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AM I LOST?

FIELD SOBRIETY GUIDE



A LITTLE GUIDE TO THE BIG BOOK

FOR ALCOHOLICS AND THEIR PEOPLE

Field Sobriety Guide No. 001

Am I Lost?

A Little Guide to the Big Book

**THANKS FOR
LETTING ME SHARE**

Number One: Am I Lost?

“Welcome” may not be what you want to hear right now. Maybe you’re reading this because you’re wondering if you have a problem with alcoholism or addiction. Or maybe you’re wondering if someone you love does. Maybe you know something about recovery, addiction or Alcoholics Anonymous, or maybe you don’t. It doesn’t matter, this is a good place to start.

This is scary, hard stuff. Plus, the idea of not drinking or using—for a while—is also probably scaring the bejesus out of you. This is a good news/bad news situation. The bad news is that you're right to be scared; you're venturing off into the unknown in search of someone and something you lost a while ago and a lot of things are about to change. Oh wait, that's also the good news.

What is this about?

We're alcoholics and addicts and we got sober following the Program of Alcoholics Anonymous. What is Alcoholics Anonymous? Well, I'm very glad you asked. From the mouths of the alcoholics themselves:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

You may have heard a lot about AA; that it's very religious, that the people believe there is only one way to recover and are very judgmental, that the Big Book was written by a white man 80 years ago and isn't relatable. Maybe you've heard that AA is kind of a cult and its methods amount to "faith healing." That it requires people to live under a forlorn veil of shame, condemned to an eternity of introducing themselves as, "My name is X and I'm an alcoholic."

That's not exactly our view. We think AA, the Big Book and the "Twelve Steps" are a practical, "doable" way of addressing addiction, coming to grips with the past and ourselves and helping to understand and implement the changes we need and want to make in our own lives. Those changes are what help relieve the obsession with drinking or drugs, or whatever it is ruining your life. Some people come to AA because their lives were beset by alcohol, by addiction, and had become unmanageable. Or maybe we were just barely "managing," keeping the plates spinning for now. Maybe the wheels hadn't all come off, yet. Whatever that life is or was, one thing it wasn't? Sustainable. That's the point a lot of us come to eventually:

I can't go on like this anymore.

In AA-speak, that feeling is called "desperation," and it's considered a gift. The idea is once you recognize things have to change, the "Twelve Steps" described in the Big Book are a great way of identifying what that change needs to be and then making it happen. Of course, the Twelve Steps and AA are primarily about solving your problem with drugs and alcohol, but we think it goes way beyond that. We think this is actually a pretty significant opportunity to re-calibrate and re-orient one's life. To push that big red "RESET" button. If you're feeling kind of lost, maybe this isn't such a bad idea?

Sure, part of this is dealing with "what is" and, yes, it's also about coming to grips with the past and what happened. But, this isn't a Program of apologies, sackcloth and ashes. This is a Program designed to help you get your life back. Alcoholism and addiction are terrible and largely misunderstood diseases, but we think "recovery" is about much more than coming to terms with a disease.

We think this is about recovering yourself: The Person you were meant to be and the life you were meant to lead.

We think this isn't just about stopping drinking. We think this is about building a happy, sustainable life filled with meaning and purpose. These Field Sobriety Guides are intended to help you navigate your own recovery and sobriety. We decided to start putting them together to try and explain some of the things that have helped us and others get sober and, more importantly, stay sober. We wanted to share the things that have helped us lead happy, productive and meaningful lives.

This is not a book of answers. You're headed into the wild, friend! We can only share how we navigated some of the same challenges, or didn't (learning from our failures is a bit less painful!). We can't tell you precisely how you should recover, we can only tell you how we did. There's some trial and error involved in this and quite a bit of bushwhacking. You're going to have to find your own way (there are lots of people eager to help), but only you know the way back to what you lost. We're writing these guides so, that, at the very least, you won't make our mistakes. We all know it's more important to make your own.

What is Alcoholics Anonymous and the Big Book?

Alcoholics Anonymous has a unique history and here's the thing people often don't get: There's no one really in charge. AA came into being in the 1930's, the pioneering and pretty insane conception of two well-known alcoholics: Bill Wilson and his co-founder, running buddy, the formerly drunken proctologist from Akron, Ohio, Dr. Bob. The history of AA is amazing, bizarre, filled with highly unlikely coincidences, remarkable transformations, miracles even. AA has literally saved millions and millions of lives in its 80 years of existence and recent studies show that following the Program of Alcoholics Anonymous is more effective than traditional, so-called evidence-based treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy and the like.

