

Your First AA Meeting
An Unofficial Guide for the Perplexed
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Introduction

Practically nobody looks forward to going to their first AA meeting. In most cases this in fact is an occasion of extreme shame, dread and despair. The majority of individuals going to AA for the first time are doing so reluctantly, either because they have promised someone else to go or because they have been directed to attend by a judge, an employer, a therapist or an addictions treatment program. Even first timers who "go on their own" are usually in an intensely ambivalent and negative state. Nobody wishes to require the help that is provided by AA, and as a result virtually everyone attending their first meeting wishes that they were someplace else doing something else.

It is in fact an act of great courage to walk into an AA meeting for the first time. Many people with severe drinking problems simply lack the courage to take this first step under any circumstances. They commonly hide their fear by critical, often cynical remarks about AA and the people who do have the courage to attend. They may indulge themselves with elaborate philosophical, scientific and even political rationalizations for why they will never attend a single AA meeting. But at bottom they are simply too afraid to walk through the door. Still worse: they are unable or unwilling to be honest with themselves and others about their real feelings and hence continue to cloak their fear behind irrelevant and insincere theoretical objections. (See "Obstacles to Recovery" for more about shame, dishonesty and personal exceptionalism in addictive illness.)

The obvious and best solution to the problem of the normal anxiety and discomfort that are associated with attending one's first AA meeting is to go to the meeting with someone who knows the ropes. If no friend or acquaintance who happens to be an AA member is available, contact can always be arranged by calling the local AA Central Office and asking for a volunteer to telephone one.

Although many people avail themselves of such measures to reduce the stress of their first AA meeting, many others find such logical preliminaries themselves too frightening and therefore do not follow them. It is principally to this last group, to those solitary and always frightened and confused "first timers," that this brief introduction is oriented.

Although there is a great deal of information about AA available on the web and in traditional print, there is surprisingly little to be found that deals with the practical concerns and fears of the individual who is attending or thinking of attending a meeting for the first time. The result is sometimes a kind of "culture shock" which takes place when the newcomer attends and is temporarily overwhelmed by the newness and strangeness of the experience. Even worse, people who seriously consider attending an AA meeting may decide not to do so because of the natural human fear of the unknown.

This guide is neither an official one nor affiliated in any way with AA itself. It represents merely one person's attempt to describe some of the common features of AA meetings. There will be many individual variations and exceptions to this or to any other relatively brief attempt to sketch the principal outlines and common experiences in a program as diverse and unregulated as AA. The best way to regard what follows is as one of those primitive and only half-correct maps drawn by the early geographers. Not everything in such maps is correct, and much that is important is omitted. But in favorable cases the map does serve as a rough guide to the territory to be explored, and provides at least some major landmarks by which the traveler may hope to orient and guide himself in his own explorations of the terrain.

An excellent source of "official" AA information is available at the www.aa.org

Anyone curious about AA and contemplating going to their first meeting should read the brief descriptive information available there, including the following:

A Newcomer Asks

Is AA For You?

44 Questions and Answers About AA

AA Fact File

Locating a meeting

There is a famous old English recipe for ox tail stew that begins "First, kill an ox." The first step in attending one's first AA meeting is to locate a meeting to attend. The best way to do this is to have or ask for a specific recommendation from someone who is familiar with both the prospective attendee and the meeting in question. Most cities have what are called "Central Offices" for AA that are listed in the local phone book under "Alcoholics Anonymous." Mental health facilities and hospitals usually have a current directory of meetings or a contact number. And the internet is an excellent resource for locating meetings anywhere in the world.

Types of AA Meetings

Meetings can be categorized by their topic and format, who attends them, and the facilities in which they are held. It is also useful to consider the unofficial distinctions of small versus large meetings and smoking versus non-smoking.

Open versus closed

Mixed, men only, women only, young peoples'

Speaker, Big Book, Step Study or Discussion

Clubhouse or church

Small or large

Smoking versus non-smoking

Meetings may be "Open" (to anyone) or "Closed" (for alcoholics only). Many groups pay no attention to this distinction, and it is not uncommon for regular participants in a meeting to be uncertain whether their meeting is officially open or closed. Family and friends of the alcoholic, along with observers and students of various kinds are welcome at the open meetings. Closed meetings are reserved for those who consider themselves to be alcoholics or who are investigating that possibility for themselves. Newcomers are always welcome at closed meetings regardless of whether they have made up their minds about themselves.

Meetings may be "mixed" (male and female), men only, or women only. Meeting schedules indicate by codes (usually MO or WO) if a meeting is restricted.

AA meetings are also characterized according to their format:

Discussion meetings

Big Book Study meetings

Step Study meetings

Speaker meetings

Discussion meetings

- 1) The discussion leader introduces a topic with some brief comments and then throws the meeting open, recognizing those who indicate their desire to share by raising their hands.
- 2) Those who raise their hands and are recognized by the discussion leader normally introduce themselves by saying "My name is so-and-so and I am an alcoholic." Some people say "I am a grateful recovering alcoholic," "I am powerless over alcohol," or some other variation. Although it is generally expected, it is not required that those who wish to share identify themselves as being alcoholic.
- 3) Sharing usually begins with some reference to the topic mentioned by the discussion leader or to comments by a previous speaker, but each member who speaks is free to change the subject or to introduce an entirely new topic if they need to do so. It is expected that anyone having a particularly hard time, especially if they are thinking seriously about drinking, will bring this up regardless of whatever the original topic or subsequent comments may have been.
- 4) Certain conventions guide the content and format of sharing in meetings, although these may be and sometimes are ignored. They include:
 - a) Length around 3 minutes or less.
 - b) Personal experience, feelings, struggles valued over opinions, theory.
 - c) Avoidance of direct advice and "cross talk," i.e. telling another member what to think or how to behave.
 - d) Some relation to alcohol or to conflicts in living that can be related to the Twelve Steps.
 - e) In general a "single share" convention is followed in which no member speaks at length more than once during a given meeting, although exceptions to this are not uncommon depending upon the group and circumstances.
 - f) Identification and empathy with the experiences of others who have shared. This is expressed by sharing one's own personal experiences of a similar nature.

Occasionally the meeting "goes around the room" and everyone has the opportunity to speak if desired, or the discussion leader may call on individual members and invite them to share. Those who do not wish to speak simply say "Thanks, I'll pass" or "I'll just listen tonight." This is always accepted and pressure is never exerted to speak.

b. Meetings usually wrap up on time and are closed in a manner chosen by the particular group. A basket is usually passed around the room for voluntary contributions to defray expenses. No contribution is required, and first-timers are often advised not to contribute. The usual donation is one dollar. It is common for the chairperson to read or remind everyone of the Twelfth Tradition (the principle of anonymity) and to invite the group to stand, join hands in a circle, and recite the Lord's Prayer or the Serenity Prayer.

