

What you can expect at your first AA Meeting

When you go to a meeting put away any preconceived ideas about AA that you may have acquired from TV or the movies, its not how much you drink but how it makes you feel. The only requirement for membership of AA is a desire to stop drinking, nothing else matters - you have that desire, so here's what happens next.

The people at AA meetings are all alcoholics at some stage of recovery. They are not there to judge you, they are there to help, and to keep sober themselves. We have all been where you are, so there are no recriminations. Most of us will have done some or all of the things you have done, and frequently worse as well.

At a meeting there is a 'secretary' who vaguely organises things. They open the meeting, and read out some information. During that introduction you will be asked to introduce yourself by giving your first name. This is just so they know what to call you. Next a reading is passed round, which individuals read a part of and pass round. You are not required to read anything out, or even speak at the first meeting unless you particularly want to do so.

The format of meetings varies. At some they have a guest speaker, who will talk for about 20 minutes before the meeting is opened up for general discussion. Or sometimes a passage is read out from the 'Big Book'* followed by individuals sharing their views on the content (or anything else for that matter). Alternatively, people just speak as and when they want to.

When speaking people will introduced themselves by their first name and then speak. You should not interrupt, but you can ask questions when they have finished, or speak yourself. It is usually a good idea at the first meeting to listen rather than talk.

You will hear the word 'god' mentioned. AA is not a religious programme, but we do believe in a 'higher power'. What this higher power is, is entirely up to you, as is whether you have one or not. For me, it is the power I get to stay sober from meeting and talking to fellow alcoholics. For others it is the God of the Bible, etc. etc. This is your own decision, and your own business.

AA has no fees. We do pass round a pot at each meeting (referred to as Tradition 7) and people put in what they want to. This goes towards the cost of the room, tea and coffee, and the running of AA as a whole. Newcomers are not expected to contribute.

People will give you phone numbers and come and talk to you in the half-time coffee break (if there is one), and afterwards. Some will offer you their phone numbers to call if you get into difficulties. Use these numbers, people expect you to, and will not be cross if you do. The saying is 'pick up the phone, don't pick up a drink'.

Meetings are informal affairs, wear what you like, and the meetings usually last 90 minutes some with a tea/coffee/cigarette break in the middle. Do try and be sober when you go to your first meeting.

That is an idea of what to expect. From my own point of view, I went to my first AA meeting and have never had a drink since. I love going to the meetings, have loads more friends (many of whom are what I call real friends, and this comes about because we have all been through the same thing together), go out more, enjoy myself more, and have a much more fulfilling life. I hope you give it a go, and do let me (us, as we work a rota) know how you get on. I can assure you there is nothing to regret or be afraid of.

* The 'Big Book' (its correct name is 'Alcoholics Anonymous') is a book written by the founders of AA, Bill W and Dr Bob. It was written in 1939 as an aid to getting sober, and AA members use it all the time. As it was written in 1939 in the American Bible Belt, the language, attitudes and beliefs reflect this - hence the 'God' thing, and that alcoholics are male. Only after a few years did it become apparent that women could be alcoholics as well! Although it is to some extent out-dated, it has served millions very well, and we work on the principle that 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'.