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# Alcoholics Anonymous as a Vital Tool in the Treatment of Addicts

By Breanne Orey

## **Abstract**

Alcoholics Anonymous, or A.A., is a phenomenal, 12-step program with the main goal of helping alcohol addicts resist the temptations of alcohol. There are several characteristics of A.A. proving it to be one of the best treatments for alcoholics. To begin with, the anonymity corresponding with the program's name is appealing to members. The discretion allows them to be open about their past experiences without criticism. In addition, A.A. members are constructively influenced by their peers who have gone through similar situations. Experienced members act as sponsors, mentors, or newfound friends to the new members. Once the alcoholic has cut their ties with alcohol, A.A. can help members maintain sobriety. It is because of these three aspects that I am arguing A.A. is the most beneficial alcohol addiction treatment.

## **Historical Beginnings and Significance**

In 1935, two men of Ohio known as Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith worked diligently to evade their addictions. This was not a simple feat due to every aspect of their lives being overpowered by one single substance – alcohol. Through the help of friends and resilient willpower, they shook their addiction once and for all. Inspired by their newly discovered freedom from the dangerous substance, the men dedicated themselves to helping other addicts resist the temptation of alcohol as well. Thus, Alcoholics Anonymous, also known as A.A, was founded (Alcoholics, 2015).

In 1935 at the Mayflower Hotel in Akron, Ohio, Wilson and Smith held their first official A.A. meeting, establishing the basic principles to build their organization. Soon after, Wilson and Smith asked the Akron City Hospital to keep an eye out for a person suffering from a similar fate who could benefit from their program. It was not long before they attained their third member, a lawyer named Bill D. This small but significant expansion sparked a new hope for Wilson and Smith, and they began having weekly meetings at their home located at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn, New York. The men opened their home to members who utilized the dwelling as a “way station” until they could be on their own again (Alcoholics, 2014).

This was only the beginning for the A.A. program. Soon enough, word had spread to local churches who quickly offered their space as a safe meeting area. Around this time,

alcoholism started to be viewed as an illness rather than a lifestyle choice. With this new understanding of alcoholism, A.A. now had the support of medical doctors and studies which emphasized the reality of the illness (Alcoholics, 2014). Some years later, word of A.A.'s success spread to neighboring states. Intrigued by the values of A.A., these states realized their locals could benefit from the program and welcomed A.A. into their borders. Once Wilson and Smith established local leaders in different states, the program was carried out in these new areas. Eventually, the values of A.A. had spread to international areas in which alcoholism was just as prevalent. This spread was attributed to A.A. members traveling to foreign places for business purposes or vacations and passing along information as they went. Its appeal led to its dispersal in these international countries and provinces as well. Currently, A.A. has been established in about 170 countries worldwide (General, 2013). Within those participating countries, there are over two million members (Lilienfield, 2011).

Alcoholics Anonymous truly is an inspirational program credited for helping countless addicts fight their addiction. There are countless testimonials from recovered alcoholics who adamantly endorse A.A. For instance, Jackie Johnson, sober for 27 continuous years testifies, "Before A.A., alcoholics were sent to a doctor or jail. Now, A.A. allows its members to talk with others who have gone through the same experiences. This program works because it's one alcoholic helping another." Mrs. Johnson is just one example of an A.A. success story. Unfortunately, personal stories are not enough to convince critics that A.A. is beneficial; however, scientific evidence might help prove its appeal. I argue that Alcoholics Anonymous should be considered the best treatment for alcoholics because of its anonymity, the fact that struggling alcoholics are surrounded by other recovered alcoholics, and because it offers valuable methods to maintain sobriety.

## **Advantages of Anonymity**

Already acknowledged in the title of the program, Alcoholics Anonymous is just that – anonymous. Studies have shown that the idea of anonymity is beneficial in online school settings because there is a higher sense of equity (Chester). One can argue that an A.A. meeting can be considered an educational setting in which this same concept can be applied. It is essential for members to recognize that the peers around them are going through a similar, if not exactly the same, predicament. This allows for all members to be on an equal level, eluding any judgments. Before more arguments are formed, it is important to clarify that the anonymity is not amongst the members in a particular meeting. Rather, this anonymity means that a member's identity is not disclosed to the public.

There are countless labels, stigmas, and judgments assigned to alcoholics. Aside from losing jobs, houses, and families due to their illness, they may be ridiculed by the public as well. For a long time, society did not understand the characteristics and causes of alcoholism. Because of this ignorance, alcoholics were labeled as deviant and unable to control a seemingly normal social activity (Trice). This is why the idea of anonymity is so vital. An alcoholic can attend A.A. meetings privately in a secure location, avoiding detection from the outside community. Members can leave their vulnerability outside the door when they enter the safety of an A.A. meeting.

Continuing along with the benefits of concealed identities, members may feel more likely to share their stories if they are certain details will remain private. Current alcoholics and recovering alcoholics alike have both experienced traumatizing experiences due to their illnesses. Evidence suggests that dialogue and conversation promote tolerance and understanding (Jones). This idea is potentially beneficial to members speaking about their experiences during the meetings. Once their story is out in the open, it can lead the way to acceptance and recovery. These examples portray the advantages of anonymity. However, this characteristic is not the only thing A.A. has to offer. Another pleasing aspect of the program is the incredibly high level of social support.

## **Positive Peer Influence**

Mentioned above, A.A. meetings are full of alcoholics who are going through similar situations at varying stages of recovery. Because of this unity, it is easier for a new member to feel welcomed. There is a concept in social psychology called “we-ness” which refers to people supporting or helping a group when they feel incorporated with it. This “we-ness” helps create positive relationships amongst the members in A.A and allows the new members to recover with guidance of their peers.

