PARTICIPATION IN A 12-STEP GROUP AND “WORKING” THE STEPS is an important and perhaps critical component of an effective addiction recovery plan. In another article (see Are 12-Step Programs Effective?), we make a compelling case for the effectiveness of such programs. Here we focus on outlining the reasons why, and the ways in which, participation in 12-Step programs work. We will start by summarizing what 12-Step program materials have to say about how such programs work, and then we will review scientific research on the matter.

The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) outlined their ideas about recovery in the “Big Book” (BB)[a]. Later, applying the principles of AA to sexual addiction, the founders of Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) outlined their ideas in the “White Book” (WB)[b]. Fundamental to their understanding of addiction is that it is not primarily a problem of self-control (BB xiii) or wrong behavior (WB 41); rather, it is a spiritual problem. Specifically, it is a problem of our heart being in the wrong place, our whole approach to life being misguided, and our connections to others and God being dysfunctional. Thus, the solution is not solely abstinence or sobriety (although that is certainly an important part of recovery), but a deeper change in who we are. In other words, the addictive behaviors are merely symptoms of the real underlying problem. Recovery requires deep spiritual transformation. Some of the more salient facets to this transformative process highlighted in the BB and WB are as follows:

- Surrender lust, resentment, and other negative thoughts and emotions to God and to our fellows in recovery (WB 66-70, 79-81). It is not merely addictive behaviors we need to stop; it is also the thoughts and emotions which always precede those behaviors. Our addiction is fueled by lust and resentment. They are toxic to us and our relationships. We are powerless against them. But, rather than give in to them, or fight against them (i.e., “white knuckling it”), we must surrender them. It seems counterintuitive, but, it’s like the Chinese finger trap—the more we fight against lust and resentment the harder it gets. The key is to surrender or release those thoughts and emotions to God and others. We use our agency to decide we do not want lust and resentment in our life (on a moment by moment basis), and we turn the lust and resentment over to God, and share our surrender with one or more fellows in recovery.

- Acknowledge, confess, and right our wrongs (WB 97-104; BB 14, 41). We all carried around a ton of baggage from our past-years and years of harm to ourselves and others. It was killing us and our relationships (with God and our fellow man). Tremendous healing within ourselves and our relationships came from becoming aware of the wrongs we had done, taking responsibility for them, confessing them to God and our fellows in recovery, and doing all we could to make amends and keep those wrongs from happening again. The healing starts with our “first step inventory,” where we share the history of our addiction with others. Next, in Steps 4-5 we make a “moral inventory,” where we list and share with others our major character weaknesses. Then, in Steps 8-9 we make a list of those we have harmed and earnestly attempt to make amends. Lastly, in Step 10 we commit to continual honesty and accountability by taking daily inventory of ourselves and our wrongs, acknowledging them, and making prompt amends. Through this process, the burdens of the past are lifted, and we refrain from taking on new burdens.
• Turn from self to God and others (WB 61; BB 33-34). The first three steps encourage us to abandon our self-will and accept God’s will. As the popular 12-Step slogan states, “let go and let God.” We must admit that we cannot recover on our own, but that through God’s help we can. Next, we must deflate our ego, level our pride, and rid ourselves of selfishness (WB 52-55; BB14, 33-34). We must humbly let go of our need to blame, criticize, and find fault with others, which builds resentment and separates us from God and others (WB 23). This happens as we make and share our “moral inventory” in Steps 4-5, and ask God to remove our weaknesses in Steps 6-7. We hope that as a result of “working the steps,” we will have spiritual experiences that will transform us (WB 56-57; BB 15), that our hearts and attitudes will change (WB 80-81; BB 15), and that we will be more connected to ourselves, others, and God (WB 102). Addiction is about isolation; recovery is about connection. Reaching out to God in prayer, and reaching out to our fellows in recovery become our lifelines.

• We need to engage in positive sobriety (WB 62, 101-102; BB 49). In other words, we don’t just stop engaging in wrong behaviors, we start engaging in right behaviors, particularly loving and serving others. In Step 12 we learn that the secret to long-term recovery is “paying it forward” by sharing our story with others and helping them in their recovery. The founders of AA discovered the magic that happens in doing so, as it was a key to their recovery and since then has been a key to the success of 12-Step programs. Again, positive sobriety is an important part of going from a life of isolation to a life of connection.

• Recovery requires a radical change of lifestyle (BB 11, 15). Recovery is much more than mere sobriety (WB 64-65). As Mark Twain is rumored to have said, “Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I know because I’ve done it thousands of times.” Stopping our addictive behaviors is quick and easy. Changing who we are and our lifestyle is a long and challenging process (luckily we have the rest of our lives to work at it). The lifestyle that comes from fellowship in a 12-Step group and working the steps helps us not only stop our addictive behaviors but keep from starting those behaviors again. More importantly, it helps us become better people more connected to God and others, who are giving to the world more than we are taking.

• These are the reasons the steps work according to 12-Step gurus. However, given the amazing success and popularity of 12-Step programs, social scientists have sought to uncover for themselves the processes or mechanisms by which the steps work. In essence, researchers have attempted to peek inside the “black box” of 12-Step programs to try and understand how something not grounded in scientific research can actually work. There is scientific evidence to suggest that each of the following factors may play a role in helping people change through 12-Step program involvement:

  • Increased commitment to abstinence and motivation to abstain. This is important because some see addiction as primarily a problem of motivation, and thus sufficient motivation in the right direction is fundamental to recovery.

  • Increased confidence or self-efficacy to remain abstinent. This is the “I think I can, I think I can,” component of recovery. Albert Bandura, one of the most famous psychologists of our day, has argued that self-efficacy is one of the most critical factors in motivating and sustaining action.

  • Increased social support (including extensiveness of one’s social network, helpfulness of one’s social network, general support and encouragement, and specific help with recovery and abstinence). In particular, it seems that those more involved in 12-Step programs expand the number of friends in recovery as well as the amount of contact with others in recovery. This increased support helps sustain abstinence.

  • Increased religiousness and spirituality. As you might expect given the spiritual basis of 12-Step programs, those more involved in such programs show increases in their religiousness and spirituality, and this is in turn predictive of greater success in recovery.

  • Increased psychological well-being. The link between addiction and psychological well-being is a “vicious circle” because people who have more negative thoughts and emotions are predisposed
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to addiction, and addictive behaviors in turn lead to more negative thoughts and emotions, which then trigger more addictive behaviors. Fortunately, involvement in 12-Step programs may help reduce depression, which in turn can reduce addictive behaviors. Thus, 12-Step programs might help reverse the vicious circle.

- Increased coping skills. Addiction generally entails unhealthy and ineffective strategies for handling the stresses of life. One way in which 12-Step programs might help is through improving ability to cope with life and better handle stress in healthy and effective ways.

- Reduced impulsivity. The more people are involved in 12-Step programs the less impulsive they are. This is good because impulsivity is predictive of health-risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse and risky sex.

- Reduced addictive cravings. One way 12-Step involvement might aid recovery is by helping lower the level of obsessive thinking about the addictive substance or behavior, and helping decrease the compulsion to use.

In short, the reasons why 12-Step programs work are clear from 12-Step books. People who have successfully worked the steps have an intimate working knowledge of these processes. Additionally, scientific research has found evidence for a number of change mechanisms at work, or pathways to recovery, in those working the steps. Thus, the reasons why 12-Step groups have been such a huge success are not a mystery.