



SafeHouse
a modern approach to recovery

You can listen to all SafeHouse Podcasts at:

<https://safehouserehab.com/safehouse-podcasts/>



Season 02. Episode 09

Finally, Research Proves AA Works.

Research as published by The New York Times proves AA works, and works better than any other approaches. True.

If you're one of those people who believes what they believe despite any evidence to the contrary – even if it benefits you – then you need not listen any further. But if you are open-minded and believe that science and evidence should shape your attitudes, even if you have healthy skepticism, then by all means we have some exciting new findings to share.

Here's what showed up in the March 11th issue of the New York Times print and digital editions.

For a long time, medical researchers were unsure whether Alcoholics Anonymous worked better than other approaches to treating people with alcohol use disorder. Back in 2006, a review of all the available evidence concluded – guess what - that we didn't have enough evidence to judge.

That has changed dramatically.

An updated review by the Cochrane Collaboration found that AA leads to increased rates AND lengths of abstinence compared with other common treatments.

What changed was this: this latest review incorporates more and better evidence. Where the 2006 Cochrane Collaboration review was based on just 8 studies, and ended with a call for more research – by the way, many reviews call for more research which is a bit self-serving to be sure, but I myself have been intimately involved in marketing and social science research for decades, and this latest review is absolutely sterling – this new report was a true meta-study of 27 reports that included better, cleaner research to weed out bias and sample problems.

Are you bored yet? Hope not.

So, our source doesn't get any better than John Kelly, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of the Recovery Research Institute at Massachusetts General Hospital, the lead author of the new review we are concerned with today, who said this:

“These results demonstrate AA's effectiveness in helping people not only initiate but sustain abstinence and remission over the long term.”

He goes on to give AA yet another little boost.

He states: “The fact that AA is free and so widely available is also good news. It's the closest in public health that we have to a free lunch.”

I have to comment here that AA has been up against cynicism among uninformed members of the public and especially among academics for a long time because there wasn't scientific evidence, there existed an unwillingness to believe the radical idea that something free and easily available actually works, and there is to this day belief in the myth that AA is a secret society, a cult. What hasn't helped too is the news that a famous actor or sports figure tried AA and then relapsed in spectacular fashion. As if it was the fault of AA, like blaming the gym if you're out of shape. You gotta do the work if you want results.

Where these findings play themselves out, where they can affect outcomes, is to help break down resistance by alcoholics to seeking help from AA, to say in effect: you can't say AA doesn't work, because it works better than anything else out there.

One more thing before we quote some numbers: an addict could easily say that 12 step programs don't work so what's the point? I haven't yet scoured the evidence on the effectiveness of NA – Narcotics Anonymous or CA – Cocaine Anonymous, but does it not stand to reason that if AA works for alcoholics, then NA or CA will also work for addicts?

I am well aware that every recovering member of AA, NA or CA will say: “Of course it works; I am living proof of that.” But that ignores the proof among those who fell out that it does NOT work for them.

Rigorous study of programs like AA is challenging because people self-select into them. Those who do so may be more motivated to abstain from drinking than those who don't.

So, what do the numbers look like?

Treatments that do not include AA result in about 15 to 25 percent of people who remain abstinent. With AA, it's somewhere between 22 to 37 percent, so the low end for AA is about the high end for other programs.

Truth is, other approaches can work too. And as with other program, AA doesn't work all the time. But is often paired with other kinds of treatment that encourage participating in AA. Other treatments include CBT – cognitive behavioral therapy in one on ones, or group therapy moderated by a counselor, in either outpatient or more intensive in-patient therapy.

Here's a telling quote:

“For people already in treatment, if they add AA to it, their outcomes are superior than those who just got treatment without AA.” says Keith Humphries a Stanford University professor and co-author of the new Cochrane review.

In the United States, despite the news about opioid abuse and the destruction that it's caused, alcohol is a larger killer than all other drugs, accounts for the majority of addiction treatment, contributes to half of the 36,000 annual deaths in vehicle accidents and is every more deadly; deaths related to alcohol more than doubled in the last 18 years.

So the context of my podcast today is mostly about alcohol and the role that AA can play, is playing, in getting and keeping alcoholics sober.

If I am to have any value to my audience, friends, family and anyone who loves an alcoholic, than I want to let you know that there is always always hope and that you have already taken a big step by becoming aware of what recovery, especially recovering using AA, has to offer.

The science says that the odds are a 37% recovery rate, the high side, in AA. But here's how to think about that. If you knew that 27% of the adult population had a 4-year

college degree or better, does that mean that the odds of a high schooler entering college had only a 27% chance of graduating? No way. What makes the odds closer to 100%? Commitment, that's what.

I'm not saying that commitment to AA will get you to 100% but I am here to tell you the odds are way better than the 37% high side average that science predicts.

There's another factor that science does not and cannot factor in or measure. In AA, we believe that drinking is just a symptom of a deeper problem than the inability to stop and stay stopped. We say we don't have a drinking problem, we have a thinking problem.

In only one of AA's 12 steps does the word alcohol appear, and that's in the first step where quote: we admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.

That's a polite way of saying that we were drinking like maniacs probably every day and that our lives had gone to hell. Yeah, the language of AA is rather civilized. Perhaps it's a reflection of the era during which the basic text called Alcoholics Anonymous was published...the year was 1939.

Let me share a moment I experienced 26 years ago while in treatment. I had sobered up, I was going to AA, attending group therapy and one-on-ones in an IOP, Intensive Outpatient Program. So about 4 months in, I asked my counselor a dumb but not so dumb question: "Margaret, what's this treatment all about?"

She looked right at me with a "I can't believe you would ask this question this far into treatment" look, and she stated in no uncertain terms: "Young man, the whole point of treatment *is to get you to work the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.*"

That rang my bell and has stayed with me all these years.

So what is the point of AA? Turns out that we alcoholics are self-centered in the extreme, we hate responsibility, we lie, cheat, steal. We want to always take the easier, softer way unless we get obsessed with a goal like status or money.

The point of AA is to have us grow as human beings from self-centered takers to compassionate givers, to become empathic people, to live principled lives and not live by our fears or desires, to go out there in the real world and become responsible, accountable, honest citizens and yes, even leaders in our communities and in our families.

So even though active alcoholism explains what we did to harm others, it doesn't excuse it either. We have to make a list of ALL the people we have harmed and make direct amends to them ALL.

AA will not coddle you or enable you to get away with a halfhearted effort. AA is for grownups. Now if you don't want what we have, you are welcome to go back out there and let us know if it got any better.

That's how we talk in AA. Straight up with love.

So what have we learned today?

1. AA has always had its detractors, but it is possible that some, not all, people can come around and believe AA is a worthwhile resource, if they were presented evidence.
2. The most comprehensive study reported by the venerable New York Times conclusively demonstrated that AA was the most effective program among all those studied- 27 studies in all- in getting and keeping people sober.
3. Moreover, where AA was a part of a larger program, the success rate was better than other non-AA-related approaches.
4. "AA is the closest thing to a free lunch in public health, as it's free and it's everywhere."
5. Finally, there is one thing that science hasn't been able to measure so far: the degree to which AA helps rebuild one's personal character, for it's not about just staying sober, it's about growing up and holding ourselves accountable as honest citizens.

You can listen to all SafeHouse Podcasts at:

<https://safehousererehab.com/safehouse-podcasts/>