Big Book and Step Study Meetings

- 1) These meetings are devoted to the study of the "**Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous**" or to the "**Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions**" ("12 and 12") written by Bill Wilson, a co-founder of AA. Participants commonly bring their own copy of the appropriate book, but there are usually extra copies available at the meeting for those who did not bring a copy.
- 2) The typical meeting will involve reading some portion of the "Big Book" or the "Twelve and Twelve" and then commenting upon it from the individual member's experience and perspective. The discussion leader may read a selected passage and then invite comments, or members may take turns reading a paragraph or two from a chosen section of the work, followed by a general discussion of the topics covered.
- 3) As in the discussion meeting, sharing that consists of personal experience and applications of the text is valued over purely theoretical and impersonal analysis.
- 4) Also as in the discussion meeting, "cross talk" is kept to a minimum. The usual etiquette is for members to remain silent until the speaker has finished.

Speaker meetings

- 1) A speaker is selected in advance who agrees to "tell their story" of drinking and recovery to the group. Speakers are usually those with a year or more of sobriety who have previously been asked and agreed to talk.

- 2) A common format is to devote the entire meeting after the usual opening readings to the speaker's story. When the story is finished the meeting is wrapped up without formal discussion.
- 3) Some meetings are combined "speaker-discussion meetings" in which a chosen speaker talks for a quarter or a half an hour, followed by a group discussion of the themes raised in accordance with the usual conventions of a discussion meeting.

Clubhouse and Church Meetings:

AA Clubhouses are sites specifically dedicated to AA meetings and usually have a wide variety of meetings every day, often at all hours of the day. Clubhouses may be freestanding buildings or rented space in other buildings. "Clubhouse meetings" typically include a wide spectrum of recovering alcoholics from still drinking to recently relapsed to decades of continuous sobriety. There are usually meetings in all of the above formats (open, closed, mixed, men, women, discussion, Big Book, Step Study, speaker, Young Peoples' &etc.). Often there are special beginner's or "First Step" meetings that are attended both by newcomers and those who have been sober a long time. Clubhouse meetings tend to be larger than church meetings – though this is not always the case.

Church meetings are held on the premises of various local churches by special arrangement with the congregation, usually including a nominal rent payment from collections taken up by the AA group at the end of each meeting. The meetings are not affiliated with the church in any way but simply reflect a tradition in which churches have provided AA with space to hold its meetings. Church meetings tend to be smaller than Clubhouse meetings, though this is not always the case. Meetings are held wherever space is available – though seldom in the sanctuary or chapel.

Meeting size varies from small to large wherever the meeting may be held and regardless of the specific format (discussion, Big Book, Step Study, speaker) and who attends (mixed, men, women, young people &etc.). "Small" usually refers to meetings of fifteen or less members while "large" can mean thirty, forty, fifty or more people.

Smoking and nonsmoking meetings. The "smoke filled room" of AA tradition was a definite reality but is now becoming a thing of the past as more and more meetings become nonsmoking only. Smokers still congregate outside the meeting before, during and after it is held – but meetings in which smoking is permitted inside are becoming rare.

The Diversity of AA Groups

No two AA groups are alike. There is an enormous diversity among groups reflecting unique features of the particular group and the individuals who constitute it. AA's Fourth Tradition states that "Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole." This is not just empty talk, as anyone who has sampled the wide variety of AA meetings knows well. There is a tremendous kaleidoscopic variation of emphasis, emotional tone, meeting philosophy, readings and ritual, and informal group norms from one group to another. This seems to be one of AA's "secrets of success" and guarantees that when there are enough groups to choose from, a newcomer will be able to find something that closely matches his needs if only he is willing to look. Though all are welcome, groups generally tend to mirror the socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics of the neighborhoods in which they meet. Exceptions, however, abound. Perhaps nowhere in modern society are as much genuine democracy and class and status-less affiliation of equals to be found as in the typical AA meeting.

Rituals and Readings: What Goes on at a typical AA Meeting

AA meetings vary considerably in their particular readings and rituals from place to place, even within the same general geographic location. Each meeting has its own style of opening and closing.

A common sequence (there are many variations) in the southeastern United States is:

Meeting called to order by volunteer chairperson.

Chairperson reads "AA Preamble" (see below), leads group in Serenity Prayer (see below).

Reading of "How it Works," the "Twelve Traditions" (see below) and "The Ninth Step Promises" (see below), often by members who were asked before the meeting to do so.

Chairperson asks if there are any newcomers or people attending that particular meeting for the first time who care to introduce themselves by their first name. (This is completely optional and may be ignored by newcomers if desired, although it is obviously a good idea to introduce oneself in order for others to begin to get to know him.)

AA-related announcements.

The meeting itself, whether discussion, Big Book Study, Step Study or speaker.

Conclusion of meeting proper.

Chips handed out for length of sobriety (in SE US). Voluntary.

"Pass the basket" for optional three dollar donation.

Statement of Twelfth Tradition.

Lord's Prayer, usually said standing in a circle, heads bowed, holding hands. Some groups close with Serenity Prayer.

The Problem of Fear

Regardless of the type, size or location of their first AA meeting, newcomers face a predictable series of challenges that must be overcome in order to begin to benefit from AA. **By far the greatest problem most individuals experience when beginning AA is how to deal with their fear.**

Fear is the great enemy of recovery from alcoholism and indeed from any serious addiction. Intensely negative emotions such as fear, shame, and guilt obstruct the road to recovery and detour the alcoholic-addict away from what is good for him (for example, AA meetings, therapy, rehab) and toward what is bad for him (isolation, secrecy, alcohol and drugs). Even when a person has supposedly "hit bottom" as a consequence of his addiction and sincerely, desperately desires to overcome it and begin leading a healthy life, the painful and aversive affects of shame, guilt and fear often conspire with his addiction to thwart him and bring his hopes to naught. In all too many cases the fear of the steps necessary for lasting recovery may be greater than the alcoholic's fear of relapse into alcoholism, resulting in the familiar "On again, off again" pattern many alcoholics and addicts display as they begin to flirt with but not yet commit to recovery.

