

HOW TO FIND A RECOVERY GROUP: MUTUAL HELP IS MORE THAN SELF-HELP

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One of the most common statements heard in mutual help recovery groups is the following: “I don’t need a self-help group. If I could have done it alone, I wouldn’t have needed you.”

Beginning with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which celebrated its 80th International Convention of 70,000 sober alcoholics who met at the World Congress Center in Atlanta in July 2015, there are approximately 400 variations of 12 Step programs that have emerged. Two decades ago, a monumental survey published in *Consumer Reports* (1995) revealed that AA scored significantly better (251) than mental health professionals such as psychiatrists (226), social workers (225), psychologists (220), family physicians (213) and marriage counselors (208). Although this survey was not a scientific study, the readers of *Consumer Reports* highlighted the popularity of mutual help recovery groups.

In a study aptly titled Matching Alcoholism Treatments to Client Heterogeneity (MATCH), the Project MATCH Research Group (1997) conducted an eight-year, multisite trial that was the largest and most statistically powerful clinical trial of psychotherapies ever undertaken. A major finding of the study was that Twelve-Step Facilitation (TSF), Motivational Enhancement Therapy (MET), and a specific type of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) produced similar drinking outcomes. The single confirmed match was between patients with low psychiatric severity and 12-step facilitation therapy. Patients receiving 12-Step facilitation therapy had more abstinent days than those treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy. Otherwise, Project MATCH revealed that no single treatment approach was more effective than the other two approaches for all persons with alcohol problems. A promising strategy

involves assigning a person to alternative treatments based on specific needs and characteristics of the individual.

In addition to AA, there are also recovery groups for families and friends of alcoholics (Al-Anon) as well as children of alcoholics (Alateen). Mutual help recovery groups are also available for those who suffer from narcotics addiction to (Narcotics Anonymous), as well as families and friends those affected by such addiction (Nar-Anon).

The following list includes a few mutual help groups whose meetings are open to those suffering from alcoholism, substance addiction, and other process addictions:

[Alcoholics Anonymous \(AA\)](#)

[Al-Anon Family Groups \(Al-Anon\)](#)

[Alateen](#)

[Cocaine Anonymous](#)

[Narcotics Anonymous \(NA\)](#)

[Nar-Anon](#)

[Heroin Anonymous \(HA\)](#)

[Marijuana Anonymous \(MA\)](#)

[Methadone Anonymous \(MA\)](#)

[Emotions Anonymous \(EA\)](#)

[Gamblers Anonymous](#)

[Overeaters Anonymous \(OA\)](#)

[Sex Addicts Anonymous](#)

In addition to the above groups, which are variations either directly or indirectly derived from the basic 12-Step program of AA, there are other mutual help recovery groups that are available. Some of these groups have a secular focus (e.g., Save Ourselves), some have a distinctly religious focus (e.g., Celebrate Recovery®), and others make allowance for both secular and spiritual orientations.

Save Our Selves (SOS) is self-described as the first large scale alternative to AA. The organization was founded in 1984 by James Christopher, an alcoholic who quit drinking in 1978. Early in his recovery, Christopher realized that AA was not the right fit for him. SOS respects recovery in every form, by whatever path it is achieved. In SOS meetings, members share their experiences, information, insights, and encouragement.

Originally known as Save Our Selves, Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS) emerged as a network of autonomous addiction recovery groups. The program emphasizes the need to place one's highest priority on sobriety by using mutual support to assist members in this common goal. The Suggested Guidelines for Sobriety focus on rational decision-making and are not religious or spiritual in nature. SOS therefore represents an alternative to spiritually based 12-Step addiction recovery programs such as AA. SOS members may also AA meetings, and of course AA members can also attend other groups because AA's Tradition Ten states that AA "has no position on outside issues." However, SOS does not view spirituality or surrender to a Higher Power as being necessary to maintain abstinence.

In contrast to secular groups such as SOS, there are other mutual help recovery groups that have a distinctly religious orientation. Celebrate Recovery® is a mutual support group in which members are expected to be "accountable to Christ, the local church, and the model of Celebrate Recovery established at Saddleback

Church" (Celebrate Recovery, 2015, p. 1) in Lake Forest, California. Saddleback Church is described as an evangelical Christian megachurch affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. In contrast to the singularity of purpose of most 12-Step groups, Celebrate Recovery has been described as being designed for a variety of "hurts, hang-ups, and habits" including dependency on alcohol and drugs, pornography, low self-esteem, need to control, depression, anger, co-dependency, depression, fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, perfectionist, broken relationships, and abuse. With its self-described broad application to a variety of problems and its distinctly evangelical Christian focus, Celebrate Recovery® contrasts the singularity of focus of programs such as AA (in which AA's Tradition Three states "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking") as well as in AA's inclusive definition of Higher Power (in which AA's Step Three states, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him").

In his 60-year longitudinal study of the natural history of alcoholism, Harvard research psychiatrist George Vaillant (1983, 1995, 2003) concluded that individuals who achieved sobriety appeared to experience four common factors: (1) They experienced negative consequences of drinking, such as a painful ulcer or legal problems. (2) They developed a less harmful, substitute dependency, such as group attendance. (3) They experienced sources of inspiration and hope, such as a religious group. (4) They developed new, close relationships and social support.

In *The Natural History of Alcoholism* (Vaillant, 1983), states that AA and similar groups effectively harness the above four factors of healing and that many alcoholics achieve sobriety through AA. However, "Direct evidence for the efficacy of AA...remains as elusive as ever" (p. 265).

Listed below are several alternatives to traditional 12-Step mutual support groups, although inclusion on this list does not imply efficacy or endorsement of any of these groups:

[Celebrate Recovery®](#)

[Learn to Cope](#)

[LifeRing Secular Recovery](#)

[Moderation Management \(MM\)](#)

[Natural Recovery](#)

[Red Road to Wellbriety](#)

[Rational Recovery \(RR\)](#)

[Women for Sobriety \(WFS\)](#)

[Self-Management and Recovery Training \(SMART®\)](#)

[Secular Organizations for Sobriety / Save Ourselves \(SOS\)](#)

References

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