

Getting the most out of meetings

Meetings are one of the most powerful tools AA offers. Obviously, they provide opportunities for service and fellowship, but here are some things I love about meetings that don't get as much attention, and I think they'll help explain why I still go to a meeting every day.

1. Freedom from having to lie. I used to think lies protected me, so I lied all the time. I now believe that lying causes me spiritual harm, and that telling the truth repairs and prevents spiritual harm. But that knowledge alone doesn't automatically make it easier to be honest.

Telling the truth gets easier with practice, and *hearing* the truth reinforces my own honesty. I know I can be honest in meetings, because when I hear other people share honestly about shameful things, I see acceptance in response.

I've found that if I stay away from meetings for too long, the desire to impress or bullshit people slowly creeps back into my life. Meetings help me to stay honest.

2. Social proof of sober behavior. Part of my disease is that I want everyone to like me. To that end, I have developed a powerful, yet unconscious, tendency to do what other people around me are doing. It doesn't really matter *what* they are doing; if everybody around me starts waving their arms, I'll probably start waving mine. I'm more susceptible to this tendency than normal people.

So I avoid places where people are drinking. I may not want to drink when I arrive, but the more I'm surrounded by *any* behavior, the more reasonable it seems. Even if I don't pick up a drink, the urge to conform often makes me so uncomfortable that I'll be driven to act out in other ways, like demanding attention, flirting inappropriately, stuffing my face, or just being critical and mean.

Happily, I can use this tendency to my advantage: when I surround myself with sober people, I feel a strong desire to stay sober and behave in a sober way. Meetings trigger my desire to conform toward a healthy end.

3. Freedom from the fear of judgment. Another facet of alcoholism is that I am obsessed with what you think of me and terrified that you will think I've done something wrong. I spent my life more or less paralyzed by the fear of other people's judgment of my imperfections. Before they stopped working, the greatest gift of substances was that they made me less concerned about what you thought of me. When I was fucked up, I was even less perfect, but I didn't even care.

Situations that trigger fear of judgment are dangerous to recovering alcoholics. That's why I avoid prolonged exposure to reunions, my family, and parties full of really cool people. Once that fear kicks up, questions like "how are you?" and "what do you do for a living?" sound to me like "what's wrong with you?" and "why are you a failure?" Fear of judgment pushes many alcoholics back towards the chemicals that no longer bring relief.

To recover, I need frequent relief from that fear. AA meetings are structured to allow me to express myself honestly without fear of being judged. This is why crosstalk

is so dangerous. If someone at a meeting publicly judges me – by correcting me, telling me what to do, or trying to shame me – I'm no longer safe. No matter how good its intent, crosstalk tends to trigger shame, and *that* jeopardizes the environment of recovery. Avoid crosstalk at all costs.

4. Freedom from judging others. During a normal conversation, I process what you are saying, weigh and judge it to see where I agree or disagree, and formulate a response. This isn't bad; it's just how conversation works.

But another feature of alcoholism is that my capacity for judgment is abnormally overactive. I feel deeply, yet unconsciously, sure that my godlike powers of judgment will protect me from harm. Therefore, I have trained myself to *reflexively* judge everyone and everything around me. My alcoholic judgment finds the ways we are different and warns me not to trust you, to keep my distance. Left untreated, the noise this creates in my head is constant and painful. My judgment shuts me off from humanity, leaving me totally isolated.

Whatever we can do to disengage that engine of judgment is vital to our sobriety. Meetings are perfect for this, giving us a place to listen to people we need not judge. And again, rules preventing me from crosstalking help me – if I don't have to respond to what you say, it's much easier to listen to you without judgment. The *potential* for recovery is there in every meeting. But it's not always automatic. I can sit through three meetings in a row, but if I judge what everyone is saying, I am living in my disease, and I'm not getting the full benefit.

Sometimes I'll think "I need to hear the solution," or "I don't want to hear a big drunkolouge!" But that desire to control what people say is alcoholism, plain and simple. To stay sober, what I *need* to do is to practice accepting what people say instead of judging it. Every alcoholic has the right to share their truth without fear. Share about your cat, your art, your shoes, I don't care. Your story can't ruin anyone's sobriety.

Here are my tricks for getting more out of meetings:

- **Sit up front.** I get easily distracted by colorful objects in my field of vision, and the more things I see, the more things I will start judging automatically. When I sit up front and stare directly at the speaker, I can listen better.
- **Stare at the speaker's lips.** If I find myself drifting into my own thoughts, this usually helps me focus.
- **Pretend I love what they're saying.** If I really hate what someone is saying, I start mentally constructing rebuttals, retorts, or abuse. When this happens, I make myself think: "this is the best thing I've ever heard!" At the very least it makes me laugh.
- **Try to remember: Sometimes the message is not for me.** When a speaker talks about something I don't relate to, like (for example) obsessive knitting, I can still get fussy. But often, I'll hear three other alcoholics share in response: "Man, I'm so glad you talked about obsessive knitting!" AA never promised me 100% identification at all times. The message is carried in many different ways, and everyone's experience can help somebody.