



**MANY ARE OF THE OPINION** *that any “program” for sexual addiction or other mental health issues that is not grounded in science is probably fluff.*

The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) emerged largely from divine inspiration and personal experiences of recovery; scientific theory and research played very little role. Thus, some may immediately dismiss 12-Step programs as a waste of time. In fact, for decades this was the stance taken by most therapists and addiction researchers, whilst AA proponents were claiming, “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path.”<sup>[1]</sup> Similarly, SA (Sexaholics Anonymous) claims that, “No one seems able to stay sober and progress in recovery without [participation in the fellowship of a 12-Step program].”<sup>[2]</sup> However, it turns out that scientific studies have generally provided support for the effectiveness of 12-Step programs. In other words, even though 12-Step programs are not based in science, they have more or less been supported by science. As a result, nowadays therapists and researchers are more apt to encourage involvement in 12-Step programs (even if they do so somewhat begrudgingly because they cannot make sense of how something not grounded in theory and research can actually work).

Support for 12-Step programs by therapists, however, is not entirely new. In fact, Carl Jung, a pioneer in the field of psychology (and one of Freud’s peers), was convinced of the role of spirituality in addiction recovery, and his thoughts on the matter indirectly inspired the formation of AA<sup>[3]</sup>. In the 1930s an alcoholic (Rowland H.) in America went to Switzerland to be treated by Jung. Upon being discharged by Jung after a year of unsuccessful treatment, Jung told him his only hope was to seek a spiritual experience. Rowland joined the Oxford Group (an Evangelical Christian movement of the time) and did have a spiritual transformation that led to his recovery from alcoholism. He shared his experience with his friend Ebby T., who was then transformed himself. Ebby T. in turn paid it forward to his friend Bill W., who was in the chains of alcoholism. Bill W. was similarly able to recover by turning to God, and went on to co-found AA. Bill W. and Jung later corresponded via

mail, and Jung reiterated his conviction that alcoholism was a spiritual problem requiring a spiritual solution. Further, in one of Jung’s books he noted that when someone from the Oxford Group seeks his help for alcoholism, he tells them to stick with the Oxford Group, because “I can’t do it better than Jesus.”<sup>[4]</sup> Jung’s understanding that addiction is fundamentally a spiritual problem in need of a spiritual solution is at the heart of 12-Step programs such as AA and SA, and, in our opinion, is largely responsible for their success.

Many well-known contemporary therapists are similarly very supportive of the role of 12-Step programs in addiction recovery. One such therapist is Dr. Patrick Carnes, who is credited for putting sexual addiction on the map (before him few thought sex could be addicting). He is a world-renowned therapist, a researcher, and very prolific writer. Several of his books are on how to effectively “work” the 12 Steps. In, *A Gentle Path through the Twelve Steps* (which we highly recommend), he notes that, “The Twelve Steps have been so useful and translatable because they tap into the essential human process of change and make that process more explicit, more understandable, and more sustainable” (p. 1)<sup>3</sup>. He even goes so far as to credit the 12 Steps as being, “one of history’s great intellectual and spiritual landmarks.” (p. 1)<sup>[5]</sup>. Similarly, Dr. Douglas Weiss, another one of the most successful sexual addiction therapists in the world (Executive Director of the Heart to Heart Counseling Center in Colorado Springs, CO), also sees 12-Step work as integral to addiction recovery. He wrote a book called, *Steps to Freedom*<sup>[6]</sup>, which is an excellent guide for Christians working the steps for sex addiction recovery. Thus, nowadays many of the most respected therapists see 12-Step involvement as one of the most important pieces of an effective recovery program for addiction<sup>[7]</sup>.

In addition to support from respected therapists, 12-Step programs are also generally supported by the scientific community, which by its very nature is skeptical of

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everything. While there may still be a naysayer here and there, and the evidence is not unequivocal, a considerable amount of scientific research suggests 12-Step programs can be helpful to addiction recovery, particularly when paired with therapy. Recent articles published in *Scientific American*<sup>[8]</sup> and *National Geographic*<sup>[9]</sup> both attest to this. Additionally, a special issue of the peer-reviewed journal *Substance Abuse* included over half a dozen cutting-edge studies of AA. In the introduction to that issue, Dr. John Kelly (with the Center for Addiction Medicine at Harvard Medical School) states that hundreds of published studies support the effectiveness of 12-Step programs for addiction recovery<sup>[10]</sup>. One study included in this special issue was a 7-year longitudinal study of over 400 teens who participated in a one-year outpatient treatment for substance use (alcohol and/or drugs), and were then followed for several years after (about half who also had at least one additional severe mental illness)<sup>[11]</sup>. Teens who regularly attended 12-Step meetings, whether or not they had additional mental illnesses, had abstinence rates over 3 times higher than those who did not regularly attend meetings. Another recent study compared 887 veterans treated (at a VA clinic) with a program focused on 12-Step work to a similar group of 887 veterans treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy<sup>[12]</sup>. Two years later the 12-Step participants had 25% higher rates of abstinence. Building on these findings, a recent longitudinal study of 1945 adults in treatment for alcohol or drug addiction found

that 12-Step attendance at one time predicted abstinence several years later, but abstinence at one time did not predict later 12-Step involvement<sup>[13]</sup>. This provides evidence that 12-Step involvement leads to abstinence, rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, the gold-standard of research studies is the experiment, and there is also experimental evidence to support 12-Step programs. For example, one randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind study of cocaine dependence found that patients assigned to a 12-Step condition had nearly 20% higher abstinence rates than those assigned to treatment-as-usual, regardless of whether they are simultaneously given medication to reduce cocaine use or simply a placebo<sup>[14]</sup>. Hence, the evidence to support 12-Step programs includes data from longitudinal and experimental studies.

In short, the general consensus among therapists and researchers is that involvement in a 12-Step program can be helpful to addiction recovery. Often called “mutual self-help groups,” 12-Step program can help people recover from addiction with minimal if any formal therapy, or can enhance the effectiveness of therapy<sup>[15]</sup>. Thus, it is not just a fad or a movement; rather, it is an inspired recovery program that has a long history of success and continues to win over more and more skeptics. Of course, whether it will help you in your recovery depends largely on you. For, as they say in 12-Step circles, “keep coming back, it works if you work it.” The program works, but only if you work it.

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[15] Harwood, T. M., & Abate, L. (2010). *Self-help for mental health: A critical review*. New York, NY: Springer.