

12-Step

Recovery

Without God

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Welcome

If you have the problem we're here to discuss, you belong. If you aren't sure whether or not you have our problem, stick around; as you hear our stories, you'll get the information you need to place yourself in or out. Only you can decide; no one can kick you out.

In these rooms you'll hear experience, strength and hope, as well as confusion and despair. You'll hear wisdom and nonsense, because we are sick people getting better, not experts. So take what works for you and leave the rest.

There are atheists here, monotheists, polytheists, agnostics and "decline to state". Recovery is available to all. This pamphlet addresses specific issues that atheists might face in American 12-step fellowships.

Alienation

It's astonishing how many of us feel like outsiders. In our families, at work, and at meetings, this is a very common theme. These feelings do *not* mean you should leave. Leaving puts you trying to recover alone, which is too hard. The fellowship exists because recovering alone was too hard for the founders and continues to be too hard for the members.

As much as you need the fellowship, it needs you. Without you, we become less welcoming, less diverse, less robust. But more important, if you leave because you feel alienated, we have failed in our primary purpose: "to help the one who still suffers."

Here are some options when you feel alienated:

- Find people you are comfortable with. It only takes a few.
- Debrief with someone who understands.
- Ask for what you need: "Would you tell me your thoughts and their reasons instead of telling me what to think?" "Let's close the meeting with the Responsibility Statement rather than The Lord's Prayer."

- You can always quote AA founder, Bill W., to someone who isn't getting it:

"...let us not pressure anyone with individual or even collective views... Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares."

- Look for similarities with those who conceptualize things in different terms than you use.
- Translate what others say into your own terms. What quality, force, or principle is this person referring to when they say "God"? Does it translate as "wisdom"? "friend"? "human goodness"? What does the literature mean when it says "power greater than ourselves"? Does the speaker's share become more useful to you if you substitute "human goodness" for "Lord"?
- Look for the truth in what the speaker is saying. For example, if a person says, "It's more blessed to give than to receive," some folks might bristle at what sounds like a religious text. But you could also consider whether or not giving confers benefits on the giver.
The principles of recovery are the same for everyone, only the ways we conceptualize them differ.

Getting nothing out of meetings

Listening to monotheists attribute their success to supernatural forces can leave an atheist thinking, "There's nothing here for me; it's just all blue smoke and mirrors."

It takes extra work to extract the useful information from a share couched in religious terms. But it makes a huge difference in how much you learn and how you feel in meetings. Here are some things to try:

- Look for the action the person took. For example, "I prayed for guidance and then called my sponsor," might become, "Ok, he opened his thinking up to new possibilities and called his sponsor. I can do that."

- Substitute your higher power for theirs: "I know God will show me the way," might become, "I know my inner wisdom will show me the way."
- Take what you like and leave the rest: "I know God has a plan for me," might become, "There's no plan, but this is my path, so I better walk it."

How to find a sponsor

If you are new, finding a sponsor might be the most helpful thing you can do. He can help you stay abstinent long enough to get your feet under you. You can ask someone to sponsor you temporarily, and you can change sponsors if the first one doesn't work out. You're driving the recovery bus.

A sponsor helps you work the steps. She might also listen to what's on your mind, make suggestions when you want them, and share her own experience, strength and hope. Or she might not; those things are up to the two of you to negotiate.

Who have you met that you want guiding you? Who has the kind of life you want? It is not necessary for a sponsor to share your beliefs, but he must respect them. Look for someone who can work with your way of thinking and not insist on his.

How to find a Higher Power that works for you

A.A., the first recovery program, uses God to emphasize the fact that an alcoholic cannot get sober on self-discipline. We don't control our recovery, but surrender to it. For atheists, finding another name for the power behind recovery can be very helpful.

Note that the word used is "power," not "being." The sailor relies on wind to power the boat, recognizing that the greater power of the wind will take her where rowing cannot. Trying to control one's drinking is like rowing.

The sailor understands the wind, but does the hawk rising on a column of warm air understand thermals? It is not essential to understand a power in order to use it. In fact, using it might be the first step to understanding.