First of all, a huge aspect linked to the A.A. program is the idea of sponsors and mentors. The concept of sponsors and mentors was developed at the very beginnings of A.A. During a particularly difficult portion of his recovery, Wilson had an epiphany. He thought, “You need another alcoholic to talk to. You need another alcoholic just as much as he needs you!” Thus, beginning the sponsorship program (Alcoholics, 2004). Basically, the sponsor acts as a stable person for a new member to turn to in a time of need. This sponsor needs to fully understand the new member and guide them through their recovery. Jackie Johnson, sponsor to four recovered alcoholics, suggested that a sponsor is just another friend who has a “drinking problem”. Sponsors are not supposed to be viewed as any higher or more important than the new members; rather, all members are intended to be viewed as equals.

Attending a meeting is an inspirational experience for both alcoholics and visitors. During the meetings, recovered alcoholics become guest speakers to spark inspiration and hope within the new members. Their speeches include humor and advice in order to tell their stories in a serious, yet light tone. Along with guest speakers, the meeting leader announces that they will start passing out the sobriety tokens (which will be discussed in the next section with more detail). Once the leader calls out a certain time period, such as “24 hours sober,” a member that fits this description stands. As they stand, they announce, “My name is [name], and I am an alcoholic.” This statement is then followed by cheer and applause from the rest of the meeting participants. The applauding accompanied with a few statements like “Way to go!” and “Congratulations!” continues as the receiver walks to the front of the room to be awarded their token. This type of verbal encouragement is another example of how new members are uplifted by the people around them.

A.A. is a very supportive-oriented program. Along with their 12 steps, they adopt these peer backing methods in order to allow one member help another. Instead of being led by a psychiatrist or professional, these meetings are led by recovered alcoholics. This makes the meetings more comfortable for new members and allows for more openness and discussion.

## **Maintaining Sobriety**

Once an alcoholic has acknowledged their addiction and achieved sobriety, the next daunting task is maintaining that sobriety. Due to the plethora of television commercials, billboards ads, and other propaganda selling alcohol, recovering alcoholics may find themselves surrounded by forceful temptation. Often times, these urges are too difficult for the recovering alcoholic to resist. In fact, a shocking 90 percent of alcoholics will relapse during the first four years of attempting sobriety (Recovery.org). A recovering alcoholic goes through a great deal of stress when dealing with this life-changing situation; therefore, they need a reliable program to depend on. Not only is Alcoholics Anonymous a treatment, sobering program, they also offer many resources to remain sober. In fact, even treatment centers have adopted A.A. and its methods to aid these patients in their recovery (Tournier). To be clear, A.A. does not display one clear-cut solution to the problem; instead, they offer several methods that can be applicable to each member.

To begin with, merely attending A.A. meetings can positively impact a person's willpower to continue their abstinence. The results from a study conducted by Henry Montgomery and his colleagues prove that attending A.A. meetings is highly positively correlated with alcohol abstinence. These researchers studied recovering alcoholics and their characteristics by utilizing research interviews. During follow-up sessions, they found that over half of the interviewees had remain abstinent (Montgomery). Considering the high percentage of relapses amongst alcoholics, this statistic is quite impressive.

Another method that A.A offers its members is considered a rewards system. When an alcoholic has reached a new sobriety milestone – 24 hours sober, 1 month sober, 2 months sober, etc. – they receive a token and a round of applause from the other members (Alcoholics, 2011). It is quite an enlightening and uplifting experience, particularly for the recovering alcoholic who feels especially accomplished. These tokens symbolize a difficult step towards sobriety. When a recovering alcoholic physically receives their award, it solidifies the reasons why they decided to become sober. In addition to collecting these circular positive reinforcements, the alcoholic also receives constructive social feedback. Being applauded by your peers for “a job well done” multiplies the effects of this reward system.

A.A. can be interpreted and utilized in many different ways depending on the condition and willingness of the alcoholic. The same idea applies for maintaining abstinence. If the alcoholic is keen on achieving sobriety, they can utilize the methods listed above, or they can identify others ways in which A.A. can help them and capitalize on it.

## **Summarized Arguments**

Despite the arguments, A.A. is definitely an important program that assists alcoholics in their recovery. As the helplessness overcomes an alcoholic, they have a comfortable place to turn to without the embarrassment associated with alcoholism. These new members are surrounded by support and encouragement from people who understand what they are going through. A.A. allows members to reach sobriety, but the next issue is maintaining it. To tackle that problem, A.A. continues to encourage continuous sobriety by using supportive methods and a reward system. Although, it is important to remember that A.A. is not suitable for everyone. This may be why critics attack A.A. Jackie Johnson offered an explanation, “A.A. is not for people who need it; it's for people who want it.” A judge can appoint an alcoholic to attend meetings, but they may not reap all the benefits if they are not set on becoming sober. However, in a case

where a person truly wants to achieve sobriety, A.A. is an excellent program to turn to.

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## **Biography**

Breanne Orey is in her third year at UC Merced where she is studying to earn a BA in Psychology with a minor in Sociology. Breanne is the Chapter President of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars for the UC Merced Chapter. She is also part of a Quantitative Psychology lab under Professor Jack Vevea at UC Merced. Alcoholism and A.A. interests Breanne because she has personal ties to A.A. members who are currently living successful lives with the help of the supportive recovery program. She hopes to spread the knowledge and benefits of A.A. to the public.