

## Working the Steps in a Group

I BELONG TO an AA group that meets on Tuesday evenings at eight o'clock. The members are primarily from Chicago's western suburbs; several are from other areas. We meet in members' homes and discuss a Step each week.

We begin with Step One, go right through to Twelve, and then start at the First Step again. If a new person comes to the group and it's his first meeting and we're on Step Seven, for example, we don't go back to Step One. If the Twelfth Step call has been made properly, we figure, the First Step has been explained to the new person before he comes to the meeting. Otherwise, there might be so many meetings on Step One that the entire group would fail to move along as it needs to. *Every* member in the group helps the newcomer feel welcome and spends some time talking with him or her after the meeting.

Everybody in the group is working the Steps. If a new person comes into the group and attends regularly, he starts working them, too. He doesn't know any differently. He very quickly figures out that "How It Works" means that *this* is how it works.

Doesn't it get repetitious with the same people talking about the same Steps month after month and year after year? Well, it probably would if we worked each Step only once. However, every member in the group is working *and* reworking all the Steps. As a result, we speak from fresh experiences each time we go through them. We don't talk about the Fourth Steps we wrote years ago. We discuss inventories written recently and Fifth Steps we took not long ago. The same holds true for every Step.

This creates an atmosphere that stimulates each of us to continue work in the program. The group is far more than a place to go and ventilate our feelings merely to find symptom relief. In our experience, conditions such as depression, anxiety, fear, boredom, hostility, and apathy are just symptoms, and they will disappear through persistent work with all the Steps. The answer, then, is not to concern ourselves with the symptoms, but to work and rework the Steps so that they may remove the causes. Then the depression, fear, boredom, or other symptom will disappear, too. We've seen this happen consistently.

Some members who join our group suffer from this condition. They have had substantial amounts of sobriety and have tried various therapies and brands of counseling, because they felt they "needed something more than just AA." In every instance, it turns out that they have not done enough continuing work with the Steps. Without fail, when these men and women begin to work and rework every one of the Steps, their symptoms gradually vanish.

Very possibly, the Twelve Steps may be the most commonly overlooked and underrated long-term therapy there is for the alcoholic. Therapies of all kinds appear and promise magnificent benefits for the client. Gradually, each sinks into richly deserved obscurity, only to be replaced by something new. Unfortunately, AAs often get siphoned into such an "expanded approach," because they're hurting and don't understand that their hurt is the inevitable result of insufficient work with the AA program. Our home group has found that this program works effectively at any stage of sobriety for any AA who is willing to keep using it. It generates a vitality for change that is translated into increasing health and freedom.

The February 1975 issue of *Psychology Today* included twelve classified advertisements for Primal Therapy, under the heading of "Growth Centers." A few years ago, all of those listings would have been for Transactional Analysis. Five years from now, it will be something else. All of these fads flourish for a while and then fade into oblivion.

It seems to me that AA members often wind up in these various therapies because of inadequate sponsorship. Sponsorship in our group is strong. We try to be honest and open, and we don't waste each other's time pretending to be counselors or therapists. We simply try to share our actual experience in working the AA program.

Such experience--generally recent--has shown us again and again that outward problems in our lives are produced by conditions within ourselves. Persistent use of the Steps removes the inward conditions that cause the problems. As we experience changes in ourselves, we live our way into a new understanding, and we gradually stop creating difficulties in our lives. We find answers and solutions that we could never see before, and they all come from the program. It's so simple that it's sometimes tough to believe!

In the past several years, three other groups have branched off from our Tuesday-night group. These, too, are Step groups. A number of AAs with eight, ten, and more years of sobriety have joined our group because they heard about it from other members, who described the help found in our meetings and work with the Steps.

It *is* a working group. We get our directions from the Big Book and the "Twelve and Twelve." They are used as springboards for continuing work, not simply for talk about what we did with a Step years ago. This continued action in the program is the key to the healing vitality the group provides for each of us.

The meeting begins with a quiet time, and then someone reads "How It Works." The host or hostess generally leads off with some remarks from personal experience about the Step under discussion and then asks for comments from each person present. Each talks about AA and the Step under discussion, rather than offering erudite philosophy or amateur psychology. No one talks about peer-group pressure, treatment modalities, attitudinal ambivalences, multidisciplinary approaches, or therapeutic milieus. Each member tries to honestly share his experience with that particular Step: what he has done with it, what he is doing with it, and what it has done and is doing for him.

Usually, we have between twelve and fifteen at a meeting; sometimes, as many as twenty. The meetings begin at eight o'clock and generally end by nine. We've found that if we try to avoid talking beyond our experiences, we can thoroughly discuss a Step in a surprisingly brief time.

Members in our group range in sobriety from a few months to many years. All of us go to the meetings because we need what the group gives us: a regular reminder of where our help lies, along with steady encouragement to keep doing the work. There's a quiet enthusiasm in our members. We know what's made the changes in our lives, and we're equipped to talk about it from the standpoint of fresh, growing experience.

And that's the message. Regardless of where we are in sobriety, you and I have a specific method of dealing with what happens to us each day--by simply renewing our work in the program. Unless I do this kind of continuing work, I'll never know what the AA message really is or how to help another person experience it. One basic measurement of my progress in AA starts with what I'm doing in my home group. Our group helps me remember the transforming power of the program, summed up on page 562 in the Big Book: "I get everything I need in Alcoholics Anonymous--everything I need I get--and when I get what I need I invariably find that It was just *what I wanted all the time*."

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