

Steve Wyatt is a writer. Here he shares his experience.

We all know the stereotype of the 'the alcoholic' - the mumbling, shambling dosser on the street, the red-faced bore in the bar, the gin-soaked old dear with make-up smeared across her face. 'I'm not like that,' we can reassure ourselves, 'so I can't be an alcoholic. Can I?'

Beware: alcoholism is the only disease that convinces you haven't got it. Denial is part of its pathology.

Such an ugly, stigmatised word, 'alcoholic', with its destructive, home-wrecking connotations of cruelty, immorality, weak will. None of us wants to admit that of ourselves. It's shameful. It's degrading. To be lumped in with people like that! Never!

I used to say - and believe - that I wasn't an alcoholic, that I just drank because of stress. It was the way I relaxed. Everyone needed a little relaxation every now and then, didn't they? I wasn't on a park bench with a bottle of cheap sherry - that was an alcoholic. I had a good job, a car with leather seats, credit cards, a rich and talented girlfriend...I couldn't be an alcoholic.

Besides, to admit to having a drink problem implied the necessity of doing something about it - like stopping drinking. No way, I thought

The problem was, it wasn't just a case of relaxing every now and then. It was every day, and party time at weekends. Half the time I was relaxed as a newt, barely functioning, unaccountably broke. I had been married (and divorced) three times but that was just bad luck, or something. Surely it was nothing to do with the drink - was it? I would wait until it got really bad.

It did. Alcohol stopped working for me. It was like losing the love of my life. Bit by bit, day by day, I began dying inside. My days and nights were full of fear I could not quench any more. The rich and talented girlfriend threw me out. I stopped hoping. I wanted to end it all.

I arrived at my first AA meeting expecting to meet all the stereotypes, all those dreadful people. There weren't any. They were just folk, young and old, men and women, rich and poor - a whole cross-section - and they had a light in their eyes that I wanted, and a readiness to laugh I had long forgotten. I thought it would be some sort of religious set-up, and it wasn't. For the first time in my life - I was 51 - I found people who understood me, who knew what made me tick, because they had been there too.

That was nearly seven years ago. My family is speaking to me again. I have friends instead of drinking cronies. I am living the kind of life I used to think was some sort of impossible dream.

I'm not saying it was easy. I have had some dark days in recovery. I have had to face things about myself that the booze enabled me to avoid, and that has been tough.

But I got out before I hit the park bench stage. It was not necessary after all to become that mumbling, shambling dosser on the street in order to qualify as an alcoholic - though it was only a matter of time, really - and I have hope once more. I have a life and, as often as not, a smile on my face.

Not a bad deal.

Steve Wyatt