It is the rare newcomer to an AA meeting who is not at least inwardly quaking in his boots. Fear of the unknown and of strange situations is a perfectly normal human response. In fact, it is a necessary response: for without the capacity for fear, no individual would survive for long. Fearful anticipation and resulting hyper-vigilance serve to protect people from harm in strange situations. The fear of the typical newcomer to an AA meeting begins but by no means ends with this normal and adaptive apprehension in regard to the unfamiliar. The newcomer is vulnerable to many other fears which usually cause far greater distress and may eventually cause him to run away, to adopt a combative attitude, or simply to be unable to profit from his AA experience.

It is probably true in general that the famous "fight or flight" response is the characteristic response of most higher organisms to perceived threat. If a danger is spotted one must either overcome it, usually by attack, or run away to escape harm and even death. The majority of alcoholics dispose of their fear—dread would probably be a more accurate word—of AA meetings (and alcohol treatment) by the classical phobic-avoidance method: they stay as far away from them as possible. This phobic avoidance is commonly rationalized in various ways, some of which may be superficially plausible. But the underlying problem in almost all cases is fear.

The alcoholic who actually attends an AA meeting, therefore, is the exception to this rule of avoidance. The "normal" thing is for the alcoholic to shy away from AA and anything remotely resembling AA. And the chief reason for this avoidance is fear, followed closely by the intense shame that is characteristic of most advanced addictive disease.

What is the alcoholic so afraid of that he is willing to go to any length—sometimes even to die—to avoid AA meetings? Every individual has a unique story—but there are some common factors which, while varying in relative importance in each case, actually constitute the principal explanation for the typical alcoholic's fear and loathing of AA.

We should keep in mind that the alcoholic attending his first AA meeting seldom does so in a state of mental calm and physical equilibrium. Usually there has been a drinking-related crisis of some kind that has prompted the first visit to AA. A considerable amount of "energy" is required to lift the alcoholic from his normal, i.e. drinking "orbit" into the initially much more aversive AA "orbit." And it is the nature of addiction that mere rational analysis seldom provides sufficient energy for such a drastic change of state. Something more, and often something painful and undeniable, is usually required in addition to whatever intellectual insight the alcoholic may possess. Attendance at one's first AA meeting does not take place in a vacuum but in the context of an existence that more often than not is riddled and riven with turmoil resulting from alcoholic drinking and behavior.

Something else to keep in mind when considering the first AA meeting is the usually highly abnormal and unstable physical state of the alcoholic. For whether he is still drinking, has attempted to cut down, or has recently stopped altogether, his brain is seldom in a healthy functional state. More often than not these days, drugs besides alcohol are likely to be part of the picture as well. All of this undermines the clarity and stability of the newcomer's psyche and makes the chore of correctly perceiving and interpreting the meeting environment more difficult.

The basic fear of the average alcoholic attending his first AA meeting is **loss of face**, i.e. fear of painful narcissistic injury, humiliation, or social embarrassment. To attend an AA meeting means to acknowledge that one is or might be an alcoholic who has been unable to control his drinking! This fear originates and is maintained solely in the alcoholic's head and is largely independent of external influence—especially external influence that might be thought to ameliorate it. Thus the newcomer at an AA meeting is frequently ashamed to be seen there despite knowing full well that everyone else present is also an alcoholic. This is because the "seeing" that pains him is his own seeing of himself as someone with a drinking problem who is in need of help. Well-meant reassurances from other people are of little help here and may even make the shame worse. For the alcoholic is ashamed in his own eyes and before himself, feelings that commonly overflow and then are projected upon others. The self-critical and ashamed alcoholic thus experiences his own internal self-condemnation as external criticism and disapproval coming or threatening to come from others. A soldier on night sentry duty on the frontier of hostile and dangerous territory will naturally be alert to every sound and shadowy movement as possibly indicating the threatening presence of the enemy. His attention is focused and organized to detect and act upon signs of imminent attack. Everything else has been put on the back burner for as long as he stands sentry duty. Such a soldier is not interested in, nor would he be very good at learning various kinds of new information about the theory of standing guard, the politics of warfare, or the geologic history of the landscape he is presently patrolling. His survival depends upon the capacity of his mind to weed out such extraneous or distracting input and to remain fixated upon the immediate task of survival through vigilance and readiness for quick response. Not merely his weapon but the soldier himself is "locked and loaded," i.e. ready for combat.

In the same way the individual exposed for the first time to an entirely new and, in his mind, potentially threatening environment such as an AA meeting will be in a state of heightened defensive vigilance, scanning the environment and the behavior of others for any signs of danger. This is by no means the optimum state of mind to make objective assessments and to draw reliable conclusions about what is going on. People under conditions of perceived high threat view, organize and interpret their environment just as the soldier-sentry described above does: they are watchful, suspicious, cautious, and prepared to fight or flee on a moment's notice.

In brief, the high anxiety and selective attention of many AA newcomers causes them to experience and evaluate their meeting environment and the people in it in a distorted fashion. Only by coming back a number of times with a diminishing level of fear and anxiety do individuals unfamiliar with AA meetings begin to acquire a more rounded, accurate and in-depth view of what is actually going on – as opposed to what they fear is or might shortly be going on.

All of the observations made above apply with even more force to those not infrequent instances in which the newcomer, in addition to suffering from alcoholism, also suffers from a significant anxiety disorder such as "social phobia" or "social anxiety disorder." A very high percentage of alcoholics, 50% or more in some studies, show evidence of an associated anxiety or depressive condition in addition to their alcoholism. In these cases faster progress in AA and sobriety is usually made when separate professional treatment is obtained for the "dual diagnosis" condition.

90 Meetings in 90 Days? You Must be CRAZY!

The newcomer is frequently shocked and horrified to hear the recommendation that in order to become adequately acquainted with AA, he should attend at least ninety meetings in ninety days – a meeting every day for three months! This recommendation amounts to a proposal for the kind of "total immersion" strategy that is often used in learning a foreign language: the student is simply thrown into an environment in which no language but the one he wishes to learn is spoken.

Also called "90-90" or "doing a 90-90," the ninety meetings in ninety days suggestion is just a common sense and experience-derived attempt to deal with the problems of perspective and interfering emotions described above. The 90-90 proposition also serves notice that the AA recovery path is not an easy or effortless one – and that a major change in daily routine and therefore priorities is required for success. The prescription is probably one of those "more honored in the breach than the observance," although a certain number of newcomers do manage to follow it or something closely akin to it. The basic idea is that in order to be successful the neophyte must spend the time and energy required to become acquainted with AA.

A large number of alcoholics who attend at least one AA meetings recoil in disgust from the 90-90 advice. It confirms for them some of their worst fears about AA, for example the charge that it is a dangerous cult that succeeds only by brainwashing the critical judgment of its participants. The very idea of making time to attend an AA meeting every single day for three months offends their sense of proportionality because it seems to them an absurd, almost grotesque over-reaction to their alcohol problem.

