



Introduction to Self-Help Groups

Introduction

Welcome to the Introduction to Self-Help Groups session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session provides information about self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and how they can help you in sobriety. The session also discusses a few alternatives to the groups based on the Twelve Steps of AA.

What is in this session?

This session has three major parts: (1) What Self-Help Groups Can Do for You, (2) Twelve Step Fellowships, and (3) Alternatives to Twelve Step Programs.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - Understand the roles that secrecy and isolation had in your addiction
 - Understand the important role that other people play in your recovery
- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - Understand the value of Twelve Step groups in your recovery
 - Know what to expect at a Twelve Step group and why it works



SESSION 13 HAS THREE MAJOR PARTS:

1. What Self-Help Groups Can Do for You
2. Twelve Step Fellowships
3. Alternatives to Twelve Step Programs

- Understand how addiction affected the level of trust in your relationships and why honesty is important for regaining trust
- ✓ After participating in part 3, you will be able to
 - Understand what self-help alternatives exist to Twelve Step groups
 - Understand why those alternative groups may also be useful in your recovery

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to look at the role secrecy and isolation played in your addiction, and how trust and honesty can help you heal. You will also be asked to think about how Twelve Step groups can help you get and stay sober, once you learn what these groups do. You will also look at some specific parts of Twelve Step groups, such as the Serenity Prayer and spirituality. You'll then be asked to consider how you feel about these things and what they mean to you.

Finally, you will learn about some alternatives to Twelve Step groups, and you will be asked to consider whether any of these alternative programs might work better for you. The understanding you gain from engaging in these activities will help you connect with others, and that will help improve your sobriety.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- Understand the roles that secrecy and isolation had in your addiction
- Understand the important role that other people play in your recovery



Part 1: What Self-Help Groups Can Do for You

Self-help groups can greatly help people who are recovering from addiction. In a self-help group, people empower each other to take control of their lives by sharing their experiences and supporting others who share the same problems.

Secrecy and Isolation

Addiction means needing to use a drug even though bad things keep happening as a result. Because it is painful for most people to feel they have lost control, most addicts suffer embarrassment, shame, and hurt in secrecy.

As a result, most people who are addicted to alcohol or other drugs do not ask for help. Their addiction makes it so they don't recognize how wrong things are and that they need help.

Even people who realize that they have a serious problem don't believe that they need help to get better. They will think they can do it on their own. Most people have made numerous attempts to quit without any real success.

One of the most common reasons for a failed attempt at sobriety is that people try to keep their addiction a secret and try to go it alone.



One of the most common reasons for a failed attempt at sobriety is that people try to keep their addiction a secret.



EXERCISE 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. How hard did you try to keep your addiction a secret?
Explain.

2. In what ways did your addiction increase your feelings of being isolated?

(more writing space on next page)

3. Do you still feel isolated from others?

Yes No (*If yes, please explain.*)

The Process of Recovery

Although there are differences among drugs, it is amazing how similar the addiction process is, despite the drug used. Although alcohol and cocaine have very different drug effects, the way addiction develops is often the same. One addiction may occur more quickly than the other, and the triggers may be different, but the process of becoming addicted is far more similar than different.

Most important, the process of *recovery* from different drugs is nearly identical. There may be some small differences, but the principles of becoming and remaining drug free are the same. Therefore the focus of your recovery will not be on the specific drug you used, but on the *process* of getting clean and sober.



EXERCISE 2

Please answer the following questions:

1. In what ways is **addiction** a process, rather than a single event or decision?

2. In what ways is **recovery** a process, rather than a single event or decision?



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Understand the value of Twelve Step groups in your recovery
- Know what to expect at a Twelve Step group and why it works
- Understand how addiction affected the level of trust in your relationships and why honesty is important for regaining trust

By sharing their experiences, strength, and hope with one another, people are able to stay sober and improve their lives.

Part 2: Twelve Step Fellowships

Back in the 1930s, two men became very frustrated by the fact that medicine and psychiatry couldn't help them overcome their addiction to alcohol. They spent a lot of time and energy thinking about what really helped people overcome their addictions.

On their own, they couldn't stay sober, but by helping each other, they found that they could. Working together, they developed specific principles that helped people overcome their addiction to alcohol. They formed a group called Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to introduce these principles of "self-help" to others. The principles they developed have since been adapted for addiction to other drugs, such as cocaine, and even to compulsive behaviors, such as overeating and gambling.

What these two men learned in the 1930s was that people who share an addiction are able to provide a great deal of life-saving support to one another. For this reason, these groups are called *fellowships*. By sharing their experiences, strength, and hope with one another, people in these groups are able to stay sober and improve their lives.

