

Cultic Groups in AA

“There are cults, for example, that focus their recruitment activities in drug-rehabilitation programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, and other twelve-step programs, as that milieu tends to be a ripe hunting ground for potential members. In cases where alcohol or substance abuse was or is a problem, attending meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous may help. However, we caution you to proceed into the 12-step world with your eyes open and your antennae up. Despite its successes, this is an area rife with abuses and incompetencies. Hustlers use 12-step programs as a hunting ground for income and glory. Some counselors and group leaders are not credentialed. Some programs are fronts for cults. Even a well-meaning program may inadvertently promote long-term victimization. Although these groups are set up to reduce codependency, many participants become completely dependent on their 12-step meetings and friends.” - Lalich, J., & Tobias, M., *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships*, 2006

Myth vs. Reality

1. Myth: You can't change sponsors or it's bad to change sponsors (“because the sponsor is not the problem;” “you may get drunk;” “the sponsor has helped you so much;” etc.).

Reality: AA members often change sponsors in order to continue growing spiritually. Sponsors are human and can only take you as far as their experience allows them to. Sometimes switching sponsors can enhance one's program. Feeling afraid to switch sponsors is a sign you may have been affected by undue influence or coercive control. Getting negative feedback from the sponsor for switching confirms the coercion.

2. Myth: There is something wrong with you/your program if you want to change home groups or stop attending a meeting. (i.e. You're “running away” due to unresolved resentment, “If it seems like everyone else is the problem, maybe the problem is in you.”)

Reality: There are times that occur where one member may become resentful at another, and inventory can be one helpful tool to help us grow and feel more open to others. However, if you have come to feel uncomfortable in your meeting, it could be a sign that you are growing in another direction spiritually and not

necessarily a sign that you are falling out of AA. Also, your needs change as you grow in recovery. What worked two years ago may not continue to work for you today. Sometimes switching homegroups can enhance one's program. There is nothing wrong/bad with switching meetings and/or your homegroup.

3. Myth: You are not sober if you take psychiatric medication, cannot have a sobriety date, and cannot work the steps.

Reality: AA has no opinion on outside issues and sponsors are not doctors. AA is a solution to alcoholism, but it cannot treat mental illness. Doctors and medications exist to help people overcome their physical and mental health issues. Troubling emotional and physical problems must be relieved if we are to maintain our sobriety. Please observe the pamphlet, *The A.A. Member—Medications and Other Drugs*. The pamphlet states that each member should make their own decisions, with the care of a competent professional, and that no AA member should “play doctor,” or use covert tactics (shame, self-righteous sharing of their own experience as the “right” one, shunning, etc.) to unfairly influence a member's decisions.

4. Myth: You need to go to a meeting a specific amount of times per week (set by the group or an individual, regardless of your input), i.e. “You need to go to a meeting everyday.”

Reality: Sobriety provides newfound discipline and balance to our lives. Everyone's program is different. At different times, we each require an assortment of program tools at varying degrees.

5. Myth: You are not helping people if you aren't actively sponsoring people. You are not a good member of Alcoholics Anonymous, or are doing something wrong, if you aren't actively sponsoring people. You must say yes to everyone who asks you to sponsor them.

Reality: Sponsorship is just one way of being useful in the AA group and in the world. Sometimes we are not available (however that is defined) to sponsor everyone who asks us. That is okay. Sometimes it is harmful to say yes to sponsoring someone if we don't

have the time or energy to devote to the sponsee.

6. Myth: Your sponsor is always right.

Reality: You can agree to disagree with your sponsor. Sponsors are human beings, just like everyone in AA, and are often wrong. There are no dictators in AA. Sponsorship is partnership. It is okay to disagree with another member of Alcoholics Anonymous, even if they happen to be your sponsor. Sponsors can offer only their experience, and ideally should not force their experience on you. There should always be respect for both people in a sponsor-sponsee relationship.

7. Myth: "It's not really a big deal to date newcomers when I have time sober."

Reality: It is harmful and selfish to date newcomers. It is not uncommon for these relationships to be unbalanced and become coercive for the new person. Any newcomer in AA needs space and time to develop their own AA program and sober network.