Arriving Late and Leaving Early

Not everyone is uncomfortable at their first AA meeting – but most people are. Part of this is the normal social anxiety associated with unfamiliar situations; the majority of it is connected with the intense self-consciousness, hyper-vigilance, shame and guilt that the prospective AA member feels for exposing himself as someone with a significant drinking problem which he is unable to handle on his own. For there is simply no satisfactory escape from the painful logic that announces to himself and everyone who sees him at the AA meeting that if he didn't have a bad drinking problem that he was having trouble handling, he wouldn't be there in the first place. Just showing up at an AA meeting, therefore, is a declaration of unmanageable personal difficulty. And for many people that is an acutely painful source of shame and stigma.

One of the common ways individuals attempt to manage their "meeting anxiety" is by arriving late and leaving early. This strategy not only cuts down on the amount of time actually spent at the meeting, it also, and more importantly, eliminates the unstructured time prior to and after the meeting itself. Newcomers tend to feel uncomfortable and awkward in such circumstances because they don't yet know anybody and aren't sure how to behave. The simplest and most obvious solution to this predicament is to avoid it altogether.

This sometimes lead to a pattern of meeting behavior that resembles a bank robbery: the getaway car is left running outside while the robber darts into the bank, grabs the money, and runs for his life before the police arrive. The role in this behavior of intense fear and the resulting phobic-avoidance defense is apparent.

Because the quickest way to overcome such irrational fears is to confront them directly rather than to run away and thereby reinforce them, individuals who are able to force themselves to come a little early and to hang around and talk for a while after the meeting tend to become comfortable more quickly. People vary markedly in regard to their interpersonal anxieties and social skills, but even for the most extroverted and gregarious souls the initial encounter with AA meetings is almost always a kind of culture shock that requires some adjustment.

Anonymity and Confidentiality Concerns

Alcoholics Anonymous categorizes itself as **anonymous** for a reason – actually for a number of reasons. It is the rare alcoholic who, at least in the beginning, is not acutely concerned about matters of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. Most first timers are afraid of being seen going into a meeting or of encountering someone they know in the meeting itself. It is not unheard of for people to attend their first meetings far away from their own neighborhood or stomping grounds in order to avoid what they fear would be an embarrassing encounter with someone they know. Such anxieties reflect and result from the intense shame and stigmatization connected in the minds of most people with the label "alcoholic."

Going to AA requires courage –or desperation- because attendance at an AA meeting undeniably moves the drinker out of the category of "heavy drinker" into that of "alcoholic" – or at least is a major step in the latter direction. Thus it happens that a great many, perhaps the majority of newcomers to AA are ashamed of themselves merely for needing to be there. As discussed above, this intense personal shame and humiliation is commonly projected onto others and onto the environment at large in the form of paranoid

vigilance and fear of external criticism, negative judgment and disapproval, when in fact the greatest source of negativity is within the newcomer himself.

The shame that is often connected with the first AA meeting is suggested in the following joke often told by alcoholism expert Father Joseph Martin in his famous talks on alcoholism:

*A man was attending the funeral of an old acquaintance he had not seen for some time and spoke to the deceased's widow, who sadly informed him that death had resulted from a drinking problem. The man said "I'm sorry to hear that. Did he ever try AA?" The widow recoiled in horror and exclaimed "Oh no! He never got **that** bad!"*

AA meetings do not take attendance or keep membership roles. It is traditional to identify oneself by first name only. All meetings include a reminder to keep everything that is said in the meeting confidential. This "Twelfth Tradition" of AA is taken very seriously by those who are familiar with and committed to the program.

What Should You Say if You Share?

There is no requirement for newcomers (or anyone else) to say anything at all. Participation, like attendance, is purely voluntary(those ordered to attend by a judge or a treatment program are not quite so "voluntary," but their actual participation, if any, is still entirely up to them.) If one happens to be called upon or otherwise asked to speak and does not care to do so, the standard formulas for polite refusal are "Thanks, I'll pass" or "Thanks, I'll just listen tonight." Everyone understands and accepts this and no pressure is applied to try to change the person's mind who prefers not to speak.

The Third Tradition of AA states that "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking." Even this "requirement" may be a little overstated, as many people attend AA who don't so much have a desire to stop drinking as they have a concern about their drinking and its consequences, and an interest in learning more about themselves. But those who continue to attend and who subsequently identify themselves as AA members do sooner or later acknowledge a desire to stop drinking. Other than this Third Tradition requirement, there are simply no formal qualifications or requirements for membership.

AA meetings are extremely diverse and thus vary considerably in the attention, if any, paid to newcomers. Many meetings include a routine question from the chairperson as to whether there are any newcomers or people from other meetings who would like to be introduced by their first name only. This is meant to offer an opportunity for those desiring to introduce themselves. It is not a requirement. Although it is usually a good idea for the newcomer's own progress and comfort just to go ahead and introduce himself ("My name is Bill and I think I am an alcoholic. This is my first AA meeting."), it is perfectly permissible to remain silent and defer such an introduction to a later time if one is simply too frightened to go ahead at that time. (Because such fears are almost always overcome by facing them and pushing through them rather than avoiding them, however, newcomers are wise to face their fear whenever they can.)

It is not required, in order to speak, to identify or "label" oneself as an alcoholic, though most members choose to do so. Some people prefer to identify themselves as "recovering alcoholics" or even "recovered alcoholic." Newcomers are entirely free to say whatever they like about themselves in this regard. Since everyone present has had and can usually remember their own "first AA meeting," there is normally a great deal of empathy and acceptance of newcomers, whatever their comments or non-comments may be.

If a newcomer does choose to introduce himself as such, it is a fairly common practice in many discussion meetings for members to talk either about their own first meeting and how they got there, or about the First Step ("We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.") The hope here is that by sharing personal experiences and vulnerabilities group members will help the newcomer to realize that he is neither alone nor by any means as different from others as he often feels to be the case. Though this strategy is a useful and generally helpful one, some newcomers are made even more apprehensive by such attention. The larger the meeting the easier it is to fade into the woodwork and not be noticed – but this temporary comfort may come at a high cost if the individual continues to maintain such a low profile that he never has the opportunity to connect with others. The AA recovery method is a "hands on" practical program that seldom works very well unless those attempting it sooner or later let down their defenses and walls and allow others to begin to get to know them. This may happen quickly, even in the first meeting; or it may take a very long time. Much depends upon the individual history and makeup of the individual and his degree of comfort or discomfort in social situations. (Newcomers who are naturally gregarious do not always fare better than those who are more shy and reserved, for the more or less automatic and sometimes superficial social skills and facade of some of the former may at times actually work against development of the more fundamental relationships that recovery almost always requires.)

