

Q&A about Alcoholics Anonymous for the Non-Religious

What is AA?

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 AA membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. Alcoholics Anonymous 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 achieve sobriety. (Copyrighted by the AA Grapevine, Inc., which publishes a monthly magazine in print and online.)

Why would I want to get involved with AA?

If you are having problems with alcohol or want to quit drinking and can't seem to do it alone, the fellowship of AA may give you the support and practical suggestions you need.

But I hear AA is a religious program, using religious language and customs. What if I don't believe in that stuff?

Most of the founders of AA were probably religious, and so are many of today's members, and you run into a lot of religious language in AA literature and sometimes at AA meetings.

However, the ONLY requirement for "membership" is a desire to stop drinking, and there are many atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists, humanists, etc. who got sober in AA. Some of us have been sober for 40+ years, and are still active in AA. You can choose not to use any of the religious language. Lots of groups include a formal prayer or two in their meetings. Some of us join in, some just remain silent. We've even started over 200 AA meetings of our own.

Is AA a religious cult?

No. A cult is a group of people with dominant leaders who demand all of their followers' wealth and time, and demand separation from former friends and family, among other requirements.

None of this is true of AA.

Many newcomers to AA are confused because they cannot identify who is in charge. No one is.

Authority belongs to the group. The volunteers are referred to as "trusted servants", to take care of cleanup, chairing meetings, business details, etc.

So, how do people join AA?

The only requirement for "membership" is a desire to stop drinking, and some of us didn't even have that at first. There is no membership application, no pledge, no dues or fees, and no membership card.

You don't "join" AA as you would join any other group. You're a member if you say you are. You can attend as many or as few meetings as you choose. You don't even have to say or think you're an alcoholic.

What are the rules in AA?

There are none. Even the twelve steps are clearly stated to be merely suggestions. You're expected to act civilized at meetings, but we tolerate extreme behavior sometimes. You can even show up drunk, as long as you keep quiet and behave.

It can feel like there are "rules" at some meetings, but those will be the customs of a particular group or the opinions of individual members.

What are AA meetings like?

Every meeting is self-governing, and AA has absolutely no rules for how AA meetings are to be run. The important thing is that they are a way for people to get together who want to stop drinking and to stay stopped.

The best way to see what they're like is to go to a few. You won't find uniformity among meetings, but you may find common features. There may be 3 people present or 100. They may ask if anyone is new in order to welcome you, but you don't have to respond. You probably won't be the only newcomer there. Some meetings are for women, men, GLBT, young people, specific professions, older people, motorcyclists, or any of a variety of special interests, but usually anyone is welcome at any meeting. Ask if you're not sure.

There is a reason it's called Alcoholics Anonymous. Anonymity is core principle of AA, to protect its members. It's traditional within AA to go by your first name only. This is intended to assure anonymity. AA members often know each other for years, and even become warm friends, and not be sure of each other's last name.

AA does not own any property. Even the national office is rented. They're most often in rented church rooms, because churches have parking lots, bathrooms, tables, and chairs. But they can meet anywhere.

Meetings usually last about an hour. They can be any hour of the day or night, and any day of the week, and usually meet even on holidays. They may have a somewhat rigid format, or they may

seem chaotic. Members volunteer for the various tasks like chairing, making coffee, etc. The atmosphere is usually informal and friendly, and you can tell some of the attendees know each other very well, while others may be quiet and not interact much. There will often be a fuss made over "birthdays", i.e., significant lengths of sobriety, in months and years.

Meetings are labelled "open" or "closed". Open meetings are open to anyone, whether they consider themselves alcoholic or not, while closed are supposed to be only for people who consider themselves alcoholic.

At some point, there will be announcements relevant to the group or AA activities in the area, and there will be a money collection. This is voluntary, and no one cares who donates what.

Commonly, people put in a dollar or two if they can. The money is used for rent, coffee, other group expenses, and some is sent to support other levels of AA activity.

Usual kinds of meetings:

Discussion meetings - Either the chair picks a topic or asks for suggestions, then attendees talk about it. Crosstalk or one-to-one responses are usually discouraged, so it's a series of individual stories or statements rather than a conversation. The chair may call on individuals to speak, or it may be voluntary.

Speaker meetings - One or two persons, often not from that group, are asked to give a more extended account of their own experience: what it was like when they drank, what happened to start them changing, and what it's like now. There may or may not be time left for others to share.

Study meetings - Reading part of an AA book and then discussing the section read.

There is almost always some religious reading or language used, varying widely among groups. Commonly, this includes a recitation of the Serenity Prayer and the Lord's Prayer/Our Father.

This is often a challenge for us nonbelievers. Some dislike it so much they stop attending, but some just ignore it or go along with it in the interests of getting and staying sober. A common motto in AA is, "Take what you like and leave the rest."

There are over 200 meetings started by nonbelievers, mostly in the USA and Canada, with no religious content. A list of them is at:

www.agnosticanyc.org/worldwide.html

What is the “Big Book”?

