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Samaritan Counseling,

12 Step coercion at Samaritan Counseling

In my meeting with Jenness Clairmont, I was told that the 12-steps were not very popular with most of the counselors at Samaritan; I do believe this. Any sensible person who's done any research on the subject would agree that AA doesn't work for most people.

However, my experience shows that 12-step recovery concepts are pervasive and negatively influencing your practice. Ethics issues are: suppression of informed consent for alternatives to 12-step programs, professional conflict of interest (referrals to the 12-step business community), refusal of service based on client's choice of 12-step alternatives, and using coercive tactics to force a client into the 12-step programs, and/or using 12-step referrals to avoid a difficult case.

Concepts of 'sober time' and 'working a program' also factor in. Sober means 'not drunk'. When AA gets involved, *sober* means 'In AA, working the program'. *Sober time* implies that a person is incapable of having rational thoughts for an arbitrary period of time. In AA, *sober time* is a power structure that determines who gets to tell who to do what. '*Alcoholic*' is a label one puts on oneself when in AA, and shouldn't be applied to people who want to opt out of that label. These aren't helpful concepts for someone who has decided that they don't want to be in AA. When you apply these concepts to people against their wishes, you strip them of their self-determination, self-reliance, and independence. You are implicitly telling them that they cannot do it, that they are selfish, dishonest, powerless, insane, defective, and many other counterproductive thoughts, which are not in line with the values of the counseling profession.

Below I will show how 12-step coercion factored in to my therapy experience. I will show that I was repeatedly referred or recommended to go to AA meetings or 12 step programs, or very expensive 'addiction treatment' (which is almost invariably AA members making a living by pushing AA as a treatment model) despite early records showing that AA didn't work for me. I was not offered or encouraged to pursue any alternative program, and was never allowed to just be better on my own. I repeatedly got success with alternative solutions on my own. The 12-step coercion became increasingly intense from your offices the more I resisted AA.

In fact, leaving AA, a program which encouraged me to publicly insult my own integrity and abilities, was one of the best choices I've ever made, and I'm proud of it.

Records:

Early records (from 2/1) show "can't relate to people in meetings". Another early record shows "AA meetings not helping". *When something isn't helping, normally, alternatives should be explored. But when it comes to AA, the message is "Keep coming back" and "wait for the miracle", no matter how*

bad you're doing in AA. AA will never tell you to explore alternatives, because they think they theirs is the only way. In fact, after being sober for two months and saying that I didn't believe in the program, it was suggested that I go drink again until I do. This is what AA calls "doing more research".

I went to therapy after one year of near-daily AA meetings, and being confused, depressed, 13th stepped, and worse off. My self-confidence was shattered because I was told daily that I was constitutionally incapable of being honest and seem to have been born that way.

I was in AA throughout the counseling. I liked seeing the people, but was uncomfortable saying the things I was supposed to say in the meetings, and it only initially helped me. I was asked to speak at one point when sober for a while and couldn't imagine myself saying the things I was supposed to say, so refused. In reality I had achieved it on my own, despite AA.

Any sobriety I achieved in AA was always based on breaking the rules, such as ignoring the powerlessness concept, thinking for myself, or having a relationship. The relationship I had in AA helped me stay sober for a while, but ended with the woman telling me that I was sick and wouldn't get better unless I had sex with her. This is called 13th Stepping.

I believe that therapy initially helped me because it allowed me to question many of the concepts in AA that seemed counterproductive to me. My counselor was not an 'addiction specialist', and that was a good thing. It brought common sense to the table.

As she learned more about the prevailing methods on how to 'treat' an 'alcoholic', things started becoming more frustrating. My own AA indoctrination encouraged her in these views. "I need to figure out how to fit in to these meetings," I said, because leaving AA wasn't an option in my mind. AA tells you that the alternative is jails, institutions, and death. More and more, I felt I was being seen as a "bullshitter" ("in denial"), and needed to be forced back into AA.

