

# Frequently Asked Questions **About A.A.**



**LARGE PRINT**

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS® is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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**Frequently  
Asked Questions  
About A.A.**

# Questions and Answers

## About Alcoholics Anonymous

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Several million people have probably heard or read about Alcoholics Anonymous since its beginnings in 1935. Some are relatively familiar with the program of recovery from alcoholism that has helped more than two million problem drinkers. Others have only a vague impression that A.A. is an organization that somehow helps drunks stop drinking.

This pamphlet is designed for those who are interested in A.A. for themselves, for a friend or relative, or simply because they wish to be better informed about this unusual Fellowship. Included on the following pages are answers to many of the specific questions that have been asked about A.A. in the past. They add up to the story of a loosely knit society of people who have one great interest in common: the desire to stay sober themselves and to help other alcoholics who seek help for their drinking problem.

The thousands who have come into A.A. in recent years are not altruistic do-gooders. Their eagerness and willingness to help other alcoholics may be termed enlightened self-interest. Members of A.A. appreciate that their own sobriety is largely dependent on continuing contact with alcoholics.

After reading this pamphlet, you may have questions that do not seem to be answered fully in this brief summary. A.A. groups in many metropolitan areas have a central or intergroup office, listed online (search “Alcoholics Anonymous” with your state or zip code) or in your local telephone directory under “Alcoholics Anonymous.” It can direct you to the nearest A.A. meeting, where members will be glad to give you additional information. In smaller communities, a single group may have a telephone listing.

If you cannot get in touch with a group in your community, please visit our website at [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org), or write to our world service office: General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Staff there will put you in touch with the group nearest

you. If you live in a remote area and there is no nearby group, they will tell you how a number of “lone” members are staying sober by using A.A. principles and the A.A. program.

You can be sure that your anonymity will be protected.

# Alcoholism and Alcoholics

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Not too long ago, alcoholism was viewed as a moral problem. Today, many regard it primarily as a health problem. To each problem drinker, it will always remain an intensely personal matter. Alcoholics who approach A.A. frequently ask questions that apply to their own experience, their own fears, and their own hopes for a better way of life. Some of these questions appear below.

## What is alcoholism?

There are many different ideas about what alcoholism really is.

The explanation that seems to make sense to most A.A. members is that alcoholism is an illness, a **progressive** illness, which can never be cured but which, like some other diseases, **can** be arrested. Going one step further, many A.A.s feel that the illness represents the combination of a physical sensitivity to alcohol and a

mental obsession with drinking, which, regardless of consequences, cannot be broken by willpower alone.

Before they are exposed to A.A., many alcoholics who are unable to stop drinking think of themselves as morally weak or, possibly, mentally unbalanced. The A.A. concept is that alcoholics are people with an illness who can recover if they will follow a simple program that has proved successful for millions of people around the world.

Once alcoholism has set in, there is nothing morally wrong about being ill. At this stage, free will is not involved, because the sufferer has lost the power of choice over alcohol. The important thing is to face the facts of one's illness and to take advantage of the help that is available. There must also be a desire to get well. Experience shows that the A.A. program will work for all alcoholics who are sincere in their efforts to stop drinking; it usually will not work for those not absolutely certain that they want to stop.



## **How can I tell if I am really an alcoholic?**

Only you can make that decision. Many who are now in A.A. have previously been told that they were not alcoholics, that all they needed was more willpower, a change of scenery, more rest, or a few new hobbies in order to straighten out. These same people finally turned to A.A. because they felt, deep down inside, that alcohol had them licked and that they were ready to try anything that would free them from the compulsion to drink.

Some of these people went through terrifying experiences with alcohol before they were ready to admit that alcohol was not for them. They became homeless or indigent, stole, lied, cheated, and even killed while they were drinking. They took advantage of their employers and abused their families. They were completely unreliable in their relations with others. They wasted their material, mental, and spiritual assets.

Many others with far less tragic records have turned to A.A., too. They have never been jailed or hospitalized. Their too-heavy drinking may not have been noticed by

their closest relatives and friends. But they knew enough about alcoholism as a progressive illness to scare them. They joined A.A. before they had paid too heavy a price.

There is a saying in A.A. that there is no such thing as being a little bit alcoholic. Either you are, or you are not. And only the individual involved can say whether or not alcohol has become an unmanageable problem.

## **Can an alcoholic ever drink ‘normally’ again?**

So far as can be determined, no one who has become an alcoholic has ever ceased to be an alcoholic. The mere fact of abstaining from alcohol for months or even years has never qualified an alcoholic to drink “normally” or socially. Once the individual has crossed the borderline from heavy drinking to alcoholic drinking, there seems to be no retreat. Few alcoholics deliberately try to drink themselves into trouble, but trouble seems to be the inevitable consequence of an alcoholic’s drinking. After quitting for a period, the alcoholic may feel it is safe to try a few beers or a few glasses of light wine. This can mislead the person into drinking only with meals. But

it is not too long before the alcoholic is back in the old pattern of too-heavy drinking — in spite of all efforts to set limits for only moderate, social drinking.

The answer, based on A.A. experience, is that if you are an alcoholic, you will never be able to control your drinking for any length of time. This leaves two paths open: to let your drinking become worse and worse with all the damaging results that follow, or to quit completely and to develop a new pattern of sober, constructive living.

## **Can't an A.A. member drink even beer?**

There are, of course, no musts in A.A., and no one checks up on members to determine whether or not they are drinking anything. The answer to this question is that if a person is an alcoholic, touching alcohol in any form cannot be risked. Alcohol is alcohol whether it is found in a martini, a bottle of wine, a pint of cheap bourbon or a can of beer. For the alcoholic, one drink of alcohol in any form is likely to be too much, and twenty drinks are not enough.