The speaking (or sharing) format in discussion meetings varies somewhat in accordance with the size and seating arrangement of the meeting. Large meetings almost always function in a "raise your hand to be recognized" fashion in which anyone wishing to speak indicates his desire to by raising his hand until he is called on by the discussion leader. Smaller meetings and meetings in which the seating arrangement is circular or around a table sometimes "go around the room" starting at one side and continuing to the other unless time runs out. In this case each person is automatically invited to speak when his turn arrives. Such an arrangement often causes a great deal of anxiety in newcomers and in those who simply have a fear of public speaking. They may sit in their seats with mounting dread as their "turn" gets closer and closer, wondering what they are going to say and how it will be received. This of course completely defeats the purpose of being at the meeting – and it is also completely unnecessary. For if one doesn't feel like speaking when his "turn" arrives, saying "Thanks, I'll pass" or "I think I'll just listen tonight" are common and perfectly acceptable responses. (But just as in the case of whether or not to introduce oneself as a newcomer, discussed above, it is almost always in the best interest of the newcomer to say a few words if he can possibly make himself do so. This behavior, that of facing rather than running away from one's fears, is what eventually "desensitizes" the socially anxious or shy person and helps him to become comfortable speaking.)

Occasionally, especially in smaller meetings, the discussion leader may call upon various individuals and ask them if they would like to share. Here also it is perfectly permissible to say "Thanks, I'll just listen" – although here also it is usually advisable for the newcomer's own progress to "take the plunge" and jump in the pool by saying something if possible.

What should one say if he wishes to speak in a discussion meeting? Anything that comes to mind and seems relevant. There are no "wrong" shares in AA. Nor is there any official time limitation, although most who share will finish in three minutes or less. Sometimes more time is needed. There are no written or rigid rules.

The AA recovery program emphasizes personal honesty and openness to a degree that is often startling to those unfamiliar with it. Sometimes such frankness and candor may give the wrong impression that a speaker is "beating up on himself" and running himself down just for the pleasure of doing so. Occasionally there are individuals who for reasons of their own seem to do just that – but the healthy aim of the AA program is simply to gain control over one's shortcomings by honestly admitting them and then doing something about them. Wallowing in guilt and self-blame is not the AA way, which is briefly stated as "learning to live in the solution rather than dwelling in the problem."

Therefore the newcomer who desires to speak need not and probably should not engage in a confessional litany of his sins and shortcomings. The mere fact that he is present at the meeting is sufficient suggestion that life has not been going well for him, and quite possibly also those around him. A common "share" by a newcomer might consist of his first name, identification of himself as an alcoholic if he believes this fits (otherwise not – it would be dishonest to say something one did not believe!), followed by a brief statement of what has been going on in his life that has brought him to his first AA meeting. The main point of such an introduction is simply to "break the ice" and to begin to let others get acquainted with one. Human beings are diverse and individually unique, but the experiences of alcoholics, particularly those at the stage of the illness at which AA attendance usually begins, are quite constricted and stereotyped. There are perhaps a dozen or so major alcoholic scenarios which, once known, can be "filled in" and fleshed out with a surprising degree of accuracy by those intimately familiar with the thinking and behavior of alcoholics. And no group of people is as familiar with the thinking and behavior of alcoholics as those in attendance at the typical AA meeting.

What response does the newcomer usually receive to his sharing? This of course depends upon many factors, including the nature of the particular AA group, those who are present, and what the newcomer actually says. In the typical scenario, subsequent speakers may relate what has been said to their own experience. No one particularly enjoys receiving unsolicited advice from others, and alcoholics probably enjoy it considerably less than average. The usual way of communicating in discussion groups is therefore by sharing one's own experiences, not merely his opinions. The chances therefore are great that whatever the newcomer specifically shares, others will respond by relating feelings and experiences similar to his. The aim is to be nonjudgmental and supportive as possible by simply fostering an atmosphere of mutual openness and honesty in which all who are present acknowledge their humanity and hence their imperfections. The usual "masks" and social role personae that may be worn in other situations are, ideally, temporarily taken off for the duration of the AA meeting.

God, Religion and Spirituality

Although it is an undeniable historical fact that AA had its origins in the so-called "Oxford Group" movement which emphasized a return to the presumed basic teachings of Christ, it is an equally undeniable historical fact that AA itself only began when its founders split off from the Oxford Group movement. Thus although the Christian religious influence is omnipresent in AA doctrine and practice, AA itself is by no means a Christian or even a religious organization – a fact that has caused and continues to cause a great deal of confusion in the minds of those unfamiliar with AA.

The history of AA and the various influences that shaped and continue to shape the program is a fascinating and complex topic – but it is seldom something newcomers have time, interest, or even mental concentration for. But for those who like to research the background of what they may be getting themselves into, the following sites provide some useful information:

www.justloveaudio.com (click on "free resources" and then click on "AA History")

www.silkworth.net

Alcoholics anonymous also has three AA history books and it would be best to read them in the following order: "Dr. Bob & the Good Oldtimers: Alcoholics Anonymous, A biography, with recollections of early A.A. in the Midwest", "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A. A.", and "Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A. A. Message Reached the World". Another great book on AA history is called "Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous" by Ernest Kurtz.

The newcomer only really needs to know that there is no religious requirement for AA attendance and that he is free to believe whatever he chooses to believe. There are many agnostics and atheists in AA as well as many members of established churches and organized religions, Christian and otherwise. The Third Tradition of AA states that "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking." Nothing is said about religion – or about any other requirement.

What then about all the talk of God and even the Lord's Prayer that is said at many –not all- AA meetings? The basic idea is to attempt to relate to **some** kind of "power greater than oneself." The reason for this "Higher Power" is to acquire a sense of perspective and also support. Many people say that they use the AA group or AA as a whole in this fashion. The Eleventh Step speaks of "God as we understand Him," a qualification that leaves ample room for personal preferences. AA members are free to believe anything they like about God, up to and including his non-existence.

It is commonly said that AA is "spiritual, not religious." The goal is direct personal spiritual growth without what many see as the unnecessary and even harmful encumbrances of organized religion. In this respect AA reveals its Protestant roots and dislike of the trappings and hierarchy of organized religion.

