

# Struggling in AA is a Rite of Passage!



***By Caitlin Trombley***

If you ever struggled with AA as a nonreligious person, you're not alone! It seems to be the norm for almost all nonreligious folks who walk into AA. For my PhD dissertation, I interviewed 51, predominantly nonreligious, individuals in Alcoholics Anonymous from all over the place. As individuals told their stories, two things were clear: (1) nonreligious members face many barriers in AA, and (2) they are resilient as hell. Below, I'll summarize what I found and reported in my 200-something page [dissertation](#).

## **Barriers Faced in AA**

There were 5 notable barriers that were commonly mentioned among participants in the study: (1) The belief that AA was religious and therefore being nonreligious was a liability; (2) The religious undertone and "God talk" in meetings; (3) Prayers in meetings; (4) The Big Book; and (5) Discrimination. Upon their initial meeting, many participants entered AA and assumed it was a religious organization based on information from friends, family, Hollywood portrayals, or their own observations. This led to anxiety and doubts about whether they would be accepted in AA as nonreligious individuals. In fact, it wasn't uncommon to hear stories about people pretending to be religious, trying to be religious, or feeling shame that they weren't religious. One participant explained this well, saying:

"I thought that you had to be religious to be in AA. I thought, I'm not welcome here because I'm atheist. So, I thought I had to lie. I attribute my not being able to stay sober long term, until now, to that lie. Like, I was lying about what I believed and the whole time they say, fake it till you make it. But it was hollow. All of the work

was hollow. I felt like I wasn't welcome here because nobody ever talked different than a Christian. Ever. At least it didn't sound like it to me. And I thought, well, that's the only way."

Fortunately, that individual learned the best path for their recovery was to be their authentic, atheist, self. She boldly came out to her group letting them know her beliefs (or lack thereof) and has maintained her sobriety since. As I said, resilient as hell!

The second barrier that was common to hear was about how frustrating it was to hear all of the religious context and God talk in meetings. Constantly hearing religious talk made people feel insecure and unwelcome. One of my favorite quotes from a participant discussing this was, "going to meetings it's like going to a revival. Everything that happened good was God, and everything bad that happened was taking their will back from God." Participants discussed how the religious would often talk about their past atheism in negative ways, and how the only way they were able to get sober "legitimately" was by becoming religious. Fortunately, we all know that's not true!

If you want to rip your hair out when you hear the Lord's Prayer at a meeting, you're not alone. The third barrier was centered around prayers, prayers, and more prayers. Every single person I interviewed talked about how frustrating this was—even the few religious folks I interviewed! For a lot of people, when they initially came in, they heard a prayer and said "nope!" and walked out thinking they'd never be back again. Fortunately, many ended up in secular meetings and finding the good folks like you who feel the same. As I mentioned, even the religious individuals thought it was a bit much. One of them said it best when he said, "I go to mass for my faith, and AA for my sobriety."

The fourth barrier was centered around the Big Book, whether it be its sexism, the we agnostics chapter, the 12-steps, or the Big Book Thumpers that try to force it down your throat. Most people first picked up the Big Book early on, hoping it would give them the advice and answers they needed to promote their recovery. Unfortunately, for most, they were baffled, or downright disgusted, at what was inside. When it came to working through the 12 steps, participants would ask peers in their traditional AA group on how to go about the god concept, and were either told a) it can be anything, it can be doorknob! (someone please, PLEASE explain where the heck this comes from?!) or b) go read *We Agnostics* and it should help (spoiler alert, it didn't). There were so many good quotes about this, but below I'll share a few of my favorites that really drew this point home.

"I would share that I was uncertain about how to do, say, step 3, and people would say well, just fake it until you make it. And that just was not workable to me. Or some people would say, you know, just let go, you know, the doorknob can be your higher power and I was like, no, that's not going to help me be sober. That's just bullshit."

Participants would express that these alternatives were frustrating, not helpful, and offensive. Often, groups would be lenient about whatever higher power someone would

initially choose, but the longer they were in the group, the more the group started to expect more. When talking about this, someone explained:

“And it’s a bait and switch cause they say anything can be your higher power, right? So, they draw you in. Anything can be your higher power. It could be a doorknob, it can be your cat, it can be like, anything you want. Right? So, then someone like me goes in and says, well, I like nature and science, and they say that’s great. Come on, that’ll do. But it doesn’t take very long before you have to get on your knees and pray to “nature” to intervene in your life and so, it doesn’t work, it’s a bait and switch cause it’s like, you can have this very ambiguous kind of idea of nature and the sky and the ocean. You can have those ideas, but then, you’d better get serious, or you’re never gonna get sober.”

