ALTRUISM AMONG ALCOHOLICS

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In practice altruism means giving more to others than we are expected to give while taking less for ourselves than we’re allowed to take. Expressions of this kind of practical altruism vary from everyday gestures of courtesy to selfless, heroic action. Altruism can mean accepting simple inconveniences for the benefit of loved ones or giving one’s life for one’s friends. Altruism motivates kindness to strangers and aid to weary colleagues, food and shelter for the needy and care for the friendless. Altruism inspires our concern for troubled others whose wisdom is less tested, whose temperament is less stable, and whose resilience is less tenacious than our own.

True altruism involves giving something personal: one’s time or trust, one’s loyalty or support. True altruism has no hooks; we act unreservedly, even anonymously, for others’ well-being. We ask nothing in return, neither friendship nor loyalty, neither religious conversion nor ideological assent, neither appreciation nor thanks. The realization of this ideal may seem rare indeed; one might think only of Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama as true altruists. Yet in everyday affairs, altruism is surely incarnated in the sacrifices of loving parents and in the tireless tutelage of diligent teachers. And there is another arena of life filled with examples of altruism: Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), in which altruism is daily demonstrated by the extraordinary emotional support and unheralded generosity recovering alcoholics extend to one another. This movement crosses every racial, religious, geographical, age, and language barrier and is still growing. AA’s success exemplifies
altruism's role in physical healing, psychological recovery, and spiritual transformation.

Alcoholism is both a physical disease and a spiritual malaise. It is also life-threatening: unchecked, it kills. If alcoholics do not quit drinking, their condition eventually becomes severe enough to require hospitalization; in time, they will die.

Sooner or later all alcoholics reach a point at which their drinking is completely unmanageable, their lives utterly out of their control. They each experience a moment in which they face a choice between further self-degradation, illness and eventual death or drastic action and dramatic change. They can no longer conceal or rationalize their condition.

When the alcoholic comes to that moment of crisis and decision, what can he or she do? For many alcoholics AA is the only effective channel to survival, sanity, and sobriety. AA provides the company of other successfully recovering alcoholics, which is critical at this point. True, alcoholics were once thought of as self-centered, irresponsible, aggressive, narcissistic, and hostile people. But the research of Tamarin and Neumann (1974) challenged that stereotype. Their studies concluded that alcoholics, who are often over-controlled and inhibited, also seem to be unusually altruistic and selfless, hard working and highly idealistic. Together, recovering alcoholics have the one irreplaceable ingredient that seems to catalyze the healing process: personal experience.

Clinical and anecdotal evidence consistently indicates that almost all alcoholics are unable to initiate recovery and maintain sobriety by themselves. Good intentions are utterly insufficient for sobriety. Despite his or her remorse and subsequent sincerity, almost every alcoholic soon realizes that going it alone, especially in the early stages, is foolhardy and self-defeating; it almost universally results in relapse. The support, experience, and wisdom of other alcoholics is crucial.

The healing power in AA rests on a number of psychological elements: the nonintrusive listening of other alcoholics; the knowledge and experience of despair, which all alcoholics have undergone; supportive reassurances and unfeigned, nonthreatening intimacy with other alcoholics whose confrontations may be blunt and brutally frank but are clearly informed by personal suffering; the availability of successfully recovering alcoholics who tirelessly share their concern and time with no reservations or expectations of personal reward. These are the beneficial traits that newly ar-
rived alcoholics routinely encounter, the psychological sparks that ignite AA's effectiveness.

AA is a surprisingly loose and informal confederation. To join AA the alcoholic merely locates an AA meeting, walks in (no invitation is necessary), sits down, and listens. The only requirement for AA is a sincere desire to stop drinking and the willingness to attend meetings. While joining AA is a very simple matter, doing so may require all the courage and humility an alcoholic can muster.

AA meetings are held many times each day in thousands of large cities and small towns around the world. AA has no admission fees, no dues, no formal registration procedures, no membership rolls, no age restrictions (some AA members are in their early teens), no uniforms or secret handshakes, no political or religious affiliations. The only quasi-structure in AA occurs at the beginning of each meeting when a list of twelve truths about the alcoholic's life—the so-called Twelve Steps—are read aloud.

AA members create an interdependent healing environment. Members understand one another; acceptance is tangible. A sense of kinship and inclusion are indispensable ingredients in the first steps toward sobriety. AA members need not know one another to help and be helped. Their particular brand of shared suffering binds them. In fact, the intensity and openness of their concern and support for one another often surprises and confounds new members and sober outsiders. Alcoholics' deepest failings are their common bond. Admitting their failures and unashamedly discussing shameful events usually elicit knowing nods and smiles of recognition from fellow alcoholics who know exactly what is being said; they've been there.

As alcoholics confront the destructive force of their drinking, they learn that they can redirect their addictive energy toward a healthy pathway that, for most alcoholics, also involves moral change and spiritual recovery. They recognize that sobriety is but one step along a lifeline of choices. Alcohol is a major symptom (but not the only problem) in alcoholics' addictive and avoidant lifestyles. They may, for example, find periods in which their craving erupts in indirect ways; alcoholics are often heavy smokers who also consume oceans of coffee and mounds of chocolate.

The indispensable core of AA's healing power—the sine qua non of its existence—is the group meeting. As each speaker addresses the group, the meeting becomes an arena of intense listening. No
one speaks very long, a few minutes at most. No one interrupts. Group members (all of whom have "hit bottom" in their own way) listen with intensity and patience. Their noninterruptive listening has a rare empathic quality, and the atmosphere is clearly supportive.

