



## Incorporating Addiction Support Groups in Health Professional Education

Jeffrey N. Baldwin, PharmD, RP

As part of their professional education, I recommended that health professional students attend **open** 12-step substance use disorder (SUD; aka addiction) support groups or groups. Ideally, students should attend a program for those directly impacted with SUD's such as Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA), **in addition to** attending AI-Anon, a program for those impacted by another's SUD.

The response of over 1,000 UNMC pharmacy students after attending such meetings as a course requirement has been universally positive for over 25 years. A common reflection is: "**I was amazed; they were just like you and me!**"

### **Guidelines for Student Attendance at 12-Step Meetings (as developed for pharmacy students):**

Students attending as part of a COP course are provided with a listing of local area "open" AIAnon, A.A., and NA meetings. [Find meeting here](#) or contact the A.A. office (402-556-1880.) AI-Anon schedules can be obtained from the AI-Anon office (phone 402-553-5033) or accessing their [website](#) . For NA meetings call (402-660-3662) or go to their [website](#).

When looking for meetings, students should only attend open programs. All Omaha area A.A. meetings are open unless marked with a C on the electronic meeting list

### **Before Attending a 12-step Meeting:**

Be prepared to encounter some "rough" language, appearances and behaviors at some meetings. Anxiety about attending these meetings is common and typically resolves as the meetings proceed. Attending with other students from class can reduce your anxiety.

**ALL** meetings are anonymous. Whom one sees and what one hears at the meetings should remain strictly confidential. If students are given an opportunity to introduce themselves, they normally should state their first name and that they are visitor (it is **suggested** that they explain a little more about this class assignment if applicable).

Some meetings, particularly A.A., will generally have a large attendance and, thus, attendance by several students will not be disruptive to the meeting. In meetings with smaller attendance, student presence should be limited to about one-fourth of the group (e.g., if a total of 12 people are attending, no more than 3 students should attend); other students should reschedule for a later date.

### **What to Expect:**

The "12 steps" are a recovery plan; specific steps are often referred to or discussed during meetings. For more information, see the ["The Big Book": Chapter 5](#)



12-step programs only ask that the participant accept that a force "greater than" themselves can help them to recover (in some cases, this may be inanimate objects, people, or the group as a whole). A.A. and other 12-step programs stress spirituality rather than religion. Prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer or the Serenity Prayer, may be used at meetings. Participate at your discretion. "Agnostic A.A." meetings are secular (non-spiritual) alternatives to traditional A.A.

Individuals in early recovery and those with other co-occurring psychiatric illness ("dual diagnosis" or "co-occurring disorders") or who are still using while trying to stop may be very nervous, jumpy, or unable to maintain coherent thoughts; do not be alarmed.

You may find yourself feeling sorry for program participants. Words of encouragement, support, or understanding go a lot further than sympathy.

#### **Donations:**

During most 12 step meetings, a collection is taken to support their activities; usual donation is \$1. The tradition at 12 step meetings is "we are self-supporting through our own contributions." Some groups may indicate that **only** group members contribute, yet have a dollar available if they do not object your donation. Some groups also take a separate collection for coffee or other food items.

#### **After the Meeting:**

If appropriate, students should summarize their experience by listing the date, location, meeting name along with an overview of their reactions/feelings. Specific names of classmates who attended with the student should not be included, though students could indicate they "attended with 2 other students." Students should also follow the admonition that "who you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here."

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#### **About the Author:**

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