

# Long Term Sobriety



*By Jeanine B.*

When friends and I talk about long-term sobriety, we inevitably ask, “How did we get here?” Of course, the pat answer is “one day at a time,” but truly, none of us really expected to a) live this long and b) stay sober for the long haul.

That was certainly the case for me. I sometimes tongue-in-cheek say that I came in to recovery on the 30-day plan, to save a relationship with a man who’d already married someone else. I can make light of it today, but there was a lot of pain in the understanding that he wasn’t coming back, whether I was sober or not, and that I needed to do the work of sobriety and healing for myself, not some imagined prize. How did I want to live my life, not just exist? How could I stay sober when everything felt so new and a little scary and I felt so alone? But of course, I wasn’t alone, and in the fellowship of AA I was able to connect with people who drank just like I did, and more importantly, applied the recovery principles in a similar manner. It was a matter of finding my tribe within the greater community, which still applies today.

And if you’d told me back then that I’d earn a couple of college degrees, run marathons, eventually meet and marry a great guy (and become a step-mom in the process), walk with my mother on her end-of-life journey, retire after thirty years in a career I enjoyed – I probably would’ve run screaming down the street to the nearest bar because I wasn’t capable of even imagining the life I’ve lived thus far. Thank goodness, life on life’s terms shows up one day at a time.

What I know today is that the disease is progressive, but so is recovery, and here I am, 38 years clean and sober, coming up on my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Wow – who blinked? I spoke with an 82-year-old neighbor last week, who’s hoping for another 10 years. We both agreed that if the next 10 go by as quickly as the last, we’ll exhale a few times and be there. More and more I ask myself, “How do I really, really apply this one day at a time business?” which means something a lot different when the time behind me is longer than the time ahead.

How do I really, really apply “one day at a time” in long-term recovery? Most of the people I talk with on the topic have been doing the deal for twenty, thirty or more years. We have the sobriety habit – the plug has stayed in the jug. But how do we continue to suit up and show up, to face all that life brings as we age, as our children and grandchildren grow up, as we walk through grief and loss, joys and challenges? What do we do when the kid gets in trouble, or mom or dad show signs of dementia? What if it’s us who notice cognitive decline? How do we deal with fears around our own mental or physical health, or our own mortality? In the old days, the fears, if even acknowledged, may have been around getting caught, or drunk driving, or the potential for overdose. Today it is more likely fears of, or the reality of cancer or heart disease or Alzheimer’s that tiptoe through the back hallways of our minds.

A few years ago, friends and I worked the Steps on aging and mortality, drawing literature from various sources. As much as I celebrate the gifts of long-term recovery, I must also acknowledge the losses – family and friends and meeting buddies dying, letting go of certain dreams and goals, as well as all that the body goes through. My knees are no longer 35, nor is my eyesight. My parents are both gone. My sister-in-law is in memory care. Time marches on.

I so appreciate that the 12 Steps can be applied to just about anything I face. Working my program means striving for a balance between acceptance and action, surrender and moving forward. As we’ve heard, “I no longer have a drinking problem, but I do have a thinking problem.” Oh yes. So what do I do with my runaway mind that often focuses on what could go wrong instead of what is going right? I think it is the same set of tools I’ve used all along – I don’t drink and go to meetings. I put pen to paper when particularly troubled. I share openly with a trusted other. I pay attention to the HALTS (yes, still and always). I make time to connect with my spiritual resources, which for me includes time outdoors or with a good friend. And, without drifting into either morbid reflection or euphoric recall, I strive to cultivate gratitude as a practice. I consider myself one of the fortunate ones – I’m sober and alive.

I’m now one of the long-timers I used to see in meetings, the old codgers who’d say, “Keep coming back” and there they’d be, week after week. There is comfort in knowing I belong, that I’m right where I’m supposed to be. There is responsibility too – to the program, to being of service (in and outside of AA), to living my values. One day at a time, I’ll keep showing up.

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Jeanine is the author of the weekly blog, "[Sober Long Time – Now What?](#)" as well as a 78 page workbook of the same name, with various topics and processing questions for individual or small group discussion. See the WEB VERSION of the blog page to order a PDF (for outside the US) or a hardcopy.

## Sober Long Time - Now What?

Exploring the intricacies of long term sobriety.

She began writing a weekly blog in 2016 on the joys and challenges of long-term recovery. Readers are invited to participate in the conversation by posting comments and their views of the various topics raised by Jeanine, each and every week. Helping to facilitate change and watching people re-gain their lives and repair relationships, continues to be her passion.

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