

A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous

Alcoholism is recognized as a major health problem. In the U.S., it is the third greatest killer, after heart disease and cancer — and it does not damage alcoholics alone. Others are hurt by its effects — in the home, on the job, on the highway. Alcoholism costs the community millions of dollars every year. So whether or not you ever become an alcoholic yourself, alcoholism still can have an impact on your life. We have learned a great deal about how to identify and arrest alcoholism. But so far no one has discovered a way to prevent it, because nobody knows exactly *why* some drinkers turn into alcoholics. Doctors and scientists in the field have not agreed on the cause (or causes) of alcoholism. For that reason, A.A. concentrates on helping those who are already alcoholics, so that they can stop drinking and learn how to live a normal, happy life without alcohol.

What is alcoholism?

As A.A. sees it, alcoholism is an illness. Alcoholics cannot control their drinking, because they are ill in their bodies and in their minds (or emotions), A.A. believes. If they do not stop drinking, their alcoholism almost always gets worse and worse. Both the American Medical Association and the British Medical Association, chief organizations of doctors in those countries, also have said that alcoholism is an illness.

What are the symptoms?

Not all alcoholics have the same symptoms, but many — at different stages in the illness — show these signs: They find that only alcohol can make them feel self-confident and at ease with other people; often want “just one more” at the end of a party; look forward to drinking occasions and think about them a lot; get drunk when they had not planned to; try to control their drinking by changing types of liquor, going on the wagon, or taking pledges; sneak drinks; lie about their drinking; hide bottles; drink at work (or in school); drink alone; have blackouts (that is, cannot remember the next day what they said or did the night before); drink in the morning, to relieve severe hangovers, guilty feelings and fears; fail to eat and become malnourished; get cirrhosis of the liver; shake violently, hallucinate, or have convulsions when withdrawn from liquor.

What is A.A.?

Alcoholics Anonymous is a worldwide fellowship of men and women who help each other to stay sober. They offer the same help to anyone who has a drinking problem and wants to do something about it. Since they are all alcoholics themselves, they have a special understanding of each other. They know what the illness feels like — and they have learned how to recover from it in Alcoholics Anonymous. A.A. members say that they *are* alcoholics today — even when they have not had a drink for many years. They do not say that they are “cured.” Once people have lost their ability to control their drinking, they can never again be sure of drinking safely — or, in other words, they can never become “*former* alcoholics” or “*ex-alcoholics*.” But in A.A., they can become sober alcoholics, *recovered* alcoholics.

How does A.A. help the alcoholic?

Through the example and friendship of the recovered alcoholics in A.A., new members are encouraged to stay away from a drink “one day at a time,” as the A.A.s do. Instead of “swearing off forever” or worrying about whether they will be sober tomorrow, A.A.s concentrate on not drinking right now — today. By keeping alcohol out of their systems, newcomers take care of one part of their illness — their bodies have a chance to get well. But remember, there is another part. If they are going to *stay* sober, they need healthy minds and healthy emotions, too. So they begin to straighten out their confused thinking and unhappy feelings by following A.A.’s “Twelve Steps” to recovery. These Steps *suggest* ideas and actions that can guide alcoholics toward happy and useful lives. To be in touch with other members and to learn about the recovery program, new members go to A.A. meetings regularly.

What are A.A. meetings?

Alcoholics Anonymous is established in approximately 170 countries. The people in each group get together, usually once or twice a week, to hold A.A. meetings, of two main types:

- (1) At “open meetings,” speakers tell how they drank, how they discovered A.A., and how its program has helped them. Members may bring relatives or friends, and usually anyone interested in A.A. is also welcome to attend “open meetings.”
- (2) “Closed meetings” are for alcoholics only. These are group discussions, and any members who want to may speak up, to ask questions and to share their thoughts with fellow members. At “closed meetings,” A.A.s can get help with personal problems in staying sober and in everyday living. Some other A.A.s can explain how they have already handled the same problems — often by using one or more of the Twelve Steps.

Who belongs to A.A.?

Like other illnesses, alcoholism strikes all sorts of people. So the men and women in A.A. are of all races and nationalities, all religions and no religion at all. They are rich and poor and just average. They work at all occupations, as lawyers and housewives, teachers and truck drivers, waitresses and members of the clergy. A.A. does not keep a list of members, but groups do report how many people belong to each one. From these reports, total A.A. membership is estimated at over 2,000,000.

Does an alcoholic have to go “all the way down” before A.A. can help?

A.A. was started in 1935 by a New York stockbroker and an Ohio surgeon, who had both been “hopeless” drunks. At first, most A.A. members also had been seriously ill; their drinking had sent them to hospitals, sanitariums, or jails. But more and more people began to hear about A.A., and soon many alcoholics found they did not have to let their illness do that much damage. They could recover in A.A. *before* their health had been totally wrecked, while they still had their jobs and their families

Are there any young people in A.A.?

