

accord extra

Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

12-STEP RECOVERY: A VALUABLE OUTSIDE AID TO THERAPY

By Jason Pelp

12-step recovery is one of the most popular and widely known models of self-help treatment available, though if you're not familiar with the history and culture of it, it may be difficult to wholeheartedly recommend this to clients. This series of articles is intended to inform counsellors of what is available to clients outside of personal therapy for those working through addiction. The following articles will address some steps each. It might be helpful to know how these many fellowships developed, and something of their style from the perspective of one who has attended many, for personal and professional reasons.

12-step recovery originated formally in 1935 when Bill Wilson (affectionately, 'Bill W') and Dr. Bob Smith (tenderly, 'Dr. Bob') met in an asylum. They found that when they talked with each other about their ailment, they stayed sober. This discovered, they found that when they helped other 'alcoholics' (those condemned to institutions due to alcohol addiction) they stayed sober, whether or



not the one they were helping ceased to, or continued drinking alcohol again. They continued their mission to help others and gathered a fellowship together. This method led to fast multiplication and a number of AA groups were formed.



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Following this, AA groups increased so rapidly that they began to discuss who may join or not. Could women? Homosexuals? Those who are struggling with other drugs (Alcoholics Anonymous 1952:139-145)? To this end, the Traditions were formulated to help 12-step groups, which are autonomous except for matters affecting other groups or their wider Fellowship (Alcoholics Anonymous 1952:146). Tradition 3 states “The only requirement for AA membership is a *desire* to stop drinking” (Alcoholics Anonymous 1952:139, emphasis added). The same principle applies to other fellowships: a desire to stop is the only requirement for membership, whether or not this has occurred.

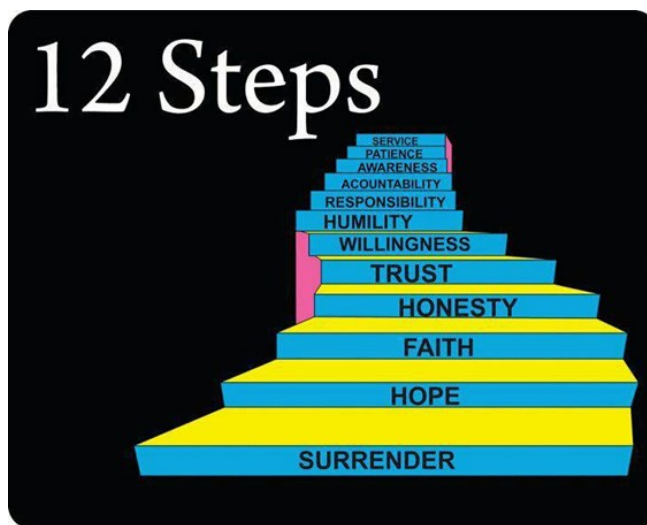
And there are myriad other ‘Anonymous’ fellowships. The wives of the original AA members began to feel affronted that their husbands were spending so much time helping other alcoholics leaving them neglected. From this, they had their own meetings to share their frustrations and out of these meetings began Al-Anon, the family/friends 12-step group. Again, they found that whether or not their partner stayed stopped, their spiritual-emotional health bettered and they continued meeting to strengthen other relatives. Years later, Narcotics Anonymous (NA) was founded for drug users. Many further fellowships were founded for a number of chemical and behavioural addictions.

All 12-step fellowships follow the same steps to recovery, and the drug, relationship or behaviour is addressed only in Step 1 and Step 12:

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

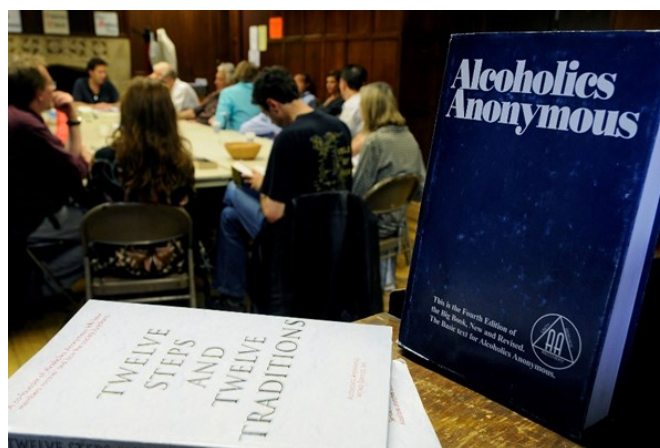
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

