

Mental Health Issues

We of Alcoholics Anonymous have had a long and varied history of trying to maintain the integrity of what we inherited from a dedicated group of men and women who founded a set of principles which have not been altered since their inception. The genius of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions is unmatched in their thoroughness and simplicity and they stand like a rock for the next hopeless drunk who shows up at the doors of A. A. looking for relief from this horrible malady. As A.A. evolved and started showing very prodigious results. We began to attract the sufferers of other substance abuse problems and with patience and wisdom, the stewards of the program found ways to help them develop Twelve step programs of their own while keeping intact, the integrity of A.A. Having been in the program for over forty five years and observing these developments I have come to recognize another area of concern which is, oftentimes, misunderstood. These problems are not substance abuse issues but fall into the Mental Health area, to one degree or another.

It seems that the majority of the people who come to Alcoholics Anonymous and get sober have a very good chance of getting their affairs in order and can, in fact, live a happy and useful life but this is not always the case. During my tenure in A.A. I have sponsored and mentored many of those unfortunate members who, after abstaining from alcohol for many years, still have erratic behavioral problems and in an environment where many of the participants, still with typical alcoholic problems, are not aware that there is another ingredient in those unfortunate few, that was, in fact, masked by the use of alcohol, and when the alcohol was removed, these other issues came to the surface. Not being in the Mental Health Field, we didn't recognize these things as psychological problems. We might have thought that they were problems of EGO, or any of the other problems that are common to alcoholics. Today, we know that that was not the case.

I have two experiences where I worked with two separate examples of this misunderstood dilemma.

First: My friend was diagnosed with manic/depressive disorder and his doctor prescribed Lithium which, according to him, takes somewhere around thirty days to build up in his system to become effective. When he was on that schedule he seemed to settle down, but according to him, he felt as though he was flat-lining and he would stop taking the meds. He explained that he loved the highs but he hated the lows. He stayed sober but never resolves the Bi/polar issue right up to the day that he passed away from unrelated causes.

Second: I was working with a person who was acting high strung after several years sober and nothing I suggest to him, on a behavioral level seemed acceptable. I got some insight into the problem when a different friend confided in me that she suffered from Attention/Deficit Disorder

and she described it as a condition where a thousand thoughts are bouncing around in your head and you keep trying to pull them down and make a complete thought out them, but it never happens. Again, this man would not explore the option of being treated or taking any kind of meds. for the same reasons that the previous person expressed.

These people will probably never experience the calmness of mind that the garden variety drunk can acquire by practicing principles. They may stay sober, and many of them do, but they are saddled with the dilemma of taking Meds. that bring them down or living with that mental issue.

These are just two examples where I could have focused on their outside behavior and been critical of it and I would have missed the whole picture. Now, I can have nothing but compassion when I recognize these things.

To put this in simple terms I like to use Fear as an example of how I've learned to traverse this very important insight.

Let's say that 5% on either side of a center line would be considered normal instinctive fear. Someone may be in so much fear that he is diagnosed as paranoid. Another may take the opposite extreme and be so fearless that he would walk in front of a bus. Few alcoholics that I've known are in the normal range, or they, most likely would not have become alcoholics. Every one of us falls somewhere between 5% and the extreme. We all have varying degrees of those same problems that we see in those people who seem to irritate us with their behavior. I am not superior to any of them, I'm just a little less damaged. I must have the strength to look deeper and have compassion for them when they display those symptoms. That goes for every new member that walks through the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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