To be sure of sobriety, alcoholics simply have to stay away from alcohol, regardless of the quantity, mixture, or concentration they may **think** they can control.

Obviously, few persons are going to get drunk on one or two bottles of beer. The alcoholic knows this as well as the next person. But alcoholics may convince themselves that they are simply going to drink two or three beers and then quit for the day. Occasionally, they may actually follow this program for a number of days or weeks. Eventually, they decide that as long as they are drinking, they may as well “not hold back.” So they increase their consumption of beer or wine. Or they switch to hard liquor. And they are back where they started.

## **I can stay sober quite a while between binges; how can I tell whether I need A.A.?**

Most A.A.s will say that it's **how** you drink, not how **often**, that determines whether or not you are an alcoholic. Many problem drinkers can go weeks, months, and occasionally years between their bouts with alcohol.

During their periods of sobriety, they may not give drinking a second thought. Without mental or emotional effort, they are able to take it or leave it alone, and they prefer to leave it alone.

Then, for some unaccountable reason, or for no reason at all, they go off on a first-class binge.

They neglect job, family, and other civic and social responsibilities. The spree may last a single night, or it may be prolonged for days or weeks. When it is over, the drinker is usually weak and remorseful, determined never to let it happen again. But it does happen again.

This type of “periodic” drinking is baffling, not only to those around the drinker, but also to the person still drinking, who cannot understand why there should be so little interest in alcohol during the periods between binges, or so little control over it once the drinking starts.

The periodic drinker may or may not be an alcoholic. But if drinking has become unmanageable and if the periods between binges are becoming shorter, chances are the time has come to face up to the problem. If the person

is ready to admit to being an alcoholic, then the first step has been taken toward the continuing sobriety enjoyed by thousands upon thousands of A.A.s.

**Others say I am not an alcoholic. But my drinking seems to be getting worse. Should I join A.A.?**

Many members of A.A., during their drinking days, were assured by relatives, friends, and doctors that they were not alcoholics. The alcoholic usually adds to the problem by an unwillingness to realistically face the facts of drinking. By not being completely honest, the problem drinker makes it difficult for a doctor to provide any help. The amazing thing, in fact, is that so many doctors have been able to penetrate the typical problem drinker's deceptions and diagnose the problem correctly.

It cannot be emphasized too often that the important decision — am I an alcoholic? — has to be made by the drinker. Only that person — not the doctor, the family, or friends — can make it. But once it is made, half the battle for sobriety is won. If the question is left to others

to decide, the alcoholic may be dragging out needlessly the dangers and misery of uncontrollable drinking.

## **Can a person achieve sobriety all alone by reading A.A. literature?**

A few people have stopped drinking after reading **Alcoholics Anonymous**, the A.A. “Big Book,” which sets forth the basic principles of the recovery program. But nearly all of those who were in a position to do so promptly sought out other alcoholics with whom to share their experience and sobriety.

The A.A. program works best for the individual when it is recognized and accepted as a program involving other people. Working with other alcoholics in the local A.A. group, problem drinkers seem to learn more about their problem and how to handle it. They find themselves surrounded by others who share their past experiences, their present problems, and their hopes. They shed the feelings of loneliness that may have been an important factor in their compulsion to drink.

## **Won't everyone know I am an alcoholic if I come into A.A.?**

Anonymity is and always has been the basis of the A.A. program. Most members, after they have been in A.A. awhile, have no particular objection if the word gets around that they have joined a fellowship that enables them to stay sober. Traditionally, A.A.s never disclose their association with the movement in print, on the air, or through any other public or social media. And no one has the right to break the anonymity of another member.

This means that the newcomer can turn to A.A. with the assurance that no newfound friends will violate confidences relating to that person's drinking problem. The older members of the group appreciate how the newcomer feels. They can remember their own fears about being identified publicly with what seems to be a terrifying word — "alcoholic."

Once in A.A., newcomers may be slightly amused at those past worries about its becoming generally known that they have stopped drinking. When alcoholics drink,



news of their escapades travels with remarkable speed. Most alcoholics have made names for themselves as full-fledged drunks by the time they turn to A.A. Their drinking, with rare exceptions, is not likely to be a well-kept secret. Under these circumstances, it would be unusual indeed if the good news of the alcoholic's continuing sobriety did not also cause comment.

Whatever the circumstances, no disclosure of the newcomer's affiliation with A.A. can rightfully be made by anyone but the newcomer, and then only in such a way that the Fellowship will not be harmed.

## **How can I get along in business, where I have to make a lot of social contacts, if I don't drink?**

Social drinking is often considered an accepted part of business in many fields these days. Many contacts with customers and prospective customers revolve around drinking and many now in A.A. would be the first to concede that they had often transacted important

business in bars, nightclubs, or hotel rooms or even during parties in private homes.

It is surprising, however, how much of the world's work is accomplished without the benefit of alcohol. It is equally surprising to many alcoholics to discover how many recognized leaders in business, industry, professional life, and the arts have attained success without dependence on alcohol.

In fact, many who are now sober in A.A. admit that they used "business contacts" as one of several excuses for drinking. Now that they no longer drink, they find that they can actually accomplish more than they used to. Sobriety has proved no hindrance to their ability to make friends and network with people who might contribute to their economic success.

This does not mean that all A.A.s suddenly avoid their friends or business associates who drink. If a friend wants a cocktail or two before lunch, the A.A. will usually take a soft drink, coffee, mineral water or juice. If the A.A. is invited to a cocktail party being given for

business reasons, there will generally be no hesitation about attending. The alcoholic knows from experience that most of the other guests are concerned with their own drinks and are not likely to care particularly what anyone else happens to be drinking.

