

Why AA's one-size approach doesn't fit all

Written By: Chelsea Carmona - West Coast regional manager of the Op-Ed Project, which works to bring underrepresented voices into opinion writing.

I was 20 when I attended my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

"Hi, I'm Chelsea, and I'm an addict," I said, introducing myself to a group of mostly middle-aged men and women.

The room fell silent.

"No!" a discouraging voice bellowed from the back of the room. "This is a meeting for alcoholics!"

I didn't understand. The staff at my inpatient treatment program had told me that newcomers were always welcome in AA. In fact, they said that if I wanted to get well, AA was the best place to go. I wouldn't find the kind of sobriety in Narcotics Anonymous, the 12-step program for drug addicts, that I would in AA.

"I'm so sorry," I mumbled to the group. "I didn't mean to offend anyone."

I started again: "I'm Chelsea, and I'm an alcoholic."

Response from a 'Real Alcoholic'

Written By: Anonymous

We encourage some non-alcoholics to continue coming to our AA meetings. We help them find their truth in the 1st step and help them find the right kind of sponsor. A sponsor that has a similar experience in regards to the 1st Step.

I will urge an addict to introduce themselves as an alcoholic in an AA meeting and limit what they say... provided again they are hooked up with their own truth.

Actually in my area AA is very accepting to non-alcoholics (perhaps too accepting). Many look at the short version of the 3rd Tradition which says the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. However, the long form says AA membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism.

A physical abnormality exists in roughly 10% of the general population those are 'real alcoholics'.

Anyone can become an addict. Provided they indulge in the use of any addictive substance long enough. Once they develop a mental obsession (thought that over-rides any other thought) it makes stopping hard or seemingly impossible.

Admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery, but perpetually admitting you have a problem that you don't actually have can make recovery difficult. Accordingly to AA's literature, approximately 10 percent of members are under age 30. Many of these younger folks are only beginning to struggle with addiction to drugs or alcohol. The recovery community requires them to fully take on the addict and alcoholic identity as a part of the acceptance process. But, from what I've seen, by defining these members as addicts or alcoholics, 12-step programs can unintentionally encourage their members to develop self-fulfilling prophecies.

Adolescents and young adults are deeply affected by the labels thrust upon them. Once labeled "troublemakers" or "difficult" by parents or teachers, they find it hard to overcome such a persona. In my experience, many of those who acquired the addict/alcoholic designation, even if they didn't deserve it at first, began to behave accordingly.

When I labeled myself an alcoholic that day, I hadn't picked up a drink in almost three years, and I'd never been a heavy drinker. My troubles began when I was introduced to Adderall during finals week my first year in college. As a high-achiever who was struggling with the freshman 15, stimulants seemed like the solution to my problems. I could sit in class all day, study all night and skip meals without the slightest hint of exhaustion. Most important, I could compete with the other students who were also abusing such drugs.

The 1st Step (finding a real personal truth) is a fork in the road for alcoholics and non-alcoholics.

To be a real alcoholic you have the physical allergy (abnormality) to alcohol. This means your body's enzymes and digestive system do not process alcohol the same way a non-alcoholic's body does. A highly addictive chemical is formed as the effects of alcohol linger and multiply.

Although this condition does get worse as a person continuously drinks, aging also play roll. An alcoholic that starts drinking to excess at an early age can get really bad really fast.

The largest AA group in my town is the young people's group. Many of them are similar to the writer of this article. But whether a person is an addict or alcoholic 'the solution' is the same.

Guidance to that 'solution' varies based on the peril and path each individual has faced. They are usually best served to have a guide that can relate to their individual issues... someone that walked a similar path of spiritual sickness and physical truth.

Real alcoholics understand... it always gets worse if we continue to drink and/or ignore our need for spiritual help. The talk of 'labels' being damaging to a young alcoholic is laughable. The sooner and younger person

After a few months, I was starting to fall asleep in class but couldn't seem to sleep at night. So I started taking opiate painkillers to help come down from the Adderall. It wasn't long before I was waking up with opiate withdrawal symptoms — cold sweats, seizure-like shakes and awful mood swings. I realized I needed help, so I approached my mom and checked into a rehab facility.

A few days into my treatment, as I embraced my new identity as an alcoholic, my mom was in a meeting for addicts' loved ones. She refused to introduce herself as the mother of an alcoholic, instead saying she was the mother of a "young woman struggling with an addiction." She received more than a few eye rolls. Mom preferred to concentrate on my identity as an honors student and council representative.

Introducing oneself as an alcoholic is much less difficult for those who have a history of alcohol and drug abuse. As Penny Lee, an addiction counselor at Recovery Solutions in Santa Ana, Calif., explains: "It helps the newcomer to be able to admit defeat. It was difficult for me, but once I did it, I knew I was in the right place: with other alcoholics."

