

Problems Other Than Alcohol:

What Can Be Done About Them?

by Bill W. -- A.A. Grapevine, February, 1958

[In the following article Bill reviews the AA relation with each other and with the world outside, with the accent on special groups which seek to handle drug addiction. At the moment this problem is under a great amount of discussion in many AA areas.]

PERHAPS THERE IS NO SUFFERING more horrible than drug addiction, especially that kind which is produced by morphine, heroin, and other narcotics. Such drugs twist the mind and the awful process of withdrawal racks the sufferer's body. Compared with the addict and his woes, we alcoholics are pikers. Barbiturates, carried to extremes, can be almost as bad. In AA we have members who have made great recoveries from both the bottle and the needle. We also have a great many others who were -- or still are -- victimized by "goof balls" and even by the new tranquilizers.

Consequently, this problem of drug addiction in its several forms lies close to us all. It stirs our deepest interest and sympathy. In the world around us we see legions of men and women who are trying to cure or to escape their problems by this means. Many AAs, especially those who have suffered these particular addictions, are now asking, "What can we do about drugs -- within our fellowship, and without?"

Because several projects to help pill and drug takers are already afloat -- projects which use AA's Twelve Steps and in which AA members are active -- there has arisen a whole series of questions as to how these efforts, already meeting with not a little success, can be rightly related to the AA groups and to AA as a whole.

Specifically, here is a list of questions:

- (1) Can a non-alcoholic pill or drug addict become an AA member?
- (2) Can such a person be brought, as a visitor, to an "open" AA meeting for help and inspiration?
- (3) Can a pill or drug taker, who also has a genuine alcoholic history, become a member of AA?
- (4) Can AAs who have suffered both alcoholism and addiction form themselves into "special purpose" groups to help other AAs who are having drug trouble?
- (5) Could such, a "special purpose;" group call itself an AA group?
- (6) Could such a group also include non-alcoholic drug users?
- (7) If so, should these non-alcoholic pill or drug users be led to believe that they have become AA members?
- (8) Is there any objection if AAs who have had the "dual problem" join such outside groups, such as Addicts Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous?

While some of these questions almost answer themselves, others do not. But all of them, I think, can readily be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone if we have a good look at the AA Traditions which apply, and another look at our long experience with the special purpose groups in which AAs are ac-

tive today -- both within and without our society.

Now there are certain things that AA cannot do for anybody, regardless of what our several desires or sympathies may be.

Our first duty, as a society, is to insure our own survival. Therefore we have to avoid distractions and multi-purpose activity. An AA group, as such, cannot take on all the personal problems of its members, let alone the problems of the whole world.

Sobriety -- freedom from alcohol -- through the teaching and practice of the Twelve Steps, is the sole purpose of an AA group. Groups have repeatedly tried other activities and they have always failed. It has also been learned that there is no possible way to make non-alcoholics into AA members. We have to confine our membership to alcoholics and we have to confine our AA groups to a single purpose. If we don't stick to these principles, we shall almost surely collapse. And if we collapse, we cannot help anyone.

To illustrate, let's review some typical experiences. Years ago, we hoped to give AA membership to our families and to certain non-alcoholic friends who had been greatly helpful. They had their problems, too, and we wanted them in our fold. Regretfully, we found that this was impossible. They couldn't make straight AA talks; nor, save a few exceptions, could they identify with new AA members. Hence, they couldn't do continuous Twelfth Step work. Close to us as these good folks were, we had to deny them membership. We could only welcome them at our open meetings.

Therefore I see no way of making non-alcoholic addicts into AA members. Experience says loudly that we can admit no exceptions, even though drug users and alcoholics happen to be first cousins of a sort. If we persist in trying this, I'm afraid it will be hard on the drug user himself, as well as on AA. We must accept the fact that no non-alcoholic, whatever his affliction, can be converted into an alcoholic AA member.

Suppose, though, that we are approached by a drug addict who nevertheless has had a genuine alcoholic history. There was a time when such a person would have been rejected. Many early AAs had the almost comical notion that they were "pure alcoholics" -- guzzlers only, no other serious problems at all. When alcoholic "ex-cons" and drug users first turned up there was much pious indignation. "What will people think?" chanted the pure alcoholics. Happily, this foolishness has long since evaporated.