On 5/7 I was "**recommended to go to AA meetings, work the steps, get a sponsor.** Cl did not agree." (implying non-compliance, but forgetting that I had been doing this for a year already with negative results)

5/21 began pursuing SMART recovery (on my own, not recommended, reported as 'instead of AA'). I was skeptical, stating "You really think this is going to help you?" I wasn't sure what she meant at the time, wondering what her third alternative was. I wasn't aware of any other options at that point, but liked that SMART said I had a choice in the matter and wasn't powerless. Also had just been evaluated by Jim Garrett and **referred to SPARC** (12 step outpatient rehab)

On 7/9 again **AA meetings were recommended, and again referred to the addiction counselor who referred me to SPARC.** Next session cancelled due to planned drinking.

Around this time I heard that one of the guys who didn't fit in had killed himself. I was also told by AA members that I was **likely to kill myself if I didn't learn to fit in.**

8/28 made a donation to <http://www.orange-papers.org/> author and decided to stop drinking on willpower and ignoring AA doctrine. Self-motivated, and similar to Rational Recovery. Beginning of two months of sobriety. The missing link was that I should have stopped going to AA meetings at this point, because they only confused me.

10/29 minor “relapse”

11/12 T and Cl relabeled Cl. an alcoholic, despite two months of relative success and current sobriety. **Referred to addiction counselor** *instead of addressing transference issues*, which I requested specifically.

11/19 again **referred to addiction counselor**, after choosing to leave therapy. “Cl. Not committed to following through on recommendations”. That was because I already knew how to stop drinking.

12/17 again wanted to address transference issues and again was **referred to an addiction counselor**.

12/18 refused to go to addiction counselor as Cl wanted to address transference issues directly, not get therapy for therapy. This was when I started to be ignored completely and only **referred to addiction counseling** repeatedly.

1/9 again **referred to addiction counselor** when asking to talk about transference issues.

1/13 meeting scheduled by concerned family member, after Cl was severely depressed and felt ignored. again **recommended AA meetings, rehab** while the main concern for Cl. was transference issues. These issues were not addressed, as Cl was deemed **incompetent for therapy unless he followed through with recommendations**.

Between this time, much work in trying to get me into \$17,000/month 12-step rehab, then a less expensive state 12-step rehab for \$5-6k, finally refusing after realizing both were **12-step based**, and went back to SPARC where I had seen some mixture of non 12-step teachings (but was confused because the 12-step teachings thrown in were contradictory.)

2/7 Cl was **given a Step One worksheet after asking for non 12-step alternatives at SPARC** (worksheet made me list my faults and told me that “I’m strong enough to quit” was a bad thought that would lead to relapse) Drank a lot while filling it out. Drank the rest of the week.

Decided to ignore it and get sober by thinking I’m not powerless. Told counselor that I didn’t like the worksheet and wanted to discuss it, and she said “if it doesn’t apply, let it fly” and **“it wouldn’t be therapeutic” to discuss my issues with it**. Realized that I would not be able to escape the 12-steps other than by ignoring anything these people told me; because there would be no admission that 12-steps may not be right for me.

Got sober for 5 days in spite of it and expected to get drug tested clean and continue therapy, **but was instead terminated** due to unethical costs for the recommended groups. Most people in SPARC are on Medicaid, and my self-pay/insurance highlighted the fact that it cost over \$265 dollars to go to a single group per week and get the required drug test (and since I’m voluntary, I could have told them the results each time).

2/28 **Informed T about frustration with addiction treatment and was ignored**. Also found that none of the SPARC treatment for the past year was covered by insurance, so started receiving large invoices.

3/4 asked directly whether I would actually be able to get back into therapy, as it seemed impossible to get better in the 12-step trap I was referred to. Therapist said “The answer is yes.”

3/17 Was requested to sustain sobriety for a period of six to eight months by David Olsen, (clearly trying to get rid of me, as they were well aware that rehab was not effective or practical, and using the AA concept of 'sober time' to undermine my judgment). I was never actually informed of this requirement, as I think the addiction counselor didn't agree with it. He specifically said that it's not true that I can't be in therapy if I recently drank. He said that he was encouraged that I felt an attachment with someone.