8. Myth: The rules don't apply to people in the program that have accumulated time sober. The principles of the program (humility, etc) don't really need to apply to people that have accumulated time sober, especially if they have helped a lot of people.

Reality: The rules apply to everyone, especially those who have accumulated a little time sober.

9. Myth: You must ask your sponsor for permission prior to making decisions, i.e. dating, attending specific meetings, or making significant medical decisions.

Reality: Your sponsor guides you through the steps of the program. They are not an authority figure who runs your life. Sponsored direction is never mentioned in the first 164 pages of the *Big Book* or the *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*. It is your program and you can choose how you work it. As we grow in the program, we turn to our sponsor when we want their experience, strength, and hope on certain issues, not for permission. As we stay sober, we learn to again trust our

intuition. A competent therapist, for example, might guide some of the decisions that the sponsor cannot speak to.

10. Myth: I get everything I need from the program.

Reality: Specialized issues require trained professionals such as tax advice from an accountant, legal advice from a lawyer, psychological advice from a psychologist or psychiatrist, and medical advice from a physician.

11. Myth: You must dress and look a certain way to attend meetings, have service or speak at meetings.

Reality: This program is an inside job and it is for everyone, regardless of how they appear on the outside.

12. Myth: You must call your sponsor everyday.

Reality: In the beginning newcomers require more help, attention, and guidance with staying sober. However, as you develop your spiritual program and deepen your faith in your Higher Power, you may need less help from your sponsor and depend more on the other tools of the program. It is okay for this shift to occur.

13. Myth: There is a right way to do AA and then there's everyone else.

Reality: Everyone works their program differently. The principles of the program are the same for everyone but how each individual person applies them in his or her life looks different. There is no one right way.

14. Myth: The most important tools are my sponsor, my home group, and a sobriety date.

Reality: A sponsor, home group, and a sobriety date are important tools that help me on my journey towards spiritual growth and a deeper relationship with my higher power. However, there are many tools that are equally as important: prayer, meditation, writing, play, rest, literature, telephone calls, and meetings.

15. Myth: AA comes first (all the time).

Reality: Everyone's program will look different. A cancer patient, a single father, and a teenager have different responsibilities and will work drastically different programs. *There is no one size fits all.* The key to keeping AA first is doing what needs to be done to the best of our abilities and turning it over to the care of our Higher Power.

16. Myth: I need to avoid my friends outside of AA and spend less time with my family in order to stay sober.

Reality: Healthy relationships inside and outside AA can be supportive to our recovery. Our families and friends likely want to see us sober and happy. We got sober to enjoy our lives and share that with other people.

17. Myth: I can't date anyone during the first year of my sobriety.

Reality: No one is the arbiter of our sex conduct - this is between me and my higher power. Guidance can be helpful, but anyone guiding others with black and white statements or through shame is a disservice.

18. Myth: If I'm not helping someone every day, I am not doing AA correctly.

Reality: Helping others is only one tool we use to grow and stay sober. There are many ways to be helpful to people outside of sponsorship, rides to meetings, and making 12th step calls- "helping" can be defined broadly. Some days we get to help people outside of AA. And some days, we need to take time for ourselves to recharge and relax. This is helpful too.

19. Myth: Self-care is selfish and taking time for solitude is self-centeredness.

Reality: Self-care is a healing, rejuvenating, and part of our spiritual program and emotional maturity. There is nothing selfish about getting adequate rest, nourishment, relaxation, or solitude to do things we enjoy. In some cases, it is selfish not to take care of ourselves when we need it because it could diminish our usefulness to other people.

20. Myth: I cannot mention drugs in an AA meeting.

Reality: Every AA group is autonomous and can make its own decisions except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole. Some groups may choose to discuss drugs and others may choose not to. Drug use is not a requirement for

alcoholism, but many AA members consumed drugs along with alcohol. The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking, so someone might have a desire to stop drinking AND drugging.

21. Myth: My personal inventory should focus only on the negative behaviors or experiences in my day-to-day life and I should report any and all transgressions to a sponsor.

Reality: An inventory can and should be balanced. Recognizing positive character assets in ourselves is a healthy way to watch our growth in the program, and sharing positive news with our sponsors and friends helps build supportive relationships. Conversations with a sponsor do not need to feel like reporting to a parole officer. You may not want to share all things with your sponsor, and might choose others (like a therapist) to share other things with. This is between you and your Higher Power.