The expectation that your replacement God was to become a Christian God was common among participants. The other popular recommendation, as I mentioned, was to go read the *We Agnostics* chapter. This sort of reiterated the idea that religious members thought that at the end of the day, you ought to end up believing in a higher power if you’re going to be “serious” about your recovery. I think one participant said it best when he said, “yeah, read the chapter *We Agnostic!* It makes you gag,” considering that the whole premise is that you will eventually find God.

Last but not least, the most frustrating barrier for me to hear about, was the blatant discrimination that happens in AA from the Big Book Thumpers. I don’t think these need much explanation, as most of you reading probably have your own story to tell. But for the sake of knowing you’re not alone in this, I’ve provided a few stories below as told by the participants.

“I’d been sober three decades or so, and after meeting this young man, maybe he’s in his thirties, I don’t know, cornered me after the meeting. And he said if you don’t find Jesus, you will never stay sober. I was like look are you kidding me? I’ve got over 30 years of sobriety already. Yeah, got it.”

“People after meetings have come up to me and told me that, you know, I’m gonna burn in hell and I’m like, okay.”

“When we first started our meeting in person, oh, we got so many visitors who would come and just double down. They would just be like, well, I have a higher power and his name is Jesus Christ and I have a lord and savior and all this kind of like, like next level. Oh, there was this one guy who lived in a county south of us, which is very, very conservative, and he would come and, like, if anybody would cry in the meeting or even just reveal something that was really heartbreaking, like oh, you know, my mom was diagnosed with cancer or something like that, he would zoom in on them after the meeting and start saying, well, you know, it could be because you need God, and God would really help you with this and stuff.”

“I was just told to shut up about my agnosticism. I was told that I would drink again if I didn’t find a God. I was told to get the fuck out of AA because I was a nonreligious human being, you know, it was brutal. It was, it was truly brutal.”

Yeah, pretty frustrating to read about, right? The good news is, like I said in the beginning of the article, two things were clear from this research (1) there are some pretty serious barriers people face in AA and (2) nonreligious people in AA are resilient as hell. When people told me their stories, they talked about the barriers, but more importantly, they talked about how they overcame them and the strategies and tools they used and still use to have a successful recovery. I’ll talk about these more below.

## **Resiliency**

Nonreligious individuals in AA use a variety of resources and create a variety of different tools to meet their needs. Everyone’s recovery journey is unique, so it makes sense that each person uses a different set of resources to support their recovery. The people I interviewed used a combination of the following to help their recovery: not working the 12 steps; creating an alternative higher power; drawing from outside resources; practicing gratitude, meditation, and mindfulness; being active and vocal about defending their nonreligious beliefs at meetings; and attending secular AA meetings.

It’s often hammered into your head that in order to stay sober, you absolutely have to work the steps. However, a good amount of people I interviewed said f\*\*\* it, and didn’t work the steps at all. They thought the most valuable aspect of AA wasn’t the program and the steps, but the people and connections they had. They really practiced the “take what you want and leave the rest” motto. For those that didn’t work the 12 steps at all, they explained that to them, any iteration of the alternative versions was one in the same. Someone said:

“It’s kind of like Splenda, you know, it’s still the same framework that you’re processing. You know, there’s the Wiccan 12 steps that basically change a Christian white higher power to a feminine higher power, it’s just a different version of God so they’ve just swapped the anthem for a different deity but it’s still a deity and I’m like, you know, we have to take some ownership in our own lives too. God’s not going to get you out of the crack house, you can’t pray your way out of the crack house. You kind of got to get on your feet and walk.”

For others, the issue with the 12 steps was that it just made them feel bad about themselves. Specifically, for a lot of women, making an inventory when you already have a low self-esteem makes everything worse, not better. If anything, we need an ego boost, not a kick when we are already down.

This, of course, is not to say you should necessarily throw the 12 steps out the window. What works for one person, may not work for another. In fact, those who did decide to work the steps did so by using alternative 12 steps, or by creating an alternative to the god concept. If you need some ideas for an alternative higher power here’s a list of the

many people I interviewed used: the group itself (classic!), the ocean, writing a list of attributes you would want a higher power to have and then making that your higher power, nature, the sun, mountains, connection with fellow human beings, the universe, your pet, a higher purpose, a doorknob (kidding!). For some reason, people often think that once they adopt whatever higher power they choose that it has to remain the same for the rest of their life. However, I think one participant worded it best when he talked about advice from his sponsor:

“She reminded me that I didn’t have to overthink anything about a higher power, it didn’t have to be any conception of anyone else’s higher power she didn’t give a fuck. She didn’t care. If it worked for me then it worked for me, and if it worked for me today, then that was great. And if I had to pick something else tomorrow then I had to pick something else tomorrow.”

