

Why People Get Better and Grow in Support Groups

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When a newly recovering alcoholic businessman named Bill Wilson met a still-active drinker named Dr. Bob Smith in 1935, and Bill began to tell Bob about his new-found relationship with God, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was born. Since then, millions of people all over the world have benefited from the fellowship and teaching of AA and a host of other support groups, as people with all types of life-controlling problems have come together to share their experience, strength and hope.

Support groups work for all sorts of people with different types of needs, struggling with many different types of issues, in all types of life situations (“Yale or jail, Park Avenue or park bench”). People begin to gain victory over life-controlling problems, and deepen their relationship with God, through their contact with support groups. Here are some principles that make support groups effective.

Commonality and hope. In an effective support group people who come, sit and listen will often go away thinking, “These people are just like me!,” and “Maybe if it works for *them*, it will work for *me*.” They realize that they are not alone, unique or “weird” in their experience, and this gives them hope.

A feeling of “home,” love, warmth, safety, acceptance. Effective support groups provide the kind of environment in which people can come out of their shell, let down their guard, and drop their self-protective mechanisms. Groups like this provide places where people can feel “naked and unashamed” emotionally, as they bare their souls without fear of criticism or ridicule.

Teaching and learning. When people begin to recover from life-controlling problems, they have to unlearn a lot of old unhealthy thinking, and begin to learn new, healthier thinking. Group members with solid recovery can teach, by example and by words, the principles and practices of recovery to newer members.

Providing a mirror. The group experience becomes a “mirror” for members who are growing in their journey of recovery. In the group context they have opportunities to put into practice their new learning about self and relationships, to “test drive” their recovery in a safe environment, and to see themselves as they really are. As they experience “iron sharpening iron,” they receive new motivation to “work their program” (Step 10 – “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it”).

Doing good. Finally, group members learn to break out of the cycle of self-centeredness and isolation by reaching out to others. Bill Wilson had very little experience of sobriety when he first approached Dr. Bob Smith, but Bill knew that he needed to share his own experience of recovery with another fellow-sufferer, *for the sake of his own recovery*. Sometimes all it takes to help another person is to be one step ahead of her or him.

People get better and grow in support groups. I encourage everyone experiencing life-controlling problems to do some research into groups that address their particular need, and make 5 or 6 visits to a group. I hope you will find that “together we can do what we could never do alone.”