

Counseling and 12-Step Recovery

The least involved approach to facing your addiction problem would be to enter a 12-step recovery program such as NA, AA, or Smart Recovery without any other sort of organized recovery assistance. My belief, if this is your chosen path, is that you must combine this effort with a professional therapist who specializes in 12-step recovery and/or an addiction medicine specialist. This will help strengthen your possibility of a successful recovery and provide you with support in maintaining that recovery.

As with any recovery program, your vigilance in maintaining your recovery will be life-long. There is no “graduation” or “remission” even though others may view it as such. Once an addict, always an addict. One person who can help you with the start of your journey is a therapist. You may have never had a therapist or thought you needed one. You have a problem with addiction and you need one now.

The therapist will help you explore reasons why you have developed an addiction. They will also help provide you with tools and skills that are useful in maintaining sobriety. This is someone that you can share your most intimate details with and possibly things that nobody else knows but you. Honesty is a key part of maintaining sobriety and this is a great place to start. The sessions you have with a therapist can truly be educational as well. They will provide an outside perspective on your problems or ways of coping (or lack thereof). One very important thing they should provide is a relapse prevention plan. This will lay out in detail the specific triggers for possible relapse and how you will deal with them. This is all very important and also things that you will not find in meetings for 12-step programs.

The success rates of a 12-step program alone are not encouraging. AA's self reported statistics state that about 27% of members were sober for less than a year, 24% were sober 1-5 years, 13% were sober 5-10 years, 14% were sober 10-20 years, and 22% were sober for 20 or more years.¹ Other sources place the overall success rate somewhere around 5-10%.² That means, without any other support or adjunct, your chance of maintaining your sobriety might sit somewhere between 5% and 27%.

There are, of course, numerous factors that might help decide your success including: self-motivation, support system, coping skills, etc. You need to be of service to yourself by taking your recovery seriously. It takes nothing other than honesty, openness, and willingness. Start with the first step in any recovery program and admit that you do, in fact, have a problem. Then, ask yourself if you want to get better. If you can answer yes you are ready to start attending meetings.

Use the resources provided in this website to find a meeting near you. There are several options for meetings: AA, NA, Smart Recovery, Refuge Recovery, Buddhist Recovery, etc. Decide where you want to start.

There are some differences between these meetings, but the basic structure and premise is the same. AA tends to be more inclusive of AA approved literature, addiction problems as they are related to alcohol, and there are some definite religious overtones. That being said, you do not have to be an alcoholic to attend. You can have some other drug problem. You do not need to be Christian to attend. You just need to believe in something bigger than yourself. Smart Recovery leaves the “God” part out of it. NA tends to be more all-inclusive of all addictions. To me, it’s all addiction regardless of the source.

There are also several different formats of meetings. Some meetings are “open”. This means that anyone is welcome, even if they do not suffer from addiction. Some meetings are “closed”. This means that the meeting is only for those suffering from addiction. Some meetings are in-person and some are online. Some allow “cross-talk” in which you are able to directly address other meeting attendees in a sort of group discussion format. Others do not allow this and ask that you share your thoughts or feelings as they relate to you. Some meetings are literature studies (a book or other piece of literature selected by the group), some are open topic discussions (someone suggests a topic to discuss such as depression and anxiety and how they affect your recovery), and there are also speaker meetings (a person is pre-selected to share about their story of addiction and how it affected their life).

In the beginning, you should try to attend one meeting per day. There is a classic school of thought that 90 meetings in 90 days is the best way to start out a strong recovery program. That may seem like a daunting task, but consider that they are usually only an hour long. How long did you spend at the bar drinking? Do you think you could now devote that time to improving your mental and physical health? With the innovation of online meetings there always seems to be a meeting somewhere. You could attend a meeting in another country if you wanted to and right from the comfort of your own home.

My personal experience is that it is easiest to find a meeting by using the website for the organization that sponsors the meetings. There will usually be a “Find a Meeting” tab. There will be an in-person option, online option, or both. An online meeting will afford the greatest flexibility using a Zoom format or something similar. An in-person meeting will require you to actually go out and meet with people. That might not be a bad idea! Whether or not you want to be there in-person is a personal choice. Either way you are meeting up with people. Personal connection is extremely important in your recovery. You need to have people to talk to and discuss matters with. Self-isolation is destructive and can facilitate greater feelings of depression and loneliness. Be very mindful of this!

When you get to a meeting you can expect people sitting around tables or chairs arranged in a circle. Social anxiety is a very common problem or feeling among people at these meetings. Try not to be too afraid to introduce yourself. They will probably ask you who you are anyway. Remember that you likely have a lot more in common with these people than you might think.

As the meeting starts the person leading the meeting will read a standard script. This is usually five to ten minutes of introductory reading and it tells you about the group and why they have assembled. The group may ask if anybody is new, from out-of-town, sobriety time, etc. Again, introduce yourself and be honest. It doesn't matter if you just drank or used the day before. We've all been there and this is definitely the place where you should not feel shame about your problems.

The group may ask if anyone is willing to sponsor. A sponsor is someone who has been sober for some time and has thoroughly invested time in studying the steps of the recovery program. It is important to get a sponsor. This is someone who can help guide you through the process. This is also someone you can call to talk with about things that are not going so well and also about things that are going well. You may become great friends, but it's fine if you don't. That's not necessarily the point. The point is to have someone that you can rely on for help in your recovery. It is someone outside of your friends and family. It is someone who understands your situation. You should not fully rely on your friends or family as your sole support. Remember what I said the role of your friends and family is.

Once the introductory stuff is out of the way you will get to the heart of the meeting. This will depend on the type of meeting: speaker, literature, or topic. The first two are self-explanatory. The topic meeting is where people will go around and share about their experiences with drugs and/or alcohol. The group will generally choose a topic for discussion. Try to share about your experience and your recovery as it relates to that topic, but you could honestly talk about whatever you want to get off your chest. I would urge you to keep your sharing related to your experiences with addiction and recovery and anything in your life that is pertinent to those topics. Also, be mindful of the length of time you are sharing related to the size of the group and the length of the meeting. I have been in several meetings where someone goes off a tangent about their mother and her cooking. Fifteen minutes later they are still talking and you really can't make sense of what they are truly trying to make a point of. Just remember what this meeting is really for: addiction and recovery. It is not a replacement for your personal therapist.

Lastly, you should expect a basket to be passed around to collect money at some point in the meeting. This is normal. These groups are self-sustaining and they generally have to pay for rent of the facility, literature, etc. Give a dollar if you can. If you can't, try to give next

time. The service provided to you by the meeting is invaluable in your recovery. You will get to connect with other people, you will hear their stories, and you will share yours. It should be a place of comfort and safety. You will never forget your first meeting. You may not like a meeting and that is fine and it's normal. Find another meeting. These meetings keep you connected to your problem and that's not a bad thing. They will help you remember what life was like while you were deep into your addiction. That should make you want to stay sober. Always remember...remember, remember, remember! Once you forget how bad it was you will become complacent. Once you become complacent you risk relapse.

1. Alcoholics Anonymous. [2014 Membership Survey](#).
2. Dodes, L. and Dodes, Z. (2014) *The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry*. Beacon Press.