In my case, labeling myself an alcoholic paved the way for me to take on the "addict" persona, and I got much worse before I got better. After treatment, I traded in my college friends for the criminal ones I met in recovery, and in turn, I gained access to a variety of hard drugs.

learns what alcoholism is and how to diagnose themselves... the better!

Since the writer of this article by her own admission and experience is quite likely 'not an alcoholic'.... Allowing her a national stage to voice opinion on AA in this manner is an abuse of power.

We can start the finger pointing with some of the activities that take place in many treatment centers and programs. I gather from the article that much of her experience revolved around what she learned in treatment.

Alcoholism is a specific condition that for centuries on this planet, dating back to biblical days... was rarely overcome. Problem drinkers were considered morally damaged and eventually locked away or worse.

Until AA came to be, there had never been any historical documentation of wide-spread, long term recovery from what came to be known as a disease.

The founders of AA came into possession of the key elements for this phenomenal program.

Namely: Alcoholism is a physical allergy, coupled with an obsession of the mind... manifested as a spiritual malady which only a vital spiritual experience can conquer. Once 'recovered' the alcoholic is charged to help others (especially other alcoholics).

That is perhaps the most disheartening aspect of 12-step recovery and inpatient care: Because most of their AA colleagues are older, the adolescents I met in treatment found more drug connections, party buddies and rehab romances than they did mentors, counselors and long-term sober friends.

During the fourth week of my stay, family week, our parents and spouses were told to cut us loose at the first sign of relapse. These principles were taken from the 12-step program of co-dependency that our loved ones were directed to follow, called AI-Anon. Relapse is part of recovery for most addicts, and that certainly was the case for me. I couldn't bring myself to tell my supportive family about my struggles because I thought I would lose their support if I did so.

My addicted peers and I may have entered treatment to leave deceit behind, but after family week, we were so terrified of losing our loved ones that we conspired to cover for one another's lies.

The lying played out during AA meetings on a regular basis. I'll never forget when a friend stumbled up to the front of the room, his sponsor beaming with pride, to take his chip for being sober for 30 days. He was high as a kite, but no one said anything because we didn't want to risk alienating him from his support system. AA's Old-Timers, older alcoholics with long-term sobriety, and our treatment center's counselors would have surely told his parents that their son needed some serious tough love.

Treatment centers often focus on trying to get patients to find ways to avoid relapse. They put sick people in a room together and encourage them to share. Perhaps they have one or two counselors in the room and I am sure there are many methods these trained professional try to put in play.

But at the end of the day... Places for 'real alcoholics' to 'dry out' have been around for centuries. They are usually not well equipped to guide the alcoholics to the spiritual solution they need.

It is really interesting to hear a former 'addict' talk down about AI-Anon's ideals about not helping addicts get their hands on more drugs.

Understand this if nothing else. Active alcoholics and addicts are both selfish, manipulative liars. Teaching their love ones to see through the smoke and mirrors of deception and delusions is certainly not a sin by any stretch. It serves vital purpose to all involved.

Many alcoholics begin to seek help as a direct result of 'enablers' finding a new way to live. AI-Anons unwittingly enjoy being around sick alcoholics and need help as much as the drunk that enjoys drinking.

AI-anon and AA, properly administered, are a divine combination.

They would have recommended kicking him out of the house and taking his car, preventing him from attending work or school. What little he had left in his life would be gone.

This is not to say that young people can't get sober, and that AA can't help them. But, in my experience, some of the techniques that work for adults are much more challenging for the 46 percent of patients at substance abuse treatment centers who are age 18 to 24. When these facilities label teenagers, who are just beginning to struggle with drugs, as addicts and call their parents "co-dependent enablers," the safe environment can quickly become hostile.

AA originated in 1935, when a hopeless alcoholic faced financial trouble. The mutual aid movement was founded by and designed for middle-aged men who had been battling the bottle for years, and had decades of job and family wreckage behind them.

If you hang around AA long enough, you will inevitably have to talk about your "bottom," or lowest point. The teenagers I met in recovery, many of whom were suburban kids who had only recently started to abuse drugs and alcohol, were laughed at when they revealed their bottom was getting a D in calculus, a fight with their parents or maybe a time they got caught sneaking out of the house.

Eventually, these teenagers compared their lowest moments to those of more seasoned patients

The writer's diagnosis of problems in 'treatment centers', I will point out again, has no bearing on AA. Much of this narrative is out of place. Many people contribute to the mistakes made by treatment centers. One of the biggest of late is the misuse of prescription drugs. Mentally ill people need medication. Addicts abuse medication. Alcoholics need meds to detox, this avoids possible seizure and death. Unless the patient be truly mentally ill... meds are often misused. Caution with meds is sorely lacking in our society.