While beginning to take pride in the quality and quantity of work on the job, the newcomer to A.A. is likely to find that the payoff in most lines of business is still based on performance. This was not always apparent in the drinking days. The alcoholic may then have been convinced that charm, ingenuity, and conviviality were the chief keys to business success. While these qualities are undoubtedly helpful to the person who drinks in a controlled manner, they are not enough for the alcoholic, if only because the latter, while drinking, is inclined to assign to them far more importance than they deserve.

## **Will A.A. work for the person who has really ‘hit bottom’?**

The record shows that A.A. will work for almost anyone who really wants to stop drinking, no matter what the person’s economic or social background may be. A.A. today includes among its members many who have been homeless, in jails, or other public institutions.

The down-and-outers are at no disadvantage in coming to A.A. Their basic problem, the thing that has made life unmanageable for them, is identical with the central problem of every other member of A.A. An A.A. member is not judged on the basis of the clothes worn, the handling of language, or the size (or existence) of their bank balance. The only thing that counts in A.A. is whether or not the newcomer really wants to stop drinking. If the desire is there, the person will be welcomed. Chances are, the most rugged drinking story the new member could tell will be completely understood and identified with by a large number of people in the group.

## **Do alcoholics who are already sober ever join A.A.?**

Most turn to A.A. when they hit the low point in their drinking careers. But this is not always the case. A number of persons have joined the Fellowship long after they have had what they hoped was their last drink. One person, recognizing that alcohol could not be controlled, had been dry for six or seven years before becoming a member. Self-enforced sobriety had not been a happy experience. Rising tension and a series of upsets over minor problems of daily living were about to lead to further experiments with alcohol, when a friend suggested that A.A. should be investigated. Since then, this person has been a member for many years, and says there is no comparison between the happy sobriety of today and the self-pitying sobriety of yesterday.

Others report similar experiences. While they know that it is possible to stay grimly sober for considerable periods of time, they say that it is much easier for them to enjoy and strengthen their sobriety when they meet and work with other alcoholics in A.A. Like most members of the

human race, they see little point in deliberately doing things the hard way. Given the choice of sobriety with or without A.A., they choose A.A.

## **Why is A.A. interested in problem drinkers?**

Members of A.A. have a selfish interest in offering a helping hand to other alcoholics who have not yet achieved sobriety. First, they know from experience that this type of activity, usually referred to as “Twelfth Step work,” helps them to stay sober. Their lives now have a great and compelling interest. Very likely, reminders of their own previous experience with alcohol help them to avoid the overconfidence that could lead to a relapse. Whatever the explanation, A.A.s who give freely of their time and effort to help other alcoholics seldom have trouble preserving their own sobriety.

A.A.s are anxious to help problem drinkers for a second reason: It gives them an opportunity to square their debt to those who helped **them**. It is the only practical way in which the individual’s debt to A.A. can ever be repaid. The A.A. member knows that sobriety cannot be bought

and that there is no long-term lease on it. The A.A. does know, however, that a new way of life without alcohol may be had simply for the asking, if it is honestly wanted and willingly shared with those who follow.

Traditionally, A.A. never “recruits” members, never urges that anyone should become a member, and never solicits or accepts outside funds.

## **The Fellowship of A.A.**

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**If any newcomer is satisfied that they are alcoholic and that A.A. may be able to help, then a number of specific questions about the nature, structure, and history of the movement itself usually come up. Here are some of the most common ones.**

### **What is Alcoholics Anonymous?**

There are two practical ways to describe A.A. The first is the familiar description of purposes and objectives that appears earlier:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

The “common problem” is alcoholism. Those who consider themselves members of A.A. are, and always will be, alcoholics, even though they may have other addictions. They have finally recognized that they are no longer able to handle alcohol in any form; they now stay away from it completely. The important thing is that they do not try to deal with the problem single-handedly. They bring the problem out into the open **with**



**other alcoholics.** This sharing of “experience, strength and hope” seems to be the key element that makes it possible for them to live without alcohol and, in most cases, without even wanting to drink.

The second way to describe Alcoholics Anonymous is to outline the structure of the Society. Numerically, A.A. consists of more than two million people, in approximately 180 countries. These people meet in local groups that range in size from a handful of ex-drinkers in some localities to many hundreds in larger communities.

In the populous metropolitan areas, there may be scores of neighborhood groups, each holding its own regular meetings. Many A.A. meetings are open to the public; some groups also hold “closed meetings,” where members are encouraged to discuss problems that might not be fully appreciated by nonalcoholics.

The local group is the core of the A.A. Fellowship. Its open meetings welcome alcoholics and their families in an atmosphere of friendliness and helpfulness. There

are now more than 125,000 groups throughout the world, including hundreds in hospitals, prisons, and other institutions.

## **How did A.A. get started?**

Alcoholics Anonymous had its beginnings in Akron, Ohio, in 1935 when a New Yorker on business there and successfully sober for the first time in years sought out another alcoholic. During his few months of sobriety, the New Yorker had noticed that his desire to drink lessened when he tried to help other drunks to get sober. In Akron, he was directed to a local doctor with a drinking problem. Working together, the businessman and the doctor found that their ability to stay sober seemed closely related to the amount of help and encouragement they were able to give other alcoholics.

For four years, the new movement, nameless and without any organization or descriptive literature, grew slowly. Groups were established in Akron, New York, Cleveland, and a few other cities.

In 1939, with the publication of the book **Alcoholics Anonymous**, from which the Fellowship derived its name, and as the result of the help of a number of nonalcoholic friends, the society began to attract national and international attention.

A service office was opened in New York City to handle the thousands of inquiries and requests for literature that were pouring in each year.

## **Are there any rules in A.A.?**

The absence of rules, regulations, or musts is one of the unique features of A.A. as a local group and as a worldwide fellowship. For example, there are no bylaws that say a member has to attend a certain number of meetings within a given period.

