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How AA Meetings Can Affect a Relapsing Drinker

Does it make sense to send – or accompany – a relapsing alcoholic or addict to open AA meetings? The answer is yes. Here is an example of what might happen.

In her drinking days, Marilyn was an angry woman. Much of the time she was wrestling with a storehouse of secret fears and angers. She often wondered: Are my fears realistic, or am I paranoid? Some of her fears were based in reality, e.g. she was frequently driving while drunk, and she was afraid that one day her luck might run out and she would be arrested.

A major source of her anger was the humiliation she felt whenever her friends and family reminded her about some of the things she had done while drinking. (Actually, she was having alcoholic blackouts, which she herself diagnosed as having “amnesia due to work stress.”)

Being coerced into alcoholism treatment by her worried parents came as a relief. Unfortunately they didn’t do it right; they just bullied her into getting “some kind of help.” To placate them, she had three sessions with a psychotherapist and went to several AA meetings. Two miserable weeks later she secretly went back to drinking.

This time, though, the drinking was not the same. Marilyn was no longer able to pretend that she was not an alcoholic. While sitting in those meetings, she had seen too much, heard too much and felt too much. The AA people were right: She was “powerless over alcohol.” When she tried to cut down on her drinking, she was miserable. After one beer she’d get angry because she couldn’t have a couple more. Telling herself to have “just one more for the road” didn’t work anymore.

“I’d get envious and angry at my old drinking buddies,” Marilyn recalled. “Sitting in my favorite bar, I’d watch them having a good time. Some of them were on their 10th beer (they drank like I used to while I was trying to nurse my second beer).” But that left her completely sober and angry at her family

because they had started this whole thing when they made her go to those AA meetings.

To get these angry thoughts out of her head, she’d try to insinuate herself into whatever semblance of “conversation” her drinking buddies were having at the moment. She’d try to join them in their laughter but somehow their old jokes, like “alcoholics are drunks who have to go to AA meetings” were no longer so funny.

Another problem was that some of her friends had begun to see her as “different” because she had taken a shot at alcoholism treatment. Once, when she suggested (laughingly) that there was a possibility that she might actually be an alcoholic, one of the old drinking buddies said – assuringly – “Why I’ve spilled more than you’re drunk.”

So, Marilyn had another beer, but she also began to wonder, who would drive her home since she was now probably over the legal limit? What really made her angry was her friends’ reaction when she told them she worried about driving. They didn’t seem to have any such worries; they just laughed and ordered more beer because they had never had a DUI themselves.

“I realized they would all be driving home later. I couldn’t believe how irresponsible they were. Had I really been like that? I guess I must have been.”

As a therapist, I’ve seen this happen many times. If you’re an alcoholic – and a person with a conscience – a dozen AA meetings will spoil your alcoholic drinking for good. (An added benefit: If you – as a non-alcoholic – accompany a relapsing friend to an AA meeting, the impact on you will be significant. Nothing will happen to your own drinking, but you will see alcoholism in a new way and you will be less inclined to ruin your life by being co-dependent.)

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