Here's a brief history of AA. Bill Wilson was an alcoholic financier living the high life in New York City during the 1920's. Like many of us, he had known he was an alcoholic for many years, but didn't really know what to do about it. Bill W, as he is referred to in AA lore, began that chaotic, dark descent that marks terminal alcoholism. Bill pursued every possible treatment for the disease of alcoholism that he could: Rehab hospitals, Bella Donna treatments, Jungian psychotherapy, Freudian psychotherapy, Hydrotherapy, the Oxford Group, and anything else he could think of. None of it worked. Bill continued spiraling down a path he knew led inevitably to his death or confinement in a mental hospital.

It was 1935 and Bill W was close to the end of his rope. He was living in a brownstone in Brooklyn with his wife. He had a gin bottle hidden in the toilet tank for special occasions and was limited to

sleeping on a mattress in the basement for safety reasons. He was a broken man, living in what he would later describe as the “jumping-off place.” What happened? Another alcoholic, an old friend named Ebby Thacher, called out of the blue to ask if he could come over for dinner and share how he had gotten sober.

This famous dinner, drunken Bill W and sober-ish Ebby T, is the manger scene of Alcoholics Anonymous. Ebby shared his good news, the story of how he had found God and had been spared from his alcoholic obsession. Bill was not sold. His aggressively agnostic religious views were usually not challenged by things like illogical, absurd and sentimental religious conversions, but they crumbled in the face of Ebby’s simple question:

“Why don’t you conceive of your own higher power?”

This is the nub of AA: Acknowledging that it just might be possible that a power greater than ourselves exists AND just might be able to help us recover. The niftiest trick,? That higher power is one of your own conception.

Soon after this dinner, Bill W checked himself into Towns Hospital (a rehab hospital dedicated to the treatment of alcoholism on Central Park West in New York) never to drink again. Even during his detox and treatment at Towns, and probably still wearing a hospital-issue bathrobe, Bill W sought permission to begin working with the other alcoholics being treated at the hospital. He wanted to share what had just happened to him, how Ebby’s simple question had caused him to re-evaluate his own life, had let him glimpse what it might mean to be imbued with true spiritual meaning. How that conversation and what followed had helped begin to quench his ruinous obsession with drinking. Ebby’s question had prompted an enormous shift in Bill’s perspective and he wanted to share this with as many other alcoholics as he could. And so, Alcoholics Anonymous was born.

Well, technically, it was formed in Akron, Ohio, a few months later. Bill was marooned there following a failed business deal and things were looking bleak, Bill didn’t even have the cash to pay his hotel bill. He was clinging to only a few months of sobriety and wasn’t sure he could hang on in the face of such daunting challenges. Instead of drinking, the thing he knew how to do, he put this new system to the test, and reached out to find another alcoholic. He was connected, pretty much at random, with an alcoholic proctologist, Dr. Bob. Their talks not only helped keep each other sober, they began helping other alcoholics, too, Soon, they were holding meetings, packed with alcoholics looking for a way out. That’s how AA was born.

In the early years, AA meetings were held in various locations, including hospitals and churches, and were attended by a small group of recovering alcoholics. The program spread through word of mouth, and by the late 1930s, there were AA groups across the United States. The principles of the AA program were outlined in the organization’s book, "Alcoholics Anonymous," first published in 1939. The book includes the famous Twelve Steps, which outline a spiritual approach to recovery and have become a cornerstone of the AA program, along with “12-Step” approaches for a wide variety of other maladies.

When people refer to “Working the Steps,” they are referring to the process of answering the questions posed by the Twelve Steps, learning how to develop or expand one’s spiritual life, identifying the things that drove our addiction and coming to understand how to change those things. It’s about charting a course for life that’s not just alcohol-free, but “Happy, Joyous and Free.”

The crux of AA’s theory of alcoholism and addiction is this: A real alcoholic or addict cannot control their drinking or using. Their efforts to “stop drinking” are unlikely to succeed in the absence of a spiritual experience. Does this mean one must become some kind of alcoholic monk in order to recover? No. AA says it’s simply necessary to identify your own higher power, something you can actually believe in, something that gives your life meaning, structure and purpose. Or could. AA works by helping people develop a more spiritually-based life, by helping them find that meaning, structure and purpose.

