumptions about either of them—that’s just the way it was. Anyway, during this trip, the other guy would not let my drink run out. He wouldn’t even ask. If my empty glass hit the table, there would be a full one there to replace it. I kept thinking “What a pal!” But he wasn’t keeping pace. Well, you can guess where that went. I overdid it, went to bed early, and was out of the way. I didn’t notice what was happening at the time, but figured it out in hindsight. Duh.

Whatever the stakes or the situation, don’t let people take advantage of you. This goes for all of us; guys and gals, young and old, and everyone in between. Learn to identify situations where someone may be taking advantage of your drinking, such as when they’re encouraging you to drink more, but they’re not keeping pace. Or everything they want to do with you involves drinking. Or your inhibitions are down, and someone wants you to do something you wouldn’t otherwise do. Don’t make yourself a victim by drinking mindlessly!

## **44. IMAGINE THE WORST**

“Always carry a flagon of whiskey in case of snakebite and furthermore always carry a small snake.”

—W. C. Fields

Obsessing constantly about worst-case scenarios, or catastrophizing, can paralyze us and stop us from taking reasonable chances. Here, however, we’re talking about something entirely different. This is the scary stuff, like those videos some of us watched during high school driver’s education classes. Even when we’re in full control of our faculties, human beings are the most dangerous animals on the planet. Add alcohol, a vehicle, a loaded gun, fire, explosives, sharp objects, or whatever, and we’re asking for it.

If you’re reading this book for yourself or someone you know, then you or that person might have done something dangerous while under the influence and survived. Remember this, my friend: The only difference between us and all those people featured in the “accident” statistics and the Darwin Awards is sheer, dumb luck. We don’t have superpowers or a guardian angel.

Here’s something I learned in a motorcycle safety course after I bought my latest bike, a Harley Softail, in 2006. The instructor told the class that there are no accidents. He referred to them as “crashes” instead, and explained that unless there is some freak event, like a defective tire blowing, a bridge collapse, or a meteor strike, those things we call “accidents” are combinations of avoidable mistakes. Add up enough of them, and something bad is going to happen. Consider motorcycles and cars. It’s dark. It’s raining. It’s late and we’re tired. The roads are bad. Our tires are bald. We’ve been drinking. Others on the road have been drinking. Trust me, add up enough of these factors and there will be trouble. Our minds trick us all the time. We fool ourselves into thinking “It won’t happen to me.” Remember the line from *Heavy Metal*? “If there’s one thing I know, it’s how to drive when I’m stoned.” It’s a funny line, but I know people who actually think that way. Alcohol makes us overconfident, and too much wrecks our judgment. Don’t fall into that trap.

Here's a thought on assumptions. You probably had a teacher in grade school who wrote on the board, "When you assume, you make an ASS out of U and ME." Remember that? I've pondered that over the years and realized something. Life forces us to make assumptions. I assume that if I do my job, I'm going to get paid. I assume that if I get on an airplane, I'm going to get to my destination in one piece and hopefully with my luggage. The trick is that when we make assumptions, we need to (1) be aware of them and (2) know what the consequences are if we're wrong. My assumptions about working and flying are safe, and if I'm wrong, I can handle the consequences. I can get another job. My death is inevitable, and my family will be okay. Assuming I can drink and drive is not a safe assumption. The risk is relatively high, the payoff is close to zero, and the consequences of a DUI or a crash with injuries or deaths are unacceptable. It's also easily avoidable. Pretty simple logic.

The point of this little section is to scare you. Keeping the worst case in mind, on this particular topic, is a good way to love your liver and everything else that counts.

## **45. PARTY WITH A PLAN**

“I’m not an alcoholic, alcoholics go to meetings. I’m a drunk, we go to parties.”

—Unknown

Spontaneity can be fun, but not always. Sometimes it pays to plan things out—deciding in advance, for example, how we want the evening to go. Or picking a designated driver, lining up a taxi, and planning to get home, get some sleep, and be ready for work by a certain time the next day. We can also decide before we even leave the house what we’re going to drink and how much. Part of the plan could be that we’re not going to drink just to make the party tolerable. If it’s lame without getting drunk, it’ll still be lame if we do drink, and we have better places to be. If you’re going with friends, you can make a game out of agreeing on a limit everyone will stick to and seeing how well you can hold yourselves to it. Write your plan down on paper and bring it with you if it will help. Following some of the my previous tips—such as eating first and eating well, knowing the alcohol content of what you’re drinking, staying hydrated, avoiding sugar and caffeine, and alternating between alcohol drinks and water—will make it easier.

Speaking of planning, make sure you know in advance how you’re getting home. Any time you find yourself wondering if maybe you should get a ride instead of driving, that’s a sure sign that you need to get a ride (I stole that off a billboard). Make a plan, your plan, and stick to it!

