

# Your First Alcoholics Anonymous Meeting

Going to your first Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting can be challenging. You likely don't know what to expect and may have preconceived ideas about AA from the media, pop culture, and other alcoholics. Some people who are court ordered to go to meetings may feel resentful about being forced to attend. Others choose to attend AA due to their personal struggle with addiction. (If you are not sure AA is right for you, you can take a quiz on the Alcoholics Anonymous website – [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)- to determine if you are a candidate for AA.) Remember that everyone in AA had to walk in to their first meeting, so you are not alone in feeling scared or anxious. But once you walk in, you will be among friends, peers, and sources of support.

## Part 1

### Preparing for the meeting

*Understand the purpose of AA:* Alcoholics Anonymous is an international fellowship of men and women who have had a drinking problem. It is self-supporting, non-professional, multiracial, apolitical, and available almost everywhere in North America. There is no age or education requirements to becoming a “member” of AA. Membership is open to anyone who wants to do something about their drinking problem.

The primary purpose of AA is to help people gain and maintain sobriety while assisting others who may turn to AA for help achieving sobriety. AA does not recruit members or actively seek to turn everyone sober. AA welcomes new members and encourages sharing and support among members. If your addiction is a chemical other than alcohol, you may be encouraged to seek out one of the many other Anonymous programs that deal specifically with your addiction.

You may be worried about being hugged as soon as you walk into an AA meeting. AA members are usually enthusiastic in greeting a new comer; however, if you wish not to be hugged, simply extend your hand for a handshake. AA meetings are not like going to the doctor or participating in a prayer circle. They are casual and though you may be encouraged to speak you are not required to say anything. You can decline to speak if you are uncomfortable; simply say your first name before saying, “I pass.”

The following are AA/Support Group guidelines for every meeting:

- Keep confidentiality: “What you hear here, stays here.”
- Make “I” statements: Avoid using “you” or “we.” For example, “My name is Steph. I am an alcoholic.”
- Stay in the “here and now.” Share what you are dealing with today or this week.
- Share feelings about your experiences, strengths, and hopes.
- Do not offer advice or try to “fix” anyone.
- Do not crosstalk or ask questions when someone is sharing.
- Do not be disturbed by the collection basket. AA meetings do NOT cost anything to attend. There is usually a collection passed around at the end of the meeting to cover the cost of renting the meeting space and paying for refreshments and literature. There is NO expectation to contribute. (Generally, if

you are court mandated to attend the meeting, you will place your card for signature in the basket and retrieve it after the meeting.)

-Do not be disturbed by a meeting's location. Quite a few AA meetings are held in church halls only because they are convenient and affordable venues. AA groups are in NO way affiliated with any religion or religious organization. The AA program can be spiritual, but what that means exactly is left up to the individual member to decide.

### **Getting familiar with the structure of an AA meeting**

Some AA meetings are one (1) hour long; others are an hour and a half. It will have a set format and structure, so after your first meeting, you can expect mostly the same format at that meeting every time you attend. The only thing that will change is the topic of discussion. One of the traditions of AA is that members are all trusted servants, so no one governs the group; elections for positions are generally held every six months. There will be a "Secretary" who conducts the meeting and a "leader" who has volunteered to lead that specific meeting. The Secretary usually has a number of years of AA recovery.

*Most meetings follow this basic structure:*

-The Secretary starts the meeting with a welcome such as, "I'm Jenna, an alcoholic. I would like to welcome you to the Monday evening AA meeting. We would like to give a special welcome to new attendees and have you introduce yourselves." New attendees will then introduce themselves with their first names, though this is not required.

-The Secretary reads "The AA Preamble." Other members read the "How It Works" section from the AA book (The Big Book). "The 12 Traditions" of AA and possibly some other excerpts from The Big Book are also read.

-The AA/Support Group guidelines may be reviewed if new people are present.

-The leader suggests a topic or step for discussion. Each time someone shares, that person will begin by saying his/her first name, for example, "I'm Mark. I'm an alcoholic." The group will then respond with a greeting such as, "Hi, Mark." After someone finishes sharing, the group will respond by clapping (or not), or with thanks, for example, "Thanks, Mark." This builds respect and a sense of community.

-When it is time for the meeting to close, the Secretary may ask the attendees for someone to lead the next meeting. Someone may read a passage from The Big Book like "A Vision for You" or "The Promises." This person or the secretary will ask all attendees to stand and hold hands to say "The Serenity Prayer." "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

-At the end of the prayer, the group may say, "Keep coming back. It works if you work it."

