

Five Reasons to Hate AA

(or any Step Fellowship)

The day after the first AA meeting, there was probably someone complaining about how terrible AA is. It's always been controversial, one way or another. And it's not the ideal answer for everyone who is struggling with addiction.

There are a lot of reasons to dislike and/or distrust AA. The most potent reason, and certainly the most regrettable, stems from the attempts of family, courts, physicians, and occasionally (unfortunately,) overzealous AA-ers, to pressure the unwilling and unready into participation. Usually these stem from the best of motives, sometimes from less altruistic roots (AA is cheaper than treatment, after all.) But they are always a mistake. As the Tradition puts it, attraction, not promotion, should be the catalyst.

Pressuring or even forcing someone into a step-based fellowship program is a great way of impairing that program's effectiveness. Step program dynamics work on a foundation of desire for change and willingness to try the steps to facilitate the change.

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Another reason is simple bad experience with a group or individual fellowship member(s). Step fellowships aren't "professional" and they don't have any hierarchical authority that intervenes when a group dynamic goes sour or fails to deal with predatory or exploitive members. If the experience is sufficiently traumatic, it can be an excellent reason to avoid steppery altogether, even though 'bad' groups and predatory individuals are a very small percentage of the worldwide total membership.

Individual experience aside, however, there are plenty of assertions that AA and other step-based fellowship is a bad thing on more generalized grounds. There are dozens of them, but they mostly fall into one of five categories:

"It's a cult. The God thing. It's brainwashing. There's a hidden agenda."

The semantics of a "higher power," and references to spirituality pose real challenges for strongly anti-theist folks, and for people who have an extremely rigid personal theology. People who have a traumatic history with god-bothering powers in their lives—families, churches, etc., can have a hard time seeing past the goddy language to the conceptual basis: **Addiction has chained our locus of control firmly to the drug or the booze.**

And the effects of the drugs or booze on our brains, plus the chaos they've created in our lives, effectively prevent us from re-internalizing that locus of control, especially during early recovery. Reliance on an external source of control is a viable alternative. The steps, the experience



and support of fellow-sufferers, and the positive repatterning of our brains that conscious attempts at faith and optimism can produce, provide such a locus, whether you call it "God," or "Group Of Drunks."

Addiction is a disease of the brain. Drugs and alcohol make nasty messes there. Call it brainwashing if you like, but re-programming your brain to function on a "clean and sober" model is rarely achieved by abstinence alone. Thus the basis of step fellowships.

"The people in the meetings are (weird/unfriendly/too friendly/ pushy/obnoxious/etc.)"

This is perhaps the most frivolous reason we've run across for hating 12-steppery. It's more of a rationalization for not recovering than an actual criticism of fellowship itself. Every attendee at every meeting has at least one thing in common with everyone else there: The reason for everyone's attendance. We drunks. We addicts.

If the dynamics of a particular group really bother someone, it's usually possible to find another group, another meeting, another location. If hanging out with "those people" for an hour or so every few

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days or each week is more uncomfortable than being addicted, you’re definitely not ready to start recovering.

(But don’t worry. The meetings will still be here when you are ready.)

“That ‘powerless’ step is terrible for people who suffer from low self-esteem or PTSD.”

There are probably some people with addiction plus mental illness for whom starting right off with the “powerless” thing is a bad idea. But they’re unlikely to manage any kind of stable recovery relying solely on a step fellowship, regardless. Step fellowship isn’t treatment. It’s a tool for maintaining recovery.

Complex cases where trauma and depression pose problems with the “powerless” semantic are more likely to benefit from professional, intensive treatment that will address detox, patient education, establishing supervised, medication-assisted therapy, applying CBT and/or other psychiatric interventions, and learning sober living and relapse avoidance skills before exploring step fellowships as a tool for sustaining sobriety.

But millions of addicts and alcoholics (and self-esteem issues go with addiction in almost every case) have achieved sustained periods of sobriety and stable recovery using step fellowships.

“It’s just replacing the crutch of booze/pills/dope with the crutch of the meetings and the Big Book.”

Um, yeah. True.

However, the crutches of booze and dope will kill you.

I know which one I’d choose.

“It doesn’t work. Studies have shown it only has a 3% success rate.”

Ah, the infallible “studies.” Setting aside the issues of methodology and reliability, let’s focus on the definition of “success.” If by “success,” we mean, “deciding to quit drinking and achieving lifelong abstinence on the first try,” then, *damn!* That’s a GOOD success rate!

Relapse is a common part of the recovery process for the majority of addicts and alcoholics, regardless of what treatment they undergo and/or what tools they use for sober living. Many addicts and alcoholics achieve sustained periods of “controlled” drinking, time and again, followed by the spiral out of control and yet another treatment or bout of step fellowship attendance. Some may never achieve lifelong sobriety.

But many do. It may be on the second attempt, or the third, or the ninth, or the nineteenth. Ask around in the rooms. Count the number of people at an open

meeting “pin night” getting their five year medallion or pin, or their eleven-year or twenty-year or thirty-fourth year recognition... Then multiply that by the number of groups in the number of cities in the number of states in the number of countries where step fellowships have established themselves.

That’s the success rate.

There may be reasons to dislike this or that fellowship, this or that group. But the practice of step fellowship remains the most valuable, effective, widely-available tool for maintaining sobriety.

As in the quote from the film “The Princess Bride”: “Anyone who says otherwise is selling something.”

In the tradition of anonymity, this article was submitted by a writer who only wants to be identified as “A Recovery and Sobriety Fan.”

Recovery Systems Institute appreciates the contributions of guest authors.