This is the sober time concept in action, implying that there is something wrong with my thinking until I accept AA. Addiction counselor apparently said 'at least a month', contrary to David Olsen's 6-8 month requirement.

From David Olsen's book "When Helping Starts to Hurt":

"Members of Alcoholics Anonymous cannot and will not permit themselves to forget their brokenness and vulnerability. Their wounds are acknowledged, accepted, and kept visible. The capacity of one alcoholic to empathize with another is still a recognized as "building a transmission line to him". The apparent (or presumable) effectiveness of AA's members in the care and treatment of their fellow alcoholics is one of the great success stories of our time, and graphically illustrates the power of wounds, when used creatively, to lighten the burden of pain and suffering. AA offers lifelong emotional support to those who explicitly acknowledge their problem and admit their helplessness to face life's stresses and temptations to regression alone."

3/18 Asked T why the 'deal kept changing'. Initially the agreement was 'be sober, see Jim Garrett once per month'. Now it was becoming an arbitrary period of time, and some arbitrary concept of what 'work' I was supposed to be doing other than not drinking.

3/19 A letter was sent to me **recommending 12 step meetings** and implying that it would be possible to get back into therapy if I complied.

3/20 quit addiction counselor due to frustrated goals. Was not called back.

3/31 asked therapist to **not push me into AA. Was not called back.**

April-May decided that I would fulfill my end of the bargain by refusing addiction treatment but allowing myself to be monitored by Jim Garrett. I had to be very confident and adamant about this, and he was not happy to hear that **I didn't trust him because of his repeated referrals to 12-step programs and his membership in AA.** He was, however, open to alternatives, which I was happy to hear.

He agreed to watch me go through all of Rational Recovery's materials and Stanton Peele's Life Process Program for two months, and approve me for therapy. **Addiction counselor said that AA had indeed harmed me, and that he was proud of the work that I'd done.**

Was under the impression that I would be able to get back into therapy, and felt successful and more confident. Jim Garrett approved of my decisions, my work (going over my own found alternatives, **none of which were presented to me as options**, such as SMART Recovery, Stanton Peele's LPP, and Rational Recovery, <http://www.hamsnetwork.org/when/> and taking my power back and believing in myself). I gained a lot of confidence and felt free of all the addiction treatment, meetings and rehab requirements.

5/22 I had low expectations about what would happen in my next therapy session, but expected at least to have the opportunity to tell T about my experience and my new interpretation of the transference (which was that I was attracted to her because she was the only person who allowed me to question AA, and became increasingly frustrated as she began to push me onto it more and more, undermining all the work I had done with her and becoming unwilling to listen to me). The phone call was immediately confrontational, and I went into a panic attack as I was asked questions about **how often I'm in treatment and how long I've been going**, while I tried to explain that I had solved the issue (for the second time, although this time more solidly because I was determined to never go to those meetings again) and didn't need addiction treatment. T stated that she had never made a promise to see me again, which left me feeling betrayed and manipulated, wondering why I was doing any of this addiction treatment for the past 5 months. It clearly wasn't about my own process, it was about getting rid of me and/or pushing me into an AA-based concept of recovery.

She suggested that **I hadn't done the recommended work** (and all recommendations, as you can see, were AA referrals), and ignored the addiction expert's advice that I was on an appropriate course. She seemed more interested in avoiding my case than hearing about my process. She told me **she would never support my decision to use Rational Recovery** (which is proudly anti-AA, and simply says that the only solution to addiction is to stop using, and stop listening to the 'addictive voice' that says you're going to use again, which happens to be almost everything AA says). As an example of this addictive voice, Dr. Olsen said that 'seeing her would cause a relapse' (which is not only ridiculous, but self-serving to the goal of getting rid of this patient, considering my constant claim that I was relapsing from January to April because my actual issues were being ignored and I was being forced repeatedly into 12 step programs... however, both of these were just the addictive voice).