## **46. RIDE THE BUZZ**

“I try not to drink too much because when I’m drunk, I bite.”

—Bette Midler

Learn to recognize the border zone between a pleasant buzz and a loss of control. You know that feeling you have after your first drink at the end of a long day, and it just starts to hit you? No lethargy, slurring, clumsiness, or loss of focus—just a peaceful, easy feeling. Instead of trying to make “more” of what’s already good, try maintaining that pleasant cruising altitude for as long as you can. Think of it like edging. You can make this a science experiment. For example, for your first drink you might go ahead and have that high-end scotch you’ve been looking forward to all day, then switch over to a light beer or drink a big glass of water. Eating helps with this, as does maintaining good hydration. Make a good thing last!

## **47. SKIP DAYS**

“I told myself I should stop drinking . . . But I’m not about to listen to some drunk who talks to himself.”

—Unknown

A close friend of mine has been successful with this. He was drinking as much as I was (a lot) and just made up his mind to start skipping days. Like me, he wasn’t committed to quitting completely. He started seeing a counselor who recommended trying this approach, and it definitely helped him cut back. He’s a musician, as am I, and neither of us is willing to give up the beer we drink when we play with our bands.

Be careful with sudden stops. Depending on your circumstances, quitting completely for any real length of time can be dangerous. If we’ve been drinking excessively for a long time, our bodies are conditioned to the presence of alcohol and stopping suddenly makes our central nervous systems work to adjust to the change. The symptoms can range from irritating to life-threatening, and can include alcohol withdrawal syndrome (AWS). This condition can cause tremors, anxiety, vomiting, headaches, nightmares, seizures, hallucinations, and worse. Note: If you experience alcohol withdrawal syndrome, consider it a medical emergency, and get to a doctor.

Research on the web can be helpful, but your doctor is probably the best source of knowledgeable help. Some people can just stop without experiencing AWS, some can’t. If you skip days or otherwise suddenly stop drinking, be aware of the symptoms of AWS and don’t be bashful about getting help from a professional to deal with it. This method can be useful whether you’re aiming for moderation, or working towards total sobriety. My doctor told me that the best medicine for weaning off alcohol is alcohol. If you’re not a cold turkey person, you might experiment with skipping days. You don’t need to wait until your next monster hangover to try this!

## **48. TAKE A TRIAL BREAK**

“The problem with the designated driver program, it’s not a desirable job, but if you ever get sucked into doing it, have fun with it. At the end of the night, drop them off at the wrong house.”

—Jeff Foxworthy

I mentioned earlier that I work with an organization for veterans that helps people deal with their issues by turning their stories into songs. I had the opportunity to help write some of them. The way it works, new people come in, and when they’re ready, they get in the “hot seat.” We tell them that what we say in that room stays there. We have boxes of tissues on the table, and everyone uses them at some point. We’ve had men and women in this group whose service goes all the way back to the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam, and every other conflict since. I listened to their stories and often went home to do research on the web or watch documentaries about the conflicts. As had happened when I served overseas during the eighties, the more I learned, the angrier I got. The sadder I got. Finally, I started to melt down, raging and crying as I read the history and saw the records of carnage, violence, suffering, waste, and lies.

In desperation, I found a great counselor in town who works regularly with veterans and started going in for weekly sessions. One day he suggested as an experiment that I take a week-long break from all of the exposure. No news, no war documentaries, no shooter video games, no politics, no online arguments, no war research—just come up for air for one week. And no drinking.

That same day, I went in to see my family doctor for a checkup. I mentioned what I was going through, and he had me fill out a psych eval form. He’s been my doctor for at least twenty years, knows me well, and is the one who diagnosed me with Bipolar II and suggested that I’ve been self-medicating with alcohol since I was a kid. He said that my counselor’s suggestion was a good idea, but that tapering off alcohol might be safer. I let him know I was going to tough it out, and he wrote me a prescription for Topiramate, which helps reduce alcohol cravings and withdrawal,

among other things. I took it for a week, didn't like the side effects, and threw it out.

I made it through the week without a drop though, at least confirming that it wouldn't kill me. You might want to try this experiment just for the sake of science. Try going on the wagon for a week, a month, or whatever increment can effectively reset your system—physically and mentally. Keep track of how you feel during that break. If you feel good, you might make it a regular practice. If that doesn't work, keep trying other methods. Be persistent, be patient with yourself, and give yourself credit for your efforts!

## **49. LIVE BETTER THROUGH CHEMISTRY**

“I never took hallucinogenic drugs because I never wanted my consciousness expanded one unnecessary iota.”

—Fran Lebowitz

This may make some of you uncomfortable, but please stay with me and keep an open mind. I put this toward the end of the book, because for many people, it would be a method of last resort. Maybe you’ve tried psychedelic drugs already, maybe not, but I’m going to offer a few points about them and their potential for helping with addiction and general mental health.