Whose version of spirituality are you required to adopt? Your own. Not a trick or a gimmick. This is actually how it works. This is not a process designed to tear alcoholics down to the studs and replace everything with sober, alcohol-free siding. This is a chance to re-frame the entire house, to renovate a life that has been under-producing the important things like happiness, love, peace, kindness and serenity. It’s a chance to build something that is happy and sustainable. Does that sound so bad?

Am I An Alcoholic?

Well, you don’t look that alcoholic. The truth is, there are a lot of us and you probably couldn’t pick us out on the street. The statistics aren’t very cheerful. Something like 30 million people in the United States struggle with addiction and alcoholism. Addiction is not only the third leading cause of preventable death in this country, it’s a disease that destroys relationships, families, friendships—really everything it touches. The true toll extends well beyond those 30 million. The worst statistic is that only about 7% of the people who need help, will ever seek it. The shame, the stigma and the fear, and the lack of information, can combine to create a pretty pessimistic outlook and make this mountain seem pretty un-climbable.

Are you an alcoholic? We don’t know. If you go back to the notes page, there are links to some online assessments you can try. You could also just ask yourself this question:

Is alcohol a positive or a negative force in your life?

We’re very big on list-making and writing exercises. So, if you’re at all like us, get out the carefully chosen supplies, perform the necessary rituals and get ready to activate those writing muscles. Try writing a “Pros and Cons” list for alcohol, or whatever substance or thing you’d like to address. You might also add a similar list of the pros and cons of getting sober or going alcohol-free. Also, I’m very big on ranking things, so if you want, you can rank each item on your Pros and Cons list from

1-5. Simple addition can produce some really amazing insight. Spend some time on this, use your own notebook if you'd rather.

Here's another question: Are you happy? Is your life everything you want it to be? If you're like the rest of us, probably not, but are there problems you'd like to fix? What are they? Are any of them connected to alcohol or substances? You could make another list to see where things stand on those topics.

Sometimes, people will cheekily suggest this as a test for alcoholism: "Just try stop drinking and see if you can." If you can't, ka-boom, "you're an alcoholic!" I'm not sure that proves anything other than it's hard for ANYONE to stop drinking, alcoholic or not. As we said, the main symptom of alcoholism is an inability to control or stop one's drinking. That is the nature of this disease. We're not bad people, drinking simply because we lack the decency and will-power possessed by others. We drink because a weird, mostly unknown set of genetics, environmental factors, emotional developments, personal history, trauma and a stew of other mental health conditions somehow combine to create a world where we are almost completely reliant upon, and believe we cannot function without, alcohol or our substance of choice.

If you're an alcoholic like me, one of the first things you'll encounter if you try to stop drinking are withdrawal symptoms: Shaking, cold sweats, debilitating anxiety, convulsions, hallucinations. Those are indications that you have a very serious disease, people can and do die from the consequences of withdrawal. Please be safe about detoxing and seek medical attention before you try and stop drinking on your own. People literally die.

If you're still not sure about where things stand and you really want to do a test with live alcohol (maybe we're getting closer to our answer already), this might be a better one. This test was devised by a woman named Marty Mann—she was one of the first members of AA in the early 1940's. She was also one of Bill W's sponsees and proteges and did a lot to popularize AA and the idea of recovery from addiction. She came up with this clever idea. Please note: I am not advocating drinking, but here is Marty Mann's suggestion:

Decide what your limit is for the next week or two. Stick to it.

How many drinks will you have a day? Fine, have that wind-down drink after work, but can you limit it to just that one? Ok, make it two. The point is: A real alcoholic can't control their drinking. Over time, it's probably going to be pretty tough sticking to that one or two drink rule. So, make your rule and write it down, then figure out how you're going to track it. We put a bunch of blank pages in the back, so that would be a great place to keep track of your "experiment." You could even write down how you're feeling as you do this. Here's something important: If you're going to drink it, you have to write it down. If you notice that you're having a difficult time being honest with yourself about how much you drink, that's probably worth noting somewhere. Anyway, Good luck. Maybe I'll see you in the next section?

How Does Alcoholics Anonymous Work?