Understandably, most groups have an unwritten tradition that anyone who is still drinking, and whose behaviour disturbs a meeting, may be asked to leave; the same person will be welcomed back at any time when not likely to disrupt a meeting. Meanwhile, members of

the group will do their best to help bring sobriety to the person if there is a sincere desire to stop drinking.

## **What does membership in A.A. cost?**

Membership in A.A. involves no financial obligations of any kind. The A.A. program of recovery from alcoholism is available to anyone who has a desire to stop drinking, whether flat broke or the possessor of millions.

Most local groups pass a basket for voluntary contributions at meetings to defray the cost of renting a meeting place and other meeting expenses. In a large majority of the groups, part of the money thus collected is passed along to A.A.'s national and international services. These group funds are used exclusively for services designed to help new and established groups and to spread the word of the A.A. recovery program to those alcoholics who may need it.

The important consideration is that membership in A.A. is in no way contingent upon financial support of the Fellowship. Many A.A. groups have, in fact, placed strict

limitations on the amount that can be contributed by any member. A.A. is entirely self-supporting, with no outside contributions accepted.

## **Who runs A.A.?**

A.A. has no officers or executives who wield power or authority over the Fellowship. There is no “government” in A.A. It is obvious, however, that even in an informal organization, certain jobs have to be done. In the local group, for example, someone has to arrange for a suitable meeting place; meetings have to be scheduled and programmed; provision has to be made for serving the coffee and snacks that contribute so much to the informal comradeship of A.A. gatherings. Many groups also consider it wise to assign to someone the responsibility of keeping in touch with the national and international development of A.A.

When a local group is first formed, self-appointed workers may take over responsibility for these tasks, acting informally as servants of the group. As soon as possible, however, these responsibilities are, by election,

rotated to others in the group for limited periods of service. A typical A.A. group may have a chairperson, a secretary, a program committee, a food committee, a treasurer, and a general service representative who acts for the group at regional or area meetings. Newcomers who have a reasonable period of sobriety behind them are urged to take part in handling group responsibilities.

At the national and international levels, there are also specific jobs to be done. Literature has to be written, printed, and distributed to groups and individuals who ask for it. Inquiries from both new and established groups have to be answered. Individual requests for information about A.A. and its program of recovery from alcoholism have to be filled. Assistance and information have to be provided for doctors, members of the clergy, business people, and directors of institutions. Sound public relations must be established and maintained in dealing with press, radio, television, motion pictures, the Internet and other communications media.

To provide for the sound growth of A.A., early members of the Society, together with nonalcoholic friends, established a custodial board — now known as the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous. The board serves as the custodian of A.A. Traditions and overall service, and it assumes responsibility for the service standards of A.A.'s General Service Office in New York.

The link between the board and the A.A. groups of the U.S. and Canada is the A.A. General Service Conference. The Conference, comprising about 93 delegates from A.A. areas, the 21 trustees on the board, General Service Office staff members, and others, meets for several days each year. The Conference is exclusively a consultative service agency. It has no authority to regulate or govern the Fellowship.

Thus the answer to “Who runs A.A.?” is that the Fellowship is a uniquely democratic movement, with no central government and only a minimum of formal organization.

## **Is A.A. a religious society?**

A.A. is not a religious society, since it requires no definite religious belief as a condition of membership. Although it has been endorsed and approved by many religious leaders, it is not allied with any organization or sect. Included in its membership are Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and members and followers of countless other religions and faith traditions, as well as agnostics and atheists.

The A.A. program of recovery from alcoholism is undeniably based on acceptance of certain spiritual values. Members are free to interpret those values as they think best, or not to think about them at all.

Most members, before turning to A.A., had already admitted that they could not control their drinking. Alcohol had become a power greater than themselves, and it had been accepted on those terms. A.A. suggests that to achieve and maintain sobriety, alcoholics need to accept and depend upon another power recognized as greater than themselves. Some alcoholics choose to



consider the A.A. group itself as that power; for many others, that power is God — **as they, individually, understand God**; still others rely upon entirely different concepts of a “Higher Power.”

Some alcoholics, when they first turn to A.A., have definite reservations about accepting **any** concept of a power greater than themselves. Experience shows that if they will keep an open mind on the subject and keep coming to A.A. meetings, they are not likely to have too difficult a time in working out an acceptable solution to this distinctly personal problem.

## **Is A.A. a temperance movement?**

No. A.A. has no relation to so-called temperance movements. A.A. “neither endorses nor opposes any causes.” This phrase, from the widely accepted outline of the purpose of the Fellowship, naturally applies to the question of temperance movements. The alcoholic who has become sober and is attempting to follow the A.A. recovery program has an attitude toward alcohol that

might be likened to the attitude of a hayfever sufferer toward goldenrod.

While many A.A.s appreciate that alcohol may be all right for most people, they know it to be poison for them. The average A.A. has no desire to deprive anyone of something that, properly handled, is a source of pleasure. The A.A. merely acknowledges being personally unable to handle the stuff.

## **Are there many women alcoholics in A.A.?**

The number of women who are finding help in A.A. for their drinking problem increases daily. Approximately 38 percent of present-day members are women; among newcomers, the proportion has been rising steadily. Like all members in the Fellowship, they represent every conceivable social background and pattern of drinking.

Women alcoholics often face different challenges in getting sober than men may face, and because society has applied different standards to the behavior of

women, some may feel that a greater stigma is attached to their uncontrolled use of alcohol.

A.A. makes no distinctions of this type. Whatever age, social standing, financial status, or education, women alcoholics can find understanding and help in A.A.

