

Growing Up In a 12-Step Home

I grew up in a cult. Yes, a cult. Now, my childhood wasn't all bad. All things considered, it would be petty to complain given all that I did have, but this essay is specifically about my experience growing up in the 12-Step Cult Religion. Unfortunately, the most common "solution" offered to those seeking help with addiction trouble (or being coerced to do so by the courts) is still 12-Step indoctrination, and this certainly includes minors. The often dangerous reality of this "help" is widely unknown or ignored.

My parents now struggle financially, but they used to make a lot of money. Their income came from the "Recovery Movement", and this was particularly profitable during the 1980's.

At the peak of their financial success, they maintained an office with a staff (all people known via 12 step groups) and had a cleaning lady come in to the house weekly (also known via "The Program"). They marketed, produced and sold audio and video "training materials" geared toward addiction counselors. When I was in high school, a friend and I would go to the office right after school and stuff flyers into envelopes, which were sent out on a mailing list advertising the newest available materials.

Eventually, they put on their own conference, where addiction counselors would come from far and wide to sit through seminars and speakers, having paid, or having had their employers pay, hefty registration fees. Additional revenue was earned by selling the recorded seminars. This conference was an annual event until just recently, when declining registration forced it to end. In the latter years, other matters related to mental health were covered.

That's a little about my parents, so let me go back to my childhood and recount some of my experiences growing up. I will undoubtedly make many observations about others, especially my parents, along the way. Before reading further, may I make it clear that I love them and genuinely appreciate all that they've done for me; whether it was good or not. I do know that they always tried to do what was right, though much of it was misguided.

I will try to limit this writing to my experiences growing up in a 12 step environment, but might stray now and then...

I was around the age of ten when we had a family meeting. I remember sitting down at the kitchen table with my sister and my parents. I don't recall very well what all was said, just that dad was going to quit drinking, and would be attending meetings. Furthermore, there were meetings for kids that my sister and I should attend. Either I or my sister inquired why. I do have a vague recollection of us being told that dad had an illness, and as a result of this illness, the entire family had been affected; as if we were somehow "sick", but these meetings would help. Mom would go to Alanon, my sister and I to Alateen.

It was very confusing, because I had no idea that my father had a problem with his drinking. I can only recall seeing him stumbling drunk a couple of times, after parties, and he would usually have a scotch and water after work, but I don't recall him drinking all evening. He had a quick temper and was never one to show affection, but that hasn't changed to this day. Even more confusing was how this caused the rest of the family to be "sick"? What did that mean?

The meetings themselves I found boring, I would zone out most of the time, but it was something I always looked forward to. There were a couple of girls I liked, and after the meeting everyone would go to McDonald's. The Alateens would hang out in their own area and it did have its social pleasures. They utilize the same 12 steps as A.A., and now I find it down right appalling that these principles are taught to vulnerable teens (You are powerless. You are insane. You need to confess everything to another person.) Lots of tears were shed in the meetings and the (non-professional) adult facilitators seemed to push for this regularly.

Before any of this began, my father started his own business traveling to various conferences and seminars (nothing specific yet), and record speakers. He would have labels pre-printed for audio cassettes, and would travel with machines that could duplicate multiple cassettes within minutes. He would sell cassettes of the speakers on the spot, available within minutes of the speaker completing his presentation.

After my father joined A.A., his business was directed solely into the addictions field. This proved to be lucrative very quickly. As an adolescent and teen, I saw much of the country as the family would travel during the summer, working at various conferences. For this I am grateful. San Antonio, New Orleans, and Fort Lauderdale are just a few examples.

I began to notice that my parents were becoming highly judgmental. It became impossible for them to see someone even drinking a beer without making a comment or being labeled a "drunk". My mother was especially bad about this, and I remember her distinctly making a comment along the lines of: "I wonder how people that aren't in recovery (12-Step Cult) cope with anything, and I don't mean just alcoholics. What a shame not to have a support group to keep you living right." This struck me as wrong. What she was saying was is that addicts in recovery are far better off than any non-addicted normal people. I began to notice this pattern of thinking around me with a lot of people, as though they were privy to some sort of "special knowledge". I would later be guilty of this myself. In this little world, it seemed as though 12-step programs were a life necessity; anyone without them was simply lost, addicted or not. Surely there was a 12-step program that suited everyone; and if you weren't involved in one, you were lost and in denial about something. My mother attended ACOA, though she was raised in a simple, yet loving blue collar home. My grandfather drank beer, but was a sweet gentle man and I know of no obvious "dysfunction" there. I think that the eighties were an interesting period of history in the recovery group and treatment center industry, as the phenomenon surely grew into a sub-culture on its own. No longer was anyone wishing to be anonymous, many people proudly wore it on their sleeves, seeking to "save" others much like Fundamentalist Christians or Jehovah's Witnesses.