Additionally, people drew from all sorts of non-AA, non-conference-approved resources. The most popular secular literature that almost every single nonreligious participant mentioned were readings from the AA Agnostica website, *Staying Sober Without God: The Practical 12 Steps to Long-Term Recovery from Alcoholism and Addictions* by Jeffrey Munn (2019), *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life: finally, a daily reflection book for nonbelievers, freethinkers and everyone!* by Joe C. (2013), and *A Secular Sobriety: Including a Secular Version of the First 164 Pages of the Big Book* by Dale K. (2017). Other popular literature were books like *The Alternative 12 Steps: A Secular Guide to Recovery* (Cleveland and G. 2014), *Modern 12 Step Recovery: Alcoholics Anonymous for the 21st Century* by Glen Rader (2021), *The Urge: Our History of Addiction* by Carl Fisher (2022), *We’re Not All Egomaniacs: Adapting the Twelve Steps for Alcoholics with Low Self-Esteem* by Beth Aich (2021), and *A Woman’s Way Through the Twelve Steps* by Stephanie Covington (1994). A lot of people also mentioned they loved listening to the Beyond Belief Sobriety podcast as well. Lastly, a frequently cited resource for support was the AA Beyond Belief Facebook group.

Practicing gratitude, meditation, and mindfulness was a common tool people used for their recovery. A lot of participants I interviewed, though nonreligious, had a lot of respect for Buddhism and Buddhist principles. People found that even a 5-minute daily meditation improved their well-being, or that writing one thing a day that they were grateful for seemed to keep their spirits high and an appreciation for life. One person said engaging in these activities “It’s just something simple that I feel like helps you deal with life on life’s terms.” In addition to AA, quite a few people I interviewed also attended Recovery Dharma and said it was useful and helped them practice meditation, mindfulness, and gratitude.

In addition to utilizing a variety of the resources mentioned, participants talked a lot about the importance of pushing back against some of the discrimination and rude comments that are made in meetings. There’s a reason I said that nonreligious AA members are resilient—to face such discrimination and to have the energy to keep on going and push back against it is commendable. People do this in a variety of ways, though most often in the form of speaking out against other members who insinuate that God belief is

necessary to maintain sobriety. People mentioned that over time, especially around Big Book Thumpers, they have become more open and more vocal about their nonreligious identity and beliefs, especially when there is newcomers or when they hear a “you have to have God to get sober.” As one person said, “I think it’s important that everyone hears that you can have long term recovery and sobriety without a God.” To some, they still go to traditional meetings just to say “I am an atheist in Alcoholics Anonymous” so other people know if they’re new and they’re having a struggle that it can be done.

Other’s use their activism to push for eliminating prayers in meetings. If you think it can’t be done, you’re wrong! Several people I interviewed had success in getting rid of prayers at meetings. It’s great to see that nonreligious AA members are stepping up, claiming their space, and advocating for newcomers so that they don’t have to go through what they once did.

Finally, the most valuable resource mentioned by people I interviewed was secular meetings and the community. I’d love to share a few excerpts from interviews on how life-changing finding secular AA was for so many people:

“These are my people, really. And I don’t have any other expectations. I can really say how I feel.”

“They were like my people, you know, they were my tribe. They understood me, I understood them, and it was like this big, refreshing thing.”

“There’s nothing to filter. I don’t have to operate on more than one level and also people talk more from the heart. They aren’t quoting from the Big Book, they aren’t comparing higher powers, the whole, you know, my higher power is bigger than yours. There is a big difference. There’s a lot more, I think compassion. They’re a lot gentler and people seem to be relieved. When you see people that are relieved to find something like a secular meeting, it’s pretty grand.”

“There’s more discussions. You can interrupt somebody and say, hey, I don’t get that point. Can you explain? You know, that kind of stuff. That is a lot more helpful to me than a rigid series of monologues that you see in traditional AA.”

“I love my secular group. Partly because I don’t know, I’m sure this is totally self-selecting but these people are smart, way smarter and more intellectually interesting than anyone I’ve previously met in AA. I feel like I have found people who are more in tune with my understanding of it all, and I feel really good about it.”

My hope to the readers is that this has been useful, whether you’re newer to AA and struggling, or you’re an old-timer nodding your head going “yup, that sounds about right.” I’d like to thank the secular recovery community for their assistance and support on this research. Thank you to Roger C. for sending me literature to help with this project, for teaching me about the secular AA movement, and for your willingness to assist in any

way you could. Thanks to members of the secular recovery community for sending me a complete list of secular recovery meetings when I reached a standstill with AA, and thank you for encouraging me to tell your stories. Keep on going, you got this!

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