The pamphlet “Young People and A.A.” gives the personal stories of ten who joined when they were under 30. The cartoon pamphlets “Too Young?” and “A Message to Teenagers” tell how some teenage alcoholics found A.A. Many young people like these are cheerfully staying sober and taking part in A.A. activities.

Who runs A.A.?

A.A. has no real government. Each group is free to work out its own customs and ways of holding meetings, as long as it does not hurt other groups or A.A. as a whole. The members elect a chairperson, a secretary, and other group officers. These officers do not give orders to anybody; mostly, their job is to see that the meetings run smoothly. In the average group, new officers are elected twice a year. But the individual group is not cut off from the rest of A.A. Just as A.A. members help each other, so do A.A. groups. Here are three of the means they use to exchange help:

- (1) Groups in the same area set up a central office or “intergroup” office.
- (2) Groups everywhere share their experiences by writing to the A.A. General Service Office, in New York City.
- (3) Groups in the U.S. and Canada choose representatives to go to the A.A. General Service Conference, held once a year. All these A.A. offices and the representatives at the Conference make *suggestions*, based on the experiences of many different A.A. groups. But they do not make rules or issue commands to any groups or members.

What does it cost to belong to A.A.?

Newcomers do not pay any fees for membership. And members do not pay dues. But money *is* needed for some purposes: renting the meeting hall, buying coffee and other refreshments, buying A.A. books, pamphlets, and magazines. So a basket is usually passed around during the meeting, and members put in whatever they can afford or wish to give. Groups also contribute money to support central offices, the General Service Office, and other A.A. activities. In return for the A.A. help that members give to other alcoholics, these members are never paid. Their reward is something much better than money — it is their own health. A.A.s have found that helping other alcoholics is the best way to stay sober themselves.

What can the families of alcoholics do?

A.A. is just for the alcoholics, but two other fellowships can help their relatives. One is Al-Anon Family Groups. The other is Alateen, for teenagers who have alcoholic parents.

What does A.A. NOT do?

1. A.A. does *not* run membership drives to try to argue alcoholics into joining. A.A. is for alcoholics who *want* to get sober.
2. A.A. does *not* check up on its members to see that they don't drink. It helps alcoholics to help *themselves*.
3. A.A. is *not* a religious organization. All members are free to decide on their own personal ideas about the meaning of life.
4. A.A. is *not* a medical organization, does *not* give out medicines or psychiatric advice.
5. A.A. does *not* run any hospitals, wards, or sanitariums or provide nursing services.
6. A.A. is *not connected* with any other organization. But A.A. does cooperate with organizations that fight alcoholism. Some members work for such organizations — but on their own — *not* as representatives of A.A.
7. A.A. does *not* accept money from sources outside A.A., either private or government.
8. A.A. does *not* offer any social services, does *not* provide housing, food, clothing, jobs, or money. It helps alcoholics stay sober, so they can earn these things for themselves.
9. Alcoholics Anonymous lives up to the “Anonymous” part of its title. It does *not* want members' full names or faces to be

revealed on radio, TV, newspapers or on new media technologies such as the Internet. And members do not tell other members' names to people outside A.A. But members are *not* ashamed of belonging to A.A. They just want to encourage more alcoholics to come to A.A. for help. And they do *not* want to make heroes and heroines of themselves simply for taking care of their own health.

10. A.A. does *not* provide letters of reference to parole boards, lawyers, court officials, social agencies, employers, etc.

How can you find out more about A.A.?

1. Most towns and cities have an A.A. listing in the telephone book, for a group or central office. Often, local A.A. has a public information committee to tell people what they want to know about A.A.

2. If you do not find an A.A. listing in your phone book, write to:

General Service Office
Box 459, Grand Central Station
New York, NY 10163

3. You can get other A.A. pamphlets either from your town's A.A. office or by writing to the General Service Office (address above), which will send you free *one* copy of each pamphlet you want. Some titles are:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT A.A.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND A.A.

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOE and

IT HAPPENED TO ALICE (two A.A. stories told in cartoon form)

TOO YOUNG? (cartoon pamphlet for teenagers)

A MESSAGE TO TEENAGERS (short version of the above)

DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DIFFERENT?

A.A. FOR THE OLDER ALCOHOLIC

THIS IS A.A.

IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN YOUR LIFE?

IS A.A. FOR YOU?

THE A.A. MEMBER — MEDICATIONS AND OTHER DRUGS

4. In local libraries, you may find copies of these A.A. books:

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE

TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS

AS BILL SEES IT

DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS

"PASS IT ON"

EXPERIENCE, STRENGTH AND HOPE

5. The A.A. Grapevine (monthly magazine) may be obtained from your local A.A. office or by writing for information to:
Box 1980, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

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