22. Myth: I am a bad person if I relapse.

Reality: In AA, we learn that we are sick people getting well, not bad people becoming good. Relapsing might indicate that our program is missing something or something in our existing program may need to shift (perhaps we need more flexibility, perhaps we need to seek outside help). Relapsing simply means we try again.

23. Myth: I must always say “yes” if something is asked of me in AA, no matter what.

Reality: There are going to be times when we are able to give someone a ride to a meeting, speak at a meeting, or cover someone’s service. There are going to be times where we simply can’t. It’s okay to say “no” to an AA request if we are unable to fulfill it due to a prior commitment or conflict, or if we need to take care of something or somebody else, including ourselves, i.e. self care actions like sleeping, eating, or preparing for work/school. Spreading ourselves too thin is not the objective of this program and can negatively impact our serenity.

24. Myth: My feelings don’t matter.

Reality: Feelings are natural and real. It’s totally okay to have feelings, and to deny them is to deny that we are human beings. We should honor our feelings and also know that there are going to be things we don’t want to do or challenges that are

difficult to overcome. The program can give us the support we need to live happy, joyous and free alongside all of our feelings.

Signs of a Cultic AA Group

- Group members insist their group is the only group “doing AA right,” whether publicly or privately.
- There are a series of unspoken rules or threats that are alluded to, but rarely explicitly said. Rules that are openly discussed are rigid, draconian and not supported by AA literature (for example, dress codes or a required number of service positions to be “working a good program.”)
- Self-doubt is encouraged. Members are taught to not trust their own minds and their own gut feelings. Members are taught to always identify with being a sick alcoholic with warped perception, and being unable to trust your own ideas.
- Members are made to believe they are insufficient or unworthy on their own, and that the only way to become worthy is to confess their shortcomings to the sponsor and “remain current.”
- Group members idolize another member or small group of members with long-term sobriety and view them as group leaders or authorities. Old-timers require stricter standards of behavior for other members than they keep for themselves.
- Group members may openly say their group is not a cult or they lean into overt cult stereotypes. For example, someone may jokingly call themselves a “benign dictator” to justify their controlling behavior.
- Group members use shame and humiliation to make other members, particularly new members, feel subservient. The *Big Book* is used to undermine and shame members.
- Members suggest staying away from medications and make negative or dismissive statements about professional institutions like therapy or psychiatry.
- Everything negative is attributed to alcoholism and the solution is always more action, i.e. “help more people.”
- Group members discourage you from interacting with people outside of AA, including family
- Meeting financial reports (or financial reports of group events) are withheld/unexplained.
- The group does not take regular group inventory, as suggested by GSO, or refuses to have a group conscience when a member tries to call one.
- Group members use passages from the *Big Book* or other literature to justify dogmatic rules.

- Group members only attend meetings started by other group members, thus creating an insular culture. Or, a cult-like group has “taken over” an established AA meeting and over time the meeting membership has transitioned to only cult AA members. Non-cult AA members eventually leave the meeting.
- There have been numerous instances or a history of sexual abuse, exploitation, grooming, or other sexual crimes/sexual deviances that often go overlooked. (ex. Older and more experienced members dating young, new members).
- Group members make you feel bad/threaten you will get drunk if you mention leaving the group or switching sponsors.
- Those who leave the group are labeled as “bad AAs,” either covertly or explicitly, often incorrectly assumed to have relapsed, or in the process of leaving AA. Those who speak out against the high-control AA group are vilified as bitter, resentful, or dishonest.
- You are essentially shunned or lose touch with members you were once very close to if you start going to other meetings.

There is a solution and AA can be a safe place for you.

For more information or for someone to talk to: aaisnotacult@gmail.com

Resources:

Websites:

[Checklist of Cult Characteristics](#)

[Recovery from Spiritual Abuse](#)

IGotOut.org

Documentaries:

The Vow (Max)

Holy Hell! (Peacock)

Hillsong (Max)

Podcasts:

The Influence Continuum by Steven Hassan

A Little Bit Culty

WTF is on My Mind?