Many people familiar with the challenges facing newcomers to AA suggest that the whole topic of God, religion and spirituality be reserved for a later and more suitable time in recovery. Excessive attention to and analysis of this or any other abstract subject is seldom useful and may in fact frequently prove harmful to recovery. Such theoretical or philosophical concerns early in recovery from alcoholism are often manifestations of the addictive process itself, or of the afflicted individual's alienation from his own core self and feelings into an over-intellectualized state where he feels comfortable and safe.

The important thing is to "keep coming back" to meetings and to have as open a mind as possible.

Dogmatism and Dogmatists

A discussion of God, religion, spirituality and AA leads naturally into the problem of AA dogmatism – actually, the problem of AA dogmatists. The actual "official" AA program as described in the Big Book and other approved literature is conspicuously and consciously non-dogmatic and broad. The famous Twelve Steps themselves are merely "**suggested**" as a program of recovery." But because human beings tend to have opinions about matters vital to their welfare, and because alcoholics as a group are probably more prone to having and expressing strong opinions than average, it is not uncommon to find AA members here and there who are convinced that their understanding of the AA program is the only possible correct one, and hence that failure to adhere to their beliefs and practices will inevitably lead to ruin on the part of anyone unwise enough to disregard their superior wisdom.

Since the whole psychological or spiritual aim of AA recovery is to gain a sense of perspective on oneself that leads to tolerance and a nonjudgmental outlook, individuals who attempt to compel others to accept their own beliefs cannot be said to be "practicing the program" themselves. Such people are often described as "dry drunks," i.e. alcoholics who, though not drinking, are nevertheless behaving the way alcoholics commonly do when they drink. These "dry drunks" manifest judgmental and intolerant attitudes and a sense of personal grandiosity and "know-it-all"-ism that causes them to believe they know best, not only for themselves but also for other people. They are not content to keep their opinions to themselves, nor even to state them humbly or diplomatically. In extreme cases they resemble the fiery pulpit preachers of organized religion's yesteryear, always prepared to thunder forth their understanding of the one and only Truth to infidels and unbelievers, coupling their sermons and admonitions with the direst possible warnings of what will unquestionably befall those who fail to heed them. They are unattractive personalities who violate the AA principle of "promotion by attraction," i.e. of the responsibility of each AA member to strive to become the sort of person that others desire to emulate. The AA newcomer can safely ignore the often detailed instructions and advice of such people in favor of the more relaxed and accepting **suggestions** of less rigid or fanatical members.

Newcomers should also be prepared for the diversity and individuality of opinion that is usually expressed in meetings, and should realize that nobody in the meeting, regardless of how they may present themselves and their beliefs, is officially authorized to speak for AA itself. Everyone's opinion, from the rankest newcomer to the most seasoned and sober veteran, is simply their opinion. In AA there are no generals, no officers, nor even any non-coms. Everyone alike is a pfc – "private first class." This certainly does not mean that everyone's opinion is just as true or useful as everyone else's – but it does mean that no one has been officially commissioned with the AA authority to lord it over anyone else or to tell them with any authority beyond that of their personal opinion how they must practice their own program of recovery.

Sponsors and sponsorship.

There is an official AA pamphlet on sponsorship that is usually available in the literature collection of most AA meetings. It may also be requested from the local AA Central Office.

Virtually all AA meetings and members recommend that newcomers obtain an AA sponsor relatively early in their recovery. As with everything else in AA, there are no official rules or regulations about sponsors and sponsorship. The basic idea is to acquire a mentor or "Big Brother" or Sister who is willing and able to guide the neophyte as his recovery progresses. Same-sex sponsors are generally encouraged except under unusual circumstances. The suggestion that newcomers have a sponsor is, like everything else in AA, just that, a suggestion. There is no requirement that anyone have a sponsor, and no one checks to see whether anyone else does.

The usual advice is to look for a sponsor "who has what you want," i.e. who appears to be sober and emotionally balanced and who displays the kinds of beliefs and behaviors that one wishes to emulate and from whom one hopes to learn something of value not only about recovery, but even about life itself. Because of the agitated and anxious emotional state of many AA newcomers, it may not be easy to make such determinations until a number of meetings have gone by and the emotional dust has begun to settle a bit. There is no real requirement to "get a sponsor at any cost," so it is permissible and probably better to take one's time and look around a bit before actually selecting someone to ask. This selection is usually done on the basis of observing and listening to the potential sponsor speak during meetings and perhaps noting their interactions with others before and after as well as during the meetings.

Some meetings include in their "readings" (the formalized way in which the meeting is opened or closed) the invitation for anyone desiring a temporary sponsor to contact a particular individual immediately after the meeting. The suggestion is often made to newcomers to seek a temporary rather than a long term sponsor just to get started in the program. Like so-called temporary employment, many but not all of these relationships will mature into lasting ones. Calling them "temporary" merely makes it easier for both parties to retire from them if for any reason they desire to do so.

Sponsorship is a highly individual matter with no fixed rules or regulations. The style and content of the "mentoring" vary tremendously from sponsor to sponsor. Some sponsors have a fairly structured approach with specific suggestions and even

"assignments" for those who ask them to sponsor them. They may ask their "sponsees" to call them every day for a while just to get in the habit of using the telephone, or they may assign specific parts of the Big Book or other official AA literature to be read and discussed with them. Sponsors and sponsees often meet before or after the meeting for coffee or meals in order to get to know each other and discuss recovery. Whatever the individual style of a particular sponsor, it is always understood that the sponsee is free and in fact morally obliged to call his sponsor any time he is in trouble or about to drink. Sponsors and sponsees are absolutely free at any time to terminate their relationship if it is not satisfactory to either of them.

Principles Before Personalities

AA is an exceedingly diverse and usually colorful collection of people with all kinds of personalities and problems in addition to that of alcoholism. Individual meetings also tend to acquire a special flavor and "personality" of their own. All in all, AA represents a vast cross-section of the general population. Along with the many good people who attend and who are sober are always some who are not so good and who may or may not be sober. An AA saying wryly but accurately notes that "If you like everyone you meet in AA, you haven't been to enough meetings."

Although the natural fear and anxiety of many newcomers usually serves to protect them from premature and unwise involvement with those who may not be good for them, occasionally the newcomer is so desperate for real human contact and even affection that he or she may be vulnerable to exploitation for money, sex or other favors by unscrupulous individuals. "Thirteenth Stepping" –there are actually only twelve steps in the Twelve Step program- is the common term for sexual exploitation of female newcomers by males in the program. The reasons to avoid premature emotional and physical intimacy in early recovery are obvious and really come down to just one principal concern: such involvements frequently become unmanageably complex or turn sour, and the risk of alcoholic relapse for the newcomer is extremely high. It is always best to keep one's life as simple and non-stressful as possible in the beginning of recovery.

