Alcoholics Anonymous is likely the most well-known program for sobriety. It has nearly two million members worldwide, and it’s the default treatment for alcoholism in US healthcare.

I’m interested in studying AA because of its profound potential for behavior change. Alcoholism is a notoriously intractable condition. Genetics predisposes some people to alcoholism; changes in alcoholics’ brains put potential for relapse on a hair trigger.

That Alcoholics Anonymous can get a subset of patients to never drink again is impressive. That it does so non-pharmacologically - really, with just words and people - makes it well worth studying. Its practices, structure, and approaches to new alcoholics are a master class in persuasion.

The Big Book is Alcoholics Anonymous’s primary text. (long title: Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism). The Big Book is one of the
best-selling books of all times (30 million copies sold). It originated the “twelve-step program” now used widely among addictions outside alcohol. During a time when alcoholism was seen primarily as a character defect, the Big Book spread the paradigm of alcoholism as an illness.

In this summary and analysis of The Big Book, learn:

- The principles behind Alcoholics Anonymous, and why they work for alcoholics
- Why the “belief in a higher power” is not as problematic as you may think
- The powerful persuasive techniques AA use to recruit members and get them onboard

I'll first summarize the main principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, then dive into their persuasive techniques. If you're just interested in the latter, skip ahead, though they don't make as much sense if you don't know what they're being applied to.

Caveats

Alcoholics Anonymous is controversial for its unclear (and sometimes embellished) efficacy, as well as its practices.

How effective is Alcoholics Anonymous?

The evidence that Alcoholics Anonymous works any better than other treatments (like psychotherapy or “opportunistic brief interventions” with medical staff lasting 5-60 minutes) is mixed. It’s clear that AA works better than nothing, but it’s unclear that it works significantly better than other interventions. Here’s the best writeup of the literature I’ve seen so far.

Part of the problem with studying AA is that it’s anonymous, so tracking patients is harder. Also, AA is
run by groups, so there’s no control over delivery of intervention, vs treatments run by medical staff. Many studies use a “twelve-step program” run by therapists, but not formal AA meetings. AA proponents point to this as a way to reject negative results.

It’s likely that alcohol abuse runs on a spectrum, and that AA’s total abstinence policies better target the severe ones.

**Here’s what I think is a reasonable (if vague) interpretation:** AA works very well for some and not at all for others; it’s not a magical slam dunk for everyone (or else the alcoholism rate would be far lower than it is). It is popular by member count, and the model is scalable and free (to patients and the medical system). The problem of addiction is also hard enough that it’s good to have a variety of treatment options, and for patients to try a bunch out and choose the one that works for them. This makes AA sufficiently interesting to study as a practice.

**Is Alcoholics Anonymous a cult?**

There’s some criticism of AA as operating like a cult. From my reading of the Big Book, AA’s principles seem relatively benign. The idealized version of an AA group seems to be secular and accepting of diversity in all its typical forms.

“Belief in a higher power” trips a lot of people up. The book makes pretty clear this does not require the Christian conception of God. Most secularly, it’s put by a member as “It's not just a God, or a spiritual power, but the fact that you're just a singular being that can't, in your own, resolve this. Even a group of friends and family, something inarguably larger than yourself, is enough.”

But AA groups are run autonomously by design. Therefore, it’s not hard to imagine that some AA groups are more rigid, religious/Christian, or predatory. And since AA was started in the US in the 1940s, there are grandfathered traditions like prayers that probably started out Christian-influenced that have to be explained away.

AA does have some hardline principles - drinking in moderation is impossible (for a segment of people);
you cannot defeat your drinking by willpower alone. These might be sufficient to turn a recovering alcoholic off - which sounds fine to me. Trying not to be everything to everyone is the essence of competitive advantage - Ikea doesn’t pretend to suit the tastes of billionaires.

Again, AA works for some but not for all, and a variety of treatment options is usually good, if you can’t predict which ones work best for which people.

