29 Going to AA Meetings

Long before this booklet was even thought of, every single idea in it and many more suggestions for living sober were learned and proved successful by hundreds of thousands of alcoholics. We did this not just by reading, but also by talking to each other. At first, we mostly listened.

You can easily do the same thing, free, and you don't have to "join" anything.

What we did was simply go to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. There are over five million each year, in approximately 150 countries around the globe. And remember, you do not have to become an AA member in order to visit some AA meetings. If all you want to do is sort of "try out" AA, you are entirely welcome to attend AA meetings as an observer and just listen quietly, without saying a word. You don't need to give your name, or you can give a phony one if you want to. AA understands. It doesn't record names of either members or visitors attending its meetings, anyhow. You won't have to sign anything, or answer any questions.

Feel free to ask some, if you wish. But many people prefer just to listen the first few times.

Like practically everyone else who has gone to an AA meeting, you'll probably be very surprised the first time. The people you see around you look mostly normal, healthy, reasonably happy, and successful. They do not look like old-fashioned cartoons of drunkards, bums, or fanatic, dried-up teetotalers.

What's more, you'll usually find us quite a friendly bunch, doing a lot of laughing —at ourselves. That is why, if you are hung-over, an AA gathering provides a cheerful environment for getting past the hangover and beginning to feel much, much better.

You can be very sure that every AA member in that room deeply understands exactly how you feel, because we remember vividly our own hangover miseries, and how it felt the first time we ever went to an AA meeting.

If you are shy, kind of a loner—just like many of us—you'll find the AA members

willing to let you pretty much alone if that is really what you want and it makes you more comfortable.

However, most of us found it much more beneficial to hang around for a bite and a chat after the meeting. Feel free to participate in the socializing, or "eyeball-to-eyeball sharing," just as much, or as little, as you wish.

Different kinds of AA. meetings

Many AA members from all over the U.S. and Canada were asked for ideas for this booklet. Near the top in all their lists is the suggestion that one of the surest ways of avoiding drinking is going to various kinds of AA meetings. "That's where we learn all these ideas from each other," one member wrote.

If you want to stay sober, going to any AA meeting is, of course, safer than going to a bar or a party, or staying at home with a bottle!

Chances for avoiding malaria are best when you stay away from a swamp full of mosquitoes. Just so, chances of not drinking are better at an AA meeting than they are in a drinking situation.

In addition, at AA meetings there is a kind of momentum toward recovery. Whereas drinking is the object of a cocktail party, sobriety is the common goal aimed for at any AA meeting. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, you are surrounded by people who understand drinking, who appreciate your sobriety, and who can tell you many means of furthering it. Besides, you see many, many examples of successfully recovered, happy, non-drinking alcoholics. That's not what you see in barrooms.

Here are the most popular kinds of AA group meetings, and some of the benefits derived from attending them.

Beginners (or newcomers) meetings

These are usually smaller than other meetings, and often precede a larger meeting. They are open to anyone who thinks he or she may possibly have a drinking

problem. In some places, these meetings are a series of scheduled discussions or talks about alcoholism, about recovery, and about AA itself. In others, the beginners meetings are simply question-and-answer sessions.

AA's who have used these meetings a lot point out that these are excellent places to ask questions, to make new friends, and to begin to feel comfortable in the company of alcoholics, not drinking.

Open meetings (anyone welcome, alcoholic or not)

These are likely to be a little more organized, a little more formal. Usually, two or three members (who have volunteered in advance) in turn tell the group about their alcoholism, what happened, and what their recovery is like.

An AA talk of this type does not have to follow any set pattern. Of course, only a tiny handful of AA members are trained orators. In fact even those AA's whose jobs involve professional speaking carefully avoid making speeches at AA meetings. Instead, they try to tell their own stories as simply and directly as possible.

What is unmistakable is the almost startling sincerity and honesty you hear. You'll probably be surprised to find yourself laughing a lot, and saying to yourself, 'Yes, that's just what it's like!"

