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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT 12-STEP PROGRAMS

There are many paths to recovery for those struggling with alcohol and other substance use disorders. In fact, there are many definitions of what it even means to be “in recovery.” For some, the term simply means abstinence, not using a problematic substance. For most, however, recovery is a more holistic experience: a lifelong process of developing meaningful ways of living without the use of alcohol or other drugs, acquiring valuable skills that help sustain abstinence over the long term, and improving relationships.

The most frequently used recovery program is the 12-step program. Though there are other recognized paths to recovery, the preeminence, growth, and success of the 12-step program as a recovery resource for over 75 years suggest that it offers something of significant value to the recovery community. The lack of understanding people frequently have about the 12-step program tends to be the result of confusion and differences of opinion about what constitutes healthy recovery and the best way to create and sustain it over the long term.

Some frequently asked questions about 12-step recovery programs are as follows:

Q. Are 12-step programs effective?

A. While individual experiences

vary widely and there is need for further research, recent empirical studies are finding support for the clinical effectiveness of 12-step approaches. Studies of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), both major 12-step recovery programs, have demonstrated that active participation is associated with:

- A greater likelihood of abstinence for prolonged periods,
- Improved psychosocial functioning, and
- Greater levels of self-efficacy.

The studies’ findings “provide increasingly supportive evidence for the hypothesis that 12-step involvement ‘works.’”

Q. Do I have to be religious or believe in God to participate in a 12-step program?

A. The short answer is No. While there are references in the 12 steps to “God as we understood Him” and “a Power greater than ourselves,” the overarching emphasis of the program is to encourage recognition that the solution to alcohol and drug dependence must come from outside oneself. The reason is simple: By the time most people even consider a 12-step recovery program, they have already made multiple efforts, often over many years, to control their problematic substance use and have been consistently unsuccessful.

The 12-step program encourages

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women and men to recognize and accept the reality of their own powerlessness in this area of their lives. The program suggests that individuals rely on some power or resource other than themselves – which seems reasonable since their own best efforts, relying on self, have not worked. In this respect, the 12-step program has a very intentional spiritual component. Successful participants in 12-step recovery programs would be the first to give credit for their sustained abstinence and healthy recovery, not to themselves, but to some power or force greater than themselves. That power or force might be a god, a recovery community, or any other entity or concept.

There is, however, no required religious dogma or orthodoxy. Dr. Harry Haroutunian, Physician Director at the Betty Ford Center, has stated this issue most simply: “The Twelve Steps were never meant to be a religious program but one of a spiritual nature What’s important is that we acknowledge that there is a power greater than ourselves.”

Twelve-step recovery programs have no theological mandates – people with or without theological affiliations are equally welcome. Members are encouraged to periodically attend 12-step recovery meetings of their choosing and learn the steps with the help of another, more experienced, member (a “sponsor”). How they do this, if at all, is an entirely personal decision.

Q. Do I have to follow a lot of rules in a 12-step recovery program?

A. The 12-step recovery programs have remarkably few rules. Even though the steps themselves are the foundational principles of the program, they are merely “suggested as a program of recovery.” A distinct feature of the 12-step recovery program has always been its unique ability to survive and prosper without being rule-based.

Q. Who attends 12-step recovery programs?

A. A common denominator of problematic substance use is that it is a disease; it affects all genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. A few visits to 12-step meetings reveal the vast diversity of those seeking recovery and quickly confirm that all kinds of people from all kinds of cultural, social,

educational, and economic backgrounds attend. They support one another and learn that they each share a common desire to find a healthier way of life free of substance use.

The Oregon Attorney Assistance Program, which has served the Oregon legal community for 35 years, makes available four confidential recovery meetings every week. The meetings follow the 12-step program template. The people attending OAAP’s recovery meetings find a community of colleagues who support one another and share their experience, strength, and hope in a safe, welcoming, and confidential environment. Those coming to the meetings have various amounts of sustained recovery: Some are quite new to recovery, some are in their first few years, and some have over 30 years in the program. The OAAP groups have equally diverse backgrounds, practices, and challenges with different substances (e.g., alcohol, marijuana, heroin, cocaine, and prescription drugs). Their common bond is their shared desire to live healthy personal and professional lives free of alcohol and other drugs.

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