

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a combat veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). After returning from a one-year deployment to Iraq, I experienced frequent nightmares and near constant feelings of hypervigilance, anxiety, anger, and mistrust. I began to self-medicate with alcohol and my alcohol use rapidly escalated until I relied on daily intoxication to numb my emotions.

Realizing I had a problem, I entered a civilian substance abuse rehabilitation program, and was determined to be an "alcoholic". In an effort to maintain sobriety, I resigned early from the military. As a medical professional, I sought help from my state's "Voluntary Recovery Program". Still plagued with my symptoms, I relapsed after one year and repeated a 28-day program with a different treatment center. I was never screened for PTSD, and was told my symptoms were due to my abuse of alcohol.

I continued to struggle and am now in a Veterans Administration long-term residential program. My diagnosis is PTSD; the alcohol use disorder is secondary to the combat trauma I experienced and could not resolve on my own. I am finally receiving the correct treatment, which includes medications, biofeedback, anger management, stress reduction, and other evidenced-based therapies to treat PTSD. What a difference in therapeutic approach!

Both The Roxbury Treatment Center and The Livengrin Foundation are 12-step facilitation centers. Both centers require daily attendance of a 12-step meeting which are led by local support group volunteers. 12-Step meetings are not treatment. I was never properly treated for PTSD while in these facilities, and I was indoctrinated to think that 12-step abstinence was the only way to recover from my "alcoholism".

To make matters worse, my Voluntary Recovery Program requires me to attend 12-Step meetings as a condition of maintaining my professional license to practice. It cannot be constitutional to hold a license hostage like this. Again, 12-Step meetings are not treatment. The only option to the "voluntary" state board program is to have my license suspended, a black mark that can never be expunged. It appears that I will sacrifice my civilian career as well, as AA attendance only intensifies my symptoms of anxiety, anger, and mistrust.

I am dismayed by the outdated “one size fits all” mentality of the rehabilitation industry. More appalling is the AA program itself. It is based on a book written in the 1930s by a non-medical person. The program of “suggestions” is quite mired in rigid thinking and dogma. Current keystones of AA “recovery” include getting a home group, relying a sponsor (who is merely a AA member who claims to have long-term sobriety), avoiding major decisions for the first year, completing “90 meetings in 90 days”, and attending meetings for life. None of these concepts are in the so-called "Big Book" written by Bill Wilson. AA members are not even following the program as it was originally designed. A cult-like atmosphere prevails at most meetings.

Very perplexing is the fact that AA “discussion” meetings are not discussions. Members speak in turn and no commentary or feedback is allowed. At best a meeting is a series of five minute monologues. A member must announce himself as an "alcoholic" every time he speaks. I was deeply wounded to be informed that my drinking was a result of my selfish, self-centered, morally corrupt lifestyle. To recover I must surrender, confess, and pray to a Higher Power who will remove my “character defects” if I “work the steps”. The steps are merely a staircase to perpetual reliance on the group itself.

My psychologist and I have determined that AA is detrimental to me There are several well-established secular support groups that offer practical programs to achieve abstinence. Thanks to the Internet, persons with addictions can find their own paths to recovery on-line. Requiring the treatment industry to offer a choice of support groups is the much larger issue. Most rehabs stubbornly stick with the 12-Step model, and as a result reap the financial reward of repeat business. AA has always had, at best, a 10% long-term success rate. Forcing patients to repeat 12-Step facilitation rehab over and over constitutes fraud and a callous disregard for the patient.

Science, medicine, and society itself have made great progress since the 1930s. Sadly, AA has not. It is imperative that the treatment centers begin to offer individualized therapy, treat the underlying causes of addiction, utilize medications, and offer a choice of support groups. For all the millions that AA has claimed to have helped, at least that many millions have been lost. Change is long overdue.

An agent for change,

Sophie Pride