Principles

- In sum, the intervention is belief in a higher power, moral inventory, confession of personality defects, restitution to those harmed, and helpfulness to others.
- It’s necessary for an alcoholic to be ‘treated’ by another recovering alcoholic.
  - “Doctors, wives, parents, friends often cannot solve the problem. But the ex-problem drinker with a solution, armed with facts about himself, can win the entire confidence of another alcoholic in a few hours.”
  - “When all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day.”
  - “That the man who is making the approach has had the same difficulty, that he obviously knows what he is talking about, that his whole deportment shouts at the new prospect that he is a man with a real answer, that he has no attitude of Holier Than Thou, nothing whatever except the sincere desire to be helpful; that there are no fees to pay, no axes to grind, no people to please, no lectures to be endured—these are the conditions we have found most effective.”
  - The treatment is helpful for the recovering alcoholic as well: “our very lives depend upon our constant thought of others and how we may help meet their needs.”
- Alcoholics are plagued as though with an allergy. Alcoholics drink to overcome a craving beyond their mental control. These allergic types can never safely use alcohol in any form at all. They cannot start drinking without developing the phenomenon of craving, and it becomes virtually impossible to stop.
  - The craving is limited to this class and never occurs in the average temperate drinker. If you can stop, you’re not an alcoholic that needs AA.
    - Moderate drinkers can think of alcoholics, “This person is weak. I can take it or leave it - why can’t she?” They do not have this problem.
    - “No person likes to think he is bodily and mentally different from his fellow. Therefore, [we’ve had] countless attempts to prove we could drink like other people. The idea that somehow someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death.”
    - **Diagnose yourself.** Step over to the nearest barroom and try some controlled
drinking. Try to drink and stop abruptly.”

- “We had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. The delusion that we are like other people has to be smashed.”
- This sobriety has to last a lifetime. Of a drinker: “he fell victim to a belief which practically every alcoholic has–that his long period of sobriety and self-discipline had qualified him to drink as other men. Out came his carpet slippers and a bottle. In two months he was in a hospital, puzzled and humiliated.”

- **It’s not a question of willpower. Most alcoholics have lost the power of choice in drink.** Will power becomes practically nonexistent.

  - “The actual alcoholic, with hardly any exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.”
  - “We feel we had gone on drinking many years beyond the point where we could quit on our will power.”
  - “This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it–this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish.”

- Alcoholics try desperately to control their drinking: drinking beer only, only drinking with meals, never drinking alone, drinking only at parties, exercising more, taking medical treatments. None of these work.

- Alcoholics are otherwise sensible and well balanced. They may have special abilities and a promising career. But they cannot help destroying this for a drink.

- Alcoholics repeat the [drinking spree -> remorse -> promise to quit] cycle over and over. Promising to change once more doesn't work. There must be an entire psychic change for hope of recovery.

  - “Where had been my high resolve? I simply didn’t know. It hadn’t even come to mind. Someone had pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it.”
  - “I told myself I would manage better next time, but I might as well get good and drunk then.”
  - “In alcoholics the will is amazingly weakened when it comes to combating liquor, though it often remains strong in other respects.”

- The first drink is critical since it triggers a drinking spree.

  - “Many drinkers will offer one of a hundred alibis; none of them really make sense in light of the disaster alcohol causes. In their hearts they really do not know why they do it.”
  - “there inevitably ran some insanely trivial excuse for taking the first drink.”

- People affected by the alcoholic - spouse, family, employers - should also be included in the recovery.

  - For instance, an AA member’s spouse can talk to a new member’s spouse, using the same approach - this is my story, these were my mistakes, here are expectations for what’s going to happen.

- **AA is not a religious organization. You can choose your own conception of God.** You need only believe in a power greater than yourself, because you have no effective mental defense against drinking.

  - The power greater than themselves is necessary to hold depth and weight.
  - “God had done for him what he could not do for himself. His human will had failed. He had admitted complete defeat. Then he had in effect been raised from the dead.”
“It meant destruction of self-centeredness.”

[My read: The belief in a greater power places all recovering alcoholics on equal moral footing (we are all powerless); it avoids self-defeating blame for not being strong enough to overcome the addiction; it provides a supernatural, omnipotent ally in your struggles.]

