

Attending Alcoholics Anonymous Meetings May Increase Spirituality and Help Decrease Frequency and Intensity of Alcohol Use

ScienceDaily (Dec. 14, 2010) — Addictions, whether it is to drugs or alcohol, are a very difficult hurdle for individuals to overcome. But, there are ways to help people with their recovery through 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Many of these organizations, including AA, highlight spirituality as a very important factor, but the data surrounding its effectiveness have often been contested.

However, new research shows that as attendance of AA meetings increase, so do the participants spiritual beliefs, especially in those individuals who had low spirituality at the beginning of the study.

The results will be published in the March 2011 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

John F. Kelly, lead author of the study, Associate Professor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the Associate Director of the Center for Addiction Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, said that while spirituality is an important aspect of AA recovery, it is not the only way they can help individuals.

"I've heard it said that AA is too spiritual, and I've also heard it said that AA is not spiritual enough for some people. Although this is not the only way that AA helps individuals recover, I think these findings support the notion that AA works in part by enhancing spiritual practices," Kelly said.

The researchers assessed more than 1,500 adults throughout their recovery process, with data being gathered at three, six, nine, 12, and 15 months. The study utilized data on their attendance to AA meetings, their individual spirituality/religiosity practices and overall alcohol-use outcomes to determine if spirituality is indeed a mechanism of behavior change.

The results indicated that there was a robust association between an increase in attendance to AA meetings with increased spirituality and a decrease in the frequency and intensity of alcohol use over time. One of the most interesting aspects of the research was that the same amount of recovery was seen in both agnostics and atheists, which indicates that while spirituality is an important mechanism of behavioral change for AA, it is not the only method used.

"Many people will be surprised that alcoholic patients with little or no interest in spirituality attended AA and seemed to change even more than did those who had a pre-existing, strong sense of spirituality," said Keith Humphreys, a Career Research Scientist with the Veterans

Health Administration and Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford University. "AA is thus much more broad in its appeal than is commonly recognized."

The researchers also noted that while spirituality is an important aspect of recovery, it is still not known how these beliefs work in complement or competition with other recovery methods, as there are multiple.

"We have also found that AA participation leads to recovery by helping members change their social network and by enhancing individuals' recovery coping skills, motivation for continued abstinence, and by reducing depression and increasing psychological well-being," said Kelly.

"Down the road it will be important to conduct more qualitative research as well as further quantitative replication of our findings in order to understand more about how exactly spiritual practices and beliefs influence coping and behavioral change in recovery from addiction"