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12-step followers should keep at it

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If you've been attending Alcoholics Anonymous or another 12-step recovery group following treatment for a substance use disorder, keep going.

That's the conclusion of a study funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism that was released this week.

The three-year study followed 227 recovering alcoholics who had been through treatment, concluding that the more frequent the attendance at AA or similar recovery support groups, the higher the rate of not using an addictive substance and the lower the consumption in the event of relapse.

The study looked at a variety of mutual-help support groups for people dealing with addictions and found that most participants attended AA, probably because AA is more available than other groups.

The study also confirmed what professionals in the addictions treatment field have long believed: the more time spent attending recovery meetings, the better the outcome for the individual.

“Research on AA is difficult due to the anonymity issue,” said Joe Diament, director of the adolescent treatment initiative at New Futures, a statewide organization dedicated to public education and reducing substance use disorders. “Recovery support is absolutely pivotal in treatment.”

Diament, who was director of Odyssey House, an adolescent treatment center in Hampton for 19 years, said the research is “very clear” that “continuing care” is vital to a successful and ongoing recovery for the chronic disorder.

“In my experience, it’s absolutely true,” he said.

Even those outside the recovery network have observed the power of the AA model. The Rev. Stephen Edington, for example, minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Nashua, said his church has provided space for a Monday night AA meeting and a Friday night Narcotics Anonymous meeting for at least 10 years.

“They’re strong and thriving,” Edington said of the groups. “They pack the room.”

Edington said he sometimes sees group participants “coming and going” while he is working at the church.

“I think what people find in a recovery group is similar to what they find in any healthy religious community,” he said. “They feel something is missing from their lives, and they’re hoping the community can provide it for them.”

Diament said anyone with an addiction to alcohol or other drugs requires treatment before entering a support group.

“Once you’ve been through treatment, any constructive, healthy recovery is better than none, and 12-step groups are particularly effective in maintaining sobriety,” he said.

The study, published in the August edition of *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, was authored by Robert Stout, director of the Decision Sciences Institute of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, and John Kelly, associate director of the Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Addiction Research Program.

“To me, there’s no question it’s true,” said Nashua resident Mary Bock, a recovery advocate. “The beauty of it is, you come in with a life that’s unmanageable, and it gives you the tools to reconcile with the past and a framework for responsible daily living.”

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