There is no contradiction between AA practices and any religion’s beliefs or ceremonies.

“If you can't believe, at the least, that as a group working together we are stronger than an individual, you have more problems than alcoholism. It's not just a God, or a spiritual power, but the fact that you're just a singular being that can't, in your own, resolve this. Even a group of friends and family, something inarguably larger than yourself, is enough.”
(from an online comment)

**Specific messaging for agnostics**

“After a while we had to face the fact that we must find a spiritual basis of life—or else. Perhaps it is going to be that way with you. But cheer up, something like half of us thought we were atheists or agnostics. Our experience shows that you need not be disconcerted.”

“If a mere code of morals or a better philosophy of life were sufficient to overcome alcoholism, many of us would have recovered long ago. But we found that such codes and philosophies did not save us, no matter how much we tried.”

“we discovered we did not need to consider another’s conception of God.”

“We found that as soon as we were able to lay aside prejudice and express even a willingness to believe in a Power greater than ourselves, we commenced to get results.”

“Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe, that there is a Power greater than myself?” As soon as a man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way.”

“When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon the Spirit of the Universe, we had to stop doubting the power of God. Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did.”

“Did we not have confidence in our ability to think? What was that but a sort of faith? Yes, we had been faithful, abjectly faithful to the God of Reason. So, in one way or another, we discovered that faith had been involved all the time!”

**If you’re a successfully recovering alcoholic, don’t force AA on other people. Merely let them know your story of recovery, that you were in a pit of despair and found a way out. When the time comes, they will seek you out.**

“I was amazed. Rumor had it that he had been committed for alcoholic insanity...I wondered what had got into the fellow. He wasn’t himself.”

**The plan is fixed and absolute.**

“At some of [the 12 steps] we balked. We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not.”

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**The Twelve Steps**
1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol–that our lives had become unmanageable.

   Explained in detail above. Self-will is not sufficient for overcoming alcoholism.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

   Being all powerful, He provided what we needed, if we kept close to Him and performed His work well. Established on such a footing we became less and less interested in ourselves, our little plans and designs. More and more we became interested in seeing what we could contribute to life.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

   “God, I offer myself to Thee–to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!”

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

   Like a retail store, do an inventory of yourself. Find the damaged and unsalable goods, and get rid of them. Search your flaws that cause your failure. Only by rooting out your flaws and negative anger will you find what makes you drink. Freeing yourself of these flaws means freeing yourself of drink.

   Resentment: List what and who make you angry. Ask yourself why you’re angry. Then ask how it causes you injury.
   
   - I’m resentful at: my boss.
   
   - The Cause: Unreasonable, overbearing. Threatens to fire me for missing work.
   

   Thus other people have the power to kill - by harming you and causing resentment. How
do you deal with this?

- “We realized that the people who wronged us were perhaps spiritually sick. Though we did not like their symptoms and the way these disturbed us, they, like ourselves, were sick too. We asked God to help us show them the same tolerance, pity, and patience that we would cheerfully grant a sick friend. When a person offended we said to ourselves, “This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him? God save me from being angry.”
- “We avoid retaliation or argument. We wouldn’t treat sick people that way. If we do, we destroy our chance of being helpful.”

- Look for your own mistakes, and ignore those of others. Where had you been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, frightened? Where had you been selfish or inconsiderate? Make a list of your wrongs.
- You must be willing to make amends where you’d done harm.
- “If we are sorry for what we have done, and have the honest desire to let God take us to better things, we believe we will be forgiven and will have learned our lesson. If we are not sorry, and our conduct continues to harm others, we are quite sure to drink.”

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- The goal is to confess every dark cranny of your past, every twist of character.
- Involve another person. “We usually find a solitary self-appraisal insufficient. Many of us thought it necessary to go much further.”

