

He's a Real Tool



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*"I am not my addiction.
I can give it funny names, question it, challenge it, and choose to defeat it."*

By Joanne O.

I call him "Alkie, Alkie Cravens". I invented him.

And you might say he invented the alcoholic me. He is a cartoon character that I created to personify the physical cravings, automatic thoughts, habits, self-defeating behaviors, and character defects that we eventually come to recognize as our alcoholic thinking. In practical application, summarizing all of that insight into the reasons we drink was just too unwieldy, when confronted by the pressing challenges of life.

So I just call him "Alkie, Alkie Cravens". He's that little voice in your head that always leads you astray. He says things like "See, your (insert appropriate authority figure) was right. You can't do it. You tried, you failed, Big Surprise. You might as well have a drink; it will take the pressure off." What he doesn't say is that HE is the one applying the pressure, pulling your strings, and pushing your buttons. He knows them all very well, he was already lurking when they were installed.

Go ahead, name your Bad Self. So that you can begin to separate your better self, and your future, from it. So that you can change, and grow, and finally quit.

The first step is awareness, just listening to the manipulative justifications and convoluted rationalizations that he hopes to slip past you without question. "Of course you'll go to the bar, it's two hours until your flight takes off." He is completely in charge of Auto-Pilot. Hit pause momentarily to remember what happens when you sit at the bar, and review all of the reasons you want to stay sober. I start simply, "No, I don't drink anymore." He loves a challenge. "You don't have to order a drink to have the shrimp, but after being singled out by the baggage screener like that, who could blame you?" Now it is time for a firm affirmation. "I don't even want a drink. I'm going to the food court. I am just hungry." He may insist. Then tell him where to get off. That you are not going to be manipulated by a sleazy little jerk like him anymore. That is usually all that is required.

If he is still persistent I sometimes literally flick him off my shoulder. I usually use my middle finger, but that's just because I am kind of immature for a 61 year old woman.

Alkie is absolutely obsessed, since his only purpose in life is to drive us to drink, his very survival depends on it. He is cunning, baffling, and loves it when people say he is powerful.

I visualize him sitting on my shoulder, whispering his manipulations, "You can't just ignore that trigger! It's your trigger after all!!!" in my ear. Such a Drama Queen, there is no such thing as a little problem to Mr. Cravens. No, every problem is huge and justifies a drink immediately.

He is as well versed as we are (since he lives in our heads) about our own reservations about aspects of the program. "They don't know what they are talking about. Just plain bad advice. Just read that chapter To Wives yet again. Remember how much that archaic nonsense helped when we were married to Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde?" He knows exactly how to pick away at our resolve and undermine the support systems for our sobriety.

And don't even get him going on the God stuff. He knows the oppressive religiosity kept me out of the rooms for over 20 years. And out of many meetings to this day.

He is still working on his B.S. in irrelevant babble after all. When he gets especially pushy, I imagine I am Robert DeNiro in Taxi Driver, "You talkin' to me, Alkie?" Okay, so 61 with less than a year of sobriety. Maturity will come with ongoing sobriety, from what I have observed in the rooms.

At first, he was loud, obnoxious, pulling my strings, and playing my cravings with glee. Once he's been recognized as the nemesis he is, confronted and shut down regularly, he becomes more subdued for a while. I believe that has to do with abstinence, with not stimulating the neuro pathways to the receptor sites in our brains that create our very real physical cravings. Or maybe he just gives up after a while.

But he is always lurking, waiting for an unguarded moment or an overwhelming fear, waiting to rush in to comfort us, offer some familiar numbness, some temporary oblivion to make everything OK. "Relaxxx... you deserve it after what you just went through." He tempts, and

entices, cajoles and ruminates on the injustices of our little world ad nauseum. He never forgets an insult, or a slight. But when it comes to taking responsibility, he has total amnesia.

In a meeting recently, a young woman tearfully confessed to relapsing yet again. She collapsed in tears of shame, guilt, and contrition. She said "I hate myself". Don't hate yourself. Hate that little voice in your head that won that round. Shame and guilt are just more material for Alkie's routine. It happened, deal with it. Use it, don't waste it. Learn from it, so he won't get the best of the better you again.

So I shared next. What I learned from my last relapse. What my little nemesis was whispering in my ear right before that. Playing on my frustrations and insecurities. "Poor, Poor, Pitiful Me..." What I wish I had said and done to shut him up, instead of drinking. We can ruminate for hours about some petty conversation at work. So go ahead and pick this imaginary conversation apart to really learn from it. So that he doesn't trick us with the same rationalizations ever again.

When I confessed my LAST relapse at my home group, they clapped for my return. I understand that ritual, but Alkie was so thrilled that he preened for the ladies and took a bow. He thought they were acknowledging his triumph. I told you he's a real tool. After a couple more weeks of confession and counting days, I announced that I would not be announcing my relapse anymore because I don't believe in positive reinforcement for negative behavior. Or in giving the little jerk the satisfaction of acknowledging his momentary victory over my better self ever again.

I am not my addiction. I can give it funny names, question it, challenge it, and choose to defeat it. Just because Alkie tells me to do something stupid doesn't mean I have to act on it. Now I recognize his subtle hiss and flick him off, tell him off, or question his faulty premise. Every time I say no to his cunning, baffling B.S., it strengthens my resolve and clarifies my commitment to my sobriety. By personifying my cravings and alcoholic thinking I was able to enlist my innate stubbornness to challenge the automatic loop that always ended, eventually, with a hangover. Now, there is something really satisfying about flicking him off my shoulder, and right out of my head.

Pass it on.... He'll hate that!