Some examples of larger forces, or higher powers, used by recovering atheists include:

"The force that keeps me sane"

"The force that keeps my sponsor sane"

"Honesty"

"Love"

"My future self"

"The fellowship of AA"

"The principles of AA"

"Doing the steps"

"Love of life"

"Grace"

"Big mama"

"John"

"Great spirit"

"The universe"

"My highest light"

"My support system"

What force has brought you this far? What fuels your desire to stop drinking? What can protect you from forgetting the importance of sobriety?

If these questions don't help, try listing the qualities you want in your new life. Do you want peace? honesty? self-respect? Such a list can help you articulate what matters to you, and this can then guide you. Or you might adopt a shorthand name for the whole collection, perhaps "what's best for all" or "integrity." If you adopt integrity as your guide, other people will help you because they also want you to have integrity. This is the power in being guided by what you value most.

Surrender

I haven't met an atheist yet who readily embraced the prospect of surrendering their life and will to forces greater than themselves. The monotheists have an advantage here.

Yet, everyone knows of many things that have to be allowed and cannot be forced: seeds sprouting and buds opening, trust developing, investments maturing and inspiration appearing. Recovery is one of these things.

How do you feel about surrendering to inner wisdom? Or your future self? Or the force that keeps you sane? All you need is a concept that lets you nurture recovery instead of manufacturing it.

Prayer

The purpose of prayer is to keep one's commitment to change fresh in mind. Addicts (including Al-Anonics) are prone to amnesia about our disease, especially in the early days of recovery. The idea of a fix comes to mind and the myriad of reasons to decline simply don't come to mind. If you start each day with a prayer to stay abstinent through the day, you are more likely to remember the reasons it matters to you.

Those who think of their higher power as a being have no trouble using prayer. But those who think of it as a non-human force can find this suggestion problematic.

For us, it can be helpful to remember that the intelligence we're addressing is our own. The subconscious mind can steer us toward or away from a drink, and we need some way to talk to that internal decider. As with any other habit, the mental habit of deciding to use doesn't disappear with the decision to stop. It needs as much persistence as going to the gym or cooking without butter. Any way of building rapport with the subconscious will help, always remembering to engage the "higher" self that wants a better life than the indulgent self provided.

Letting go

"Let go and let God"--how many times do we hear it? But is there any reason you have to let God in order to let go? What happens if you just let go? Are the possible outcomes any worse than if you try to control something that you either can't, or shouldn't, control?

Sometimes the outcomes are better. When you've stopped obsessing and broadened your perspective, you often see things you missed when you were narrowly focused. When you allow that the worst could happen, you can think ahead to how you'll handle it if it does. When you calm down, you get a sustainable life that doesn't push you into acting out in your addiction or compulsion. You can watch with loving eyes, and act appropriately when action is called for. When you bide your time, opportunities arise that you couldn't

create. These possibilities are foreclosed when you strain to control the uncontrollable and give up in anger or resentment.

Working the steps

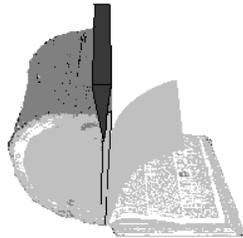
The steps are a program of recovery. Deciding to stop is not enough to stop us; we need to be pro-active. Step work is a great way to spend the time when you would have been using, and it transforms our lives into stable, rewarding processes that generate no compulsion.

Doing the steps in order makes the tasks manageable: admitting our powerlessness sets us up to look for a power that can help; trusting in such a power puts us in position to commit; the commitment then raises the question how to proceed, with the inventory answering that question. On it goes, the work broken down for us into bite size pieces. (Ok, meal-size pieces.)

If you've settled on a higher power and have a sponsor, you're in good position to work through the steps. If you don't have a higher power or a sponsor, you can still get to work. Just remember that, if you get stuck, you can get help. We're pulling for you!

I am responsible...
When anyone, anywhere,
reaches out for help, I want
our hand always to be
there.

And for that: I am
responsible.



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