

Helping Others Helps Alcoholics Stay on the Road to Recovery

ScienceDaily (Jan. 29, 2011) — Participating in community service activities and helping others is not just good for the soul; it has a healing effect that helps alcoholics and other addicts become and stay sober, a researcher from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine reports. In a review article published in the Volume 29 issue of *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, Maria E. Pagano, PhD, associate professor of psychiatry at the School of Medicine, sheds light on the role of helping in addiction recovery, using the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a prime example.

She cites a growing body of research as supporting evidence. "The research indicates that getting active in service helps alcoholics and other addicts become sober and stay sober, and suggests this approach is applicable to all treatment-seeking individuals with a desire to not drink or use drugs," Dr. Pagano says. "Helping others in the program of AA has forged a therapy based on the kinship of common suffering and has vast potential." In her research, Dr. Pagano highlights the helper therapy principle (HTP), a concept embodied by AA, as a means of diminishing egocentrism or selfishness, a root cause of addiction.

The HTP is based on the theory that, when a person helps another individual with a similar condition, they help themselves. The principle is reflected in the stated purpose of AA, which is to help individuals "stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety." Helping other alcoholics is viewed as the foundation for the alcoholic helper to stay on the path to recovery, Dr. Pagano says in her overview of the AA program.

In addition to outlining the basis for AA-related helping, Dr. Pagano reviews the data to date that illustrates the health and mental health benefits derived from helping others. She likewise examines several empirical studies she conducted previously which show how helping others in 12-step programs of recovery help the recovering individual to stay sober.

The research includes a 2004 study by Dr. Pagano and her colleagues. Using data from Project MATCH, one of the largest clinical trials in alcohol research, the investigators determined that 40 percent of the alcoholics who helped other alcoholics during their recovery successfully avoided drinking in the 12 months following three months in chemical dependency treatment, whereas only 22 percent of those that did not help others stayed sober.

A subsequent study by Dr. Pagano and her colleagues in 2009, also involving data from Project MATCH, showed that 94 percent of alcoholics who helped other alcoholics, at any point during the 15-month study, continued to do so as part of their ongoing recovery, and experienced lower levels of depression.

Similarly, a study of alcoholic patients with body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a condition in which a person is excessively preoccupied with a perceived physical defect, found that those who helped others were more likely to become sober and enjoy an improved self-image than non-helpers. "These studies indicate that among alcoholics, AA-related helping and giving general help to others has positive effects on drinking outcomes and mental health variables," Dr. Pagano says in the *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* journal.

In fact, the benefits of doing good works and helping others also extend to individuals coping with chronic conditions like depression, AIDS, and chronic pain. "When humans help others regardless of a shared condition, they appear to live longer and happier lives," she adds. The benefits of helping are significant because the costs of alcoholism and drug addiction to society are so great, Dr. Pagano says. In light of recent health care reform, resources which can reduce these costs and suffering are crucial.

However, the lack of consensus on what peer helping is in addiction recovery requires additional study to clarify what specific behaviors to encourage, to whom and what forms of service to recommend for individuals engaging in early and ongoing recovery. Dr. Pagano is presently conducting a longitudinal study examining the role of service in adolescent addiction recovery. An area of new scientific discovery, she's applying the knowledge she's accrued with adults to adolescent populations with addiction.