

SELF-HELP GROUPS CAN REALLY UNDERSTAND ME AND MY PROBLEMS

What are self-help groups and how do they help?

A man was lost in a forest and had been wandering about for several days, unable to find his way out. One day, he saw another man approaching him from a distance. His heart filled with joy.

“Now, I can find out which is the right way out of this forest”, he thought to himself. When they neared each other, he asked the man, “Brother, will you please tell me the way out of the forest? I have been wandering about here for several days and I cannot find the way out.”

The other man said, “ Some time back I was also lost like you. I did not know the way out. But I can now assure you that it is easy to get out of this forest by keeping to the beaten track. Do not go the way I went; I know that is not the way. Now, come, let me show you the way out”.

Just as this man who was lost in the forest found one with a similar problem, we too have self-help group members. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) / ‘Narcotics Anonymous’ (NA) is a fellowship of people like us who have one thing in common – problem with alcohol / drugs. Our common aim is to stop taking drugs and to continue to stop. To do this, we meet regularly, talk and help one another, to lead the NA way of life.

A man was watching his middle-aged neighbour planting a small mango tree. He asked him, “Why do you need to plant this mango sapling when your uncle has gifted his huge mango orchard to you some years ago!” The man rested on his spade and said, “All my life, I enjoyed mangoes, but never from a tree that I planted myself. By planting this mango sapling, I am just trying to repay the others who planted trees for me. This way, I, too, enjoy the benefits.”

Similarly, as N.A. (Narcotics Anonymous) members, sharing the benefits we have received, keeps us sober and also shows us the way to help others.



No qualification is needed to belong to this fellowship - the desire to stop using drugs is enough. N.A. meets its expenses with the money that its members give voluntarily. Nothing is collected by N.A. as fees. No one is compelled to pay anything. If one cannot afford to pay, one need not and he is still welcome. N.A. does not run any hospitals, clinics, counselling centres, etc. N.A. does not offer financial help. It does not offer jobs nor does it help anyone find a job.

What do we mean by ‘Anonymous?’

When one approaches NA for help, he

- need not declare his name
- need not give his address
- need not state where he works
- need not disclose any information regarding his family



Even if some particulars are given, they will not be revealed to anyone outside the fellowship. Thus all members are anonymous. No one outside knows anything about us, individually.

How do we get in touch ?

We can get in touch with recovering persons by attending NA meetings that are held in different parts of the city. The list of venues can be obtained from the treatment centre. Those of us, who are not in a position to be part of a group either due to distance or for any other reason, can still keep in touch with other members by writing letters or through the telephone. Reading and studying books, periodicals and other literature written by N.A. members can also be of help.

What can a newcomer expect at a meeting?

All NA groups have regular meetings. There are no hard and fast rules as to how the meeting should be run. Each group can have its own way of running the meeting. What is most commonly seen is described below.

- Those attending the meeting sit on chairs usually in a circle or in rows.
- The meeting begins with everyone reciting the *Serenity prayer. After this, the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions are read out.

- The person conducting the meeting will ask one of the members to start speaking. Or he may invite someone to share his feelings / experiences.
- Some of these meetings have only two or three selected speakers for one day.
- When a member speaks, he gives his first name and then declares that he is an addict; for example, “My name is Raju, I’m addicted to drugs”.
- The member will speak only about his own experience. He will usually describe how drugs affected his life, how he got out of it and what his life is today. Since he is disclosing his problems to the group, this is called ‘SHARING’. He shares this with the group members as one would with a close friend.
- While someone is sharing, no one interrupts. What is shared is totally confidential. No one talks about it outside.
- When someone has shared his problem, no one offers advice. If one member wants to help another, he will share about a similar problem he had faced some time in the past, and how he overcame it. These automatically serve as guidelines.
- Towards the end of the meeting, a cover or bag or box is passed around. Each member puts in whatever he would like to contribute. This is usually only a few rupees. This money is used to pay for refreshments, to pay the rent for the place where the meeting is held, etc. No one is under any obligation to pay anything. Usually newcomers are not asked to contribute
- The meeting closes with the Serenity Prayer



What exactly do we gain by attending meetings?

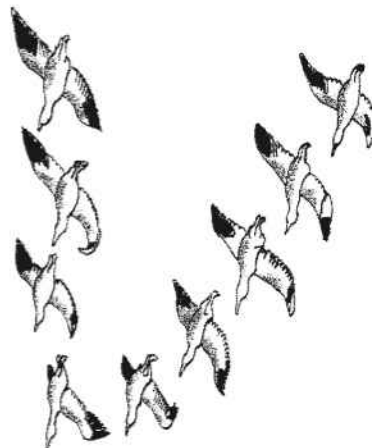
The benefits are many. There are many who do not even know to read or write; but by merely attending meetings, sharing and listening have become sober and have changed their lives.