- What happens to people who don’t go far enough? “They took inventory all right, but hung on to some of the worst items in stock. They only thought they had lost their egoism and fear; they only thought they had humbled themselves. But they had not learned enough of humility, fearlessness and honesty, in the sense we find it necessary, until they told someone else all their life story.”
- Consider your doctor, a private and understanding friend, a member of your religious organization. The person should understand this is a life-and-death errand.
- Don’t choose someone you’ll hurt - a spouse, a parent.
- The result should be looking at the world afresh, with relief. You’ll feel your drinking problem has disappeared. You’ll be at peace.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- Review the first 5 steps to see if you’ve left anything out.
- Do not cling to something you don’t want to let go. Ask God to help you be willing.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
- “My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen.”

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- [My read: Guilt over past misdoings drives people back to drinking, especially when the misdoings seem unforgivable. Excavating these wrongs, like cleaning out a cavity, reduces the temptation to drink.]
- “If we haven’t the will to do this, we ask until it comes. Remember it was agreed at the beginning we would go to any lengths for victory over alcohol.”

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
Approach with a sincere desire to set right the wrong. Say that you’ll never get over drinking until you’ve straightened out the past completely.

Don’t approach and say you’ve gone religious. You’ll tempt being branded a religious fanatic. Use your behavior to convince them.

Do not criticize or argue. You’re not there to discuss his faults. Stick to your own.

Most often, the person admits his own fault, melting away years of resentment.

Leave almost no one out of approach. Any fear that remains may drive you back to the bottle. If you fear the outcome, leave it in God’s hands - otherwise, all would be lost anyway.

- More people are accepting than you think. Creditors may understand.
- Maybe admitting something to someone make get you in jail (like not paying alimony to spouse). In this case, try to ask for forgiveness.
- If it implicates other people, secure their content.

Don’t be servile or begging. “As God’s people we stand on our feet; we don’t crawl before anyone.”

Exceptions to consider

- If you’d be certain to go to jail, consider that you’d be doing no one any good by being in jail. Maybe make amends another way.
- If you have to confess to adultery, don’t involve the other person by revealing the identity.

There are some wrongs you can never fully right. Don’t worry about them if you can honestly say to yourself that you could right them if you could.

10. **Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.**

Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. If they come up, ask God at once to remove them. Discuss them with someone immediately, and make amends quickly. Then turn your thoughts to someone you can help.

When agitated or doubtful during the day, ask for the right thought or action. [God feels like a supernatural, all-powerful propelling force. Imagine the power you feel this way.]

Over time, you’ll realize you’re seldom interested in liquor. You haven’t been fighting temptation. Instead, the problem has been removed. You feel safe and protected.

Don’t get complacent: “We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.”

Do you have to avoid every place that has liquor? No, not if you have a good reason for going to the place, other than stealing pleasure from the atmosphere.

Don’t proselytize to others. **Don’t show intolerance of drinking as an institution** - this attitude isn’t helpful to anyone.

11. **Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.**

“When we retire at night, we constructively review our day. Were we resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid? Do we owe an apology? Have we kept something to ourselves which should be discussed with another person at once? Were we kind and loving toward all? What could we have done better?”

Don’t drift into worry or morbid reflection - this will diminish your usefulness to others. Ask God’s forgiveness and ask what corrective measures need be taken.

On waking, plan your day. Divorce it from self-pity and selfish motives.
Pray that you’ll be shown all day what your next step is to be, that you be given whatever you need to take care of such problems.

As you complete these steps, you will feel renewed. Fear and insecurity will leave; ability and peace will replace them. “God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.”