For those not already hip, psilocybin is a psychoactive alkaloid, the active ingredient in what you may have heard referred to as “magic mushrooms.” At the right dosage, it causes an acutely altered psychological state. While psilocybin mushrooms have been vilified and misrepresented as part of the United States’ misguided and failed war on drugs, the scientific world is continuing to do what scientists do: learn and progress. Scientists and professionals in the psychiatric community are investigating, under carefully controlled conditions, whether psilocybin and other compounds can curb addiction to alcohol, nicotine, cocaine, and opiates. Studies by researchers in credible institutions such as Johns Hopkins University and New York University are demonstrating that psychedelics are effective in the treatment of alcoholism and have demonstrated substantial and lasting relief from depression and anxiety in people with life-threatening cancer.

According to the DEA, psilocybin is a Schedule I substance under the Controlled Substances Act. Schedule I drugs, which include heroin and LSD, have a high potential for abuse and serve no legitimate medical purpose in the United States, and have a lack of accepted safety standards for use under medical supervision. While there is certainly potential for abuse, especially for anyone prone to chemical addiction, I don’t agree with other two thirds of this conclusion. If you live in the United States of

America, that's the way it is for now. Cannabis is also a Schedule I substance. Fortunately, efforts to have psilocybin decriminalized are beginning to pay off.

You may have also heard or read about ayahuasca, a brew made from the *Psychotria viridis* shrub and stalks of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine. When combined, the active compounds from these two plants form a powerful psychedelic mixture that produces an altered state of consciousness that can include euphoria and out-of-body experiences. People have used Ayahuasca traditionally for spiritual purposes, and it has gained popularity among those looking for a way to open their minds and heal from traumatic experiences. For example, the Heroic Hearts Project ([heroicheartsproject.org](http://heroicheartsproject.org)) is a non-profit organization that offers a program to veterans interested in psychedelic treatment options, advocating legal access and research, and promoting awareness of natural treatments like ayahuasca and other psychedelics to help end dependence on ineffectual synthetic drugs and heal minds. If you're not a vet, there are other options.

Ayahuasca's main ingredient is naturally occurring DMT, also a Schedule I substance, which makes it illegal in the United States. DMT stands for N, N-Dimethyltryptamine, a hallucinogenic drug also known as the "spirit molecule" because of its psychedelic effects. Fortunately, it's legal in some countries, including Brazil, Costa Rica, Italy, Peru, Romania, and to some extent legally available in other countries. There are guided retreats available, managed by qualified and responsible people, so if you're trying to figure out where to go for your next vacation, this might be it.

Another drug showing promise is ketamine. Once used mainly as an anesthetic on battlefields and in operating rooms, it is now under study using lower doses for treatment of major depression and suicide prevention.

These are powerful substances, and if we delve into them, we need to respect them. I don't recommend buying a bag of shrooms or some DMT from a stranger, eating a bunch, and hoping for the best. I'm going to plead the Fifth here regarding my own experience, and just offer some general advice: Approach this with at least the same rigor you would use when considering using a new prescription drug. **WARNING:** There are known, serious risks in combining psychedelics like psilocybin and ayahuasca with SSRIs, or Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors, for example Celexa,

Lexapro, Prozac, and others. If you decide to seek this type of alternative treatment, do so in consultation with your doctor! Also, keep the legalities in mind, and be careful. Do your research, work with people you can trust, and treat it with respect.

## 50. JUST QUIT

“I finally quit drinking for good. Now I drink for evil.”

—Unknown

A book on loving our livers wouldn't be complete without considering sobriety. I don't mean waking up in a strange place with a skull-splitting hangover and vague memories of having done something stupid last night (or maybe no memories at all), missing clothing or other possessions, walking home in the blinding morning sunlight without shades, feeling like demons are digging your eyeballs out, and thinking “I'll never do that again!” And then doing it again.

I mean getting to a place where you've decided that it's time to quit, 100 percent, forever. Reaching the point where you are committed to making the move and never going back. I think about this once in a while and wonder if it might be a good idea. Then I think, nah, I'm not ready for that and not sure I need it. I also wonder, as part of that internal discussion, whether or not I'm in denial. Then I think, hey, if I'm even thinking about it, does this mean that, yes, I am in denial, which means that I do need to quit? Then I come back to the thought that, no, I'm not in denial. Anyway, as of writing this book, the answer for me is no, it's not time to quit, and I have enough control over myself to keep my life on the rails and still enjoy some reasonable amount of drinking. Some will say that's a clear sign of denial and I need help. Okay, whatever. I haven't ruled it out. Completely. Yet. I guess.

