

What is mutual aid?

At its most simple level, mutual aid can be described as people with similar experiences helping each other to manage or overcome issues. What it infers is a system where people come together with their peers to build a network of support.

In Keith Humphreys' book *Circles of Recovery*, he identifies some shared characteristics of mutual aid groups, such as members sharing some problem or status that results in suffering/distress, members both offer and receive support as a part of the group, groups are organised and facilitated by members, experiential knowledge is the basis of expertise and no fees are charged, except for individual member voluntary contributions.

There are many models of mutual aid, with varying approaches and set ups for different cohorts of people.

The most widespread are the '12-step' fellowships (Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Families Anonymous, Marijuana Anonymous etc), but there are also SMART Recovery Groups, Methadone Anonymous (US) and LifeRing Recovery (US). Al-anon and Alateen help families of alcoholics. These supportive networks span the country, at times and in places where a large number of people can access support.

Some people's journey to recovery takes them straight to mutual aid; for others, their journey goes via the 'formal' structured treatment system or doctors, nurses and counsellors. Either way, mutual aid groups provide an immense opportunity to offer the kind of supportive environment needed to help individuals recover and to support them in the long term – as well as giving them the opportunity to support others. It is perhaps this changed, supportive social environment – that many who have faced problems with addiction may not have experienced before – which has the greatest potential to support sustained life changes for individuals, and the families and communities in which they live.

[Mark Gillyon, head of delivery at the NTA, talks to Jules T, public information representative from Narcotics Anonymous](#)

How do you describe the aim of Narcotics Anonymous?

Our primary purpose is to carry to every using addict the message that recovery is possible. We know from the experience of many thousands all over the world that sustained, long-term recovery can be achieved through our programme, which is simply based on complete abstinence and the therapeutic value of one addict helping another.

How did it all start?

In the USA in 1953, when drug addicts who had been attending meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous decided to form their own fellowship. Following that first NA meeting in Los Angeles, the society grew slowly, spreading to other major north American cities and to Australia by the early 1970s. The first NA meeting in the UK took place in London in 1980.

In 1983, when NA published its self-titled Basic Text, the growth of the organisation rocketed. New groups sprang up in Brazil, Colombia, Germany, India, the Irish Republic, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK. By the end of the year 1,200 groups had been established in 11 countries. Growth from then on was rapid.

How big is NA, and how accessible?

There are currently more than 700 weekly meetings across the UK, from Penzance to Wick. Around 250 take place in London. In addition, more than 30 meetings are held each week in prisons and a further 30-40 in treatment and detoxification centres.

We are a community-based society of people for whom drugs had become a major problem. We offer a new social circle, support, friendship, encouragement and a place to share. For those leaving treatment or prison, we are a soft landing.

There is no fee, though each meeting takes a collection to cover the rent for its venue, the cost of tea and coffee, and buying some literature from our service office.

Who can attend NA?

NA is open to anyone who has a desire to stop using, regardless of age, race, sexual identity, religion or lack of religion. It is not a requirement to be abstinent (drug-free) to attend our meetings. There are no fees or dues, no pledges or promises to make. We do not assess people's desire, or whether they have a problem at all: that is for each individual to decide for his or herself. If someone says they have a problem, and that they want help, we offer it. Despite our name, we are not concerned with the drug used: we accept anyone who feels they have a problem, regardless of the substance – and just to be clear, we do absolutely include alcohol as a drug.

How does it work?

Our groups meet regularly to help each other stay clean. At meetings in church and community halls across the country,

members share their experiences, strength and hope with one another. Newcomers are amazed to meet for the first time people who have got, and stayed, clean; old timers are reminded by the raw sharing of those in early days of their own distant pain, and of how much they have to be grateful for now.

Everyone helps each other - because as we say in our readings 'we keep what we have only by giving it away'. In other words, helping others is not a by-product of recovery: it is the engine that makes recovery possible.

Ours is a programme of complete abstinence from all mind- and mood-altering drugs. It is centred on the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions of NA. When adapting AA's First Step, the word 'addiction' was substituted for 'alcohol', thus removing drug-specific language and reflecting our belief in the disease concept of addiction.

The 12 Steps are simply written, and act as a daily guide in the journey to becoming acceptable, productive and responsible members of society. The process of 'working the Steps' involves admitting we have a problem, asking for help, carrying out a personal moral inventory, identifying our weaknesses (and strengths), making amends to those we have harmed, and then helping others to achieve their own recovery. We work through the 12 Steps with a sponsor - a kind of mentor we choose because we feel some sort of identification or affinity, or because we admire their recovery. Nobody is assigned a sponsor, and nobody is obliged to do what a sponsor suggests. In fact we have no rules at all, only suggestions. We know from our own experience that addicts react negatively to being given rules!

Are there religious elements to the fellowship?

NA is not a religion or a cult. We have many members from every major faith, and plenty of atheists too. Our programme does have a spiritual dimension, because the disease of addiction has a spiritual dimension: active addicts are locked in self-obsessed fear, and often believe they are the centre of the universe, which makes them very selfish. In recovery, we suggest accepting that there is a higher power than ourselves - in other words, that the world does not revolve around us. Our members choose their own higher power. For some it's their NA group, humanity, or nature; for others it's the god of their faith. We use the word God as a shorthand for all of these higher powers in some of our literature, always with the rider 'a God of our understanding'. We never instruct members what that understanding should be.

Are there specific meetings for specific groups, for example, women?