As we discussed, Alcoholics Anonymous came into being in the 1930's, and the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous was published In 1939. We're now on the 4th Edition of the Big Book and it is one of the biggest selling books of all-time. They do a pretty good job explaining the purpose of the Big Book in the very first paragraph:

We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics precisely how we have recovered is the main purpose of the book.

I'm going to pop in here with a bit of my own story. I knew I was an alcoholic when I was 18 years old. I finally started to try getting sober in about 2010. It took me almost ten years to get my first year of sobriety. I relapsed a lot during that time and I tried just about everything: rehab hospitals, different therapists and therapeutic modalities; breakthrough programs, relapse prevention programs, Intensive Outpatient Programs, sober living, sober coaches, the Sinclair Method, Baclofen, Smart Recovery, AVRT, EMDR, CBT, DBT. None of that produced more than 90 days of sobriety for me over the course of a decade.

I went to AA meetings nearly every day. I wanted to get sober so badly, but I just couldn't stop drinking. I knew my life was slipping away, that I was losing everything and everyone I cared about. I still couldn't stop drinking. I ended up moving to New York during the Pandemic, alone, broken and pretty much out of hope. Desperation finally produced what AA calls "willingness." I found a sponsor, listened to what he told me and started studying the Big Book. Not reading the Big Book, I'd done that already and the margins were full of my snarky dismissals. Reading the Big Book hadn't gotten me sober. I began to study the Big Book and I realized something freaky:

The Big Book is true.

The stuff in those pages actually happened. Bill Wilson, a larger-than-life figure of the 1920's and '30s, was an alcoholic pretty much like me. As I saw the parallels with my own life, my own history of alcoholism, I began to think this crazy thought:

If Bill W was an alcoholic like me, maybe what he did to get sober would work for me, too?

And that is the second critical thing about AA: It's not about commands or rules or the one true path to recovery, it's governed by the laws of attraction. An alcoholic looks at a sober person and says, "I want what she has." What she has is the serenity, peace and general okay-ness that goes along with sobriety. How she got it is by studying the Big Book and working the Twelve Steps described therein.

Here's maybe a good time to list out the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

Step Four: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step Five: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step Six: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step Seven: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Step Eight: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Step Eleven: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Step Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

It's usually advisable to work the steps with a Sponsor (we'll cover how to get one of those later, too) or even with a small group of other alcoholics, but this basically involves reading the Big Book carefully and doing the required thinking, self-assessment, and, if you do it the way we like to, a lot of writing. Working the Steps is not just a way to stop drinking, it's a way to interrogate the assumptions of your life, re-framing them to produce joy and happiness. It's a way to understand who you are, who you could be, who you were meant to be.

What about AA Meetings?

There are roughly one ka-jillion different AA meeting out there—there are mens meetings, womens meetings, couples meetings, morning meetings, midnight meetings, big meetings, small meetings, Big Book reading meetings, discussion meetings, Beginners Meetings, Step Meetings, Tradition meditation meetings, LGBTQIA meetings, Atheist Meetings. As noted earlier, there's not a ton of oversight in AA and pretty much any group of AA members can start a meeting. I think this is one of the really great things about AA—the sheer number and diversity of meetings is amazing. The advent of Zoom AA Meetings has made meetings from all over the world accessible to the alcoholic sitting in their kitchen in their pajamas. You are not even required to have your camera on.

Here's the basic idea: Go to a meeting, in-person or online, and listen. When you hear someone talking that you identify with, listen harder and pay attention to what they say about how they got sober. Take those lessons home (or to the other room if you were in your kitchen) and try them out. Go back to the meeting again, or try another one. Do some more listening and maybe even share how things are going with you. Listen some more and try some more stuff. Eventually, someone will be listening to you explain how you got sober and how you stay sober. Trust me, that's a powerful moment and moments like that happen at AA meetings every day.

How Do I Go to a Meeting?

Well, it's really, really simple and terribly hard, all at once. We've put a bunch of links on the resources page. Use those links or ask folks you know. Also, did you know you can even call an actual phone number and a live, AA-savvy alcoholic or addict will talk to you and help you find a meeting? They have even been known to pitch in and help find transportation. Note: You'll be riding shotgun with an alcoholic.