My mother is an interesting case study by herself. Never proclaiming herself an addict (except once, when a 12-stepper that thought she was showed disappointment to learn otherwise), she developed a strong following of weak-minded people from the sub-cults such as Alanon and ACOA that fed her ego enormously, and viewed her as some sort of guru. My father wasn't quite as dogmatic, but even as a teen it struck me as odd and somewhat amusing when he said of a local addictions counselor who's methods were under question: "Well, I guess he knows what he's talking about...he's been through treatment himself nine times".

During my years of Alateen, I began showing signs of depression and poor self-image. This may have been largely due to the meetings. I spent those first few years seeing a counselor that was very much encouraging of 12-step participation. I liked him well enough but don't recall ever feeling better or receiving anything helpful from the visits.

By the age of 13, I had begun my experiments with beer and pot. I would say the reasons were two-fold: peer pressure from school and neighborhood friends, and maybe even more so, curiosity based on all of the people I had been exposed to through my parents and what was now their entire world. Their seemed to be a certain GLORY in being a recovering addict or alcoholic and I had heard plenty of entertaining war stories. Looking back, there is little wonder why I would be very curious to see what it would be like to get wasted and act out

Around this time, while traveling in Texas, I disclosed to my parents that I had tried alcohol and pot a few times and felt bad about it. They did not scold me; rather embraced me and told me how proud they were for sharing this with them, and were genuinely gleeful that I would now also label myself an addict and attend meetings.

Yes you read that correctly. Few times = addict. Here I will raise a very disturbing point that I always realized, deep down: My parents would have preferred having an addicted son in recovery as opposed to a son that was non-addicted.

To any rational person, this would seem sick. I doubt my parents would ever say such a thing outright, but it's pretty obvious.

As I progressed in my teens, my experimentations continued. By my freshman year in high school, I was regularly cutting classes and running with a crowd that loved to drink and smoke dope. Friday nights were for drinking beer, no questions asked, and smoking weed was pretty much whenever we could sniff it out. It was smelled on me on occasion, but nothing too serious came of it.

Until shortly after I turned fifteen. A police officer stopped into my parent's office to purchase a cassette tape. My mother said that upon seeing him, she was immediately struck with an ill-feeling that I had gotten into major trouble. Despite this visit having nothing to do with me, it was decided right there and then that I would go to a 12-step based treatment center.

I spent 60 days in a new low-cost facility; just for adolescent boys (it would later treat girls also). Most of the staff was relatively inexperienced, and I got close to some of them quickly. It wasn't too bad, we had no responsibilities related to school; the food was pretty good; we only had one or two group sessions a day that were often fun and never to intense; and would venture out a few times a week for an AA or NA meeting (The insurance companies and taxpayers shell out thousands of dollars per "patient" for this type of "treatment"). I became friendly with many in the NA meetings, including multiple people that I later found out had prior sex offenses against minors, and attended these meetings to look for fresh meat. Wasn't this a lovely environment for an emotionally vulnerable teenager? (I was never abused sexually, but I did later find out about some of these people. I can locate some of them now on the Sex Offender Registry. I also witnessed some abuse, just didn't see it for what it was at the time. People in their 30's, 40's and even 50's have no business dating teenagers).

One person I got to know during and after treatment by attending NA meetings was Dave M. Dave M. was 25 at the time, and definitely favored hanging around teens that were around my age, 15 or 16. He lived in a half-double in a pretty run down part of town but his place was pretty nice and was a hangout for a pretty large group. The teens in this circle really seemed to look up to Dave, and I admit I thought he was pretty cool at first. Dave had one particular male teen move in with and they developed a sexual

relationship with each other while both of them continued to get under the skirts of teen girls that came into the program. Some years later, when I was 19, I shared a townhouse for a few months with Dave M. and four other NA members, Dave was now around 30 years of age and would frequently entertain teens as young as 13, male and female, pursuing sexual relationships. We once walked in on Dave having sex with a 14 year old girl on the living room floor. A few of us expressed concern with his behavior, which he rationalized as having a lack of prospective sexual partners his own age. What really troubled me was that during this time, Dave gained employment at the same treatment center I had gone through years before as a "Tech" (not a counselor, but one that monitors activity, maintains order and keeps notes on the residents' behavior). The center now treated adolescent boys and girls and he often worked alone on the overnight shift. He was eventually terminated for questioning decisions of the Director and landed a similar role in a group home for mentally challenged teens. I lost touch with him of course, but years later, Dave M. made the news as the leader of a homosexual prostitution ring that got busted and allegedly had a very embarrassing and prolific list of clients. He also appeared on the state's offender registry for having sex with minors and possessing child pornography.

It was actually very emotional when I left the facility just before Christmas in 1985. I had formed some strong bonds...reflecting on this, a dependence on some of these people to validate me, to make me feel special, and to tell me what was wrong with me. For a time afterward, I would visit the center (not far from home) and continued with my NA meetings. I stayed in touch with a few of the kids I was in with, but not regularly.

I would later reconnect with and smoke weed with one kid that was in there with me. His name was Jeff, and he truly was from a bad home. He moved in with an NA member for a while about a mile south of where I lived. This person he lived with is one of many now questionable people as previously mentioned (but I seem to recall he died from AIDS). When he was 17, Jeff took his own life in a stand-off with the police. He was in the back of a van full of stolen items. The police tried to coax him out; instead he put a .22 to his head and later died in the hospital. His father refused to pay for a funeral. One of the staff members also took her life a year or so after I was released. She had (inappropriately) disclosed during one of the group sessions that she had a form of bone cancer. I later learned of her suicide but no one was aware that she was suffering from bone cancer, nor seemed concerned with it when I brought it up. I don't know if it were true or not but she was criticized heavily for the selfish act and for not working a "strong program".

Shortly after my release from treatment, I had made it to 90 days clean, 60 of which were in the treatment center. I remember when I "relapsed". I was sitting in my bedroom alone, and I had a sudden compulsion to call a guy in the neighborhood. There was no confusion as to my motives, our relationship at that time was all about getting high, and we had never communicated about anything else. A short time later, I was at his house getting high. I largely justified this with being taught that I was "diseased" and "powerless". Now I think that being in an environment when you're still talking about drinking and drugging constantly is still letting those things control you.

Ironically, this person, who seemed so hopelessly addicted and seemed to have flushed his life down the drain, would later quit drugs completely on his own. He began developing health problems, and that was all it took. In later years we would become very close friends, and still stay in touch though not as often anymore.

The next couple of years were like living in two separate worlds. Due to my family pressures, I had to maintain some level of involvement with meetings and people involved, and keep any drinking or drugging secret. I would periodically commit to sobriety/being clean, but couldn't really bring myself to sever ties

with my school and neighborhood friends. As I kept that life a secret from the recovery world, I also kept my recovery world a secret from them.

As I approached 17, I decided that the turmoil of the back and forth, “double-life” was too much and committed myself to recovery, yet again. I voluntarily transferred to an alternative high school, which was a “last chance” for troubled teens that had been expelled from other public high schools. I probably would have found even more trouble rather quickly, had it not been for meeting Eric. Eric was sober over a year in AA, I about 6 months in mostly N.A. We became very close and it wasn't long before we were inseparable. After school we would go to my parent's office to stuff envelopes for their mass marketing mailings to the treatment industry, the rest of the time we hung out at an AA club. We went to a lot of meetings and were friendly with a lot of people, many of them young too. This period of my life in the program is the fondest. We had a lot of fun. Cars, girls, occasional fights and other trouble but we were sober.

Eventually the call of my old buddies came back and I was back to the double life. As Eric and I developed other friendships and were no longer going to school (we had both dropped out. Many teenagers in recovery then felt like they could have no ambition due to developing an “ex-con”-like mentality that is common in the culture). I worked full time and partied every chance I got. My strongest urges to drink and use were often immediately following an interrogation from my parents, which of course were frequent.

The back and forth just kept going on for years to follow. At nineteen I attended an AA young people's convention where a teenage girl spoke of being raped by some male attendees. I anonymously called the police but I don't think anything came of it.