Yes, AA originated with older drunks. But AA is not exclusively a 'mutual aid movement'. Helping others is what recovered members are encouraged to do to insure their own sobriety... but the birthplace of the foundation of the 'AA program' was 'The Oxford Group'. This group was originally known as 'the 1st Century Christian Movement'.

Their moral standards of absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love as life-long goals to strive for, being spiritually reborn and living in a State of Grace were founded by teachings that were presented for people of all ages.

AA, in my opinion, was divinely inspired for some of God's favorite people. But AA sees fit to allow each person to find spiritual help without the boundaries of religious demands and pre-defined prejudice.

who had been separated from their children or had multiple drunken-driving offenses, and questioned the severity of their own drug and alcohol problems.

"Someone once told me that the AA program won't work unless you're desperate," says Lisa Neumann, founder of an AA alternative and author of the book "Sober Identity." "But why is this the way? You don't need to go so far down before you can say, 'Can you help me?'"

For young people, there aren't a lot of alternatives to AA. Those who choose not to follow the rigid 12-step structure are almost always viewed as in denial or on the verge of relapse. Although many addicted teenagers are in denial, those who genuinely wish to find sobriety are forced into a "with us or against us" environment in which addiction can thrive.

"AA isn't for everybody — nor should it be," Neumann says. "It's more about the discipline to stick with something, not necessarily AA. ... There are many paths, and that's OK."

One of AA's numerous slogans asserts that each addict is unique, but it offers only one path to sobriety. In reality, people sober up doing all sorts of things that don't involve 12 steps. Many people find sobriety by going to church, changing their friends or ending a bad relationship. Some studies show that young people tend to "mature out" of their drug and alcohol addictions

In AA we are each told to look to identify with how other people around us drank like we drank, acted like we acted, and mostly felt like we felt.

For the alcoholic, alcohol provides temporary relief (while it is working) for a spiritual deficiency. That feeling of restlessness, irritability and discontentment that often begins at a very young age will continue to return when the effect of alcohol is removed unless the alcoholic accepts 'spiritual help'.

Alcohol temporarily provides a solution to a problem. Alcohol tends to blind the alcoholic in a fog of delusion. It is a disease that tells you it does not exist. That blindness and ignorance can continue for many years. But the founders of AA had hopes that this world would come to see alcoholism for exactly what it is and that hope has continued to be realized.

Many more young people find early sobriety as a direct result of AA. Once they know they have a problem and become willing to seek 'a solution' that is much better than the old solution... there is no longer a need to live a life of continued self-destruction.

I have a group of friends (real alcoholics), that were 'sober by thirty'. There are 100s of us in this one mid-sized city. I would venture to say... more than existed in the entire world 100 years ago.

Genuine sobriety came when my mentor told me that we did not have to adhere to the conventional 12 steps. Once I was able to free myself from the AA traditions that kept me from being sober, such as chip-collecting, making amends and daily prayer, the process was simple. Unfortunately, many AA members shunned me for working outside the AA model.

AA may not help many young addicts get sober, but it can do wonders to help them stay that way. The program stresses honesty, service work and gratitude — which are vital to helping alcoholics and addicts sustain sobriety.

AA groups continue to work to be youth-friendly, but they have a long way to go. They might start by learning a thing or two from other 12-step programs, such as Narcotics Anonymous. NA holds bowling nights and family picnics, Lee says, adding: "AA is geared toward adults, but what about the kids? Where's the AA picnic?"

Fellowship is the most beloved and successful aspect of AA. After all, Neumann reminds me that "we don't heal alone."

AA leaders need to revise the program to accommodate the experiences unique to the next generation. That may start with allowing members to admit they have a problem without having to take on a label. AA should embrace, not alienate, young drug users and alcoholics. We're there to benefit from the group's most productive tradition: long-term sobriety.

Alcoholics that come to AA are often hindered from recovery by people who had a 'habit' of hard drinking and given a good reason... decided to quit and did just. They had no need for steps or a spiritual experience.

They:

Just don't drink no matter what...

Put the plug in the jug...

Do 90 in 90...

Fake it till they make it...

Preach of a program of suggestions...

Say if your butt falls off, bag it and bring it in...

Many of these slogans are party-line non-sense perpetuated by people sitting in a chair drinking coffee and chasing the beautiful AA women. They reflect the feelings of 'hard drinkers' that really don't need AA.

These non-alcoholics certainly have no business on a 'National Stage' propped up by a 'Liberal Think Tank' that may have an agenda of bad-mouthing a miraculous spiritual program that has revolutionized the recovery process on a growing world-wide level.

AA is a place for the hopeless to find hope.

All other 12 step programs exist as a result of the success of the AA message.