

How to Make AA Work for You

Most people have heard of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and are aware that it is there to help alcoholics to recover and regain a healthier lifestyle. However, how this is achieved is shrouded in mystery as far as the general public is concerned and that is partly because of the principle of maintaining individual anonymity in AA. As a result there are all sorts of preconceived ideas about it and this can result in making sufferers and professionals wary about engaging with AA.

I first attended an AA meeting in my capacity as a newly appointed Consultant Psychiatrist working in addiction in Birmingham over 30 years ago. The thing that struck me most was that here, in the AA meeting, was a room full of people who looked healthy and were sober. I could not help but compare them to the people who were coming to see me in my outpatient clinic who appeared to be depressed, defeated and physically unhealthy. I have subsequently concentrated on trying to persuade patients to engage with AA. Once they have engaged with AA they usually find that their initial misconceptions are unfounded.

People often ask about the evidence that AA works. There are two types of evidence. Firstly, there is the evidence that results from comparative studies where one treatment intervention is compared to another proven intervention. There is an increasing body of evidence that demonstrates that AA assists individuals to achieve sobriety and promote a more enduring change. Secondly there is also the evidence from very simple observation where by attending AA meetings one can see and hear of the recovery pathway of lots of individuals. Double blind control trials are not the only way to observe that something is of benefit. There has never been a double blind control trial testing the efficacy of having a parachute when jumping out of a plane compared to not wearing one. The benefit of having a parachute is easily observed and glaringly obvious.

AA is a self help organisation whose principles and philosophy have evolved over the last 77 years. It is based on the collective knowledge of sufferers who have achieved sobriety through sharing their experiences as to how to achieve recovery. It has undoubtedly assisted millions of people to achieve sobriety. This common experience and the evolution of a common but broad based strategy has been shared and found to be helpful by the still suffering alcoholic.

The first step is to contact AA and attend an AA meeting which you can do by phone. A member from AA will be willing to meet with you initially, and share their experiences of the illness and how they have managed to get into recovery. Contacting AA can be daunting and someone from

AA will be willing to assist you in attending your first meeting. By listening to what is being said in the meeting you will find that it helps to dispel the various myths and prejudices about AA. You do not have to speak (known as sharing) at your first meeting. You will see that people are healthy, friendly and willing to help you. This assists you in gaining an understanding of the condition that they have developed. You will notice that suddenly you do not feel alone. The sharing of information and feeling that you are not alone is a very powerful mechanism to start the change. If other people can do it then so can I.....

If you attend you will hear members talk of the 12 Steps which can be seen as the basic principles in helping you to achieve the change. Simply put, the first step is to realise and accept that one is an alcoholic and that that pattern of behaviour has had a destructive effect on one's life. The second and third step is all about how to go about effecting a positive change. The fourth step is about developing the ability to self reflect and thereby gain a better understanding of what makes you tick. This will help you in making other changes in the way that you deal with life. The last step is about helping other still suffering alcoholics.

AA is not a religious organisation. There are people from all walks of life and every persuasion just as there are in the general public. There are people who are atheists, agnostics and others who belong to other formalised religions. It does not matter what your beliefs are, nor will anyone try and persuade you to change your beliefs. People do talk about a spiritual awakening in the last step but this is not a religious experience but more of a growing awareness of the complexity of one's existence.

AA is totally self supporting. It does not rely on government funding which would make it vulnerable to changes in government funding policies. To paraphrase a colleague, Professor Jonathan Chick, AA is of infinite value as a resource to the NHS, the law and society generally, since it does not cost society one penny, yet the benefits of helping sufferers of this illness to recover from their addiction is of enormous value to society.

So if you know of someone whose drinking is causing difficulties in their lives, the first step is to try AA. However, do not expect a quick fix i.e. one meeting won't be enough and you may have to attend three or four times a week initially. Someone said to me that going to AA in the beginning was like being an American and watching your first game of cricket. Initially it is confusing and may not be enjoyable. However, after attending 80 cricket matches you will gain an understanding of the game and start to enjoy it.

Buying the recommended books from AA (and it is helpful to read them as well) is important to guide you through the process. Find someone at AA who has been sober for at least two years to be your guide/ mentor or to use the AA parlance to be your “sponsor”. This person can help you to understand the 12 steps and how to get into recovery. Try different AA meetings and then identify which meeting will be your home meeting i.e. the one that you feel most comfortable in.

The important message is that you can recover from this illness and regain control over your life. The solution is simple. The first step is to pick up the phone and speak to someone from Alcoholics Anonymous.

Dr Ash Kahn

Consultant Psychiatrist

Non-Alcoholic Trustee, General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain