



A Rebellion Dogs Blog

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Graduation Day in AA? Many Paths and Many Myths about 12-Steppers that drift from regular face-to-face meeting attendance

This May, Steve K posted an essay by Lisa Martinovic on [12StepPhilosophy blog](#). Lisa shares wise words about “neuroplasticity ... the phenomenon by which the brain changes itself through experience. It does so by strengthening the neural connections (synapses) associated with a particular course of action every time we take that course.” Neuroplasticity is important in understanding addiction and recovery...



What Gets You Sober – God Or Your Neurons?

ASIDE MAY 17, 2017 STEVE K 2 COMMENTS

By Lisa Martinovic

But that’s not what I’m writing about. Lisa Martinovic shares her story about “graduating” 12-Step meetings--a phenomenon more popular than we 12-Steppers know. We should talk about more, understand the various paths of recovery more. What really happens to all those who leave 12-Step meetings?

People once believed our world was flat. If you lived on the coast you would be told that when you looked to the horizon you were seeing the end of the world. Anyone who sailed past the horizon, out of view, fell off the earth; so we would be told. Do you and I tell the same fables about people who stop going to meetings? True

enough, the tragic and familiar relapse stories that we hear often, start with complacency, disconnection and then, boom! Disaster strikes. I would have to wager that all of us, sober ten years or more, knows someone who got on with their life without meetings and is still fine. What are the numbers? What are the chances? Is there myth-busting that is needed to clear up misconceptions? We are well-served to understand recovery more broadly. Some of us feel that maintaining this "every slip starts with not going to meetings" is a necessary negative reinforcement that is keeping people alive, keeps drunks from sailing over the edge of the earth. I do not share that view.

Not everyone who stops meetings will get very sick and die. Yes, some relapses have a starting point that included reducing/stopping going to meetings. I'm not going to quit meetings any more than I'm going to stop exercising. I don't know for sure that either activities extend the length of my life, but exercise as well as attending recovery gatherings are enjoyable parts of a balanced life. I like recovery and I'm still learning at meetings.

I don't feel confined to 12-Step rooms. AA, NA (etc.) meetings is more to me than somewhere for sober people to gather where people remember my name. Recovery, for me, is entertaining, social, rewarding and educational.

So, we hear the relapse horror stories. What we hear less about is that many rich and remarkable lives start with freeing up the time and commitment that are taken up by meetings and 12-Step service. At least, we don't hear about it in meetings. Since I've been a consumer of podcasts and blogs and other peer-to-peer content, I hear how these stories of transcending meeting/sponsor/service-dependency. While we don't have a pamphlet on the literature table about life after meetings, is this not a legitimate track for successful recovery?

Some leave AA angry or frustrated. True, that. Sometimes the loudest in the room are the anti-social, cantankerous bullies that seemingly raise their self-image by crushing others instead of encouraging their new, or long-term recovery fellows. So, I understand that there comes a time when AA meetings are more re-traumatizing than helpful for any of us who've been abused.

The site leavingaa.com is a community for recover from recovery. The 12-Step are not a sanctuary away from predators who sexually, financially or emotionally prey on the vulnerable. Sharply critical of AA's laissez faire resistance to a central authority, outrage is voiced that AA doesn't impose and enforce rules. Why won't GSO directs and discipline members or groups? This heated criticism/concern is felt on-line, in magazines and in the rooms, too.



A recent offering, from September 2017, the General Service Office of AA published, ***Safety Card for A.A. Groups: Suggested Statement on Safety*** which states:

“Our group endeavors to provide a safe meeting place for all attendees and encourages each person here to contribute to fostering a secure and welcoming environment in which our meetings can take place. ... we ask that group members and others refrain from any behavior which might compromise another person's safety.

...If a situation should arise where someone feels their safety is in jeopardy, or the situation breaches the law, the individuals involved should take appropriate action. Calling the proper authorities does not go against any A.A. Traditions and is recommended when someone may have broken the law or endangered the safety of another person. ... problems found in the outside world can also make their way into the rooms of A.A. For this reason, groups and

members discuss the topic of safety—to raise awareness in the Fellowship and to seek through sponsorship, workshops and meetings to create as safe an environment as possible.” [1]

I’ve worked through some issues of my own. As a young person I faced periodic dismissiveness. As someone who declines dependence on a deity for my own recovery, I have faced discrimination and hostility. There have been periods of time I didn’t go to AA. Too be clear, in some cases it was career or family. Other times, I tired from a certain anti-intellectualism that—if not a condition of AA, is widely tolerated in certain regions of 12-Step meetings. There have been years in which I went to six or seven meeting in the whole year. Of course, there have been times when I go to that many face-to-face meetings every week.

Regarding aggressors in the room, I found them to be more bark than bite. Still, plenty of our members find a more tranquil network outside the rooms, away from bullies and bleeding deacons. So, it’s a personal decision to stay or go. There is no obligation. I feel that I owe something to the still-suffering, so I stay. I still find stimulation and community. To some extent, in my case, some of that duty is codependent, and some of it is gratitude.

Some get what they need from us and move on to new routines. They don’t leave us to spite us; they graduate. Here’s what Lisa says about her turning point after double-digit years of sobriety:

From the very beginning, I challenged certain aspects of the twelve-step party line. ... But the basic framework of the program did work for me, so I kept coming back and kept staying sober. Ten to fifteen years in, I started to chafe. ... So, did I still need to go to meetings to maintain my sobriety? Our community was rife with people who had returned to meetings after trying and failing to stay sober alone. We were constantly warned that catastrophe awaited anyone who stopped working the program. (Such fear-mongering is but one of the reasons twelve-step is called out as a cult by detractors.) ... Though I never made an official break with twelve-step, I found myself going to meetings less and less often until eventually I stopped altogether. The habits that I had practiced with such devotion for so long had made permanent changes to my brain and behavior. And they live in me to this day.

I would not suggest that everyone should ultimately graduate from twelve-step. It’s just what worked for me.

Over the years, good friends in AA (and other 12-step fellowships) have found what they needed in the rooms and move on. Sometimes, this transition is after decades of regular meeting attendance and personal enmeshment (being a sponsee, being a sponsor, service work, etc). Is it frightening or liberating to leave your NA, OA or other 12-Step fellowship behind? Does everyone get the same hyperbolic warning: "Don't sail to far from shore; you'll fall off the end of the world"? Maybe graduates knew they would be okay. Maybe it’s a new leap of faith. Maybe for some, it’s gradual—tapering off 12-Step dependency.

Being a parent is a series of worries as our kids reach new stages of independence. It can feel the same way with my close recovery network. I've been indoctrinated with the stark warning from



Lisa Martinovic is a native San Franciscan who — to the surprise of everyone, most especially herself — spent most of the 1990s in Hogeye, Arkansas. Yet it was there that she came into her own as a slam poet, writing and performing political satire, ribald erotica, Ozark character studies and a genre she calls poemedy—a hybrid art form combining the most compelling qualities of poetry and stand-up comedy. She has ten self-published.

Lisa has toured as a performance poet throughout the US, featuring New York City, San Francisco and New Orleans Lollapalooza.

those who drift from meetings, then lost their way and suffered, often met with near-death encounters, re-enslaved to their drug of choice. Returning to the fold, they share their tragic tale. So I worry (a little) when loved ones take a sabbatical from 12-Step engagement.

A personal view that I have of 12-Step rooms is that there is a false intimacy in AA. We may feel a close bond that proves to be illusionary when it meets a real test. I've seen members who take a sabbatical and no one calls from their home group. After years/decades of intimate discussion, picking up the phone late at night, during work or meal time, countless favors, and then a year after leaving their home group, members are left to wonder, "Why did no one call?" Now, it's understandable—even healthy—that we don't stalk newcomers. If they stop coming, should we track them down or leave them to their own devices? Attraction rather than promotion is a personal boundary issue, isn't it? But if you've known a person and said, "Good to see you," for years and then you don't see them for a couple of months, are they out-of-sight-out-of-mind? How cold is that? Damaged people—and let me just speak for myself, here—have boundary issues. Behaving badly is still a regular occurrence for me and I have said, well-meaning but inauthentic things, platitudes, and I try today to be clear about how I communicate but I am not always skillful and vigilant.

For the record, I have my own experience as far as drifting away from meetings. I never quit Adult Children of Alcoholics; but I haven't been to a meeting in over 15 years. Has my "laundry list" of mal-adaptive coping techniques come back to overwhelm my life? Not often. I've been to SLAA, NA, Al-Anon, DA, GA, and other process or substance use disorder fellowships and I haven't quit any of them. But have I been to a meeting in the last year? No. I go to AA and mostly secular AA and service meetings (hospitals and institutions). I spend more time online (podcasts, YouTube, blogs, chat groups) than I spend in my face-to-face AA groups. I feel akin to several other fellowships, but I haven't been back and don't know when I'll be back.

Lisa Martinovic's account is the opposite of the relapse horror stories when it comes to moving on from AA indoctrination. We have much to learn from ex-12-Steppers?

AA doesn't study these patterns, but researchers do.

Lee Ann Kaskutas et al, in 2005, published *Alcoholics Anonymous Careers: Patterns of AA Involvement Five Years After Treatment Entry*. Over 300 of us were recruited for this long-term study as we were going into treatment. While it may not be definitive, it offers more subjectivity than my or your anecdotal observations and I find these studies worth noting:

“Some individuals just never connect with the program; some connect but do not stay with it; some immediately feel at home in AA and rely on meetings daily or almost daily; and some embrace AA but their life is not dominated by meeting attendance. It will be important to replicate these results in other treated (and untreated) samples, and to follow AA participants over longer periods of time to more fully understand patterns of meeting engagement and disengagement throughout recovery.

Of course, meeting attendance is but one component of AA engagement. As shown in our mapping of meetings with others AA beliefs and activities, decreasing in AA meetings do not necessarily signal disengagement from AA (especially with respect to feeling like a member of the fellowship).” [2]

A 2003 Heath C. Hoffmann offering called, *Recovery Careers in Alcoholics Anonymous: Moral Careers Revisited* [3] looked at 12-Stepers and identified four AA 'careers' an academics term for what we call, 'many paths.' Here are the four careers (trajectories):

1. Insiders (including rank and file members, bleeding deacons/elder statesmen and circuit speakers)
2. Tourists
3. Chronic Relapsers
4. Graduates.

