



The spirituality of recovery is about a new way of life

As John Mac Dougall, manager of Spiritual Care at Hazelden, points out, abstinence is but one element in recovery from addiction. Many people quit drinking or another addiction only to start practicing it again. They don't realize that quitting is merely the beginning of recovery, and they treat the symptoms of the disease and not the disease itself.

"The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous only mention alcohol once, in Step One," reminds Mac Dougall. "The Twelve Step model of recovery that we suggest is spiritual. It's about getting honest, finding a higher power, and admitting that you can't do it alone."

Spirituality, says Mac Dougall, is three-dimensional and deals with the quality and nature of our relationships as they relate to a higher power, to others, and to ourselves. All three of these components are intertwined, he says. "For example, it's not possible to love God and treat others like dirt," said Mac Dougall.

People come to treatment with a variety of motivations. "They often come to get away from something they view as worse than treatment—divorce, bankruptcy, bill collectors. . . . Most people come to escape from the pain of the disease. We help them make a turn. Instead of running away from sickness, we encourage them to move toward the positive values of recovery and health."

Some people come to treatment having neither a conscious belief in nor a relationship with a higher power, explained Mac Dougall. "We aren't concerned with what they believe about God's name and address, or whether they view AA or their peer group as their higher power."

"A lot of people come into treatment saying, 'I don't believe in anything I can't understand,' or 'I don't need to rely on a higher power because I do everything myself.' I ask them if they ever take aspirin, which was discovered in 1897. People took it for a hundred years without understanding how it worked, because it made them feel better. Then I ask them if they knit their own clothes or grow everything they eat. We help them to see connections and how we're interdependent for almost everything we do."

When people complain they don't have a definition of God, Mac Dougall tells them he doesn't either. "Instead of pointing out what to believe in, I ask them to pay close attention and note what they observe in their own life or in others' lives to see where the power is showing up. If they take a close look at their peers, they can see them getting better. I urge them to look for the extraordinary thing that's happening in our ordinary lives."

Our higher power is like heat from the sun. When we sit on a screened porch on a hot summer's day we can feel warmth generated by the sun, even though we cannot see the source of that warmth. If we go into an air-conditioned house to get a glass of water, we know the warmth is still there, ready for us. It did not leave when we walked away.

Spirituality is something like that. We may walk away, but our spiritual self waits for us patiently, like a trusted friend.

The spirituality of recovery is a different way of life, characterized by letting go of control and accepting the guidance of a higher power, peers in recovery, and Twelve Step programs. It offers a process of spiritual growth that goes far beyond the mere cessation of drinking and drug use. This new way of life teaches honesty, willingness, trust, community, respect, serenity, courage and wisdom.

ALIVE & FREE

"In recovery, we do much more than dry out," says Mac Dougall. "We come back to life."

--*Published March 8, 2004*

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).