
Alcoholics Anonymous Meetings: The Basics

Introduction

Research has shown that consistent attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings is at least as effective as any other treatment, and possibly more so. The two key ingredients of AA meetings are:

- Making positive changes in social networks
- Learning coping skills to maintain abstinence when in high-risk social situations

What Are the 12 Steps?

The essential idea: Stopping alcohol use is only the beginning of a journey. In order to maintain sobriety, alcohol must be replaced with something just as compelling. The 12 steps represent a series of guidelines for how people might choose to live their lives without alcohol.

The steps can be broken down into three phases: Surrendering, Confessing, and Maintaining (memory aid: “SCM” — “AA is no SCAM”).

Steps 1–3: Surrendering

- 1: Admit being powerless over alcohol
- 2: Accept that a higher power can restore your sanity (traditional AA steps refer to God as the higher power, but patients may substitute whatever they find appropriate)
- 3: Decide to turn your will over to that higher power

Steps 4–9: Confessing

- 4: Write out a moral inventory of your behaviors due to alcohol use
- 5: Find someone to confess to (eg, a sponsor or therapist: “We are as sick as our secrets”)
- 6 and 7: Prepare yourself mentally to make necessary changes in your life
- 8: Make a list of people you have harmed
- 9: Make direct amends to these people

Steps 10–12: Maintaining

- 10: Take a daily personal inventory (eg, take time at the beginning and end of each day to reflect on behaviors)
- 11: Engage in daily prayer/meditation (eg, pray for inner strength to maintain sobriety)
- 12: Help others (eg, become an AA sponsor or help in other ways)

How Do AA Meetings Work?

- Patients can find local meetings by going to the AA website and entering their ZIP code. Research has shown that the threshold for effectiveness is attending at least one meeting per week. Meetings are free.
- There are many categories and flavors of meetings: groups for alcohol use vs polysubstance use, gender-specific or age-specific groups, professional groups, etc. Remind patients: “If you don’t like one meeting, try another.”
- Meetings last an hour. First-timers will introduce themselves (eg, the new arrival will say, “Hi, my name is Danny and I’m an alcoholic” and members will respond, “Hi Danny”). Meetings might focus on a particular step or have a guest speaker.
- Eventually attendees should find a sponsor. Patients might start by getting together a “phone list,” which includes a few people whom they are comfortable with and who are willing to make themselves available to talk.