One of the best AAs I know is a man who had been seven years on the needle before he joined up with us. But prior to that, he had been a terrific alcoholic and his history proved it. Therefore he could qualify for AA and this he certainly did. Since then, he has helped many AAs and some non-AAs with their pill and drug troubles. Of course, that is strictly his affair and is no way the business of the AA group to which he belongs. In his group he is a member because, in actual fact, he is an alcoholic.

Such is the sum of what AA Cannot do -- for narcotics addicts or for anybody else.

Now, then, what can be done? Very effective answers to problems other than freedom from alcohol have always been found through "special purpose" groups, some of them operating within AA and some on the outside.

Our first special-purpose group was created 'way back in 1938. AA needed a world service office and some literature. It had a service problem that could not be met by an AA group, as such. Therefore,

we formed a Board of Trustees (The Alcoholic Foundation) to look after these matters. Some of the Trustees were alcoholics, and some were non-alcoholics. Obviously, this was not an “AA group.” Instead, it was a group of AAs and non-AAs who devoted themselves to a special task.

Another example: in 1940, the New York AAs got lonesome and installed themselves in a club. The club had directors and dues-paying AA members. For a long time, the club members and directors thought that they were an AA group. But after awhile, it was found that lots of AAs who attended meetings at “Old 24th” didn’t care one hoot for the club, as such. Hence, the management of the club (for its social purpose) had to be completely separated from the management of the AA group that came there to hold its meetings. It took years of hassling to prove that you couldn’t put an AA group into the club business and make it stick. Everywhere today, club managements and their dues-paying members are seen as “special purpose” groups, not as AA groups.

The same thing has happened with drying-out places and “Twelfth Step Houses” managed by AAs. We never think of these activities as “AA groups.” They are clearly seen as the functions of interested individuals who are doing helpful and often very valuable jobs.

Some years ago, numbers of AAs formed themselves in “retreat groups” having a religious purpose. At first, they wanted to call themselves “AA groups” of various descriptions. But they soon realized this could not be done because their groups had a dual purpose: both AA and religion.

At another time a number of us AAs wanted to enter the field of alcohol education. I was one of them. We associated ourselves with some non-alcoholics, likewise interested. The non-alcoholics wanted AAs because they needed our experience, philosophy, and general slant. Things were fine until some of us AAs publicly disclosed our membership in the educational group. Right away, the public got the idea that this particular brand of alcoholic education and Alcoholics Anonymous were one and the same thing. It took years to change this impression. But now that this correction has been made, plenty of AA members work with this fine group and we are glad that they do.

It was thus proven that, as individuals, we can carry the AA experience and ideas into any outside field whatever, provided that we guard anonymity and refuse to use the AA name for money-raising or publicity purposes.

I’m very sure that these experiences of yesterday can be the basis of resolving today’s confusions about the narcotic problem. This problem is new, but the AA experience and Tradition which can solve it is already old and time-tested. I think we might sum it up like this:

We cannot give AA membership to non-alcoholic narcotics-addicts. But like anyone else, they should be able to attend certain open AA meetings, provided, of course, that the groups themselves are willing.

AA members who are so inclined should be encouraged to band together in groups to deal with sedative and drug problems. But they ought to refrain from calling themselves AA groups.

There seems to be no reason why several AAs cannot join, if they wish, with a group of straight addicts to solve the alcohol and the drug problem together. But, obviously, such a “dual purpose” group should not insist that it be called an AA group nor should it use the AA name in its title. Neither should its “straight addict” contingent be led to believe that they have become AA members by reason of such an association.

Certainly there is every good reason for interested AAs to join with “outside” groups, working on the narcotic problem, provided the Traditions of anonymity and of “no endorsements” are respected.

In conclusion, I want to say that throughout AA’s history, most of our special-purpose groups have accomplished very wonderful things. There is great reason to hope that those AAs who are now working in the grim regions of narcotic addiction will achieve equal success.

In AA, the group has strict limitations, but the individual has scarcely any. Remembering to observe the Traditions of anonymity and non-endorsement, he can carry AA’s message into every troubled area of this very troubled world.

Bill W.