

Loneliness vs aloneness



By Andy F

Loneliness and aloneness: What's the difference?

As a newcomer, I kept hearing about the differences between loneliness and aloneness. In AA, drunk or sober, a pervasive and consuming loneliness is considered one of the many negative symptoms of untreated alcoholism.

“Almost without exception, alcoholics are tortured by loneliness.”
(12 & 12 p. 57)

On the other hand, aloneness is a symptom of recovery, a gift of the twelve steps. It implies a comfortable solitude, usually achieved through an empowered sense of self-worth and spiritual awakening.

The collapse of a dysfunctional marriage

After getting sober, I was just as dependent on my wife as I was on alcohol. My festering insecurities condemned me to be dominating, controlling, and highly manipulative. Eventually, the marriage ended. Although I didn't pick up the first drink, the psychological impact of splitting up was the same as Bill describes as the consequences of full-blown alcoholism. He tells us that at some point in his drinking career, the alcoholic is.....

... “struck down and left in terrified loneliness”
(12 & 12 p. 57).

That is what happened to me after three years in AA. Here was my untreated alcoholism, stone-cold sober! Here was the “*spiritual malady*” (BB p. 64) described by Bill. Despite putting down the alcohol, I was still looking to be fixed from the outside in.

The three-fold illness; mental, physical, and spiritual

Alcohol had always been the glue that held me together. I frequently heard at meetings that my alcoholism was in me and not in a bottle. Now, finding myself single in sobriety, I suddenly experienced the loneliness that Bill mentions in the literature. It almost drove me crazy!

Whenever I got home to an empty flat, if I didn't find at least three messages on my answering machine, I would get suicidal. Only another alcoholic can understand that type of loneliness. Although I wasn't ready to get a sponsor and work the steps, in all likelihood, attending daily meetings probably saved my life.

An agnostic with attitude

Nevertheless, as a militant agnostic and prejudiced towards [the “God” word](#), I refused to surrender to the suggestions of a sponsor. The result was life in AA with [untreated alcoholism](#). Not drinking made my inner emptiness worse!

... “his many troubles now made more acute because he cannot use alcohol to kill the pain...”
(12&12 p. 39)

I wouldn't wish this suffering on anyone. In Bill's Story at the beginning of the Big Book, he describes it perfectly. The only difference between his experience and mine was that he was still drinking, and I wasn't.

“No words can tell of the loneliness and despair I found in that bitter morass of self-pity.”
(BB Bill's Story p.8)

There is a solution; even for agnostics

Ultimately, and only with the **Gift Of Desperation** (an acronym for God), I asked David, an old-timer in AA, to be my sponsor. What was truly remarkable about David was that although he was religious, he never demanded that his sponsees believe in any unseen higher power. He was wise enough to leave their spiritual search up to them. David knew that if they followed his suggestions, God or no God, the twelve steps would help them to get well.

David told me that if I used “*AA itself*” as a “*power greater than me*” (12&12, p. 27), I would recover. Moreover, my third-step decision was simply a willingness to persevere with the rest of the steps. The results were spectacular! The twelve steps gradually and gently helped me let go of my ego defenses. I began to develop a relationship with the real me. It was so life-changing that I am happy to call it a ‘*non-God-centered spiritual awakening*.’ I felt comfortable alone and with others for the first time since childhood.

The spiritual gift of solitude

I always believed my loneliness was due to not having a partner or more friends. The steps revealed the real reason. Although I still don't believe in the God of religion, the twelve steps gave me the most precious gift I could have ever hoped for—the gift of my true self!

When it's my turn to share at an AA meeting, I usually say that when I first came to AA and put down the drink, I didn't have a self. I had no idea who or what I was. It wasn't the lack of a girlfriend or more buddies; it was me that I was yearning for! Years before, I went MIA (missing in action) on the battlefield of my alcoholism.

Of course, I was absent from the company of regular people, but more importantly, I was also missing from my own life! I began the journey to my true self when I agreed to follow a sponsor's **Good Orderly Direction** (an acronym for God). As I later realized, the authentic self is spiritual by its very nature.

Reclaiming the lost me by facing the shadow self

[Carl Jung](#), the world-famous psychiatrist and psychotherapist, believed that a person could never become a whole and well-adjusted human being until they faced what he called ["the shadow self."](#) This was my dark and negative side, which I had never dared to face. It was the part of me that I didn't like and couldn't accept. In AA, I learned that these were my defects of character. Could they be the shadow self that Jung was referring to?

The steps helped me accept myself, warts and all! I realized that besides my shortcomings, I also had good qualities. I gradually began to strengthen my character assets. In so doing, I developed a positive relationship with myself. With the help of the humility offered in step seven, I became willing to make every effort to become a better person.

A non-God-centered spiritual awakening

The honesty I learned in the steps gave me an identity and a sense of self. This newly acquired gift was so powerful that it was comparable to the **"entire psychic change"** (P. XX1X) Dr. Silkworth mentions in the Doctor's Opinion. The more I learned to practice [love and service](#) to other alcoholics, the more I began to love myself. The twelve steps have enabled me to watch sponsees recover, which has also helped me love and accept myself. As an agnostic in AA, it doesn't get any more spiritual than that.

Andy F. went to his first meeting on May 15th, 1984. Having had negative experiences with religion and religious people in childhood, he found it impossible to embrace the twelve steps. Frequent references to God and a higher power put him off completely. He decided to pursue his recovery through therapy. Unfortunately, it didn't keep him sober. He became a serial relapser and, several times, came close to losing his life. Eventually, he was lucky to find an experienced oldtimer happy to work with an agnostic. Andy was able to stay sober and recreate his life. It's now been twenty-seven years since his last relapse. He is committed to sponsorship and has become an avid blogger. Andy's blogs are about his experiences in recovery as an agnostic alcoholic.

For more information about Andy and the books that he has written and published, click here: <https://aaforagnostics.com/>.