Okay, you found a meeting that's convenient. Now you just go. Walk right in, if you're not sure where to go, a question like, "Excuse me, where's the meeting?" will get you there. No one is going to ask who you are or why you're there. I mean, they might do the name part, that's just being friendly, but feel free to make one up if that makes it feel safer. The only point is to stay. Pick a seat, any seat, but stay. If an in-person meeting feels like too much, that's cool, Zoom meetings are great for checking AA out. In-person and Zoom meetings are usually run in pretty much the same way and follow similar formats. As mentioned, it's probably easier and more acceptable to attend zoom meetings in your PJs, if that's a consideration.

Here's how meetings usually work: The chair will call the meeting to order and someone will read the Preamble. There may be other readings. At some point, the Chair will introduce a speaker, who will share their story for 20 minutes or so. Then there is often a break and the chair may ask if this is anyone's first meeting, or their first time at this particular meeting. If you'd like to introduce yourself, you may. You can just raise your hand and when recognized say, "I'm (state your name) and this is my first meeting."

You're now a "newcomer," the reason for the whole program. People will be pretty enthusiastic and may even seek you out after the meeting to see if you'd like their number or if there's some other way they could help. This is a chance to dig in and start meeting people or, it's cool to just keep checking things out—there is no pressure, take things at your own pace.

Next, the chair may give people a chance to share their "day-counts." It's common for people in their first ninety days of sobriety to announce their "day count" when they go to meetings. People will raise their hands and announce how many days of sobriety they have. Again, sharing your "day count" is entirely optional. The basket may be passed at this time, the standard donation is \$2.

Now, the chair may give "day-counters" a chance to share. Meaning, if they'd like, they can be recognized and can speak for the next 2-3 minutes, hopefully on a topic that relates to their recovery. When the "day-counters" are done, the chair will open up sharing for everyone else at the meeting.

At precisely the 60th minute, people will stand up and the meeting is over. Meetings end very, very punctually and usually with the participants reciting the Serenity Prayer together. There are meetings where people also recite the Lord's Prayer. This is not an AA-mandated thing, it means that the people who attend this meeting voted to conclude it this way. AA is kind of a democracy and if something at one meeting bothers you, find another one. That's why there are lots of meetings.

Meetings can be funny, poignant, powerful, really sad and sometimes, kind of infuriating. You can hear really beautiful, insightful things and some really stupid things that will set your teeth on edge. Remember the part about no one being in charge? Anyone can raise their hand and talk at an AA meeting. The Program of Alcoholics Anonymous comes from the Big Book, not from the mouths of other alcoholics at AA meetings—be mindful of that difference. I love going to meetings, both live and online, and I like having a portfolio of different kinds of meetings—it's important to find meetings and sober activities that resonate with you.

Getting sober and working the Steps has not been some kind of spiritual comeuppance, it's not like being Bender in the Breakfast Club and having all of your Saturday mornings spoken for, until the merciful end of time. It's not anything like being sentenced to Quiet Study Hall. It's actually about being set free. Working the Steps, studying the Big Book and getting sober have heralded the most exciting, dynamic, creative and kind of terrifying phase of my life. I didn't just manage to stop drinking—the Big Book and the Twelve Steps ushered peace, joy, serenity, love and just plain happiness into my life.

If you'd like what I have, I know how you can get it.

T.B.D | **THANKS
FOR LETTING
ME SHARE**

The Pros and Cons of:

date _____ / _____

Pros

score

Cons

Subtract "Cons" from "Pros"

Today I'm Grateful...

date ____ / ____

The form consists of a large grid of small squares, approximately 20 columns wide and 30 rows high. A vertical line is drawn on the right side of the grid, creating a margin. The grid is intended for writing a list of things the user is grateful for.

Today I'm Grateful...

date ____ / ____

A large grid for writing, consisting of 20 columns and 30 rows of small squares. A vertical line is drawn on the right side of the grid, approximately 10 columns from the right edge, creating a margin. The grid is intended for writing a list of things the user is grateful for.

Today I'm Grateful...

date ____ / ____

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NOTES

date /

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NOTES

date _____ / _____

A grid for writing notes, consisting of a header section with the text 'NOTES' and 'date ____ / ____', followed by a large grid of small squares. A vertical red line is present on the right side of the grid.

NOTES

date _____ / _____

NOTES

date ____ / ____

A large grid of graph paper for writing notes. The grid consists of 20 columns and 30 rows of small squares. A vertical red line is drawn on the right side of the grid, approximately 19 columns from the left edge. A horizontal red line is drawn at the bottom of the grid, approximately 29 rows from the top edge. The grid is otherwise empty.