Sometimes newcomers plunge right into the after-meeting socializing and personal relationships among members at a pace that is too fast for their own good. Non-program related issues and concerns may sometimes dominate these friendships and work to the detriment of the individual's recovery by blurring their focus on the AA program itself. Conflicts and complications in personal friendships with other AA members may even serve to disillusion the newcomer and undermine his trust in the program itself. It is therefore always wise to remember the advice, "Principles before personalities." Individual human beings are always fallible and hence apt to disappoint, but the principles of recovery and of right conduct remain and are untouched by individual failings.

Before and After the Meeting

AA meetings generally begin and end on time. Depending on the particular group, its size and location, some people usually arrive early and socialize before the meeting actually begins. After the meeting officially concludes there is usually a period of time during which people hold individual or small group conversations about various program and non-program related topics. These before-and-after times can be especially anxious times for the newcomer, who usually doesn't know anybody and who may be extremely self-conscious merely as a result of finding himself in a new and unfamiliar situation.

The best way to deal with such anxieties is the usually preferred method of head-on confrontation with the fear, for it is a psychological fact that what we are afraid of and avoid almost always gains more power over us, while that which we face up to and conquer thereby loses its ability to frighten us. The more actual interactions the newcomer to AA has, the more data he acquires with which to refine his understanding of what is actually going on at the meetings. Thus those who can make themselves do so are best advised to arrive early and leave late rather than the common and understandable tendency to reverse this polarity by arriving late and leaving early.

If an individual identifies himself as a newcomer just getting sober he will very often be given names and phone numbers by other members along with an offer to be of help if needed. This is a sort of informal and temporary sponsorship that reflects the AA tradition of service by helping others. More than one newcomer totally unfamiliar with AA has been startled and made temporarily suspicious by such unsolicited friendliness, even to the point of suspecting that those offering him their cards actually desire to sell him something or otherwise take advantage of him.

Brainwashing, Mind Control and Cultism

AA has been accused of all of these, both by disgruntled former participants and also by those who have never set foot in an AA meeting. The newcomer will have to make up his own mind, based upon his own observations and experiences, about such charges, at least some of which seem to stem from negative experiences with the Dogmatists described above. If one simply recalls that all opinions expressed by AA members are just that, opinions; and if he remembers that no one in AA possesses any official rank or authority to dictate to anyone else what to think or how to behave in regard to anything at all, much of the air in such hostile balloons is immediately deflated.

The newcomer who hangs around long enough will usually have the pleasure of getting acquainted with as remarkably diverse, independent, defiant and colorful a collection of personalities as it has ever been his privilege to know. Far from it being the truth that all recovering alcoholics are alike in some stereotyped "programmed" fashion, it is the recovery from alcoholism that releases the actual individuality of each alcoholic. It is in fact the drinking alcoholic or the defiant newly "dry" alcoholic who is much more apt to resemble in thinking and behavior everyone else in the same category as himself. Genuine, as opposed to merely superficial, theatrical

or pretend individuality actually only begins with recovery from alcoholism. For there is much more to being an individual than merely claiming to be one. Although AA is generally a safe place, not everyone can be trusted.

Slogans and Other Superficial Things

Newcomers are sometimes shocked and even repulsed at what they take to be the insultingly simple and superficial nature of many AA sayings and slogans. There is often a good deal of misunderstanding of what the slogans actually mean. "One day at a time," for example, is not infrequently "translated" by the anxious and not always clear-headed newcomer to mean something like "Don't plan and don't take care of important matters" or something equally erroneous and absurd which he quite rightly and often indignantly rejects. Terms like "acceptance" and "powerlessness" are highly vulnerable to such distortions and misunderstandings which time and continued participation in meetings usually correct.

The typical guilt and shame ridden newcomer may interpret talk from other members about their "character defects" and the Fourth Step "fearless and searching moral inventory" as nothing but a demand to pay for one's sins by confessing them publicly in the most abject and humiliating fashion. Individuals who are simply attempting to be candid and honest about their shortcomings and their plans to change them may be viewed by neophytes as "beating up on themselves." It is for this reason that many people suggest that newcomers concentrate on attending meetings and not drinking "one day at a time" rather than immediately launching into the more complex parts of the AA program. Time is required to begin to feel safe and comfortable and to get to know others. Time, considerably more time than alcoholics usually realize or believe, is also required for the physiological effects of alcohol and alcohol withdrawal on the brain to clear up.

Just as children and young people commonly find well-known proverbs irritatingly obvious and ordinary, only to realize gradually as adults the depth of wisdom contained in their simple, compressed format, so do AA newcomers commonly construe the familiar AA sayings and slogans one way in the beginning and another way later on, after they have had time and opportunity to reflect upon them and to discuss them with others. Simplicity is not always equal to superficiality. Novice Zen Buddhist monks have been known to meditate for up to 15 years on koans –sayings- such as "When hungry, eat; when tired, rest" before mastering them.

The following collection of slogans comes from the Humor Anonymous website:

It's hard to be a big shot in an anonymous program.

That's easier said than felt.

Willpower tells me I must, but willingness tells me I can.

We're only as sick as our secrets.

Do what you did and you get what you got.

If it's God's will, I will.

Sometimes the only thing between an alcoholic and a drink is his higher power.

In the beginning I went for my drinking. Today I go for my thinking.

Time takes time.

Patience takes patience.

You can't think your way into a new way of living...you have to live your way into a new way of thinking.

God don't make no junk.

It wasn't my drinking, it was my thinking.

Fake it 'til you make it.

Live for today. Yesterday's history. Tomorrow's a mystery.

Poor me, poor me, pour me another drink.

Use your brain. It's the little things that count.

A closed mouth gathers no foot.

Little by slowly.

I don't want the morning after the night before.

After a year, you can have your cake and eat it too.

How does A.A. work? It works just fine.

Do the next right thing.

Drink till you're convinced.

Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

Keep coming back, it works if you work it.

Talk does not cook rice.

Sit down, shut up and listen.

Act "as if..."

If you think the program is too simple, go out and drink some more. By the time you get back you'll be simple enough for the program.

It's always easier to take somebody else's inventory.

Pray daily, God is easier to talk to than most people.

If drinking doesn't bring you to your knees, sobriety will.

When you sober up a horse thief, all you have is a sober horse thief.

Gratitude is an attitude.