AA's publication *Alcoholics Anonymous* (also known as the "Big Book") explains the principles of the program and tells the stories of others who have gotten sober through AA. The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* is AA's other major publication. It discusses the Twelve Steps on which AA is based and the traditions about how the fellowship is run. (The Steps are discussed in session 14.)

Twelve Step groups are not like most organizations. They do not have leaders, dues, rules, or membership lists. These groups are simply people who come together for meetings to share and support one another.

There is only one requirement for membership in a Twelve Step fellowship, and that is the desire to stop using alcohol or other drugs.



EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following questions:

1. AA, Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and Cocaine Anonymous (CA) are called fellowships. What does the word *fellowship* mean to you? Explain.

2. What do you think are the advantages of having other people support you in your recovery?

Some Frequently Asked Questions about Twelve Step Programs

What is the difference between Twelve Step and self-help?

Self-help is a situation in which one person with a problem (such as addiction) helps another who has the same problem. Twelve Step programs are a type of self-help, but there are other self-help groups that are not based on the Twelve Steps.

Are there different Twelve Step groups? Yes. For people who are addicted to mood-altering drugs, there are several groups. Look in your local yellow pages for information about meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Potsmokers Anonymous, and Pills Anonymous. There are similar groups for young people. For family and friends of addicts, there are Al-Anon, Alateen, Nar-Anon, and COCANON. Also, there are Overeaters Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Families Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and similar groups for a range of different problems.

There is also a Twelve Step group called Double Trouble in Recovery (DTR). It is a Twelve Step fellowship of men and women who share their experiences, strength, and hope with each other so that they may solve their common problems and help others to recover from their particular addiction(s) and manage their mental disorder(s). DTR is designed to meet the needs of people who are dually diagnosed. In other words, it is for people who have an addictive substance problem and who also have been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. These groups address the problems and benefits associated with psychiatric medication. Their Web site is **www.doubletroubleinrecovery.org**.



Self-help is a situation in which one person with a problem (such as addiction) helps another who has the same problem.

Are all Twelve Step meetings the same? No. Most programs have different types of meetings. For AA, these include the following:

- *Speakers meetings*, where someone tells the story of his or her addiction and recovery.
- *Topic meetings*, which involve a discussion on a specific topic, such as fellowship, honesty, acceptance, or patience. At these meetings, everyone is given a chance to talk, but no one is forced to.
- *Step/Tradition meetings*, where the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of the program are discussed.
- *Big Book meetings*, which focus on reading a chapter from AA's Big Book, often a story about someone's personal experience or a recovery-related topic.

No two meetings, even in the same categories above, are exactly alike. Meetings have different "personalities" determined by the members of the group. If you're uncomfortable in one group, try another until you find one that you like.

Who can join? Nobody really "joins" a Twelve Step program. They are not organizations that have dues, leaders, and membership lists. They are simply gatherings of people who have a desire to stop using alcohol or other drugs. People simply attend.

What do I do to become involved? The easiest way is to ask someone to take you or go with you. Doing so may decrease your discomfort about going to your first meeting. If you don't know someone who goes to a Twelve Step program, check the phone book. Most regional offices can arrange for someone to take you to your first meeting. You should try to go a little early and stay a little late. Tell a few people there that this is your first meeting, and ask them to introduce you and show you the ropes. They will. Also, pick up some free literature.

Are Twelve Step programs religious? Twelve Step programs are not religious; they are spiritual, and spiritual growth is considered to be an important part of recovery. However, the spiritual choices members make are very personal and individual. Participants decide for themselves what their “Higher Power” is. There are both atheists and religious people in these programs.

Are Twelve Step meetings therapy? No. The Twelve Step meetings may be very therapeutic and beneficial, but they are not led by therapists or counselors. They are called “self-help” groups because they are groups in which alcoholics and addicts help and support one another. For many people, Twelve Step programs are the backbone of their long-term personal recovery, but they need not be the only part of their recovery.



EXERCISE 4

Please check the answer that seems most true:

1. Twelve Step meetings work because
 - They are a type of therapy
 - They are a type of religion
 - They are a type of self-help group
 - None of the above

2. What would be a good reason for not going to Twelve Step meetings?
 - I don't know anyone who will invite me
 - I don't believe in God
 - I don't want to have to talk in front of a group of people
 - None of the above

Honesty

When you're in active addiction, you learn how to fake it and get by. While addicted, real emotions and feelings are often suppressed or hidden from others.

In Twelve Step programs, what's inside becomes more important than what's outside. In active addiction, it pays to have a hard outer shell that can protect you from others. But this shell also keeps you from dealing with your own feelings and emotions. Keeping that defensive shell stops people from growing.

It is possible to attend Twelve Step meetings and fake it. Wanting to keep that tough, defensive shell is natural because addicted people are not used to sharing feelings, talking honestly, and trusting another person. But if you do this, you can't expect a meeting to be of any help. A commitment to sobriety involves honesty. Being honest may make you feel vulnerable, so you also need to be able to trust others. If you don't try to trust the Twelve Step programs and the people in the programs, your progress will be slow.

