

Alice King found that steps classes of two kinds kept her physically - and spiritually fit.

I thought I had given up hangovers. But last week, as I looked down at my body I saw I was much mistaken. What are those nasty flabby bits of skin under my arms hanging over the top of my sleeveless dress? They are like two gate crashers at a party - unequivocally uninvited. And come to think of it, I pondered with alarm, that baby tummy is not looking too pretty either, especially as my youngest is now nine.

I have always struggled with my weight. But towards the end of my drinking I abandoned all exercise save that of lifting a glass to my mouth. Besides, daily retching and liquid lunches with no solids was my unhealthy programme of sustaining weight loss.

When I was at the height of my career as a wine writer I used to have a personal trainer whom I paid in wine. The fitter I got, the more ... knowledgeable about wine she became. We have remained firm friends ever since so I called her up - immediately. Since stopping drinking I have learnt to live in the solution not the problem. Time to step into action - quite literally.

Next day saw me at her house, squeezed into a leotard (not a pretty sight) standing in front of a Reebok step. Next to me, another friend an artist who also used to teach a form of Pilates. In true alcoholic style, I now have two personal trainers rather than one! It's quite a party - three middle age women (and my gate crashers), all different shapes and sizes but sharing a common goal of getting fit and creating a better, less middle aged shape.

As I climbed onto the step and began the familiar up down up down routine I contemplated how a different 12-step recovery programme has saved my life. I repeat Step One every morning 'we admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become un-manageable'. It was not until I admitted complete defeat and accepted I couldn't drink at all that I was empowered to start living my life again.

As I turn around the step I realised Step Two was a major turning point in my life - 'Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.' When I started my spiritual workout I began to feel a lot better. I used to be like a Polo - I had a gaping hole inside me that I filled with alcohol. In recovery I am filling that hole with faith and like to think I am now more like an extra strong mint.

'You've still got good legs' interjects Number One Trainer in a bid to gee me up. This reminded me of Step Four 'Made a searching a fearless moral inventory of ourselves'. This was a biggy and involved listing all of my character defects and the resulting associated behaviour and catastrophes in my life. On the positive side of this alarming yet insightful balance sheet I also had to list my character assets so I could grasp what I was good at too.

I needed to take several deep breathes, rather than my habitual few stiff drinks to get through Step Five - 'admitted to God, to ourselves and another human being the exact

nature of our wrongs'. I choose to do this with my therapist as I reasoned she was already privy to much of my bad behaviour. This was the first time in my life I acknowledged responsibility for my actions while ill and drinking. A few weeks after this confession I realised I felt lighter and freer and my hell-bent compulsion to drink had miraculously disappeared.

By now I am sweating profusely and looking longingly at the clock. 'Come on, just one last song' urges Number Two Trainer. Manically I recited Step Twelve in my head 'Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics.' And that, dear reader, is just what I have done. Thank you for helping to keep me sober and reading this piece. Remember - it's one step at a time!