It is Alcoholics Anonymous, published by the first few members in 1939, and still considered the core “text” of AA. Its primary author was Bill Wilson, with input from the two existing groups in New York and Akron.

It is universally respected within AA. Don’t let it put you off that some members treat it almost as sacred scripture. The book itself states clearly that it is not the final word on recovery from alcoholism. Some phrases within it are commonly quoted, and some members know which content is on which page, but other members have never read it, or seldom refer to it. There is no one way to use or look at the Big Book.

A section called "How It Works" is read at the start of most AA meetings. It contains the famous Twelve Steps.

What are the Twelve Steps?

These are the guidelines which most of AA considers the heart of its recovery process. They are similar to the principles of many spiritual and growth disciplines throughout history. Although the Big Book itself says they are only "suggested", they have become essential ingredients in the minds of many members.

How do non-believers like me deal with the religious parts of these Steps?

Many nonbelievers find wisdom and guidance within the steps and just adapt them to their own beliefs. They use the Steps for guidance, just ignoring the God references. There have been many revised or alternate sets of steps written by AA members, some of which can be found in The Little Book: A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps. The book can be found online at

<http://www.omagod.org/#!alt-steps/c10e3>

What's a “sponsor”, and do I need one?

A sponsor is a more experienced member whom a newcomer can ask for more individualized, personal guidance in getting sober. It is entirely up to the newcomer to choose and ask someone to sponsor him/her. It is traditional for the sponsor to be the same gender as the sponsee.

Having a sponsor is not required, but is generally encouraged. Some of these relationships last for years. However, either party can end the relationship at any time for any reason.

How many meetings do I have to attend?

None, unless a court or treatment program requires it. (AA meetings will usually sign attendance slips, but are not affiliated with courts or treatment programs.)

The common wisdom is for a newcomer to attend many meetings, including different ones. This gives extra support in the difficult early days of sobriety, and exposes the newcomer to many different members and styles within AA. "90 meetings is 90 days" is a common recommendation but not a requirement.

How long do I have to attend meetings?

As long as you want. Some people don't like AA at all, and only attend their first meeting. Many attend for a few weeks, months, or years. Some of us stay involved for decades because we like the people and atmosphere in AA. It helps us continue to grow.

What is Al-Anon?

Al-Anon is a fellowship of persons whose lives have been impacted by someone else's alcoholism, usually family members. Their goal is not to change the alcoholic, but to improve the impacted people's lives.

Is there any more to AA than the meetings?

Yes, and like the meetings, participation is up to the individual.

Local meetings band together in "districts" to do things like organize jail meetings, keep a supply of literature, and publish a meeting schedule. Districts are united within an "area", usually a whole state, and areas are part of the annual General Service Conference. None of these has any authority over its member groups. Decisions are made by the group itself, called "group conscience".

In many communities, there are AA-oriented clubs, often called Alano Clubs. These are private organizations, usually incorporated, and not part of AA formally. They are created to provide a space for meetings. AA groups and AA itself has a tradition of not owning anything (maybe a coffee pot), in order to avoid any possible dissension over property.

Local AA groups may put on social/recreational events, like picnics, topic workshops, dances, campouts, retreats, conventions, etc. These are not a formal part of AA.

Are there other secular organizations that might help me stop drinking?

Yes: LifeRing; Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS); SMART Recovery; Women for Sobriety, and others. They all have websites, and people are getting sober in all of them. Their only drawback is that they are relatively small, with relatively few local groups. AA's big advantage is that there are meetings everywhere.

Where can I learn more about AA? Is there something I can read or someone I can talk with confidentially?

Our chairperson would be happy to speak with you in private or arrange a meeting with some of our members. Please don't wait to ask. Our primary purpose for even being here is to help you stop drinking and recover from alcoholism.

- 24 hour local hotline: (407) 260-5408
- Central Florida Intergroup: www.cflintergroup.org
(local support for A.A. members)
- General Information about A.A.: www.aa.org

For the nonreligious:

- www.OMAGOD.org (This is Our Mostly Agnostic Group Of Drunks' website.)
- www.AAagnostica.org
- www.WAAFT.org

Online meetings:

- www.InTheRooms.com
- <http://www.waaft.org/#!online-meetings-with-slackcom/clyh>
- www.agnosticaaanyc.org
- <http://www.agnosticaaanyc.org/Skype.html>
(Twice weekly online Skype meetings)

This is OMAGOD's Video Chat Meeting. Search the "Video Meeting" list for "Agnostic AA" and click on the meeting time. Tuesday Nights at 9 PM EST.

Conclusion - The agnostic AA meeting preamble:

Agnostic groups in AA attempt to maintain a tradition of free expression, and conduct a meeting where alcoholics may feel free to express any doubts or disbeliefs they may have, and to share their own personal form of spiritual experience, their search for it, or their rejection of it. We do not endorse or oppose any form of religion or atheism. Our only wish is to assure suffering alcoholics that they can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else's beliefs or having to deny their own.