One of the big benefits of attending such open meetings is the opportunity to hear a wide, wide variety of actual case histories of alcoholism. You hear the symptoms of the illness described in many varying forms, and that helps you decide whether you have it.

Naturally, each AA member's experiences have been different from the others'. It is possible that some time you'll hear someone recall favorite drinks, drinking patterns, and drinking problems (or drinking fun) very much like your own. On the other hand, the incidents in the drinking stories you hear may be quite unlike yours. You will hear people of many different backgrounds, occupations, and beliefs. Each member speaks only for himself (or herself), and voices only his own opinions. No one can speak for all of AA, and no one has to agree with any

sentiments or ideas expressed by any other AA member. Diversity of opinion is welcomed and valued in AA.

But if you listen carefully, you will probably recognize familiar feelings, if not familiar events. You will recognize the emotions of the speaker as having been much like your own, even if the life you hear about has been radically different from yours

In AA, this is called "identifying with the speaker." It does not mean that the age, the sex, the life-style, the behavior, the pleasures, or the troubles of the speaker are identical to yours. But it does mean that you hear of fears, excitements, worries, and joys which you can empathize with, which you remember feeling at times yourself.

It may surprise you that you will almost never hear an AA speaker sound self-pitying about being deprived of alcohol.

Identifying with the speaker's past may not be as important as getting an impression of his or her present life. The speaker usually has found, or is reaching for, some contentment, peace of mind, solutions to problems, zest for living, and a kind of health of the spirit which you, too, want. If so, hang around. Those qualities are contagious in AA

Besides, the reminders you get of the miseries of active alcoholism can help extinguish any lurking desire to take a drink!

At meetings like this, many AA members have heard the very tips on recovery they were looking for. And almost all members leave such a meeting so refreshed and so encouraged in their recovery that the last thing on earth they want is a drink.

Closed discussion meetings (only for alcoholics—or for people who are trying to find out whether they are alcoholics)

Some AA groups hold discussion meetings labeled "open," so anyone is welcome to attend. More often, such meetings are described as "closed," for members or prospective members only, so those who attend can feel free to discuss any topic

that might trouble—or interest— any problem drinker. These are confidential discussions.

A member who has volunteered in advance may lead off the meeting by telling briefly of his or her own alcoholism and recovery. The meeting is then open for general discussion.

Anyone troubled by a particular problem, no matter how painful or embarrassing, may air it at a discussion meeting and hear from others present their experiences at handling the same or a similar problem. And yes, experiences of happiness and joy are shared, too. One surely learns in such discussions that no alcoholic is unique or alone.

It has been said that these meetings are the workshops in which an alcoholic learns how to stay sober. Certainly, one can pick up at discussion meetings a broad range of suggestions for maintaining a happy sobriety.

Step meetings

Many AA groups hold weekly meetings at which one of the Twelve Steps of the AA program is taken up in turn and forms the basis of the discussion. AA's Twelve Traditions, the Three Legacies of AA, AA slogans, and discussion topics suggested in AA's monthly magazine, the Grapevine, are also used by some groups for this purpose. But other topics are almost never ruled out, especially if someone present feels an urgent need for help with an immediate, pressing personal problem.

In conjunction with the books "Alcoholics Anonymous" and "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions," Step meetings afford perhaps the most easily grasped insights into and understanding of the fundamental principles of recovery in AA These sessions also furnish a wealth of original interpretations and applications of the basic AA program—showing how we can use it, not only to stay sober, but to enrich our lives.

State, regional, national, and international A.A. conventions and conferences

Attended by anywhere from hundreds to more than 20,000 AA members, often

accompanied by their families, these king-size AA gatherings usually are weekend affairs consisting of many kinds of session. The programs often include discussion workshops on varied topics, as well as talks byguest experts on alcoholism, and usually a banquet, a dance, entertainment, and time for other social or recreational activities, all the more highly enjoyed because they are alcohol free. They show us how much fun we can have sober.

They also give us a chance to meet and learn from AA's who live in other areas. For many members, these occasions become favorite holiday weekends, as well as highly prized, peak experiences in recovery. They provide inspiring memories to cherish on ordinary days, and often see the start of close, lifelong friendships.