Notes:

- **no alternatives were ever recommended.**

- **Referral to AA/12-step was increasingly intense and coercive, even though objectively counterproductive, and my non-AA solution was solidly rejected.**

- I was never finally 'allowed to be better' because 'sobriety' meant being in addiction treatment (AA).

I want all your counselors to be aware of how dangerous repeated 12-step referrals can be. Every suggestion to go to a 12-step program was telling me I'm powerless, can't do it, and am not 'sober' even if I'm not drinking anymore.

The correct approach is not to push or persuade AA onto your patients with more and more intensity, but to know and share with them the available options. A good AA member, or professional who sincerely wants to help someone in their quest for sobriety (who is not putting AA over someone else's recovery) should tell them things like:

- “The disease concept of alcoholism is actually pretty controversial. Most doctors don't agree with it at all, in fact. There's something called 'brief intervention' which is when a doctor tells you, 'look, alcohol is affecting your health, and you should quit'. Just like with smoking, when people care about their health and are informed, they can start making different choices.”
http://www.rational.org/pdf_files/InformedConsent.pdf

- “You're not powerless. That's a concept AA uses. It helps some people but is easily misinterpreted and is difficult for a lot of people to understand or accept. You can actually do it all by yourself if you like. Is there something you want to do in life but are not able to do it because you're drinking too much?”
- “You can leave AA if it's confusing you, and you're not going to die. They tell people that with the intention to get them to take their sobriety extremely seriously, but sometimes it can scare people away from looking into other methods.”

<http://www.hamsnetwork.org/when/>

“AA generally seems to fail women as well as failing people with independent personality types, higher IQs and higher educational attainments--i.e., the majority of people.

It is unfortunate that bright and independent thinkers who question the AA program are told that their thinking is diseased and that they need to go out and drink more until they "hit bottom". They are told that only after they have suffered enough will they meekly accept AA theology as divinely revealed truth. It is unknown how many people have died from following this bit of advice. A far more humane and realistic approach would be to tell people who find that the AA program does not fit them that there are other options out there which may fit them better.

Many people feel crazy in AA. Attending AA meetings can make some people clinically depressed, can make some people drink more, and can lead some people to commit suicide. What is the greatest shame is that the people who suffer the most from AA are usually the brightest and most independent thinkers there. Moreover most women find AA is damaging rather than helpful because they are in need of personal empowerment whereas AA specializes in "breaking down big egos".

- “Rehabs are actually very intensive 12-step groups, so if you hate AA meetings, then I doubt you'll enjoy a rehab. There are lots of other options, though.”
- “SMART Recovery is a group-oriented program that conceptually is almost completely opposite to AA, designed for people like you who don't like the idea of 'powerlessness'. Since AA isn't working for you, maybe you should give that a try. They have meetings online and are abstinence based too, since that seems to be a good goal for you at this point.”
<http://vimeo.com/38755165>
- “I can see that AA is actually confusing you so badly that you've developed what Rational Recovery calls a Recovery Group disorder:

“Addiction treatment disorder: psychosocial aftermath of intense, repeated exposure to 12-step based counseling, especially under coercion. Prominent symptoms include increased bottom-seeking behavior, profound self-doubt, feeling crazy, relapse anxiety, doubt of simple truths, perception that others cause your problems, withdrawal from social activities, fear of travel, fear or bodily desires, guilt about not working the steps diligently enough or believing in a higher power devoutly enough, social weirdness.

“I’d suggest you look into their materials, which might help you understand why you’re getting confused by the 12-step programs, and help you get away from them completely”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok8WjIeX-jE>

- “There are other programs too, all designed for people like you who don’t feel comfortable in AA.”

The above description of my therapy experience, I hope, will be respected as proof that harmful 12-step coercion is very much influencing your counseling practice. Believe in your patients’ ability to think through and process things in their own ways, and don’t keep pushing AA against evidence that it’s not working.

Sincerely,

Tom Gleason