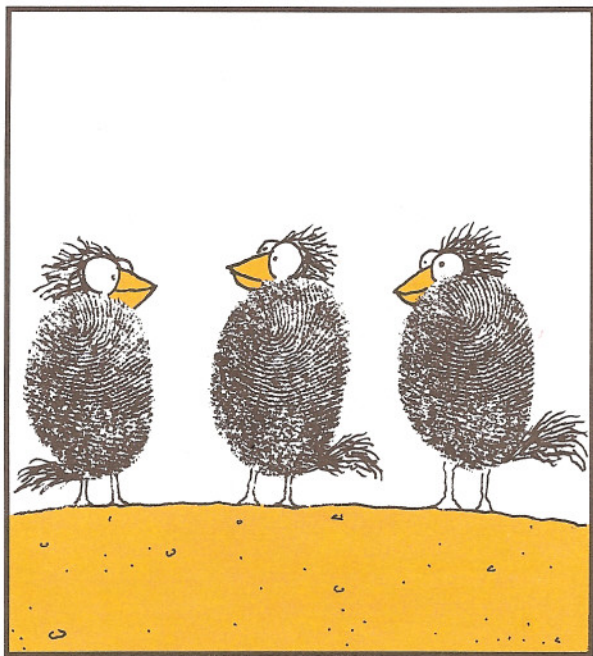


POCKET POWER

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REACHING OUT

TO OTHERS



Hazelden

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Hazelden

Editor's Note:

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REACHING OUT TO OTHERS

Each morning of the week, many members of the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship regularly attend meetings at 7:00 A.M. called "Attitude Adjustment Hours."

These are people who understand the importance of reaching out, and they choose to begin their day this way. They recognize and act upon their need for fellowship, for moving out of isolation into areas of commonality and mutuality. They want to maintain and improve an exciting, satisfying way of life throughout the next 24 hours. Quite simply, they want to feel good and they know how to accomplish that without chemicals.

In addition to having the disease of chemical dependency in common, these members share an understanding of the importance of allowing other people into their lives. They know through experience that personal growth and recovery demand that we alter basic components in lifestyle. One of these is the need to extend ourselves to others.

No one who puts on a new pair of slippers needs to be told change is uncomfortable. The old pair of slippers, though tattered and threadbare, are friends, familiar and comfortable. The

new ones feel stiff and awkward, and unless we throw away the old pair, there is always the temptation, especially when alone, to slip back into them.

This small, homely example of change can hardly be compared to the monumental challenge of recovery from chemical dependency. But it does illustrate two important things: new behavior and attitudes are stiff and uncomfortable (especially in the area of a learned drug response to life); and, it is easy to slip back into old ways, to regress, to relapse.

Loneliness, Isolation, and Boredom

The behavior of addicted people is stereotyped, repetitive, maladaptive, and rigid. Isolation is often entrenched and can be extremely subtle. We can be lonely in a room of three hundred people. We can live in a "loving" family and feel completely alone and unloved. The wonder is not that we have difficulty reaching out to others in sobriety. The wonder is that we learn to do it at all!

It is a well-known fact we don't do what we *want* to do as much as those things we do by *habit*. Habits feel comfortable. Multiply this by about one million, and you have the dilemma of the learned, habitual response of the chemically

dependent person in avoiding life and self with alcohol and/or other drugs. What could possibly enable alcoholics and addicts to depart from such an ingrained lifestyle?

Chemical dependency is the disease of loneliness, isolation, and boredom. We constructed a prison cell of chemicals, and learning how to escape from such solitary confinement is a central lesson in recovery. A.A. is undoubtedly the world's largest organization of "loners" who discovered their need and love for each other.

In addiction we pulled away, either actually or psychologically, from others. Instead of asking, "How are we alike?" we proclaimed "I'm special, unique, and different. You can't understand me, and I don't want to understand you. It's my life and I'll do with it as I please." Some of us had to die of our uniqueness. Others changed and live with varying degrees of joy and serenity.

In A.A.* we become part of a great whole. It is an integrating way of life. We awake to the fact that even the Steps are written in the plural. They read "*We*" did these things. "*We*" came to understand. As the fog lifts, we realize that other people have been reaching out to us all along.

*Or any other Twelve Step program.

One day we actually *hear* and understand when someone says, "I can't. *We* can." What a powerful idea! Until this time our lives had been ruled by the idea that only people with mammoth amounts of willpower could achieve anything worthwhile in life. Our false pride, perfectionism, and delusion kept us from asking for any help.