## **Are there many young people in A.A.?**

One of the most heartening trends in the growth of A.A. is the fact that more and more young people are being attracted to the program **before** their problem drinking results in complete disaster. Now that the progressive nature of alcoholism is better appreciated, these young people recognize that, if one is an alcoholic, the best time to arrest the illness is in its early stages.

In the first days of the movement, it was commonly thought that the only logical candidates for A.A. were those individuals who had lost their jobs, had completely disrupted their family lives, had hit the street or had otherwise isolated themselves from normal social relationships over a period of years.

Today, many of the young people turning to A.A. are in their twenties. Some are still in their teens. The majority of them still have jobs and families. Many have never been jailed or committed to institutions. But they have seen the handwriting on the wall. They recognize that they are alcoholics, and they see no point in letting alcoholism run its inevitable disastrous course with them.

Their need for recovery is just as compelling as that of older persons who had no opportunity to turn to A.A. in their youth. Once they are in A.A., the young people and the oldsters are rarely conscious of their age difference. In A.A., both groups start a new life from the same milestone — their last drink.

# Group Meetings

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**The local group meeting is the center and heart of the A.A. Fellowship. It is, in many ways, a unique type of gathering and one that is likely to seem strange to the newcomer. The questions and answers that follow suggest how the A.A. meeting functions and how the newcomer fits into the group picture.**

## **How does a person join A.A.?**

No one “joins” A.A. in the usual sense of the term. No application for membership has to be filled out. In fact, many groups do not even keep membership records. There are no initiation fees, no dues, no assessments of any kind.

Most people become associated with A.A. simply by attending the meetings of a particular local group. Their introduction to A.A. may have come about in one of several ways. Having come to the point in their drinking where they sincerely wanted to stop, they may have

gotten in touch with A.A. voluntarily. They may have called the local A.A. office listed online, or they may have written to the General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 or visited the A.A. website at [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org).

Others may have been guided to a local A.A. group by a friend, relative, doctor, counselor or spiritual adviser.

Usually, a newcomer to A.A. has had an opportunity to talk to one or more local members before attending the first meeting. This provides an opportunity to learn how A.A. has helped these people. Beginners get facts about alcoholism and A.A. that help to determine whether they are honestly prepared to give up alcohol. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

There are no membership drives in A.A. If, after attending several meetings, the newcomer decides A.A. is not for them, no one will urge continuation in the association. There may be suggestions about keeping an open mind on the subject, but no one in A.A. will try to make up newcomers' minds for them. Only the

alcoholic concerned can answer the question “Do I need Alcoholics Anonymous?”

## **What is an ‘open’ meeting?**

An open meeting of A.A. is a group meeting that any member of the community, alcoholic or nonalcoholic, may attend. The only obligation is that of not disclosing the names of A.A. members outside the meeting.

A typical open meeting will usually have a “leader” and other speakers. The leader opens and closes the meeting and introduces each speaker. With rare exceptions, the speakers at an open meeting are A.A. members. Each, in turn, may review some individual drinking experiences that led to joining A.A. Speakers may also give their interpretation of the recovery program and suggest what sobriety has meant to them personally. All views expressed are purely personal, since all members of A.A. speak only for themselves.

Coffee and other refreshments are frequently offered at open meetings.

## **What is a ‘closed’ meeting?**

A closed meeting is for A.A. members only, or for those who have a drinking problem and have a desire to stop drinking. Closed meetings give members an opportunity to discuss particular phases of their alcoholic problem that can be understood best only by other alcoholics.

These meetings are usually conducted with maximum informality, and all members are encouraged to participate in the discussions. Closed meetings are of particular value to the newcomer, since they provide an opportunity to ask questions that may trouble a beginner and to get the benefit of “older” members’ experience with the recovery program.

## **May I bring relatives or friends to an A.A. meeting?**

In most places, anyone interested in A.A., whether a member or not, is welcome at open meetings of A.A. groups.\* Newcomers, in particular, are invited to bring

**\*Consult the group for local custom.**



wives, husbands, partners or friends to these meetings, since their understanding of the recovery program may be an important factor in helping the alcoholic to achieve and maintain sobriety. Many members' spouses attend frequently and take an active part in the social activities of the local group.

(It will be recalled that “closed” meetings are traditionally limited to alcoholics.)

## **How often do A.A. members have to attend meetings?**

Abraham Lincoln was once asked how long a man's legs should be. The classic answer was: “Long enough to reach the ground.”

A.A. members don't have to attend any set number of meetings in a given period. It is purely a matter of individual preference and need. Most members arrange to attend at least one meeting a week. They feel that is enough to satisfy their personal need for contact with the program through a local group. Others attend a meeting

nearly every night, in areas where such opportunities are available. Still others may go for relatively long periods without meetings.

The friendly injunction “Keep coming back [to meetings],” so frequently heard by the newcomer, is based on the experience of the great majority of A.A.s, who find that the quality of their sobriety suffers when they stay away from meetings for too long. Many know from experience that if they do not go to meetings, they may get drunk and that if they are regular in attendance they seem to have no trouble staying sober.

Newcomers particularly seem to benefit from exposure to a relatively large number of meetings (or other A.A. contacts) during their first weeks and months in a group. By multiplying their opportunities to meet and hear other A.A.s whose drinking experience parallels their own, they seem to be able to strengthen their own understanding of the program and what it can give them.

Nearly all alcoholics, at one time or another, have tried to stay sober on their own. For most, the experience

has not been particularly enjoyable — or successful. So long as attendance at meetings helps the alcoholic to maintain sobriety, and to have fun at the same time, it seems to make good sense to be guided by the experience of those who “keep coming back.”

## **Do A.A.s have to attend meetings for the rest of their lives?**

Not necessarily, but — as one member has suggested — “Most of us want to, and some of us may need to.”