-The meeting is now officially over. Attendees may stay and have informal discussions or ask questions of one another before leaving. Coffee or tea may be available after the meeting.

## Part 2

### Finding the right meeting for you

*Note the different types of AA meeting*

Each AA group follows the guidelines of the AA program, but they can have their own agenda and mandate. There are several types of AA meetings:

*-Step meetings:* Readings are from the book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Each meeting focuses on one of these steps. The step will be read out loud and commented on by the attendees. Not everyone in the group will be on that step, but, usually, everyone gets a chance to talk about what the step means to them. Some step meetings ask that you have worked the step in question in order to share on it, but everyone is welcome to listen and learn.

*-Big Book meetings:* These meetings use a reading from the book Alcoholics Anonymous, commonly called "The Big Book," to spark discussion. Several pages may be read aloud by a volunteer or members may take turns reading a portion of the Big Book. There is then a discussion of how the pages have proven useful to each member.

*-Speaker meetings:* These meetings are less participatory, as a single speaker will be talking most of the meeting recounting his/her experiences with alcohol and with AA in order to inform and guide other members. Some of these meetings will be open to the general public.

*-Beginner meetings:* These are meetings for people who are new to AA and want to learn more about the program. The agenda and structure for these meetings will likely follow the traditional AA structure.

*Open and closed meetings:* Open meetings are for anyone, while closed meetings are for alcoholics only. Family and friends of an AA member, as well as observers, are welcome at open meetings.

### Locate AA meetings near you

You may have already called our hotline to find a meeting. You can also find a list of meetings online on our local Alcoholics Anonymous website, [www.callaa.org](http://www.callaa.org).

-Once you get to your first meeting, ask for a directory. It will include meetings listed by cities. The directory will provide the name of the meetings, the time and place of the meetings, and what kind of meetings are available in your area.

-Besides the types of AA meetings, there are also certain group distinctions. For example, meetings may be mixed (male and female), men only (MO), or women only (WO).

-Ask someone for a meeting recommendation. This is one of the best ways to find a meeting that is right for your recovery. Asking an existing member of AA for a meeting recommendation is a great way to start a conversation! It also may feel less scary or intimidating to attend an AA meeting based on a suggestion from someone who attends that meeting.

## **Attending the meeting**

### *Arrive on time:*

-As part of AA protocol, meetings always start on time, on the dot. Try to get to the meeting five (5) minutes early to ensure you can find a seat and get comfortable.

-Shut off your cell phone or put it on vibrate for the duration of the meeting. You may be asked to leave if you disrupt the meeting with cross talk (talking over others), cell phone activity, or any other inappropriate or disruptive behavior.

-Once you sit down, you will usually be welcomed or greeted by AA members. They may introduce themselves or offer to shake hands. But you are not obligated to participate in small talk or share your personal story right away.

-*Share only if you feel comfortable.* Often, one's first AA meetings are about listening to others and learning how AA works. Though the secretary or leader may ask you to share your thoughts during the discussion, you are in no way obligated to participate or respond. Simply say your first name before saying, "Pass" if you are not ready. You'll soon discover you are in a room with peers who are struggling with the same feelings and issues as you.

-Try to stay until the end of the meeting. One strategy newcomers might do is "arrive late and leave early" due to fear or anxiety around attending the meeting. Doing this will only lead to an unstructured meeting schedule and a stilted recovery. Stick around after the meeting and try to talk to the other members over refreshments. In time, you will find that AA is a place where you can be honest and open about your struggles.

-*Go to another meeting.* If you feel comfortable with the structure of a particular group, attend next week's meeting, or go to another meeting on a different day at the same time. We are lucky to have hundreds of meetings available in our area! Over time, you should start to feel comfortable enough to participate in the discussions and share your inner struggles.

-*Think about getting a sponsor.* A sponsor is someone who can help you, as a newcomer, stay sober. Sponsors do this by sharing their own personal experiences and struggles. However, they are not doctors or professional therapists. An alcoholic who has remained sober for some time (a year or so) and has worked through the 12 Steps of AA is generally considered a good sponsor candidate. They are volunteers who are not compensated financially for their time. A sponsor will guide you through the 12 Steps of AA, encourage you to attend AA meetings, and will help you connect with other members.

We hope this document has answered some of your questions, and eased your mind about coming to AA. We look forward to seeing you soon!