Step One came as a bewilderment in its suggestion that our lives were beyond our management. We gradually began to see Steps Two and Three provided other management, something we could reach for if we became willing, honest, and open-minded.

An emphasis on surrender gradually permeated our self-centered, egotistical "Me First and Only" way of thinking and behaving. As we attended more meetings, not always understanding why we were there but feeling a glow and a lift by the meeting's end, we began doing something first *with* and then *for* others. What a switch! We cleaned ashtrays, made coffee, and stacked chairs. Our little jobs gave us a strange sense of satisfaction and usefulness, and the multilayered veneer of self-sufficiency and inflated ego began to crack. We started to enjoy the give and take of meetings. We even tried putting our trust in a Power greater than ourselves.

Dependence

The genius of A.A. directs dependence into constructive channels. Instead of "loving things and using people" the recovering person drops a deviant lifestyle and dependence on self-destructive substances and behaviors to enter into interdependence with others. We begin using things and loving people. We switch our dependence to our Higher Power, and love working through the group. Each of us has the opportunity to offer and receive unconditional love with family, friends, and God.

The removal of drinking and other drug-taking leaves a void. "The hole in my soul" is exposed. This enormous gap is filled to overflowing as we reach out to others and become involved. Older members suggest we select a sponsor, a mentor, a confidant, and as we grow older in the fellowship new members ask us to assume that role. We forge close, rich relations that last a lifetime. Loneliness, isolation, and boredom are strangers to us so long as we walk this path.

Working the Program

As ties of this kind develop we decide to do our best to live the Steps. When we hit a plateau, we may choose to complete another

Fourth and then Fifth Step, reaching out again. We go from feeling egotistical and self-centered to realizing the truth of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, "It is in giving that we receive." As we extend love to others it comes back tenfold.

It is extremely difficult to go on hating and destroying yourself when you're doing something worthwhile for others or when you are active in sharing your strength, hope, and experience with the group. We raise our self-esteem in the lifelong process of pushing on to a higher level of maturity and adult responsibility. The rewards are magnificent.

Recovering chemically dependent people make restitution to their families, another dimension of reaching out. As loved ones experience their recoveries in Al-Anon, Alateen, and Alatot, all members learn to speak a common language. When we speak of miracles we include the wonder and blessing of reunited families. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "We should be ashamed of not performing miracles, and we do not feel this shame enough."

Staying close to A.A. helps us deal with perfectionism or defeatism. We don't have to accomplish the most, the best, the fastest. What you are is not what you do. Emphasis is on our spiritual way of life which allows us to live joyously and sanely "out there" in the great world

as it exists. A.A. is filled with realism and pragmatism; "If it works, don't fix it." No one is expected to ascend to great heights or do outstanding deeds.

No Longer Alone

By freely reaching out we develop an accurate sense of significance. We gain perspective, and how important that is! We are no longer the center of the universe. Our preoccupation with self lessens as we tune in to the needs of others. Reciprocity replaces the obsession with our own misery. We become self-nurturing when we can say, "I have a God who loves me," and believe it.

We had reached a point at which we could no longer help ourselves, and it was only then that we became open to accepting assistance from others. We can't fully do this until we learn to trust. Trust is the magic balancing act in loving. Small children trust, and they are very open about wanting and enjoying friends. In drug dependence we removed ourselves from true camaraderie and stopped believing in friendship. We didn't trust anyone, including God, and we knew we couldn't trust ourselves.

It is inspiring to see what a big world of friends there is out there as we become inter-

ested in someone besides ourselves. We are no longer alone, and there is healing in this. Benjamin Franklin said, "When you are good to others you are best to yourself." We achieve self-acceptance and self-worth through acceptance of others. We attempt to extend unconditional love to everyone, including ourselves.

The latter part is often the most difficult. The first commandment reads, "Love thy neighbor as *thyself*." Reaching out includes discovering our own authentic, genuine self. In being open to truly loving self and others, trust is essential. Most of the A.A. program, however, is based on trust and faith. As these grow we can offer each other a deeply personal gift: caring and sharing.

Communication is, of course, pivotal in this process. In order to transfer dependence from drugs to people and a spiritual way of life, we must express ourselves to others and actively listen to what they have to say. Many of us had to listen in the beginning to understand we were not completely insane. We were elated to learn any mental derangement might be temporary. Nowhere can we observe more interested or perceptive active listening than in A.A., and being heard today is a great luxury.

Many times we find we don't fully understand what we felt or thought until we hear someone reflect it to us. This accurate feedback holds a

magnifying glass to our thoughts and impressions. We find special talents and abilities that enable us to truly *hear* each other, not only with our ears and minds, but with our hearts and sense of humor. It is important to be able to talk about the disease and be understood by those who have also experienced it.