12. **Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.**

- “Our very lives, as ex-problem drinkers, depend upon our constant thought of others and how we may help meet their needs.”
- [My read: active social engagement encourages social responsibilities that increase the barrier to drinking. It builds friendships that add happiness. Seeing AA methods work in someone else reinforce how they’ll work for you. Helping others adds “credit” to your internal moral bank balance, where past misdoings have drawn large debits.]
- Don’t start as an evangelist or reformer. Don’t show intolerance for drinking as an institution. Cooperate, don’t criticize.
- [Also, this gives AA members a cover to help other alcoholics, who may be resistant or skeptical of intentions. “I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing it for me” neutralizes skepticism.]
- To prepare for a prospect:
  - Find all you can about him.
  - If he doesn’t want to stop drinking, don’t persuade him. You spoil a later opportunity. Never force yourself on him, even if the family pleads.
  - Sometimes wait for him to go on a binge, then to admit he would go to any extremes to quit for good.
  - If he wants to stop, talk to the person most interested in him, usually his spouse.
  - Get an idea of his behavior, problems, background, seriousness of condition, and religious leanings.
  - Put yourself in his place. Were you in his place, how would you like to be approached?
- The approach:
  - See the person alone, if possible. Hold a general conversation.
  - Then turn to talk of drinking. Share your own drinking habits and experiences. Talk about your drinking career up until when you quit. But don’t say how that was accomplished. Let him see you know all about the drinking game.
  - Then talk about the story of your cure. How you struggled to stop, your excuses for drinking. Then share principles of AA - how you found willpower wasn’t enough, how alcoholism is an illness, how you were doomed by yourself.
  - Let the person draw his own conclusion about whether he’s an alcoholic. Then let him ask the question of how you became well, if possible.
  - Outline your course of action, beginning with acknowledging you were an alcoholic, and how you came to believe in a higher power. You may have to deal with concerns here.
  - Make it clear he’s not under pressure - he doesn’t have to see you again if he doesn’t want to.
  - For any complaints, don’t fight them. Simply tell him you once felt as he did, but you doubt whether you would have made much progress without believing what you do now.
If he refuses AA, encourage him to follow his conscience. But point out that we alcoholics have much in common, and you would like to stay friendly. Then let it go.

- **Don’t chase someone who cannot or will not work with you.** Spend your time on someone you can actually help. Let him come to you when the time is right.
- Be helpful with money, lodging, and resources as you can - but not to the extent of sabotaging yourself or the alcoholic. Helping an alcoholic too much makes him reliant on you and not God.
- Burn the idea into every man that he can get well regardless of anyone or anything. He does not need his wife to come back, to hold a steady job, to have enough money. The only condition is that he trusts in God and cleans his house.
- Be prepared to spend a lot of time having your life interrupted by the alcoholic and his possible drinking sprees.
- Through all of this, engage the family as they are willing. Share your own stories, especially around how you resolved your family conflicts. Prepare them for a period of growth and possible setbacks. Don’t participate in their quarrels.

The Twelve Traditions

How can AA best function? How can AA survive? The Twelve Traditions answer this.

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
   - “AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first.”
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
   - Refuse none who wish to recover. Never charge money or require conformity.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
   - If an action may affect AA as a whole, confer the trustees of the General Service Board.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose--to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
   - An AA group should never go into business.
   - An AA group should never bind itself to an organization - it should be able to freely discard other groups like clubs or hospitals.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may
employ special workers.

- AA 12 step work should never be paid for.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

- Each AA group needs the least organization possible. Rotating leadership is best.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

**Persuasive Tactics**

All people, to some extent, seek to solve their own problems. They don't want to be lectured and told what to do. They don't like when their faults are pointed out to them.

Alcoholics are no different. Getting annoyed when someone criticizes your drinking is a component of a basic screen for alcoholism.

So if Alcoholics Anonymous can get 2 million alcoholics on board, willingly practicing its beliefs, and succeeding in sobriety, **it must be doing something right.**

*The Big Book* is a tour de force in persuasion. It discusses the problem of alcoholism and details a clear path to treatment, all without a hint of prejudice or judgment.

Here are the most important principles I found in my reading:

- Be inclusive to make no one feel alienated demographically, and to reduce the barrier of joining
out of fear of social rejection.

- “We are average Americans. All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds.”
- “We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship. We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue. We have discovered a common solution.”
- “We have been speaking to you of serious, sometimes tragic things. We have been dealing with alcohol in its worst aspect. But we aren’t a glum lot. If newcomers could see no joy or fun in our existence, they wouldn’t want it. We absolutely insist on enjoying life.”

**Tend not to be accusatory and blame the reader. Don’t use you as much as we.** “We have undergone these problems. We thought X. If you are one of us, you will also do Y.”