Do we have to go to those meetings for the rest of our lives?

Not at all, unless we want to.

Thousands of us seem to enjoy meetings more and more as the sober years go by. So it is a pleasure, not a duty.

We all have to keep on eating, bathing, breathing, brushing our teeth, and the like. And millions of people continue year after year working, reading, going in for sports and other recreation, frequenting social clubs, and performing religious worship. So our continued attendance at AA meetings is hardly peculiar, as long as we enjoy them, profit from them, and keep the rest of our lives in balance.

But most of us go to meetings more frequently in the first years of our recovery than we do later. It helps set a solid foundation for a long-term recovery.

Most AA groups hold one or two meetings a week (lasting about an hour or an hour and a half). And it is widely believed in AA that a new AA member fares best by getting into the habit of regularly attending the meetings of at least one group, as well as visiting other groups from time to time. This not only provides a big choice of differing AA ideas; it also helps bring into the problem drinker's life a measure of orderliness, which helps combat alcoholism.

We have found it quite important, especially in the beginning, to attend meetings

faithfully, no matter what excuses present themselves for staying away.

We need to be as diligent in attending AA meetings as we were in drinking. What serious drinker ever let distance, or weather, or illness, or business, or guests, or being broke, or the hour, or anything else keep him or her from that really wanted drink? We cannot let anything keep us from AA meetings, either, if we really want to recover.

We have also found that going to meetings is not something to be done only when we feel the temptation to drink. We often get more good from the meetings by attending them when we feel fine and haven't so much as thought of drinking. And even a meeting which is not totally, instantly satisfying is better than no meeting at all.

Because of the importance of meetings, many of us keep a list of local meetings with us at all times, and never travel far from home base without taking along one of the AA directories, which enable us to find meetings or fellow members almost anywhere on earth.

When serious illness or natural catastrophe makes missing a meeting absolutely unavoidable, we have learned to work out substitutes for the meetings. (It's amazing, though, how often we hear that blizzards in sub-arctic regions, hurricanes, and even earthquakes have not prevented AA's from traveling a hundred miles or more to get to meetings. With a meeting to reach, getting there by canoe, camel, helicopter, jeep, truck, bicycle, or sleigh is as natural to some AA's as using cars, buses, or subways is for the rest of us.)

As a substitute for a meeting, when attendance is impossible, we may call AA friends on the telephone or by ham radio; or we may hold a meeting in our minds while reading some AA material.

For several hundred isolated AA "Loners" (such as armed services personnel far from home), and for several hundred seagoing AA "Internationalists," special services are provided free by the General Service Office of AA to help them keep in close contact with AA They receive bulletins and lists that enable them to communicate with other members (by letter or sometimes tape) between the times

they find it possible to go to regular AA meetings.

But many of those who are on their own do something even better when they find no AA. group near enough for them to attend. They start a group.

The money question

Alcoholism is expensive. Although AA itself charges no dues or fees whatsoever, we have already paid pretty heavy "dues" to liquor stores and bartenders before we get here. Therefore, many of us arrive at AA. nearly broke, if not heavily in debt.

The sooner we can become self-supporting, the better, we have found. Creditors are almost always happy to go along with us as long as they see we are really making an honest, regular effort to climb out of the hole, even in tiny installments.

A particular kind of expenditure, however—in addition to food, clothing, and shelter, naturally—has been found extremely valuable in our first sober days. One of us has given his permission to print here his

Investment Counsel

In the first few weeks without a drink
When the wolf is at the door,
And the sheriffs at the window
And you're sleeping on the floor,
And life looks bleak and hopeless
From a monetary angle,
It's time to spend, in certain ways,
To solve the awful tangle:
That token or that bus fare
To get you to a meeting,
That dime to use the telephone
For that necessary greeting,
That nickel for "expenses"
That makes you feel you matter,
That dollar for the coffee shop

For after-meeting chatter.
All these are wise investments
For the neophyte to make.
This "bread," when cast upon the waters,
Always comes back cake.