Reaching Out

So much in recovery must be taken on faith. Becoming open-minded skeptics, we don't completely *know* why the Steps and the program work, but we see them working in the lives of others. The effects of the program shining in members and their families is palpable. If we but look and listen, we see and hear the pragmatic truth embodied in the lives of those we come to love. Whatever pit we are in when we enter recovery, we can see and hear someone who has climbed out of the same pit. That is part of the wonder of reaching out, of coming out of isolation, and we need only *be there* and employ our senses to acknowledge it.

We know, then, that many things serve together to encompass sobriety, but if we stop and wonder whether or not the program is working in our lives we need only ask one question, Am I a joy to be with? If we are surly, supersensi-

tive, or filled with resentments and self-pity, we may ask, When did I stop reaching out to give and receive help, compassion, and love? Rigorous honesty is a basis for trust, friendship, love, and service.

It doesn't matter in which direction we reach out first, vertically or horizontally. In either area we find self-transcendence. As we move closer to our fellow addicts, we ignite love working through the group. Through the providence of A.A. we succeed, and we no longer need to bear the weighty burden of guilt. Forgiveness is a necessary blessing of the nonjudgmental A.A. program.

As we move through the accomplishment of Steps Eight and Nine we experience that, and we grow in perspective and humility so that we are able in Step Ten to "promptly admit" when we are wrong. In the all-encompassing petition of Step Eleven we see the ultimate direction for our attitudes, behaviors, and life's work. Then, when we are ready to acknowledge Step Twelve, we understand the true scope of reaching out.

None of this is automatic. We don't "do" the Steps once and then forget them. The sweep of the A.A. program requires eternal vigilance because of our vulnerabilities toward ego inflation, false pride, and the other nagging character defects and shortcomings.

The tug of drug dependence, our overlearned response to life, is strong and always there in the back of our minds. The urge to repeat intoxication, to get "high" or "stoned," is perhaps the strongest pull we will ever know. And, we are not strong enough to secure a lasting victory in not doing it if we are left solely to our own devices.

Instead we establish the horizontal connection with others as we develop our vertical connection with a Power greater than ourselves. The Steps and other members guide us to this heightened spiritual dimension in life, and we may appreciate how subtly connected the horizontal and vertical planes are. In reaching out toward one, it is possible to enter both.

We may have felt foolish, terrified, or just plain bored with our youthful religious beliefs. We may have wanted to leave them behind forever. We may have been frightened, rebellious, or disinterested. We probably tried to bargain at times of desperation. A.A. affords us a more mature and loving approach to a Higher Power concept. We have a God who forgives and loves us.

We are only human, and relapse is always a danger. Unless we guard carefully it will appear. We must go on reaching out. There is an inherent danger in accumulating many years of sobri-

ety without continually striving to improve its quality. Treatment centers, hospitals, and asylums are full of men and women who had achieved ten or more years of sobriety only to decide on a hot summer's day that they could "handle a beer" or a glass of wine with dinner. The road back to sobriety is often long and arduous. There are those who never complete the journey.

In sobriety we never reach the point at which we can coast. New members may not have the same problems we do, but working with them allows us to keep our memories fresh. This is ego deflation in action. Some people don't *want* to remember. That is dangerous. If nothing else, working with new members is cheap insurance against relapse. To the truly dedicated, it is much more.

A.A. emerged as the outstanding self-help movement of this century in the 1930s because one man knew he desperately needed to change. He reached out to another alcoholic, who happened to be a physician. These men had many question marks in their early working format for sobriety, but they recognized from the very beginnings of this powerful fellowship the importance of extending self to others.

When we come into A.A. today we may feel sentenced to a life of bread and water. The

"good old days" have vanished never to return, and we mourn their loss. As we begin to relish the feast of life A.A. provides, we give ourselves permission to change and become as fully human as possible. We savor the true, deep flavors of life in sobriety, and we learn to laugh at "the bad old days." At first, we grudgingly allow ourselves to receive from others in the fellowship. Then we gradually continue that legacy by giving to those who follow. We give as it was given to us. We find self-worth, self-acceptance, and legitimate self-esteem by passing on the gift.

Reaching out can't end at five or ten or twenty years or any other length of time if we wish to continue the miracle of our rebirth. We nurture others and are fed in return, or we wither. In taking the risk of reaching out, we form truly intimate relationships. Fellowship delivers us from the tyranny of drugs, and the power struggle ends. We let go and let God. We develop the ability to care, to love, and to give. We become playful and alive.

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