I've been here a few 24 hours.
EGO: Edging God Out
We came, we came to, we came to believe.
Daniel didn't go back to the lion's den to get his hat.
If you stick with the bunch, you'll get peeled.
We suffer from alcohol-ISM, not alcohol-WASM
Some people drink normally, and I normally drink .
The person with the most sobriety is the one who got up earliest this morning.
A.A. is the easier, softer way.
Go to meetings when you want to, and go to meetings when you don't want to.
There are no elevators in A.A., only steps.
If you don't want to slip, stay away from slippery places.
The mind is like a parachute, it works better when it's open.
The only step we have to do perfectly is step one.
Meeting-makers make it.
You can't save your face and your ass at the same time.
If I don't let go, I lose my grip.
Steps 1, 2, and 3 condensed: I can't, He can, so let Him.
We'll love you until you learn to love yourself.
Don't give up before the miracle happens.
You never have to drink again.
If you don't have a Higher Power, borrow mine.
Progress, not perfection.
Unless I accept my virtues, I will be overwhelmed with my faults.
We are not human beings sharing a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings sharing a human journey.
Let God save your soul...we're here to save your ass!
Practice makes progress.
Sometimes you have to get on your knees to rise.
If you don't talk about it, you'll drink about it.
Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.
In A.A., for every nut there's a wrench.
Some other common slogans are:
Expectations are like resentments in escrow.
It's OK to look back at the past - just don't stare.
My mind is like a bad neighborhood: it's not safe to go there alone.
It's a WE program.
The only thing I need to know about God is that I ain't Him.
K.I.S.S. = Keep It Simple, Stupid
H.A.L.T. = (Don't let yourself get) **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely and **T**ired.
Fear is the opposite of faith.
I don't need to have an opinion about *everything*.
Easy does it.
Think the drink through.
If you can't remember your last drunk, you haven't had it.
Don't drink, and go to meetings.
Trust God, clean house, help others (Dr. Bob).
AA is a simple program for complex people.
Nobody is too dumb to get sober but plenty of people are too smart.

A New Vocabulary

One of the commonest stumbling blocks for AA newcomers is the AA vocabulary itself. Familiar and everyday terms such as acceptance, powerlessness, and humility are used in AA in ways that are somewhat different from ordinary usage. This causes a good deal of confusion and misunderstanding in some minds, as for example when the term "acceptance" is mistakenly supposed to mean merely rolling over and playing dead, or letting other people walk all over one; or when "humility" is misunderstood to mean self-condemnation, groveling, or putting oneself down. Although most newcomers, after a few meetings, seem to pick up the context and the actual meanings of such terms when used in AA, others have great difficulty understanding the AA usage and continue to misconstrue them in ways that are often antithetical to their intended meaning. The word "powerless" has probably resulted in more confusion than any other single term used by AA.

A brief **unofficial** lexicon of the actual AA meaning of such terms might go something like this:

Acceptance. Recognizing and admitting the actual facts of the case rather than clinging to what one would prefer to be true. Starting from a reality base. Behaving like an adult in the face of disappointment and frustration. It is acceptance to make other plans when it rains on the day one had planned a picnic. Lack of acceptance would be manifested by self-pity, sulking, and brooding all day on the unfairness of the rain shower. Far from being passive, acceptance in this sense is active and creative.

Humility. Seeing oneself and one's concerns in correct perspective. Behaving in accordance with such a correct understanding of oneself rather than in accordance with a falsely inflated or deflated idea of oneself. Humility thus understood is merely perspective - sanity - honesty. It is comparable to a scientific investigator doing his best to collect, analyze and report his findings objectively, no matter how he might wish them to turn out. It represents a net gain rather than a loss in the adaptive repertoire of the individual, hence a potential augmentation of his personal power.

Powerlessness. Lack of complete control over events, especially one's intake of alcohol once he has started to drink. Powerlessness is seldom absolute. But even relative or occasional powerlessness is sufficient to do great harm. The valid identification, admission, and acceptance of circumstances in which one is absolutely or relatively powerless actually increases one's actual power. "Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed." Francis Bacon.

The AA subculture differs in many ways from the wider culture in which it is contained. A kind of "culture shock" is thus inevitable for those who have no prior familiarity with AA or 12 Step programs. Wise newcomers adopt a patient, wait-and-see attitude before arriving at definite conclusions about phenomena they may never have encountered before. The predicament of the newcomer is in fact akin to that of an anthropologist living among and wishing to understand the habits and mores of a strange and unfamiliar tribe. Time and open-mindedness are required to gain a correct understanding in such matters.

AA and Psychiatry

Alcoholics Anonymous and its co-founders Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith from the beginning held and sought earnestly to maintain good relations with the medical community, including psychiatry.

"**The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous**" itself contains a famous introduction called "**The Doctor's Opinion**" by William D. Silkworth, a psychiatrist. The official AA position has consistently been one of humility and cooperation rather than grandiosity and exclusivity in regard to various ways of helping the alcoholic.

It is well known that individual physicians vary greatly in their understanding of alcoholism and addiction and that those who lack such an understanding may be less than helpful with their alcoholic and addicted patients. However, there are many physicians and psychiatrists who do possess an excellent grasp of the principles of addiction treatment and who are therefore highly skilled in their treatment of their alcoholic and addicted patients.

The individual experiences of AA members at meetings reflect this broad array of professional abilities and range from highly favorable to highly unfavorable. In this and in other instances newcomers should keep in mind that opinions of others are just that: opinions. AA does not claim to have, and individual members are not competent to give -unless they have acquired special training- professional advice regarding mental health disorders other than alcoholism - including advice on the question of appropriate usage of medications for depression, manic-depression (bipolar disorder) and anxiety disorders.

Occasionally individual AA members will express the erroneous opinion that "you can't be sober as long as you are taking any mind-altering medications." Newcomers may even be advised by some people to discontinue medications without discussing this with their physician. Such advice, should it be encountered, should be regarded as simply the private and personal opinion of the person tendering it. There is nothing in the official AA literature that prohibits the alcoholic from taking appropriately prescribed and required psychiatric medications.

Attitudes toward psychiatry and psychiatric medications, while always an individual matter, tend to vary somewhat in relation to specific groups. Up to 50% of alcoholics suffer from an associated "co-morbid" or "dual diagnosis" condition such as depression or severe anxiety. Newcomers in treatment for such conditions will generally feel more at home in meetings whose members respect the stated limitations of AA in regard to their diagnosis and treatment.

The AA Preamble

"ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

The Serenity Prayer

God, grant me
The serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can, and
The wisdom to know the difference.

The Twelve Steps

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.
Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
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.
Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Twelve Traditions of AA

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is one ultimate authority - a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose - to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An AA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. AA, as such ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

The Ninth Step Promises

"If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

"Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize *if we work for them.*" - *from Chapter Six of "The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous."*