- “Clear-cut directions are given showing how we recovered.”
- Use other people’s speech to be more accusatory instead of the program’s. “I saw then that I had no hope to solve my problem myself.”
- You is usually structured as “you may” “if you” “some of you are thinking” “suppose you do something like this”
- Exception is when giving commands on how to work with other alcoholics and to wives on how to handle situations.
- “Suppose we tell you some of the obstacles a family will meet; suppose we suggest how they may be avoided—even converted to good use for others.”

**Teach by telling stories, not by instructing the reader.** Provide plenty of anecdotes of success stories and warning stories. People will identify with the subject of an anecdote - then the treatment from that point on becomes more convincing.

- The Big Book includes 36 separate stories. Their general structure:
  - Here is my background, employment history. (Diverse backgrounds)
  - Here is how I got into drinking, then fell deeper into alcoholism. Here is how bad it got. Here are all the things I tried to get over it, and the justifications I gave for drinking.
  - Here was my turning point that turned me onto AA (often hitting a particularly bad time, or an AA member approaching me).
  - Here was my process of recovery. Here’s what I liked most about the process.
  - Here’s where I am now.
  - Here’s my best advice.
  - “I was out of hope. Then a man who made a complete recovery came to me. I was skeptical, but I tried it, and it worked.”
  - “Each individual describes in his own language and from his own point of view the way he established his relationship with God.”

**Communicate the beliefs you wish the reader had, in the form of confessions by third parties:** “I knew from that moment that I had an alcoholic mind. I saw that will power and self-knowledge would not help in those strange mental blank spots.”

- Not: “Your will power and self-knowledge are not enough. You need to realize that you’re an alcoholic;”

**Preempt self promotion:** “Our hope is that many alcoholics will see these pages. Only by fully disclosing ourselves and our problems will they be persuaded to say, “Yes, I am one of them too; I must have this thing.”

**Don’t press the beliefs and classify the reader as an alcoholic.** Lay your beliefs out there,
then let people come to you once they identify and realize their situation matches the books’.
- “But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly any exception, will be absolutely unable
to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge. This is a point we wish to emphasize and
re-emphasize, to smash home upon our alcoholic readers as it has been revealed to us out
of bitter experience.”
- Predict how the person who doesn’t accept the teachings is going to fail. When they realize the
diagnosis was correct afterward, they will trust the general teachings.
  - It is either death or accepting spiritual help [note how it’s not “accepting AA” which is
too self promotional - it’s accepting the strategy underlying AA.]
  - This might be too preachy, review how AA does it. Maybe offer from perspective of
personal failures.
- Separate out moderate drinkers from alcoholics, to distinguish how some people are born with a
curse to not handle alcohol; to better filter for people who will be suited for AA.
- Prepare the reader for the large changes that need to happen.
  - Almost none of us liked the [tactics required]. But we saw it really worked in others.
  - “It meant I would have to throw several lifelong conceptions out of the window.”
- **Empathize with the reader. Address their misgivings.**
  - Almost none of us liked the [tactics required]. But we saw it really worked in others.
  - Most of us have been unwilling to admit we were real alcoholics.
  - We are of all groups of society.
  - Some of our alcoholic readers may think they can do without spiritual help. Let us tell you
the rest of the conversation.
  - “Our friend was somewhat relieved, for he reflected that, after all, he was a good church
member. This hope, however, was destroyed by the doctor’s telling him that while his
religious convictions were very good, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital
spiritual experience.”
  - “We hope no one will consider these self-revealing accounts in bad taste. Our hope is that
many alcoholic men and women, desperately in need, will see these pages, and we believe
that it is only by fully disclosing ourselves and our problems that they will be persuaded to
say, ‘Yes, I am one of them too; I must have this thing.”
  - From a doctor: “Though not a religious person, I have profound respect for the spiritual
approach in such cases as yours. For most cases, there is virtually no other solution.”
- Give accurate portrait of struggles person has gone through. Like a horoscope, it can be wide
ranging, but they will pick up on the elements that apply strongly to them. This builds faith that
the speaker empathizes with their position.
- Give analogies to highlight the foolishness of alcoholic behavior.
  - On thinking you can overcome alcoholism, despite many failed attempts: “Our behavior is
as absurd and incomprehensible with respect to the first drink as that of an individual with
a passion, say, for jay-walking. He gets a thrill out of skipping in front of fast-moving
vehicles. He enjoys himself for a few years in spite of friendly warnings. Up to this point
you would label him as a foolish chap having queer ideas of fun. Luck then deserts him
and he is slightly injured several times in succession. You would expect him, if he were
normal, to cut it out. Presently he is hit again and this time has a fractured skull. Within a
week after leaving the hospital a fast-moving trolley car breaks his arm. He tells you he
has decided to stop jay-walking for good, but in a few weeks he breaks both legs. On
through the years this conduct continues, accompanied by his continual promises to be
careful or to keep off the streets altogether. Finally, he can no longer work, his wife gets a divorce and he is held up to ridicule. He tries every known means to get the jay-walking idea out of his head. He shuts himself up in an asylum, hoping to mend his ways. But the day he comes out he races in front of a fire engine, which breaks his back.”

