

How It Works



***Fifty Chosen Articles:
Number Thirty-Two.***

***Today's article consists of two modern versions of "How It Works".
The first was originally posted in August 2015 and the second was posted in September 2016.***

AA needs to adapt itself to modern times rather than cling to the past.

A New "How It Works"

By John Sheldon

Writing the book Alcoholics Anonymous, what we today call the Big Book, was a moment of genius and creativity. I can just imagine the excitement in the room when Bill read the steps to the group for the first time, and what an interesting debate it must have been as they hashed over the precise wording. There were those on one side who wanted the program to be religious, specifically Christian, and there were others who wanted it to be completely secular, no god at all, and those who were between the two camps who helped bring about a compromise.

Imagine the passion those early members felt for the fellowship as they watched it grow, as they made new friends while getting sober together!

New groups were forming all over the country and AA was a real movement that was really going somewhere. The fellowship was looking forward, to the future. It was free of any burden from the past, no founding fathers to revere, no sacred texts, everything was fresh. The Twelve Traditions formed from AA's early experience were formally adopted in 1950 when AA was only fifteen years old. The AA members of that time were experiencing a program that was designed by their generation and for their generation.

Sadly, this doesn't describe AA in the 21st Century.

No longer is AA looking forward to the future, instead it clings to the past. The AA of today is no longer dreaming, no longer tapping into the collective imagination and talents of its membership. AA isn't building anything new for future generations. In twenty-four years, the Big Book will be 100 years old! Those of us who are members of the fellowship today should be horrified at the thought that this book will be used as the central text in the year 2039.

That's not the future any of us should wish for AA.

It's time to get some movement back into this movement.

What could "How It Works" look like at an AA meeting in the 22nd century?

This is my effort to answer that question.

We are Alcoholics Anonymous, members of a world-wide fellowship of men and women united by a common purpose to stay sober and help others to recover from alcoholism. For us alcohol was cunning, baffling and powerful. It took us to that great jumping off place where we met terror, bewilderment, frustration and despair. Without help it was too much for us!

But we found help in Alcoholics Anonymous and the collective experience of those who preceded us in recovery. Here, we learned that honesty, open mindedness and willingness were indispensable if we were to reclaim our lives. Although our personal stories and experiences vary, this is a general description of the path we took.

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable. This humbling admission was a relief, the fight was over. We came to believe we could be helped through the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, and we made a decision to turn away from obstinate denial, to let go of our old ways, and to follow suggestions.

We took stock of ourselves to uncover the truth about who we were and the events that shaped our lives, and we shared our stories in their entirety with another person, leaving nothing out. Through this process we learned the value of character building and we persistently worked to let go of those personal traits that blocked us from our usefulness to others. Understanding the damage left in the wake of our drinking, we made amends to those we had harmed, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Having followed these suggestions, our old ideas and attitudes were replaced with a new outlook on life. We became less interested in ourselves and more interested in the welfare of others. Our past became our greatest asset, the primary tool to help other alcoholics. At last, we felt that we were set on a new course.

We maintained this new attitude by continuing the practice of personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitting it. We sought to improve our conscious awareness of these principles, and the serenity, courage and wisdom to carry them out. Everything we had done and all that we experienced to this point produced within us a

deep and meaningful transformation, and having had this experience, we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

This may seem a daunting task, but we assure you that none of us follow these principles perfectly, they are suggestions only, and there is no requirement they be followed at all. Together, we have recovered and with us so can you.

We members of Alcoholics Anonymous of the 21st Century need to build on the foundation that was laid by the AA of yesterday. The time has come to build something new, something better that will reach more people, save more lives and make a real difference. In order to do this, we need to stop clinging to the past. Honor it yes, even revere it, but we mustn't let it burden us. If we don't take responsibility for this fellowship and help to prepare it for the 22nd Century, then we are doing a grave disservice to the founders. Alcoholics Anonymous simply cannot survive long into the future if it refuses to dream, to change, to adapt and adopt, to think big.

We have the technology to gather the experience of millions of alcoholics the world-over and to transmit that experience in the language of our generation. We can and should rethink everything. For example, can't we have more than one version of the steps? Can't we take the principles of the steps and translate them into language for people of all faiths or people with no faith at all? If an AA group somewhere decides to write its own version of the steps while staying true to the basic tenants, isn't that something we should celebrate and encourage?

There's a lot of excitement among the agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA. We are writing new literature, blogs, creating websites, holding conventions, creating new groups, workshops for new groups, rethinking the steps, even debating these things. It's an exciting time, a time of change. This is where the change begins, but the rest of the fellowship needs to join in. We need to build it together or we will ultimately drift apart.

Change is coming, it's inevitable, but we have a duty and obligation to those who preceded us to act as capable stewards of the fellowship so that future generations can build on our work.

John Sheldon is from Kansas City, Missouri and has been a sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous for over 30 years. He launched the website AA Beyond Belief in the fall of 2015 and stopped new postings in February 2021. He now has a website with some 250 podcasts: [Beyond Belief Sobriety](#).

An Updated "How It Works"

By Hilary J.

The program is a tool to help us to recover from our addictions. It requires us to be completely honest with ourselves, and to take personal responsibility for our own behaviour and attitudes. We have found this to be a crucial element in our recovery.

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you truly desire recovery, and are willing to go outside your comfort zone and work hard to change your life and your behaviour, then you are ready to take certain steps.

Some of these appeared very daunting. At first, most of us thought we could find an easier, softer way; but we could not. Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point, and chose the path to sobriety. Here are the Steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery:

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addictions—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to accept that we needed strengths beyond our awareness and resources to cope with our problems.
3. Made a decision to use the program to overcome our addiction.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves: acknowledging our strengths and weaknesses, and the fears, resentments and selfish behaviours that contributed to our addiction.
5. Admitted to ourselves without reservation, and to another human being, the details of that inventory, both positive and negative.
6. Were ready to let go of our destructive patterns.
7. Humbly sought to change our behaviour and attitudes in order to achieve sobriety.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Searched within ourselves for our rightful path in life and the power to carry that out.
12. Having achieved recovery through taking these steps, we tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Many of us exclaimed, “What an order! I can’t go through with it.” Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is that we are willing to work hard to improve our lives and maintain our recovery. The principles we have set down are merely guides. We claim progress rather than perfection.

Hilary J. is from Vancouver, British Columbia and attended her first 12-step meeting in 2007. She has been an active member of the Vancouver AA Fellowship since 2010, holding service positions in different groups over the years. Although she first got sober in mainstream AA working the traditional Steps, “the God thing” was always an issue and that’s why she jumped at the chance to help launch a secular group, Vancouver Sober Agnostics, and rewrite the Steps and “How It Works”.