A commitment to sobriety involves honesty.



EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following questions:

1. How strong are the defenses you developed as a result of your addiction? In what ways have these defenses stopped you from being honest with yourself or others?

2. Is it important that others are honest with you?

Yes No

Why or why not?

3. What do you think you gained by not being honest with others? What do you think you lost?

Trust

Two things are involved in trusting other people. First, trust involves the belief that the other person is truthful, reliable, and fair. Second, trust means that you have some kind of hope, anticipation, or expectation for the other person.

To trust people means to believe they are honest and will keep their word. And that is exactly the opposite of addicted behavior and thinking.

In recovery, you will need to learn or relearn how to trust. In your addiction, you learned to do whatever was necessary to keep using—often this meant learning to fake it, to lie, and to cheat.

Most relationships begin when two people trust each other. If drugs or alcohol get between people in a relationship, a triangle develops and the relationship suffers. Once alcohol or other drugs enter the picture, one person will start to lie to the other, and trust is lost.

When you begin the recovery process, you won't regain trust right away. You will need to learn to trust others again, and other people will have to learn to trust you. Both sides need time.



EXERCISE 6

Please answer the following questions:

1. How did your alcohol or other drug use make you stop trusting yourself and others?



In recovery, you will need to learn or relearn how to trust.

2. What do you expect of others before you will trust them? Do you think others can expect the same of you? Explain.

3. What can others do to gain your trust? What can you do to help them trust you?

4. Have you ever reacted to a lack of trust by threatening to relapse? Have you ever said, "If you are going to treat me like I am still using, I might as well use"? Explain.

The Serenity Prayer

Many Twelve Step meetings begin or end with the group saying the Serenity Prayer:

*God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*



EXERCISE 7

Please answer the following questions:

1. Overall, what does the Serenity Prayer mean to you?

2. Have you incorporated it into your life?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

3. What are some of the things that you cannot change? Explain.

4. What does it mean to you to have the courage to change the things you can? What are those things? Explain.

**One of the first things
you should do in recovery
is find a sponsor.**

Twelve Step Sponsors

Because the first few weeks and months of recovery are frustrating, confusing, and frightening, there will be many times when you will need to talk about your problems and fears. So one of the first things you should do in recovery is find a sponsor in whatever Twelve Step group you attend. Participating in the Twelve Step programs can be strange and difficult at first, and a sponsor can help guide you through the process.

What Do Sponsors Do?

1. Sponsors help the newcomer by answering questions and explaining the Twelve Step recovery process.
2. Sponsors agree to be available to talk, to listen to your difficulties and frustrations, and to share their own insights and solutions.
3. Sponsors make suggestions to help you solve problems. They can do this based on their experience with long-term sobriety. What worked for your sponsor will often work for you, although sometimes it may not.
4. Sponsors agree to keep your secrets and feelings confidential and to protect your anonymity.
5. Sponsors are often the first people to know when their “sponsees” experience a slip or relapse. At those times, sponsors push their sponsees to attend more meetings or get other help.

Finding a Sponsor

Getting a sponsor is easy. All you need to do is ask someone to be your sponsor. This should be someone who you feel has good sobriety and a healthy life.

A sponsor should also

1. Have several years of sobriety
2. Have a healthy lifestyle and not be struggling with major problems
3. Be an active and regular participant in Twelve Step meetings, and be actively “working” the Twelve Steps
4. Be someone whom you can relate to well and respect, even when you don’t agree with him or her
5. Be the same sex as you, and for whom you don’t have sexual or romantic interest



One of the first things you should do in recovery is find a sponsor in whatever Twelve Step group you attend.



EXERCISE 8

Please check true or false for the following statements:

1. You should choose a sponsor who is the same sex as you.

True False

Explain why:

2. You should take as much time as you want to find a sponsor.

True False

Explain why:

3. A sponsor will listen to your problems and give you advice.

True False

Explain why:

4. A sponsor will lend you money and give you a place to live.
 True False

Explain why:



Part 3: Alternatives to Twelve Step Programs

Twelve Step programs are the most common self-help recovery groups in the world. While the Twelve Steps are spiritual and not religious in nature, they do ask people to have a belief in and reliance upon a Higher Power, which many people refer to as “God as I understand Him.” Each person, though, can define and describe God as he or she chooses.

Some people in Twelve Step programs, such as agnostics and atheists, participate in meetings but do not use the word *God*. In fact, there are special AA meetings for people who do not believe in God. These meetings are often called We Agnostics.

