

Charity Blanchard
English 102

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Clean and Sober

Visualize your idea of an alcoholic. What does he or she look like? Is it an old man on a corner begging money for a beer? Is it the guy that you saw stumbling out of the bar last night, the one who could not even stand up, much less walk? Or does that image hit a little closer to home, say your mother or father? What do you think of? Now think of that person again. How did he or she get that way? Did he or she just start drinking one day and not stop? Or was there something else, something you could not see, something that maybe even he or she does not know about?

The word alcoholism, as defined by Webster's New World College Dictionary, is a "chronic diseased condition marked by psychological and nutritional disorders, marked by that compulsive consumption of and dependence on alcohol" ("Alcoholism" 33). In some circles, it is considered a disease that is carried from one generation to the next, a disease that can and does destroy lives. Others consider the development of alcoholism the result of a choice that someone makes to drink excessively. While each group may have its own thoughts and ideas, the reality remains that alcoholism is indeed a disease-- a very serious disease that can and will ruin a life if not properly understood and treated. The help that an alcoholic needs also has two different viewpoints. The first

is that the alcoholic simply lacks self-control and can cease drinking if he or she really wants to and puts his or her mind to it. While this is a commendable decision, it must be realized that the process of becoming clean and sober requires much more of a person than the simple desire not to drink. This is directly related to the second point. While similar, Alcoholics Anonymous takes a different approach. It states that the alcoholic must first have the desire to stop drinking, and then reach out to other people for the help and support that this tremendous undertaking requires. While simply having the desire to stop drinking may work for some, a better way to start the recovery process is for the alcoholic to reach out to a group of people in an organization that is specially formulated to deal with the problems that a recovering alcoholic faces: Alcoholics Anonymous (Anonymous A)¹.

The decision to stop drinking is one of the hardest that the alcoholic will ever make. It requires that he or she completely re-evaluate his or her life as well as actions from his or her past. It is not an easy process and not something that should be dealt with alone. It is for this reason that Alcoholics Anonymous was created. The Alcoholics Anonymous manual, usually simply referred to as the Big Book, states, “Each group has but one primary purpose- to carry its message to the alcoholic that still suffers” (Alcoholics Anonymous, Big Book 564). Becoming clean and sober is a life-long process. It begins with a simple step: The desire to stop drinking. However, the desire alone, while important, is not always enough. Many of the people who are members of A.A. will have many relapses before succeeding. Often, the sobering alcoholic will continue to engage in activities that he or she did while drinking and will have an

overwhelming desire to start again. Understandably, this desire is often too much to handle, and he or she has what is known as a relapse. However, if the “suffering alcoholics”, as they are known, have a support system to turn to, it greatly reduces the chance of a relapse (O’Brien and Chafetz 1978). This is where the importance is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.

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Get yourself in. As we know the need for this. A.A. meetings are always done in a group setting. This insures that there is always someone there who knows exactly what the person who needs the support is going through. Also built into the A.A. support system are two of the most valuable tools for the alcoholic who needs help but cannot get to a meeting. These are the availability of group members’ telephone numbers and the sponsor program. At each meeting, there are lists of members and telephone numbers that are available for help at any time of the day or night. For the alcoholic who is just beginning on the road to recovery, these can be an invaluable resource. These numbers are of people who have completed all twelve of the steps of A.A. and have the emotional resources to help another get through the temptation to drink and help with any questions or problems that may arise. The other support system of A.A. is the sponsor program. While not a requirement of the program, it is nevertheless a

very valuable resource. When the person who is trying to recover has reached the point

where he or she is comfortable with the program and the people in it, and understand what the program is about, it is time to get what is called a sponsor. A sponsor is one of the people who will stand beside a recovering alcoholic throughout the whole of his or her recovery. A sponsor is an alcoholic who has successfully completed all of the twelve steps of A.A., and like a person on the phone list, is always available. The difference is that the sponsor knows their sponsee inside and out. He or she can answer questions, help with problems and cravings, and generally be a form of support to which the alcoholic can turn in any crisis. Many of these relationships turn into friendships that will last a lifetime (Ketcham et al. 170). While having a good support system is certainly important during the initial stages of recovery, one cannot overlook the importance of the twelve steps themselves, which have made A.A. so famous and effective.

The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are integral to the recovery of an alcoholic. They provide a sense of accomplishment when one is completed and give a tangible goal that can be seen coming closer and closer as the alcoholic progresses into sobriety. The steps, while very basic, are the foundation upon which the individual's future sobriety will be based. The steps start with Step 1, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable" and progress through finding a Higher Power to turn to in times of spiritual need (Steps 2 and 3), making amends to those that were hurt during the course of the alcoholic's drinking (Steps 8 and 9), and ending with Step 12, carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers (Alcoholics Anonymous, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 5,7-8)². While the steps

in between these are of equal importance, these steps show the true progression of the

sobering alcoholic. They help them to see where they were and how far they have come. There is no time limit in which the steps have to be completed, which allows personal growth to happen on a timetable that is comfortable for the individual. Some may work through all twelve steps in a year, while some may spend a year on one or two steps.

The timetable of recovery is not important, as recovery is a life long process. Many who decide to become clean and sober on their own relapse because they do not fully understand the ramifications of this disease. Alcoholism is not a curable disease. It is something that will haunt even a recovering alcoholic for the rest of his or her life. Those that do not have the support and knowledge think that after they have ceased to have the craving for alcohol they can have it in small amounts. This is not true. The recovery is a life long process, and the abstinence from alcohol is forever. The mere taste of a small amount of alcohol is enough to send an alcoholic back into the web of drinking--even if he or she has been clean and sober for forty years (Anonymous B)³. It is for this reason that the group support offered in A.A. is so vital. With this support, the choice of whether or not to “go back out there after being clean and sober” becomes much more difficult. It also makes the feeling of accomplishment feel that much better when the alcoholic realizes that there is indeed life after alcohol (Anonymous A). It is at this point in his or her recovery that the alcoholic realizes that there is indeed life after alcohol, and that he or she can derive satisfaction from something rather than alcohol. This sense of accomplishment is what makes the program so successful. It proves that the hard work a person puts into making him or herself a better person is much more

rewarding than the immediate gratification he or she received from the bottle (Ketcham et

al 279).

While the decision to stop drinking is a very difficult one, it is without a doubt one of the most rewarding decisions that the suffering alcoholic will ever make. It is a life changing experience, one which will make life for the alcoholic more rewarding and successful. After completing all of the recommended steps, there is a sense of accomplishment that will forever remain and will give the alcoholic some of the needed strength to face the temptations throughout the rest of his or her life. Again, it is not something to go through alone, but with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous, its literature, and the members, the transition between suffering alcoholic and recovering alcoholic can be made more bearable and a great deal easier.

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Notes

^{1&3}During the course of gathering information for this paper, I attended some meetings of Alcoholic Anonymous. Due to the nature of the Traditions of the group, the people I spoke with are cited as Anonymous. They were a tremendous help in helping me to understand the inner workings of this organization and why it is so successful.

²In order to fully understand Alcoholics Anonymous and why it is so successful, it is necessary to understand the foundation on which it is organized. To do this, one must read and understand both the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions. Therefore, copies of these have been added to the end of this paper.

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²The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

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

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

(Alcoholics Anonymous, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 5-8)

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²The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous

- 1) Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity
- 2) For our group purpose there is but 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 A.A. is a desire to stop drinking.
- 4) Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole
- 5) Each group has but one primary purpose- to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
- 6) An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to and related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
- 7) Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
- 8) Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9) A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

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10) Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion or outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public 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.

(Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 9-13)

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