Yes, in the UK there are men's and women's meetings, as well as meetings for gay and lesbian members, language-based meetings and also some other special-interest meetings, for example for people with an illness to manage in recovery.

What are the benefits for those who attend?

From the annual survey carried out at our World Convention in 2007, NA members have a mean average of 9.1 years clean. By comparison, the 2003 membership survey, showed a mean average of 7.4 years clean. The 2007 survey also asked

members to assess areas of their lives that have improved with NA attendance. The two areas that received overwhelming improvement were family relationships, where 90% of our members stated enrichment, and social connectedness, mentioned by 83% of the respondents. Active addiction is marked by increased isolation and destruction of relationships: these results show that recovery in NA has helped people to repair the damage in their lives from drug addiction.

Our 2008 UK membership survey shows that 98% of respondents claimed improvement in their quality of life since coming to NA; 72% improvement in employment status; 63% in educational qualifications; and 91% in relationships.

Stats aside, most people I know would say the biggest benefits are peace of mind (especially freedom from the obsession to use), a sense of belonging somewhere, and the awakening of an ability to love and to be loved.

What about those who are still in treatment receiving prescribed medication, for example? Can they engage with NA?

You don't have to be clean (by which we mean drug-free) to attend our meetings, and we are clear that prescribed medication, taken as prescribed by a physician, does not compromise a person's recovery. We hold meetings in treatment facilities for people who can't get out to attend our public meetings.

Can you support parents and families of addicts?

We have open meetings which welcome non-addicts to attend as observers and see what goes on in our meetings. However, we do not set out to support non-addicts: our programme is all about one addict helping another to recover. There are other organisations, including 12-step fellowships such as Families Anonymous, and Al-anon and Alateen, which offer specific support for family members. While we don't endorse or promote any outside organisations, our helpline is happy to refer family members on to them.

What about clients in prison? Can they access prison-based groups, in most prisons in England?

We hold meetings in almost every prison in the UK. A regular 'secretary' will arrange for an NA member to attend each week to share his or her experience, strength and hope with all those who attend the meeting. This is not easy for us to maintain, especially with the locally variable and often complex or even prohibitive clearance procedures. By definition, many of our members are former clients of these facilities, which makes their sharing even more powerful, but often precludes them from being allowed in.

How can drug treatment workers improve their understanding about NA, and offer the opportunity of going to NA to anyone who might want it?

We strongly recommend attending one of our open meetings as an observer. I've taken many people, and I have never had anyone be less than touched, moved and inspired by the experience. Just check the website and look for the word 'open' under a meeting's

listing. A local public information volunteer can often be found to accompany people, which can make it that bit easier, and you don't have to give your reason for attending. Call our service office on 020 7251 4007 and ask for PI. They'll take a message and someone from PI will call back to make arrangements.

How can people find their nearest meeting?

Our website is www.ukna.org. It has the most up-to-date meeting list available. We also print a booklet called 'Where to Find', which is available at most meetings and is free to those in early recovery. Our helpline aims to be available 24/7, and is on 0300 999 12 12.

It might be challenging for someone to go to their first meeting. Can they go with a worker, family member or friend? Or meet an existing NA member beforehand?

We all remember the experience of walking into our first meeting. Usually people are kind: we say in our readings before every meeting that the newcomer is the most important person in any meeting. We also have a pamphlet entitled 'What to Expect at Your First NA Meeting', available from our service office or website.

Open meetings welcome anyone, so family and friends are welcome to come along to those, and if people call the helpline and ask to be met we will do our best to get in touch with a local member who will meet the newcomer before the meeting and talk them through everything.

Where can people get further information?

The website www.ukna.org, or the global website www.na.org, the helpline on 0300 999 12 12 for addicts seeking a chat or a meeting, the service office on 020 7251 4007 for enquiries about our literature or to contact service volunteers in public information.

If we could do three things to make treatment more effective, what would they be?

To maintain our focus, we do not have any opinion about outside issues, by which we mean anything outside of NA itself, so we can't give advice or opinions on treatment.

Of course, we do believe that by offering clients access to NA, especially as they move towards the end of their treatment, the long-term success rate will improve. That access can take the form of passing on our literature, or directing people towards our meetings.

For our part, we are committed to making sure that every professional in the treatment community has a clear and accurate picture of what NA is, and what it isn't. We'll send public information volunteers in to do presentations to anyone who'd like to know more, or ask questions about anything. Just call our service office on 020 7251 4007 and ask for a PI presentation.

We don't claim to be the only effective solution for addiction, but we know from our experience over almost 60 years and with hundreds of thousands of recovering addicts that our programme works for anyone who's willing to work it. We are here to cooperate with the UK's treatment community, in order to get closer to our goal that no addict need die without knowing that recovery is possible in NA.

Useful contacts

Al-Anon

www.al-anonuk.org.uk
020 7403 0888

Alateen

www.al-anonuk.org.uk
020 7407 0215

Alcoholics Anonymous

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
0845 769 7555

Cocaine Anonymous

www.cauk.org.uk
0800 612 0225

Families Anonymous

www.famanon.org.uk
0845 1200 660

LifeRing Recovery (US)

www.Unhooked.com

Marijuana Anonymous

www.marijuana-anonymous.co.uk
07940 503438

Methadone Anonymous (US)

www.methadoneanonymous.us

Narcotics Anonymous

www.ukna.org
0300 999 12 12

SMART Recovery

www.smartrecovery.org.uk
0845 603 9830
01463 729548