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for Oregon Lawyers

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WHAT TO EXPECT AT 12-STEP MEETINGS

Twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) have saved many lives since founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob first got sober in 1935. Although 12-step meetings are occasionally depicted in films or on television, nothing can compare with the experience of attending a meeting in person. For people who contemplate attending their first 12-step meeting, this article may allay some anxiety and dispel some illusions about what to expect.

Most 12-step meetings start (and end) on time, so at the scheduled hour the chair or group secretary will call the meeting to order. Other conversations stop and people take their seats. The chair will announce that the meeting will begin with a moment of silence, sometimes followed by a recitation of the Serenity Prayer. (“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”)

Some people express unease with 12-step programs because of “all the talk about God.” In a 12-step program, “God” is to be understood as “a higher power” – interpreted in any way that works for you. Therefore, a “Group of Drunks” (GOD) providing “Good, Orderly Direction” (GOD) can be the higher power for an alcoholic if he or she so decides. The 12-step approach to recovery is a spiritual approach, not a religious one, and takes no position on political issues or any controversy. The 12-step format has been shown to be effective with atheists and agnostics alike. When viewed broadly in this way, the Serenity Prayer provides a

powerful spiritual guide to people of all beliefs.

As the meeting begins, the chair usually asks whether anyone is attending for his or her first, second, or third time. The chair may then ask whether any out-of-town visitors are present. The purpose is to welcome guests and newcomers. Individuals at their first meeting (or, at AA meetings, those with fewer than 30 days of sobriety) may be welcomed with a hug and awarded a “keep coming back” coin or chip for encouragement.

The chair may talk for a few minutes and then will call on meeting participants to talk or “share,” requesting that they limit their comments to three to five minutes and restrict their discussion to issues relating to recovery. At some time during the meeting, the chair may open the meeting to anyone who has not been called on who really wants to talk, frequently referred to as a “burning desire to share.” People who are called on to speak usually begin by identifying themselves, for instance, “My name is Michael, and I am an alcoholic.” The group usually responds with “Hi, Michael,” and then the individual speaks for a few minutes.

Twelve-step meetings provide a safe environment for people in recovery to share their thoughts and feelings. However, no one is ever forced or pressured to speak. If a person is called on and does not wish to talk, he or she has only to say, “I think I will just listen today,” or, “I’ll pass.” Unlike group therapy, no cross-talk or interruptions are allowed. Members share their own experience, strength, and hope with each other, rather than telling one another what to do.

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At some point, the chair may pause for announcements and to collect funds so that the group can be self-supporting through its own contributions. (This is AA's Seventh Tradition.) Cash donations of a dollar or two are usual, although newcomers are not required to contribute.

Most meetings last either one hour or 90 minutes. At the end of the meeting, the group members stand, join hands, and recite the Lord's Prayer or the Serenity Prayer (for those who care to join). With slight variations, this basic meeting format is the same throughout the world, varying only in language.

Twelve-step meetings fall into several different types. Some meetings are "speaker meetings" in which one individual talks, usually sharing the story of his or her recovery. Others are "discussion meetings" in which everyone shares, talking about a topic or whatever is on his or her mind. In "step meetings," someone reads from the program's literature and attendees discuss it. (AA's literature includes the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Other 12-step programs have their own literature.) Meetings may be "open" or "closed." In closed meetings, only persons in recovery (or individuals with a desire to stop the addictive behavior) may attend. Open meetings are open to anyone, including family or friends of the person in recovery. In all meetings, whether open or closed, attendees are urged to observe the confidential nature of the sharing, expressed by the saying, "What you see here, stays here."

Twelve-step meetings may also address a specific population, such as women, men, gays, or lesbians. The OAAP has 12-step meetings for lawyers in recovery from alcoholism, substance abuse, or sexual addiction, and also has Al-Anon meetings for those affected by the addiction of another. All OAAP 12-step meetings are strictly confidential.

At meetings, you may witness a lot of laughter and joking. The humor shows itself in 12-step meetings, and newcomers are frequently surprised to hear members laughing about an incident that might seem grim or unfortunate. Usually, the laughter is based on personal identification with the speaker or the incident.

The 12-step format used for Alcoholics Anonymous has enjoyed such tremendous success that many other groups have formed using the AA model for meetings and the 12-step format: Gamblers Anonymous (GA), Overeaters Anonymous (OA), Cocaine Anonymous (CA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA), Co-dependency Anonymous (CODA), and Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA), to name just a few.

Many treatment centers, both inpatient and outpatient, also use the 12-step format. One of the goals of treatment is to break through denial and to help the addicted person see the problems caused by his or her addiction. Treatment centers like to involve the client in 12-step programs because part of the ongoing recovery process will consist of aftercare, including maintaining sobriety (or abstaining from the addictive behavior) and attending outside support groups.

Research also indicates that participation in 12-step meetings increases an individual's chances for sustained recovery. A 1999 study at UCLA found that participation in 12-step meetings doubled the abstinence rate over those who completed treatment and did not go to meetings. In a 1994 study of 65,000 patients who attended AA after treatment, those who attended AA weekly for one year had a 73 percent rate of sobriety. Of those who attended AA only occasionally, 53 percent stayed sober. In contrast, those who never went to 12-step meetings or stopped going had a 43 percent sobriety rate.

If you think you may have an addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex, or gambling, you probably do. If you would like help, or know someone you would like to help, call the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program for more information. All communication with the OAAP, including attendance at 12-step meetings, is strictly confidential pursuant to ORS 9.568; PLF Policies 6.150, 6.200, and 6.250; Oregon State Bar Bylaw Article 24; and ORPC 8.3(e). The OAAP can guide you to resources and you can see for yourself if the 12-step approach that has worked for more than 2 million people can work for you or the person you care about.

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