Most alcoholics don’t like to be told that they have to do anything for any extended period of time. At first glance, the prospect of having to attend A.A. meetings for all the years of the foreseeable future may seem a heavy load.

The answer, again, is that no one **has** to do anything in A.A. There is always a choice between doing and not doing a thing — including the crucial choice of whether or not to seek sobriety through A.A.

The primary reason an alcoholic has for attending meetings of an A.A. group is to get help in staying sober

**today** — not tomorrow or next week or ten years from now. Today, the immediate present, is the only period in life that the A.A. can do something about. A.A.s do not worry about tomorrow, or about “the rest of their lives.” The important thing for them is to maintain their sobriety now. They will take care of the future when it arrives.

So the A.A. who wants to do everything possible to insure sobriety today will probably keep going to meetings. But attendance will always be on the basis of taking care of present sobriety. As long as the approach to A.A. is on this basis, no activity, including attendance at meetings, can ever resemble a long-term obligation.

## **How will I be able to find the time for A.A. meetings, working with other alcoholics, and other A.A. activities?**

During our drinking days, most of us somehow managed to minimize the importance of time when there was alcohol to be consumed. Yet the newcomer to A.A. is occasionally dismayed to learn that sobriety will make some demands on time, too. If the beginner is a typical

alcoholic, there will be an urge to make up for “lost time” in a hurry — to work diligently at a job, to indulge in the pleasures of a home life too long neglected, to devote time to community or civic affairs. What else is sobriety for, the new member may ask, but to lead a full, normal life, great chunks of it at a time?

A.A., however, is not something that can be taken like a pill. The experience of those who have been successful in the recovery program is worth considering. Almost without exception, those who find their sobriety most satisfying are people who attend meetings regularly, never hesitate to work with other alcoholics seeking help, and take more than a casual interest in the other activities of their groups. They are people who recall realistically and honestly the aimless hours spent in bars, the days lost from work, the decreased efficiency, and the remorse that accompanied hangovers on the morning after.

Balanced against such memories as these, the few hours spent in underwriting and strengthening their sobriety add up to a small price indeed.

## **Can newcomers join A.A. outside their own community?**

This question is sometimes raised by persons who seem to have perfectly valid reasons for not wanting to risk identification as alcoholics by any of their neighbors. They may, for example, have employers who are totally unfamiliar with the A.A. program and potentially hostile to anyone who admits the existence of a drinking problem. They may wish desperately to be associated with A.A. as a means of gaining and maintaining sobriety. But they may hesitate to turn to a group in their own community.

The answer to the question is that people are free to join an A.A. group anywhere they may choose. Obviously, it is more convenient to join the nearest group. It may also be the most straightforward approach to the individual's problem. The person who turns to A.A. for help is usually, but not always, pretty well identified as a drunk. Inevitably, the good news of this person's sobriety is bound to spread, too. Few employers or neighbors are likely to resent the source of their worker's or friend's

continued sobriety, whether it centers in a local A.A. group or one located fifty miles away.

Few people these days are fired from their jobs or ostracized socially because they are sober. If the experience of many thousands of A.A.s is a reliable guide, the best approach for the newcomer is to seek help in the nearest group before beginning to worry about the reactions of others.

## **If I come into A.A., won't I miss a lot of friends and a lot of fun?**

The best answer to this is the experience of the hundreds of thousands of individuals who have already come into A.A. In general, their attitude is that they did not enjoy real friendships or real fun until they joined A.A. Their point of view on both has changed.

Many alcoholics discover that their best friends are delighted to see them face up to the fact that they cannot handle alcohol. No one wants to see a friend continue to hurt.

Naturally, it is important to distinguish between friendships and casual barroom **acquaintanceships**. The alcoholic is likely to have many acquaintances whose conviviality may be missed for a while. But their place will be taken by the hundreds of A.A.s the newcomer will meet — people who offer understanding and acceptance, as well as help in sustaining sobriety at all times.

Few members of A.A. would trade the fun that comes with sobriety for what **seemed** to be fun while they were drinking.



# The Recovery Program

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Upon attending only a few meetings, the newcomer is sure to hear references to such things as “the Twelve Steps,” “the Twelve Traditions,” “slips,” “the Big Book,” and other expressions characteristic of A.A. The following paragraphs describe these factors and suggest why they are mentioned frequently by A.A. speakers.

## What are the ‘Twelve Steps’?

The “Twelve Steps” are the core of the A.A. program of personal recovery from alcoholism. They are not abstract theories; they are based on the trial-and-error experience of early members of A.A. They describe the attitudes and activities that these early members believe were important in helping them to achieve sobriety. Acceptance of the Twelve Steps is not mandatory in any sense.

Experience suggests, however, that members who make an earnest effort to follow these Steps and to apply

them in daily living seem to get far more out of A.A. than do those members who seem to regard the Steps casually. It has been said that it is virtually impossible to follow all the Steps literally, day in and day out. While this may be true, in the sense that the Twelve Steps represent an approach to living that is totally new for most alcoholics, many A.A. members feel that the Steps are a practical necessity if they are to maintain their sobriety.

Here is the text of the Twelve Steps, which first appeared in **Alcoholics Anonymous**, the Fellowship's basic text:

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 moral 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.

## **What are the ‘Twelve Traditions’?**

The “Twelve Traditions” of A.A. are suggested principles to insure the survival and growth of the thousands of groups that make up the Fellowship. They are based on the experience of the groups themselves during the critical early years of the movement.

The Traditions are important to both oldtimers and newcomers as reminders of the true foundations of A.A. as a society of alcoholics whose primary concern is to maintain their own sobriety and help others to achieve sobriety:

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. membership 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 any 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.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on 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.