Between the ages of 20 and 25 I had 3 DUI's and multiple public intoxication arrests, the whole period is a drunken haze once I was out on my own (with an occasional in-between places/roommates). With every legal dilemma came plenty of scolding from my parents, and I had plenty of exposure forced on me by the courts. By now I simply resented it. I had no respect for it. The counselors and addiction treatment services that the court would refer me to were clearly about the money. One place didn't even bother to provide any treatment or counseling if you didn't want it. I was free to show up, pay for it and leave. That's exactly what I did. When the system is putting you through the grind, they own you. If you made a million dollars a year, they'd find a way to take it. Of course if you did have the money, many lawyers claimed they could make it disappear. Otherwise, you go through the machine. It's all money; if you can't shell it out up front, you will over time.

As far as AA meetings went, I was given the “court cards” to have signed at meetings, but after all of the years I had spent in them, I was well aware that nothing could be verified. All I needed to do was look up the names and dates of meetings on the schedule, and my drinking buddies would sign it. I remember one particular probation officer looking at it funny, but what could he do? How could he prove it was bogus?

I ended up in “treatment again” during this era. While on probation for my second DUI, I got locked inside a nightclub I frequented and worked at part-time over a summer. I tripped the alarm, and despite one of the owners showing up explaining it was an accident and no harm was done, I was hauled off to jail for Public Intoxication. When I was released after a weekend, I came home to my parents (I was staying there at the time, though spent a lot of time sleeping on the couches of friends) and one of my buddies, whom my parents coerced in attending an “intervention”. I was told by both my parents and my friend, whom I frequently stayed with, that I was being completely dis-owned and cut off from any help, including

a place to sleep, unless I immediately checked into a treatment center. Feeling rather defeated from a weekend in jail, not having a place of my own and basically no other options, I relented and agreed to go.

It was decided that I would go to a facility a couple of hours away because it was not a facility where you had to pay money (unless you had it and chose to) or have insurance. This facility had a workshop where “residents” labored in the manufacturing and distribution of pallets, the simple wood structures that goods are placed on so that they may be picked up and moved with forklifts. The leadership declared that this was also beneficial in getting residents in the habit of putting in a day’s work. After the first couple of weeks, which was to be spent in a more intense indoctrination period, ongoing treatment involved working in the shop eight hours a day.

Because of the cost factor, and the fact that prisoners were transferred to it, this facility had a long waiting list, but of course my parents knew people. They had a friend they knew for many years who worked as an addictions counselor in this facility and were able to get me in immediately. It turns out that this friend of theirs was secretly drinking at this time, while maintaining his job counseling others to stop.

One of the first things they did upon my getting out of Detox (which was completely unnecessary for me, I was not having any withdrawal issues beyond normal hangovers when I drank) was drive us new residents to the town’s government office to apply for food stamps, which I never even saw, they assumed complete control over them and said that is how we were allowed to eat. This facility was a far cry from the place I was in as a teen, it was incredibly dogmatic and the staff treated us like spoiled children and maintained strict control. We spent most of the time in group sessions, where we had no choice to speak but anything you had to say was almost certainly going to result in a verbal beat down by the staff, always being told that we were in denial and had defective thinking. Growth and progress was apparently measured by how often one was driven to tears, which I never was. Having been around the block and knowing how the game is played, I think the counselors resented my presence from the start. The rest of the time we were allowed to sit in a common area but were constantly reminded to remain quiet. I think I recall being shipped out once for an AA meeting but they had meetings there where outside AA members came in. They also allowed a group of Evangelical Christians in to visit with us. We were forced to participate in this visit whether we wanted to or not.

The facility had a strict contraband policy and conducted searches in our sleeping area frequently. We were not allowed coffee as they considered it a stimulant (though there was a soda machine with caffeinated drinks and smoking was allowed) so I smuggled in some instant coffee at the suggestion and urging of one of the prison-transfers. I was caught with it and thrown out, much to my pleasure and amusement. My counselor prophesized destruction and despair for me, with smug satisfaction, since I had not completed my “treatment”.

After leaving the facility, I continued to attend AA meetings and one evening a guy named Tracy declared he was going to be my sponsor, since he was sick of watching me struggle and come and go. I agreed and it soon became apparent that he was extremely controlling. He demanded that I call him or visit at least twice a day, was always negative and condescending and generally dogmatic about the program. During one of my visits, he was on the phone with a woman (or underage girl? Can’t say) and stopped to chastise me about something. He then explained to the female on the phone that he was talking to one of his “sponsees”, and that he “sponsored” lots of guys, which obviously resulted in her telling him what a great guy he was. This and the “Fourth Step” worksheet he gave me in which I was to basically document my sexual history caused me to part ways with Tracy. I ran into him at a meeting some years later after I was married. He was still sober (allegedly) and in the program, but looked very sickly. I read that he passed away shortly thereafter.