For people who are not at all comfortable with the spirituality (or other aspects) of Twelve Step programs, there are alternative self-help groups that are not based on the concept of a Higher Power. Although these alternatives have different philosophies, they generally offer a self-help approach that focuses on personal responsibility, personal empowerment, and strength through a sober social network.

Alternatives to Twelve Step programs are best thought of as cooperative rather than competitive with Twelve Step programs. Many people use both Twelve Step programs and alternatives. The more widely known alternative self-help groups are the



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 3:

You will

- Understand what self-help alternatives exist to Twelve Step groups
- Understand why those alternative groups may also be useful in your recovery

Secular Organizations for Sobriety, SMART Recovery, and Women for Sobriety. To locate meetings for these organizations, visit their Web sites or e-mail them. Contact information is provided in the appendix at the end of this session.



EXERCISE 9

Please answer the following questions:

1. How do you feel about using the term *Higher Power*? What do you specifically mean by this term?

2. If you are uncomfortable talking about spirituality or a Higher Power, what specific aspects are you most uncomfortable with?

Secular Organizations for Sobriety

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS) was founded in southern California by James Christopher in 1986. His primary goal was to create an alternative to AA for people who could not accept the emphasis on spirituality of Twelve Step programs. Like AA and NA, SOS is a nonprofit, nonprofessional group that is committed to helping alcoholics and addicts get and stay clean and sober.

SOS is also similar to Twelve Step groups in that its meetings are confidential and recovery is seen as a one-day-at-a-time process. SOS also asks members to admit they are alcoholics or addicts. Meetings last for ninety minutes and involve group discussion. The focus of the group is always on sobriety, not issues such as personal improvement or getting in touch with a Higher Power.

SOS suggests attending as many SOS and other recovery group meetings as possible. As a result, many SOS members also participate in Twelve Step groups, practice spiritual principles, and believe in a Higher Power. SOS also recommends getting names and phone numbers from other sober people and creating a sober network.



Many people participate in both Twelve Step programs and secular organizations in their search for recovery.



EXERCISE 10

Please answer the following questions:

1. SOS is not against having group members believe in a Higher Power, but sees spirituality as a separate issue from sobriety. How would this affect recovery for you?

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2. SOS recommends that sobriety must be the “top priority of our lives.” What does that mean to you?

SMART Recovery

SMART Recovery is another self-help alternative to Twelve Step groups. It uses principles that come from cognitive-behavioral therapy to guide members in getting and staying sober. Like SOS, it does not ask participants to believe in a Higher Power, but instead teaches self-reliance.

SMART Recovery also distinguishes itself from Twelve Step groups in that it doesn’t ask people to label themselves as an addict or alcoholic, and it doesn’t use sponsors. It expects that members will stop going to meetings after they feel they’ve gotten sober.

At SMART Recovery meetings, members discuss addiction-related topics and learn and practice techniques (drawn from the mental health field) for changing behavior.



EXERCISE 11

Please answer the following questions:

1. SMART Recovery stresses self-reliance rather than reliance on a Higher Power. What are the benefits of this? What might be the problems with it?

2. SMART Recovery uses methods that come from current therapy approaches to substance abuse treatment. Would this appeal to you?

Yes No

Please explain.

Women for Sobriety

Women for Sobriety (WFS) was created by Jean Kirkpatrick, who first got sober in AA. She observed, though, that women were less likely to get sober in Twelve Step groups than men, and therefore, she wanted to create a self-help program that would better meet the needs of women by empowering them rather than making them feel guilty over past behavior.

WFS has Thirteen Statements in place of the Twelve Steps. These statements ask group members to begin by admitting their problem. While they don't mention a Higher Power, they do stress spiritual growth and the importance of love and positive thinking.

At WFS meetings, women don't introduce themselves as alcoholics or addicts, but rather they state their name and say something positive about themselves, such as, "I am a competent woman." Moderators who have long-term sobriety run meetings. Moderators choose a topic for each meeting, and the group discusses it.



EXERCISE 12

Please answer the following questions:

1. While Twelve Step groups may have meetings for men and women only, the program was created by men. Why do you think a self-help program designed for women is useful?

2. Twelve Step programs ask members to carefully review past actions and make amends for bad behavior, but WFS takes the attitude that the past is gone forever. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of the WFS approach?



Session 13 Summary

In this session you have learned about how your addiction isolated you and caused you to lose the trust of others. You also learned how being honest with others who have faced addiction can help you connect with them and regain people's trust. Additionally, you learned about Twelve Step groups and alternative self-help programs and the important role they can play in your recovery. This information will help you select appropriate activities for getting and staying sober.



Alternative Self-Help Groups

Secular Organizations for Sobriety

Center for Inquiry—West
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Hollywood, CA 90027
Phone: (323) 666-4295
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Web site: www.cfiwest.org/sos/
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SMART Recovery

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