

AA Slogans Can Harm Recovery

Recovery from addiction has much to do with the addict's maladaptive personality traits. (The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous calls them character defects.) Not surprisingly, recovery goes better if AA sponsors use the various AA slogans selectively, in the same way that psychotherapists vary their treatment techniques. The idea is to correct the patient's personality defects and selectively re-enforce the personality strengths, i.e. the defenses that help the patient.

All human beings have some personality traits that help them, but they also have some traits or flaws that lead to psychological malfunctions. The idea in recovery is for the AA sponsor to gently – and firmly – confront the alcoholic's/addict's primary psychological defense mechanisms. Knowing how to do that is what makes some sponsors more effective than others.

How it this looks in theory For a closer look at the problem, here are some time-honored AA slogans:

“Easy does it”, “One day at a time”, “Turn it over”, “Let go and let God.”

And here are some of the alcoholics'/addicts' favorite – but faulty – mental defense styles, that help them make it through life – one day at a time.

Emotionally immature: The baby

Passive-aggressive: The covertly angry obstructionist

Schizoid: The loner

Obsessive-Compulsive: The perfectionistic nitpicker

Histrionic-Narcissistic: The dramatic temptress or the aloof dandy who is in love with himself.

Sociopath: The glib, glad-handing con artist.

Maladaptive as these traits can be, one of the problems with addiction is that drugs or addictive behaviors make these pathologic mental defense styles worse. Paradoxically, addicts can abuse the aforementioned AA slogans and thereby cause themselves to relapse repeatedly.

How it can work in practice Here are some guidelines on how sponsors can use these slogans to help their sponsees work the program more effectively.

Don't tell emotionally immature newcomers “Easy does it,” do things “One day at a time,” or “Turn it over.” Such patients are experts at turning it over . . . they'll turn everything over to anybody who will take it. Also, they love the one-day-at-a-time idea because to them, planning is the pits.

Don't tell passive-aggressives to let out their anger at other people. (They love to make amends – apologize for past misdeeds – provided it will cause harm to others.) Instead, tell them to talk their anger out and discuss it with their sponsor, in their support group or in a therapy group where they can get therapeutic feedback.

Don't take histrionics-narcissists on 12-Step calls – they really get off on the drama. (This also applies to old-timers who are dry, but have never changed their bitter personality style.) And don't appoint them to extend welcomes to people at the door of the AA meeting hall. (Primping and glad-handing – instead of carrying the message – is their favorite way of relating.)

It is the Schizoid loners who need to do 12-Stepping and hand shaking at the door of the meeting hall, even though – or especially because – it makes them uncomfortable to do it. And they need to do it over and over in order to break out of their isolation and to grow emotionally.

Don't ask obsessive-compulsives to be the coffee maker or to supervise putting the chairs away after the meeting. (They'll bring a set of coffee pots from their own office – sterilized every week for health reasons – and one or two of their minimum wage office staff to make sure that chairs are removed properly and stored properly.)

“Let go and let God” is bad advice for the immature baby, but it is proper advice for obsessive-compulsives. Why? Because they feel like they are God. (Not in the grandiose self-inflating sense that narcissists or sociopaths do, but in the “responsible for saving the world” sense. That's why they apologize for the weather when it rains at the picnic.)

Don't nominate the sociopath for group treasurer. Honesty is not his strongest suit. And don't encourage or invite histrionics/narcissists or sociopaths to be your main speaker for the meeting. They'll revel in their own performance . . . and the audience will laugh or yawn . . . but little else will happen – either to the speakers humility or to the emotional/spiritual growth of the audience.

. . . Just let it flow . . .

Last week I had a nightmare. I dreamt that I was at an AA meeting at which the emotionally immatures ate all the cookies, the passive-aggressives kept spilling coffee on the rug and the histrionics-narcissists gave their lurid drunkalog once again.

Meanwhile, the schizoids were hiding in half-measures row, the compulsives were obsessing about how the group will pay next month's rent for the meeting hall, and the sociopaths were trying to figure out from which newcomer to borrow money.