If and when you decide that it's really time to quit, then I wholeheartedly encourage you to follow through on that decision with all of the resources at your disposal. I recommend getting qualified help. Be careful about how you do it. I know people who just quit cold turkey and never went back, on sheer will power. For others, however, quitting all at once can be dangerous, even fatal, if you're drinking hard and suddenly stop. According to the American Addiction Centers website, “Alcohol is a substance that should never be stopped ‘cold turkey’ without professional intervention, care, and supervision.” There are pharmaceutical drugs that can help you get through withdrawal symptoms. There are plenty of people

and organizations that are qualified to help you, so if you're committed to quitting, stay with it!

I am certainly not qualified, but I want to share this one suggestion. On the advice of one of my counselors, I've been reading a book called *One Breath at a Time: Buddhism and the Twelve Steps* by Kevin Edward Griffin. Being, as I said, committed to not quitting, I'm not planning on going into a Twelve Step program, but I figured I should at least learn something about it. Having studied Buddhist principles since around 2006 and getting into regular meditative practice, yoga, and other mindfulness exercises, I was intrigued by the title. I don't call myself a Buddhist because it's a word that carries a ton of baggage. I've been through the training and taken the refuge vows, so technically I'm an avowed Tibetan Buddhist, but I think of it more as a martial art for the mind than a religion, so I don't use the label. Anyway, one of the principles of Griffin's book is to help non-theists open up to the idea of the Twelve Steps and benefit from the method without being put off by the religious aspect. If you want to do a Twelve Step program but aren't comfortable with terms like "God" and "higher power," that book could help you make it work.

There are as many ways to stop drinking as there are people who want to do it. Try not to think of it as giving something up but gaining something better. A close friend of mine has been sober a long time. All he does is tell himself every morning "I'm not going to drink today," and for him that works. If you decide to quit, I commend you and urge you to persist, keep trying different things until you find what works best for your particular temperament and circumstances, and have faith in yourself. There are many paths to sobriety, and many people willing to help you along the way. Don't go it alone!



## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

“I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up where I needed to be.”

—Douglas Adams

Well, that’s all I’ve got for now. I hope you found at least one idea in this book that helps you enjoy your drinking, at whatever level feels good while being safe and healthy for you and the people around you. It occurs to me that some of you might be thinking something like “Yo, Rick. It sounds like you’re still a bit of a booze hound. Are you sure you’re qualified to write a book about drinking less?” All I can say is that I’m still working on it myself but making progress.

Conventional wisdom may tell you that there is no safe amount of alcohol. There’s also conventional wisdom that will tell you that some alcohol is good for you, even advising what kind you should drink, how much, and how often. Then there are the stories about people who drink all they want until they’re a hundred years old and die as happy and healthy as anyone else. I don’t know about any of that, but one thing we can see is that there’s a vast middle ground between teetotalers and those of us who like to drink and don’t want to give it up, but also want to lighten up and develop healthier habits around alcohol. The fifty ways that I’ve shared in this book are methods that I’ve tried, most of which I practice in varying combinations to help me stay moderate and happy.

Excessive drinking is a habit I developed when it seemed like there were valid reasons for it. I’m learning to recognize those reasons as excuses and working to treat them accordingly. These fifty ways are just a different set of habits, but better ones. They’re working for me in many ways, not just by keeping my drinking to an acceptable level, but by improving my life in general. Take the ones that work for you, leave the ones that don’t. I invite you to return to these pages again and again as a reference as you progress on your path toward mindful moderation. I wish you success and happiness in all your good work. Peace, my friend, and remember to forgive yourself!



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Jon Scott, Spiritual Heretic

Summit for Soldiers

Freedom Sings USA

The 6916th Raiders

Mark Simpson, Bill Dwyer, and Adam Webster

Bryan Collins, author of *The Art of Writing a Non-Fiction Book: An Easy Guide to Researching, Creating, Editing, and Self-Publishing Your First Book*

Cal Newport, author of *So Good They Can't Ignore You*

Everyone I've ever known, for putting up with my endless bullshit and loving me anyway.



## RESOURCES

*Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*  
by Rick Hanson

*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey

*No Hands And No Excuses: Living A No Excuses Life...No Matter What Happens To You!* by Lee Shelby

Moderation Management ([moderation.org](http://moderation.org))

Freedom Sings USA ([freedomingsusa.org](http://freedomingsusa.org)).

Summit for Soldiers ([www.summitforsoldiers.org](http://www.summitforsoldiers.org))

*The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan

*Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal* by Ben Sasse

SugarScience, University of California San Francisco  
([sugarscience.ucsf.edu/](http://sugarscience.ucsf.edu/))

American Liver Foundation ([liverfoundation.org/](http://liverfoundation.org/))

*Clinical potential of psilocybin as a treatment for mental health conditions* by Jeremy Daniel, PharmD, BCPS, BCPP and Margaret Haberman, PharmD, BCPP <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6007659/>

Heroic Hearts Project ([heroicheartsproject.org](http://heroicheartsproject.org))