(Narcotics Anonymous 1982:17, italics original)



Whilst Ebby Thatcher (‘Ebby’) who told Bill W in his asylum that alcoholism is a spiritual condition which requires a spiritual solution in the form of surrendering to God having found “religion”, contemporary members are encouraged to find their own personal Higher Power or god of their own understanding.

Typically, a meeting will involve a number of people who are elected to ‘do service’ for a year; they’re rotated annually to ensure no-one misses out on the chance to experience different service positions, and to ensure no-one becomes too important; humility is a key aspect of 12-step recovery: “Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern” (Alcoholics Anonymous 1952:132). The greeters will arrive half an hour before the meeting starts and will hug anyone willing to receive one as they arrive. The tea person will offer a tea/coffee and biscuit/cake, and the meeting begins to gather together.



The secretary introduces the meeting and invite any newcomers and visitors to introduce themselves so they can be welcomed by the group. Some readings from approved literature will be read, then the speaker (Chair) will be introduced to share their "experience, strength and hope" (Alcoholics Anonymous 1947) which might be comparable to church 'testimony'. The wider group are invited to share back with the Chair to express identification and express what's happening in here-and-now life. A collection is taken to cover expenses for rent, refreshments and literature, and notices are given. Often a group will socialise in a café afterwards.

There are a number of suggestions which are offered to newcomers, and usually upheld by 'old-timers' (people in long-term recovery and still work the programme to maintain this). This includes having a home-group which they would attend weekly and hold a service position. They'll be encouraged to find a 'sponsor': a mentor who's completed the 12 steps and can likewise guide them one-on-one, without cost, through these. They'll also be encouraged, daily, to call other fellows to maintain fellowship in between meetings, read the associated approved text, make gratitude lists, and pray & meditate as well as complete relevant step-work.



Some advantages to counsellors and clients

- 1) 12-step meetings are available regularly, usually within easy travelling distance.
- 2) Fellows exchange telephone numbers to call for, or to give, encouragement: this is above and beyond a counsellor's usual working alliance.
- 3) "The therapeutic value of one addict helping another" (Narcotics Anonymous 1982:68) is powerful in a different way than psychotherapy or a spiritual community where the same level of lived empathy may not be available.
- 4) 'Outside help' (psychotherapy and/or a spiritual community) is seen in 12-step recovery as complementary rather than conflicting.
- 5) Hearing a chair reminds the fellow of their ailment: they drank/used/ate/gambled/etc. like the Chair, not like ordinary people.

- 6) Sober/clean time is celebrated in many groups with the distribution of coins or key-rings, applause from the group, and hugs from the chip/key-ring distributor. This can give the one marking a milestone in recovery celebration, and people yet to reach this, inspiration.
- 7) There are groups targeted at minorities, e.g. women's, LGBT+, BME, native language-speaking, young people's, agnostics' & atheists', and newcomers' groups. But these are never exclusive: an addict is free to attend any meeting when they need one.
- 8) Unlike therapists, sponsors self-disclosed freely to encourage identification.

Resources

Alcoholics Anonymous (1939) *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.) Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc.

Alcoholics Anonymous (1947) *Preamble*

Alcoholics Anonymous (1952) *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, General Service Board

Narcotics Anonymous (1982) *Narcotics Anonymous* (6th ed.) Narcotics Anonymous World Services Inc.

Pan Fellowship (2008) *Deep Soul Cleansing*

Bibliography



Jay felt a calling to train as a therapist whilst in rehab, struck by the effectiveness of Gestalt therapy to allow him to become honest with himself, others, and God: his passion is to embody and inspire authenticity! In his spare time Jay performs stand-up comedy and loves to cook!

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