## **What are ‘slips’?**

Occasionally a person who has been sober through A.A. will get drunk. In A.A. a relapse of this type is commonly known as a “slip.” It may occur during the first few weeks or months of sobriety or after the alcoholic has been dry a number of years.

Nearly all A.A.s who have been through this experience say that slips can be traced to specific causes. They deliberately forgot that they had admitted they were alcoholics and got overconfident about their ability to handle alcohol. Or they stayed away from A.A. meetings or from informal association with other A.A.s. Or they let themselves become too involved with business or social

affairs to remember the importance of being sober. Or they let themselves become tired and were caught with their mental and emotional defenses down.

In other words, most “slips” don’t **just happen**.

## **What is ‘the 24-hour program’?**

“The 24-hour program” is a phrase used to describe a basic A.A. approach to the problem of staying sober. A.A.s never swear off alcohol for life, never take pledges committing themselves not to take a drink “tomorrow.” By the time they turned to A.A. for help, they had discovered that, no matter how sincere they may have been in promising themselves to abstain from alcohol “in the future,” somehow they forgot the pledge and got drunk. The compulsion to drink proved more powerful than the best intentions **not** to drink.

The A.A. member recognizes that the biggest problem is to stay sober now! The current 24 hours is the only period the A.A. can do anything about as far as drinking is concerned. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow never

comes. “But today,” the A.A. says, “today, I will not take a drink. I may be tempted to take a drink tomorrow — and perhaps I will. But tomorrow is something to worry about when it comes. My big problem is not to take a drink during this 24 hours.”

Along with the 24-hour program, A.A. emphasizes the importance of three slogans that have probably been heard many times by the newcomer before joining A.A. These slogans are: “Easy Does It,” “Live and Let Live,” and “First Things First.” By making these slogans a basic part of the attitude toward problems of daily living, the average A.A. is usually helped substantially in the attempt to live successfully without alcohol.

## **Does A.A. have a basic ‘textbook’?**

The Fellowship has four books that are generally accepted as “textbooks.” The first is **Alcoholics Anonymous**, also known as “the Big Book,” originally published in 1939, and revised in 1955, 1976 and 2001. It records the personal stories of 42 representative problem drinkers who achieved stable sobriety for the



first time through A.A. It also records the suggested steps and principles that early members believed were responsible for their ability to overcome the compulsion to drink.

The second book is **Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions**, published in 1953. It is an interpretation, by Bill W., a co-founder, of the principles that have thus far assured the continuing survival of individuals and groups within A.A.

A third book, **Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age**, published in 1957, is a brief history of the first two decades of the Fellowship.

The fourth is **As Bill Sees It** (formerly titled **The A.A. Way of Life**, a reader by Bill). This is a selection of Bill W.'s writings.

These books may be purchased through local A.A. groups or ordered directly from Alcoholics Anonymous, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 or through the website at [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org).

## **What is AA Grapevine?**

Grapevine is the international journal of A.A. in the United States and Canada — a digest-sized magazine available to A.A. members as well as those interested in A.A.'s program of recovery from alcoholism.

Grapevine is published monthly in English, and there is also a bimonthly Spanish edition called *La Viña*.

Both publications are written, edited and illustrated by A.A. members, and represent the collective voice of contemporary A.A. experiences.

AA Grapevine is one of the multi-media publishing arms of A.A.'s General Service Board, featuring books in print, digital and audio formats as well as other recovery products and services tailored to the A.A. community. The themes and the stories reflect current issues and struggles individuals in recovery may face.

## **Why doesn't A.A. seem to work for some people?**

The answer is that A.A. will work only for those who admit that they are alcoholics, who honestly want to stop drinking — and who are able to keep those facts uppermost in their minds at all times.

A.A. usually will not work for those who have reservations about whether or not they are alcoholics, or who cling to the hope of being able to drink normally again.

Most medical authorities say no one who is an alcoholic can ever drink normally again. The alcoholic must admit and accept this cardinal fact. Coupled with this admission and acceptance must be the desire to stop drinking.

After they have been sober a while in A.A., some people tend to forget that they are alcoholics, with all that this diagnosis implies. Their sobriety makes them overconfident, and they decide to experiment with

alcohol again. The results of such experiments are, for the alcoholic, completely predictable. Their drinking invariably becomes progressively worse.

## **Newcomers' Questions**

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**A.A. has but one primary purpose, although it may indirectly be responsible for other benefits. The following are questions that are occasionally asked by newcomers to the Fellowship.**

### **Will A.A. help me financially?**

Many alcoholics, by the time they turn to A.A. for help with their drinking problems, have also accumulated substantial financial problems. Naturally, some may cherish the hope that A.A. may in some way be able to help them with more pressing financial obligations.

Very early in A.A. experience as a society, it was discovered that money or the lack of it had nothing to do with newcomers' ability to achieve sobriety and

work their way out of the many problems that had been complicated by excessive use of alcohol.

The absence of money — **even with a heavy burden of debts** — seemed to prove no hindrance to the alcoholic who honestly and sincerely wanted to face up to the realities of a life without alcohol. Once the big problem of alcohol had been cleared away, the other problems, including those related to finances, seemed to work out, too. Some A.A.s have made sensational financial comebacks in relatively brief periods. For others, the road has been hard and long. The basic answer to this question is that A.A. exists for just one purpose, and that purpose is in no way related to material prosperity or the lack thereof.

There is nothing to prevent any member of a group from taking a newcomer to a meal, a suit of clothes, or even a cash loan. That is a matter for individual decision and discretion. It would, however, be misleading if an alcoholic gets the impression that A.A. is any sort of moneyed charity organization.

## **Will A.A. help me straighten out my family troubles?**

Alcohol is frequently a complicating factor in family life, magnifying petty irritations, exposing character defects, and contributing to financial problems. Many people, by the time they turn to A.A., have managed to make a complete mess of their family lives.

