

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

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One of the most commonly heard statements in mutual-support 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.

### **Traditional Recovery Groups**

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).

In the metro Atlanta area, there are hundreds of weekly AA and Al-Anon meetings. Many of these meetings are held in churches and synagogues, although AA and Al-Anon are not affiliated with any sect, religion, sect, denomination, political entity, organization, or institution. AA and Al-Anon do not engage in any controversy, do not endorse or oppose any cause, and do not require any dues or fees for membership. AA and Al-Anon are self supporting through the voluntary contributions of their members.

With respect to other types of counseling, treatment, or psychosocial groups, an email to the AA General Service Office will typically elicit the

following statement that is based on the Tenth Tradition: “Alcoholics Anonymous neither endorses nor opposes other approaches, and we cooperate widely with the medical profession.” Also consistent with the Tenth Tradition, the General Service Office declines to comment on whether AA’s efficacy has been proved.

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](#)

## **AA Clubhouses**

The Northside Alcoholics Benevolent Association (NABA Club) is known by members and locals as “Naba.” Chartered on December 20, 1957, the NABA Club (<http://www.nabaclub.org/>) is the oldest and largest clubhouse housing AA and Al-Anon meetings in the Atlanta area. It is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization located whose primary goal is to offer a safe haven for anyone who wishes to recover from alcoholism. NABA has been tax-exempt since December 1958 (EIN 58-0898190). NABA hosts over 40 different AA, Al-Anon, and Alateen meetings a week. There are several meeting rooms including a large room for speakers meetings and other events.

The Biscayne Room (<http://biscayneroom.com/>), located a few miles from the NABA Club in northeast Atlanta, was opened in June 1968. Biscayne is open seven days a week and many alcoholics have found recovery there. The Atlanta area also includes other clubs such as the Triangle Club (<https://www.atlantatriangleclub.org/>) opened July, 1966, the Dogwood Club (opened April, 1965, the Rebus Club in Smyrna (opened February, 1969), the DeKalb Room (opened April, 1971), and the Tara Club (opened March, 1972). Further north of Atlanta, in the Sandy Springs area, is the 8111 Clubhouse (<http://www.8111clubhouse.org/index.html>).

These clubs operate on a limited basis.

## **Nontraditional Recovery Groups**

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. There are

multiple paths that can lead to recovery. According to Peele, Bufo, and Brodsky (2000, p. 22), the five most popular alternatives to AA have been Rational Recovery, SMART Recovery, Women for Sobriety, Secular Organizations for Sobriety, and Moderation Management.

**Save Our Selves.** 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.

**Secular Organizations for Sobriety.** 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 attend 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.

**Self-Management and Recovery Training.** Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) describes itself as "a nationwide, nonprofit organization which offers free support groups to individuals who desire to gain independence from

any type of addictive behavior" (<https://www.smartrecovery.org/>). Historically, this approach has some of its roots in Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), which was originally developed by Albert Ellis (1957, 1994). Rational Recovery (RR) was founded by California licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), Jack Trimpey. In 1983, his wife Lois asked Jack to choose between his long-standing use of alcohol and remaining in the Trimpey family. Although Jack's first reaction was anger, he grudgingly accepted her terms. Jack and Lois soon decided to create Rational Recovery, an alternative to 12-step recovery (Richardson & Trimpey, 2011). Trimpey established Rational Recovery in 1986 in his hometown of Lotus, in Northern California. RR's name is a deliberate play on words of the alliterative AA (Trimpey, 1996). RR's program's primary text has been referred to as *The Small Book* (Trimpey, 1995), in contrast to AA's popular "Big Book." The network of RR meetings was affiliated with Rational Recovery Systems, a for-profit corporation owned by Jack Tripey.

The efficacy of RR has been the subject of research conducted by principle investigator Mark Galanter, M.D., a former president of both the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) and the American Association of Addiction Psychiatry (AAAP). In a national sample of 433 substance-abusing people (mostly men) attending 63 established RR groups, 58% reported at least 6 months of abstinence among those members who had joined RR for 6 months or more (Galanter, Egelko, & Edwards, 1993). These investigators concluded that "RR succeed in engaging substance abusers and promoting abstinence among many of them while presenting a cognitive orientation that is different from the spiritual one of AA. Its utility in substance abuse treatment warrants further assessment" (Galanter et al., 1993, p. 499). This research was conducted

before This research was conducted before RR cancelled and disbanded their mutual-support meetings effective January 1, 1999 in favor of self-recovery treatment.

In 1994, the Rational Recovery Self-Help Network changed its name to SMART Recovery, and ended all affiliation with Jack Trimpey. According to the SMART website (<https://www.smartrecovery.org/>), the change occurred because of disagreements between Trimpey and the non-profit's board of directors about the program of recovery to be offered in the self-help groups. With a central office based in Mentor, Ohio, Smart Recovery is currently an international non-profit organization that provides assistance and mutual-support groups.

SMART Recovery presents itself as an alternative to traditional 12-Step programs such as AA. SMART differs from AA by not encouraging individuals to admit powerlessness over addictions, not using the concept of a Higher Power, not using the 12-Steps, and not endorsing the disease model of alcoholism (Miller & Kurtz, 1994). Addiction is viewed as a dysfunctional habit or a voluntary choice, rather than a disease, with the admission that it is possible for certain people to have a predisposition toward addictive behavior (Horvath, 2000). Proponents of the SMART program describe it as a self-empowering, science-based recovery (Horvath & Yeterian, 2012).

The SMART program, described as the 4-Point Program, emphasizes four areas in the process of recovery: building motivation, coping with urges, problem solving, and lifestyle balance (Shaw, Ritvo, & Irvine, 2005). The 4-Point Program is operationalized through the use of tools collectively known as the SMART Toolbox (Brooks & Penn, 2003). Collectively known as the

SMART Toolbox, the recovery tools are a compilation of various cognitive and behavioral strategies taken from motivational enhanced therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (Brooks & Penn, 2003).

**Celebrate Recovery®.** 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”).

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 \(SOS\)](#)

## Epilogue

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).

The bottom line is that the best recovery group is the one that allows a person to maintain a life of sobriety—living a life that is happy, joyous, and free. For those who are maintaining such a life, the best advice would be to keep doing what is working. For those who are still searching, then consider some of the factors that comprise better groups (see Doverspike, 2023).

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