



Twelve Traditions guide many mutual-help support groups

Alcoholics Anonymous was born more than 63 years ago, on June 10, 1935, the day Dr. Bob S., a well-known surgeon, quit drinking for good with the help of Bill W. By 1946, AA had grown from two to 24,000 members. As is usually the case, with growth came growing pains. Groups were springing up all over, and these groups needed guidance on how to relate internally and with the world outside AA. But AA was a fellowship, not a corporation; rules of order common in a business setting would not work here.

As Bill W. wrote in AA's early years, "Should we ever harden too much, the letter might crush the spirit. We could victimize ourselves by petty rules and prohibitions; we could imagine that we had said the last word. We might even be asking alcoholics to accept our rigid ideas or stay away. May we never stifle progress like that!"

He met the challenge by creating the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. Today, millions of people in this country attend mutual-help support groups. The AA traditions have been adapted for use by hundreds of different fellowships, such as Gamblers Anonymous (GA), AI-Anon and Overeaters Anonymous; they are the glue that hold those groups together. Most groups adapt the traditions to meet their needs by simply substituting their own words for AA-specific language (eg, compulsive gambler for alcoholic).

"The Twelve Traditions are to the group what the Twelve Steps are to the individual," writes Joe Klaas, author of *The Twelve Steps to Happiness*. Klaas says the traditions are designed to work for the good of all members in Twelve Step and other mutual-help groups. In this way, they invite cooperation and discourage competition, enhancing the idea of fellowship and unity. A brief overview of the traditions helps elaborate on Klaas' comments:

A Twelve Step journey is not a solitary one. When you join a group, you move automatically from "I" to "We." **Tradition One** emphasizes that personal recovery depends upon the group's unity and that "our common welfare should come first."

The fellowship is not a hierarchy. **Tradition Two:** "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern."

The heart of Twelve Step philosophy is held in **Tradition Three**, which states "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking." No one who honestly seeks to recover should ever be denied entry to any Twelve Step group.

Tradition Four says "Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole." Each AA group has a great deal of flexibility to conduct itself as it wishes, provided it adheres to the steps and traditions.

Tradition Five is to groups what Step Twelve is to individuals: a reminder of service, of the responsibility members and groups have to carry the message of recovery to those who suffer.

While groups can cooperate with each other and with outside organizations, **Tradition Six** states that they should not endorse or finance other enterprises. Autonomy is protected and the purpose of the fellowship is not compromised.

Twelve Step groups are about recovery, not making money. **Traditions Seven and Eight** describe how groups are supported by voluntary contributions. While groups should get reimbursed for literature

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and related expenses, they may never charge for services.

Tradition Nine is a reminder that groups are not organized in the traditional sense because no one member is in charge. Leadership rotates and representatives serve, they don't govern.

When you don't take sides, you cannot lose. **Tradition Ten** advises that a group should never be drawn into public controversy or express opinions on outside issues.

Traditions Eleven and Twelve deal with anonymity and "the need to place principles before personalities." Recovering people learn early on to praise the program, not the person.

Having withstood the tests of time and change, the traditions remain strong and relevant, a guide for millions who are united worldwide in fellowship.

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).