We have plenty of stories of insiders—some become circuit speakers, sponsors, sponsors, sponsors or trusted servants. Others are the rank and file members. Tourists are motivated to attend AA by outside forces (court, employer, doctor, family, etc.) Graduates—and this is what I would characterize Lisa and others we are talking about as—have had their experiences documented by researchers. Graduates...

“...experiences some level of conversion to the Twelve Step ideology of AA but at some point ‘graduates’ from the program after he has been able to resolve conflicts.”

Note that, according to Hoffmann's findings, not all graduates stay stopped. Some,

“...having been able to resolve conflicts surrounding his drinking ... no longer requires frequent attendance at AA meetings and might even resume alcohol consumption without experiencing related conflicts.”

Hoffmann notes that this means that AA dogma that “once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic” may not be true for everyone. Also, Hoffmann notes that some AA argue that these cases were

never “real alcoholics” in the first place, satisfying their need to defend the once a drunk—always a drunk position to which they seem to find comfort and satisfaction.

The tourist may do 90-meetings-in-90-days, go to conferences, get a sponsor, work the steps, maybe even get booked and after six to 18 months, they have gotten what they needed—sustained sobriety—and they get on with their life. Some say, "The only time I thought about drinking was when I went to AA meetings." Other tourists—members who were coerced to go to meetings—change their attitude and become insiders.

Chronic relapsers come back to our meetings, remorseful, desperate and in a act of purging, flog themselves with testimony of their humiliation. Some don't come back, because sometimes they die. And if we ever cared enough or were engaged enough to get their last name, we might hear about their death and attend their funeral. In many more cases, we wonder, "What ever happened to Sandra?" Sometimes the relapser becomes the rank and file member and they have a happy ending.

The AA graduate stays longer than the tourist and has a career path that looks like the insider member for many years (or decades); then life changes. I've seen member who moved towns. They never feel the community in their new AA environment that they enjoyed at home. They didn't get engaged and they faded from the 12-Step scene, without fanfare. Sometimes they still had plenty of AA friends that they kept in touch with and sometimes I was lucky to be one of the few. Sometimes they out-grow their community.

In some cases, they see their group(s) changing for the worse, becoming more dogmatic or anti-intellectual. More conservative members might feel the same way about a completely different set of changes. It could be the meeting gets more spontaneous and less structured. Drug talk, cross-talking or texting starts to make them feel uncomfortable in their own meeting. After a while they stop enduring the bad experience of going to meeting and find they prefer their nights off to their home groups and/or other AA service commitments.

We need more of these graduate stories. I am not asking for volunteers. I am just saying we should collect and celebrate these personal accounts, just as we celebrate the insider 12-Stepper.

Jon Stewart is an online friend who's no enemy to AA but his recovery community has expanded and his meeting attendance has faded to periodic. He's still a great contributor to the recovery community, talking about the Sinclair Method and other avenues to recovery. He's an active online recovery participant and there's nothing about his recovery that appears to me to be any shakier than rank-and-file NA, AA, SLAA (and other process and substance addiction mutual-aid societies) members I know.

While relapse can happen when someone stops going to meetings, relapse also happens to treatment professionals that enjoyed decades-long engagement in 12-Step rooms. No one is immune from relapse. More of these graduate stories would help us replace our current mythology. Who wants to trade one slave-master for another? I don't want to go to AA because it's a crutch that I can't get along without. I want to go because I want to go. AA doesn't fail someone who stops going. And people who recovery with the help of AA don't owe a lifetime

debt of repayment. It's an AA success story that some graduate—not to take anything away from the individual commitment to sobriety. How do we know that the people who leave AA aren't our best success stories?

Life offers opportunity. Opportunity imposes risk. For me, I want to hear all the stories of the many paths of recovery. Thank you, Lisa, for sharing your success story. It isn't disloyal to AA to point out our flaws. I thought Lisa posted a very balanced account of AA's attributes and some of our shortcomings. I've found some of these other graduates. Podcasts, like The Bubble Hour, and several others, offer stories of people whose life choices don't always include a meeting a day or even a meeting every week.

I hope this story gets shared and enjoyed. I for one, highly recommend it. Steve K, author of *The 12 Step Philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous: An interpretation by Steve K.* and host/blogger to 12stepphilosophy.wordpress.com surely feels the same. From his website you can read the whole article by Lisa about how the brain reacts to addiction and recovery. There are plenty more good blogs by Steve, so take your time and scroll around.

<https://12stepphilosophy.wordpress.com/2017/05/17/what-gets-you-sober-god-or-your-neurons/>

<http://leavingaa.com/about/>

[Lisa's BLOG http://slaminatrix.com/](http://slaminatrix.com/)

[1] https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/f-211_SafetyCardforAAGroups.pdf

[2] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16340455>

[3] <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/009145090303000306> Contemporary Drug Problems 30/Fall 2003 pp. 647 - 684