Confidentiality and anonymity are taken for granted. A person may even speak, unseen, from the back of the room. In those few minutes, a speaker may reveal (perhaps for the first time) the self-defeating facades and self-destructive delusions that have constituted his or her alcoholic lifestyle. During these AA meetings each person introduces himself or herself to the group by first name only, adding that he or she is an alcoholic ("I'm Bill and I'm an alcoholic"). New members then make any brief, candid statements or comments they wish about their lives, particularly about alcohol's role in it, and what they are learning by being sober. Group members simply listen; no one is challenged or questioned; there is usually no dialogue or discussion, no rules about what to say.

Because of the alcoholic's history of denial, AA encourages frankness. Alcoholics tell harrowing, sometimes brutal tales about their excesses, often with little delicacy or reserve. In the group the recovering alcoholic finds honesty and support all around; lies and further denial are transparent and useless. Evasion and equivocation hinder recovery. This blunt, unadorned self-descriptive communication seems to possess extraordinary, life-saving properties. In the psychological complexities of hearing and accepting others, of unchallenged self-revelation and undefended self-disclosure, a powerful therapeutic milieu develops. Without the need for lies and facile dodges, the truth surfaces; alcoholics see the extent of their past rationalizations, excesses, and excuses. They see how completely alcohol has sullied their thinking, stultified their emotional lives, and twisted their reason and judgment. They realize how their thoughts have been profoundly convoluted. They see that self-delusion and lies are useless. They learn to face their self-indulgence, to accept responsibility for their past and present behavior. They also learn to avoid the destructive excesses of unproductive guilt, depression, and remorse. And, most critically, they learn how to live without alcohol. They see how others do it. They realize that they drink not because they have problems; they have problems because they drink. And at last they grasp the basic message that it's taken them their lifetimes to appreciate: if they
don’t drink alcohol, they won’t get drunk! Thus, self-revelation is
the first step to sobriety and self-discovery in AA.

Newcomers to AA are urged to attend meetings as often as pos-
sible, usually at least once a day for a minimum of thirty to ninety
days; the more meetings the better. As one AA member put it, “We
have all known the newcomers’ terror and humiliation. In the
group we all share the same kind of pain in personal ways. That’s
all we need to know about one another: the pain. There’s no arguing
or debating in group meetings, no right or wrong way of being
sober, as long as you don’t drink. There’s just the reality of being
an alcoholic with other alcoholics, admitting the worst to them
and to yourself, knowing that just being with them, even briefly,
is the way back to decency and sobriety and survival. Everyone
understands the other person’s search because everyone is still
searching, no matter how long they’ve been sober, because sobriety
never ends.”

In the transformation from addiction to sobriety, from self-
destruction to emotional and spiritual redemption, alcoholics have
a healing benefit: knowledge of their self-defeating potential. They
have learned the worst about themselves the hard way. The worst
mistakes they might make have, in all likelihood, already been
made long ago. They have little else to lose.

There are pitfalls to sobriety, however. Alcoholics always leave
a wake of shattered relationships, broken promises, and disillu-
sioned allies behind them. In the waning days of their drinking,
the people closest to them are usually drinkers themselves or are
well-meaning but ill-advised loyalists (the enablers) who actually
abet, however, unwittingly, their addiction. When healing begins,
alcoholics have to establish their priorities, often for the first
time. They learn that it is now essential to honestly take inventory
of their whole way of relating to other people (Johnson 1973).
They soon realize that their entire lives have—without excep-
tion—been connected to or dominated by alcohol. Consequently,
they may have to withdraw from certain relationships and social
routines connected to alcohol. They may have to end long-term
friendships and switch jobs. And, as much as they may have
prayed for the alcoholic’s recovery, the alcoholic’s family (if they
are still around) may find his or her sobriety a taxing and stressful
experience.

At some point in their recovery, the newcomers may select a
“sponsor”—a more experienced recovering alcoholic whose sobriety and wisdom have been tested, someone more mature in the healing process, a mentor and counselor who will act as the alcoholic’s immediate source of advice and support. But above all else, the crucial requirement for alcoholics’ recovery and for those who still love them (or are trying to) is that they remain sober, no matter what the cost!

The religious overtones, the spiritual rhetoric and redemptive imagery in AA are difficult to accept for some critics who say the AA approach is naive or unscientific. There are also a few newly formed atheist AA groups who reject the mention of God or a higher power as a factor in their recovery. Some critics also feel that AA (and many of the self-help organizations based on the AA/Twelve Step recovery model) panders to uncritical, self-deceiving losers who are really kidding one another and who use meetings simply to blow off emotional steam, to achieve an inexpensive catharsis. These critics overlook the countless recovered alcoholics whose lives are sober evidence of something intensely powerful at work. In its brief history, AA has provided a path to sanity, sobriety, and serenity and restored life and hope to millions of alcoholics around the world.

The social scientist may ask, Is AA a valid example of altruism in the strict sense? Do recovering alcoholics give support and acceptance to one another altruistically or for their mutual benefit? Are they on a power binge or an ego trip or just trying to ease their own personal discomfort? Are AA members selflessly altruistic or are they really using one another, out for their own sakes, concerned only for their own sobriety (Batson 1990)?

From a clinical or research perspective, these are challenging questions. In the day-to-day world of the recovering alcoholic, however, they are utterly meaningless. Why and how AA works is less important than that it does work. In fact each AA meeting ends with the powerful admonition, “Keep coming back; it works!”

Viktor Frankl (1984, 113) once wrote, “Man is able to live and die for the sake of ideals and values which give meaning to life.” AA helps people see sobriety as a life-saving ideal and each sober moment as a valued step in the life-long journey toward serenity. Success in AA terms is measured “one day at a time”; each day’s success means life itself.
REFERENCES