‘I can’t do it alone, but we together can’ is the basic philosophy, which helps self-help group members to stay sober.

When you see geese heading south for winter, flying along in a ‘V’ formation, you might like to consider what science has to say about why geese fly this way.

When geese head south for the winter, they fly in a 'V' formation. By flying so, the whole flock adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

When a goose goes out of line, there is a drag and every one helps him to get back into the formation. If a goose gets sick, one or two other geese will get out of the formation and take care of the sick goose. They wait till the sick goose is able to fly again.



People who share a common direction can get where they are going more quickly and easily because they are travelling on the thrust of one another.

It is difficult to stay sober all by oneself (like a single goose trying to fly). With the help of fellowship, it is easier to give up drugs - the thrust of one another helps us to go ahead in reaching sobriety. If one has relapsed, other recovering persons come to his assistance and help him to get back (standing by one another).

If we do just two things when we attend the meeting, our lives will change for the better – sharing and listening.

Sharing

When we are sharing our thoughts and experiences, we should be honest. It does not matter if one speaks well or badly. What is important is that the truth should be spoken. One may wonder, “When I share, it may help other members. But how does it help me?”

A farmer, whose corn always took the first prize at the state fair, had the habit of sharing his best corn seeds with all the farmers in the neighbourhood.

When asked why, he said, “It is really a matter of self interest. The wind picks up the pollen and carries it from field to field. So if my neighbours grow inferior corn, the cross pollination brings down the quality of my own corn. So I am concerned that they plant only the best”.

When we help others, we are also helping ourselves. Sharing our thoughts and experiences helps in two ways;

- As we share facts about ourselves in front of others, we gradually accept these facts.

- When we are confused about what we should do, just speaking our minds to the group will help us to understand what the problem really is. Our will to act is also strengthened as we share.

Listening

We can gain almost as much from listening in the meeting as we do by sharing. When we listen without any intention to criticise, and with an open mind to fully understand what the speaker is saying, we can learn a lot. As we listen, it is quite likely that some of the problems the speaker had faced may be troubling us also. In this way, we can gain a lot of insight into our problems.

How it works

If we are willing to make the effort and ready to take certain steps, we can recover. These are the principles that make our recovery possible.

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over drugs – that our lives had become unmanageable

- Addresses – denial
- Promotes – honesty and self-examination
- Principle – honesty

Step 2

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity

- Addresses – insanity of the secret hope that one can use again comfortably
- Promotes – openness to new internal experiences
- Principle – hope

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him

- Addresses – letting go
- Promotes – acceptance (preliminary to 5, 7, 11), thus relieves shame; forgiveness which relieves guilt; care which reduces self-destructive behaviours
- Principle – faith

Step 4

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves

- Addresses – guilt, shame, grief and other powerful negative emotions
- Promotes – an understanding that all of us make mistakes and at times need help; preparation for honest sharing in human relationships
- Principle – courage

Step 5

Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs

- Addresses – anxiety that will cause anger, disgust, rejection
- Promotes – honesty, capacity to be intimate
- Principle – integrity

Step 6 – Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character

- Addresses - hard to recognise character and personality problems without outside help
- Promotes – awareness of oneself and impact on others, personal honesty and willingness to change
- Principle – willingness

Step 7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings

- Fascinating and mysterious step
- Principle – humility

Step 8

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all

- Addresses – making the list is painful, is easier to blame others
- Promotes – maintaining relationships
- Principle – empathy

Step 9

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure themselves or others

- Addresses – anxiety, fear of rejection, punishment
- Promotes – repairing of damaged relationships, experience of forgiveness and relief from guilt
- Principle – justice

Step 10

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it

- Promotes – keeping character defects in check, self observation and admission of problems
- Principle – perseverance

Step 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out

- Promotes – development of one’s own experience
- Principle – spiritual awareness

Step 12 – Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs

- Promotes – freedom from bondage of self-centeredness
- Principle – service

Practising the steps leads to

- Honesty
- Acceptance and forgiveness
- Humility
- Altruism
- Openness
- Willingness
- Courage

What you should do

We suggest that you look for a sponsor as soon as you become acquainted with the members in your area. Being asked to sponsor a new member is a privilege so don’t hesitate to ask someone. Sponsorship is a rewarding experience for both; we are all here to help and be helped. We who are recovering must share with you what we have learned in order to maintain our growth in the NA programme and our ability to function without drugs.

This programme offers hope. All you have to bring with you is the desire to stop using drugs and the willingness to try this new way of life. Come to meetings, listen with an open mind, ask questions, get phone numbers and use them. Stay clean just for today.