I stayed sober a while but resumed to problem drinking after about 9 months, ultimately leading to my 3rd DUI and another grind through the system, including 11 months on home detention and forced counseling. This is the facility allowed me to just pay and leave at times. Despite the high costs, I was doing well enough in my job to have my own apartment and because of the home detention, didn't spend nearly as much time with my old drinking and drugging friends. Over time they stopped coming around as often and my drinking pretty much stopped. I began to realize that my urges to drink were largely instilled in me from outside influences, including AA, my parents and the treatment machine, and maybe I didn't have a "disease" after all. I was simply growing out of it.

I started to grow up around the age of 26. I reconnected with an old girlfriend that I dated off and on throughout my teens. I had actually met her at an AA dance when I was seventeen and she was not quite thirteen. She lied about her age and I broke it off with her when I learned how young she really was. She would end up pregnant at the age of thirteen by a sexual predator she met at another AA dance in his mid-twenties, and would then get pregnant again at the age of fifteen by another AA sexual predator around the age of thirty. I would later take these children on as my own when we married and we had two more children. When my parents saw that the relationship was serious, they made it a point to pull her aside and "educate" her on my drinking problem, as they have done with many of my closest friends over the years. We would divorce 16 years later.

My parents were of course, thrilled when I started going to AA again a few years into my marriage. I hadn't been drinking much at all, maybe a few times a year at first, but would drink to intoxication when I did. Once I started having some success in my job after a long struggle, I began drinking beer consistently on weekends to "reward myself" and my behavior while drinking was again becoming unpredictable. With the growing concern of my wife, I started going to AA meetings again.

I often felt strong cravings to drink during and after meetings. Even more concerning was that I could not escape the familiar sights and sounds. The same thought-stopping slogans and clichés were still in abundance, and I grew increasingly frustrated listening to people whine about their self-inflicted problems, from a woman complaining that she had to go back to jail for violating her probation by drinking (which she felt wasn't fair since she has a "disease"), to a guy complaining about a water heater breaking that was under warranty. I couldn't get past the self-appointed gurus telling others they weren't working a strong enough program and trying to impose control over them. I could no longer look past the constant flow of people shuffling in and out of the rooms with or without court-orders and the old-timers repeating the same jargon and slogans meeting after meeting as if it were ancient wisdom. In 25 years, nothing had changed. I ran into a few people that I knew in my teens and they had accomplished nothing in their lives other than clout for being "Old-Timers", some of which I know never had a drinking problem to begin with.

The dangers of practicing the steps, which are at their core declaring one's self unable to run their own life, dwelling on one's negative qualities and constant confessions, were also becoming more apparent, much in the form of a sweet gal in her early twenties that like me, had been introduced to the program at a young age in Alateen and Alanon, and was now attending AA as an Alcoholic. The poor girl was constantly miserable and had disclosed making a couple of weak suicide attempts. I tried to reach out to her after I stopped attending to talk to her about my feelings on how the program might be harming her, but once I had let it be known through the grapevine that I now completely rejected AA teachings, she would not respond to any attempts of communication. I know of at least one dogmatic member strongly discouraging any further contact with me.

It's not relevant to the essay, so I won't go into all of the hell I went through with my divorce (it did involve problem-drinking and a suicide attempt) but I will mention that even before it occurred, I was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder and have suffered from it nearly all of my life. Because of this, drinking isn't an option as it increased my suicidal ideations to dangerous levels. Alcohol is incredibly poisonous and this is more apparent the older one gets. That said, consider how dangerous and troubling it is that people suffering from genuine mental problems including depression, PTSD, bi-polar disorder and others are labeled as having the fictitious diseases of alcoholism and addiction and forced into treatment facilities that push the 12-Steps and/or are court-ordered to attend 12-step meetings and make them feel even worse about themselves rather than getting the help needed for the quite REAL diseases and disorders that they have. What concerns me even more, however, and the motivation for sharing what I have in this essay, is the kids being forced by their parents, peers and judges into a dangerous cult-religion that is full of sexual predators and deranged people of all sorts. For more information on the history of 12-step programs, their dangers and horrendous failure rates, visit www.orange-papers.org. This is not my site, but the most comprehensive source of accurate information that I have seen.