



Twelve Step recovery is spirituality at its best

Nancy Kehoe, Ph.D., is a Massachusetts psychologist who for 20 years has trained mental health care providers to tend to the spiritual as well as the psychological needs of their clients. At a Hazelden Women Healing conference in April, Kehoe emphasized that although spirituality and religion can be integrally linked to mental health, the therapeutic community is usually reluctant or ill-equipped to explore these areas with clients -- even though doing so could greatly enhance and speed up their recovery.

Understanding how people image God or a Higher Power and what role spirituality plays in patients' lives can give therapists valuable information for diagnosis and treatment, Kehoe said.

Mental health professionals can learn much from Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization founded on the premise that recovery and healing involve body, mind, and spirit, she says. Life is out of control for people who struggle with substance abuse or other addictive behaviors, and the first step toward recovery is acknowledging that healing requires more than willpower.

"Most people try to live by self-propulsion," says AA's Big Book, "Alcoholics Anonymous," the basic text of Twelve Step groups. But to recover they have to "quit playing God." "We are not saints," says the Big Book. "The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress."

That spiritual progress is not about religion; it's about accepting that you need help from a source outside yourself to recover from addictive practices. The "Higher Power" who guides in the recovery journey is defined by each individual. It might be a spiritual being, it might be nature, or it could be a God of traditional religions. As the authors of the Big Book put it, "To us, the Realm of the Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek."

While recovering people are encouraged to pray or meditate for guidance and wisdom, they don't expect a Higher Power to do all the work of recovery for them. And members of Al-Anon understand that prayer alone can't make a husband or a mother or a child stop drinking or using drugs. An addict has to want to recover, and has to take that first step for him or herself. In the meantime, Al-Anon members discover that while they can't control the actions or inactions of their loved ones, through the help of their group and their Higher Power, they can learn how to care for themselves in healthy ways that will enrich their own lives and spirits.

Twelve Step recovery is spirituality at its healthiest. Recovering people are told to honestly examine their character defects, and to then make amends to those they have harmed. This "relational" approach is not the same as the religious concept of doing penance, explained Kehoe, because it requires individuals to interact with those they have harmed in order to right a wrong. In Twelve Step recovery, making amends is a process that involves inner reflection, accountability and action.

Recovering people also learn how to deal with shame and guilt in ways that nurture their spirits. They grow to understand that shame is feeling bad about who you are, while guilt is feeling bad for what you've done. They often find that it is easier to forgive others than to forgive yourself, but with time, integrity, hard work, and the help of a Higher Power, you can make amends even to yourself.

Kehoe said that Twelve Step groups have also discovered how rich traditions, ritual and community -- resources that have renewed peoples spirits throughout history -- can aid in the recovery journey. Mutual-help groups are communities in which people gather to tell their stories and listen to another's story with respect and without judgment. Certain rituals such as reading a meditation for that day, checking in with each other, and taking turns sharing a problem or concern, are familiar practices that

ALIVE & FREE

unite and comfort. In Twelve Step groups, all participants are equal, and all have the common spiritual goal of recovery.

--Published May 19, 2003

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).