- **Give hope to the most helpless cases.**
  - Often through a neutral third party like a doctor. “I thought there was no hope for you, but you cured yourself.”
  - “I have seen hundreds of families set their feet in the path that really goes somewhere; have seen the most impossible domestic situations righted; feuds and bitterness of all sorts wiped out. I have seen men come out of asylums and resume a vital place in the lives of their families and communities. Business and professional men have regained their standing. There is scarcely any form of trouble and misery which has not been overcome among us.”

- **Use a third party authority as indirect validation of the program, namely doctors.**
  - Finally he shook his head saying, “Something has happened to you I don’t understand. But you had better hang on to it. Anything is better than the way you were.” The good doctor now sees many men who have such experiences.
  - “I have felt that A.A. is a group unto themselves and their best results can be had under their own guidance, as a result of their philosophy. Any therapeutic or philosophic procedure which can prove a recovery rate of 50% to 60% must merit our consideration.”

- **Have third parties directly address third parties (eg spouses, employers).**
  - “As wives of Alcoholics Anonymous, we would like you to feel that we understand as perhaps few can. We want to analyze mistakes we have made. We want to leave you with the feeling that no situation is too difficult and no unhappiness too great to be overcome.”
  - **Similar structure as messaging to alcoholics:** “We did all these things to cope. We suffered all these pains. We have had these thoughts. We have made these mistakes. This is what finally worked for us. These are our suggestions. Here are expectations on how this is going to go. Here are situations you’ll encounter after trying AA, and here is how we troubleshoot them.”
  - “You should never tell him what he must do about his drinking. If he gets the idea that you are a nag or a killjoy, your chance of accomplishing anything useful may be zero.”
  - “If he is lukewarm or thinks he is not an alcoholic, we suggest you leave him alone. Avoid urging him to follow our program. The seed has been planted in his mind. He knows that thousands of men, much like himself, have recovered. But don’t remind him of this after he has been drinking, for he may be angry.”
  - **We may have seemed to lecture.** If that is so we are sorry, for we ourselves don’t always care for people who lecture us. But what we have related is based upon experience, some of it painful. We had to learn these things the hard way.”

- **God provides a supernatural, omnipotent ally standing beside you.**
  - If you have doubts: “You forget that you have just now tapped a source of power much greater than yourself.”

- **Overcome objections with “I know you’re resistant. We can only recommend it because it has worked. Deviating from this will cause failure.”**

- **Make person realize they’re powerless to change their behavior and they need help. This increases buy-in.**

- **Don’t be pushy about onboarding. It only works for people who realize they need help and are at**
wits’ end. Let them come to their own conclusion about whether they need help, and be ready and willing when they are around.

- The proud will insist they know everything they need to about drinking, behavior management, etc. But call attention to the fact that **however deep her knowledge, she couldn’t have applied it correctly, or else she wouldn’t be in this position.**
- Don’t show intolerance of drinking as an institution. No alcoholic wants to be lectured about alcohol by someone who hates it. (they have gotten plenty of this from others)