Some newcomers to A.A., suddenly aware of their own contributions to chaos, are eager and enthusiastic about making amends and resuming normal patterns of living with those closest to them. Others, with or without cause, continue to feel bitter resentments toward their families.

Almost without exception, newcomers who are sincere in their approach to the A.A. recovery program are successful in mending broken family lives. The bonds that reunite the honest alcoholic with family members are often stronger than ever before. Sometimes, of course, irreparable damage has been done, and a totally new approach to family life has to be developed. But generally, the story is one with a happy ending.

Experience suggests that the alcoholic who comes to A.A. solely to keep peace in the family, and not because they have a desire to stop drinking for themselves, may have difficulty achieving sobriety. The sincere desire for sobriety should come first. Once sober, the alcoholic will find that many of the other problems of daily living can be approached realistically and with very good chance of success.

## **Does A.A. operate hospitals or treatment facilities for alcoholics?**

A.A. does not operate any outside enterprise or provide any professional services relative to the treatment of alcoholism. It is nonprofessional, peer-led and self-funded. Participation is anonymous and open to anyone looking for help with a drinking problem. Traditionally, no professional services are ever offered or performed under A.A. sponsorship. By adhering to the tradition of avoiding services that others are prepared to render, A.A. thus avoids any possible misunderstanding of its

primary purpose, which is to help alcoholics searching for a way of life without alcohol.

In some areas, service committees made up of individual A.A. members have made arrangements with local hospitals for the admission of alcoholics who are sponsored by A.A.s as individuals, not as representatives of the Fellowship as a whole.

In other areas, individual A.A.s or groups of A.A.s have established rehabs or other facilities that cater primarily to newcomers to the recovery program. Because of their special understanding of problems confronting the alcoholic, the owners or managers of these places are often able to help the newcomer during the first crucial period of sobriety. But these facilities have no connection with A.A. beyond the fact that they may be operated by persons who achieved their own sobriety through A.A. As a movement, A.A. is never affiliated with business enterprises of any description.



## **Does A.A. sponsor any social activity for members?**

Most A.A.s are sociable people, a factor that may have been partially responsible for their becoming alcoholics in the first place. As a consequence, meetings of local A.A. groups tend to be lively affairs.

A.A. as a fellowship has never developed any formal program of social activities for members, since the sole purpose of the movement is to help alcoholics get sober. In some areas, members, entirely on their own, have opened clubrooms or other facilities for members of the local group. These clubs are traditionally independent of A.A., and great care is usually taken to avoid direct identification with the movement.

Even where no club exists, it is not uncommon for local groups to arrange anniversary dinners, picnics, parties on New Year's Eve and other special occasions, and similar affairs. In some large cities, A.A.s meet regularly for lunch and host informal get-togethers over weekends.

## **Who is responsible for the publicity about A.A.?**

A.A. never seeks publicity but always cooperates fully with responsible representatives of press, radio, television, films, and other media that seek information about the recovery program. The A.A. tradition of public relations has always been keyed to attraction rather than promotion.

At national and international levels, news of A.A. is made available by the Public Information Committee of the General Service Board. Local committees have also been organized to provide the media with facts about A.A. as a resource for alcoholics in their communities.

A.A. is deeply grateful to all its friends who have been responsible for the recognition accorded the movement. It is also deeply aware of the fact that the anonymity of members, upon which the program is so dependent, has been respected so faithfully by all media.

It should also be noted that within A.A., at A.A. meetings and among themselves, A.A. members are not anonymous.

## **What do medical authorities think of A.A.?**

From its earliest days, A.A. has enjoyed the friendship and support of doctors who are familiar with its program of recovery from alcoholism. Doctors, perhaps better than any other group, are in a position to appreciate how unreliable other approaches to the problem of alcoholism have been in the past. A.A. has never been advanced as the only answer to the problem, but the A.A. recovery program has worked so often, after other methods have failed, that doctors today are frequently the most outspoken boosters for the program in their communities.

## **What do religious leaders think of A.A.?**

Probably no lay movement of modern times has been more richly endowed than A.A. with the support of the

clergy of so many different faiths. Like the doctors, humankind's spiritual advisers and faith leaders have long been troubled by the problem of alcoholism. Many of these have heard honest people make sincere promises to abstain from alcohol — only to see them break those promises, often within hours, days, or weeks. Sympathy, understanding, and appeals to conscience have been of little avail to the clergy in their attempts to help the alcoholic.

Thus it is perhaps not surprising that A.A. — although it offers a way of life rather than a way of formal religion — should be embraced so warmly by representatives of many different denominations.

# A New Way of Life

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A way of life cannot truly be described; it must be lived. Descriptive literature that relies upon broad, inspirational generalities is bound to leave many questions unanswered and many readers not fully satisfied that they have come upon the thing they need and seek. At the other extreme, a catalog of the mechanics and details of a program for living can portray only part of the value of such a program.

A.A. is a program for a new way of life without alcohol, a program that is working successfully for millions of people who approach it and apply it with honesty and sincerity. It is working throughout the world and for those in all stations and walks of life.

Perhaps this pamphlet has answered the main questions, spoken and unspoken, that you may have concerning A.A. Perhaps there are other questions that can be answered, as those in this pamphlet have been,

solely on the basis of A.A. experience with the problem of alcoholism. If you have such questions, feel free to get in touch with an A.A. group in or near your community or visit [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org). Information can also be obtained by writing to our world service office: General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 or calling 212-870-3400.

## **A.A. PUBLICATIONS**

Complete order forms are available from the  
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# A DECLARATION OF UNITY

This we owe to A.A.'s future: To place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come.

## I am responsible...

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there.

And for that: **I am responsible.**



This is A.A. General Service  
Conference-approved literature.