
Alcoholics Anonymous and 12-Step Alcoholism Treatment Programs

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Abstract. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) self-help groups are the most commonly accessed component of the de facto system of care for alcohol problems in the United States. Further, AA's concepts and approach have strongly influenced a significant number of professional treatment programs. Nevertheless, only a modest number of longitudinal, comparative outcome studies on AA and on professional 12-step treatment programs have been conducted, which has limited both the certainty and scope of conclusions that can be drawn about these interventions. Research indicates that participation in Alcoholics Anonymous and in 12-step treatment are associated with significant reductions in substance abuse and psychiatric problems. Further, such interventions, it has been found, reduce health care costs over time in naturalistic, quasi-experimental, and experimental studies. Evaluation studies have also begun to illuminate the processes through which self-help groups and 12-step treatment programs exert their effects. To build on this knowledge base, future research should (1) be methodologically flexible and well-matched to its phenomenon of interest, (2) include evaluation of the unique features of self-help organizations, (3) increase representation of African-Americans and women in research samples, and (4) increase statistical power through larger sample sizes and more reliable measurement. Key content areas for future enquiry include further longitudinal evaluation of the outcomes of participation in AA and 12-step treatment (particularly in outpatient samples); better specification of the aspects of AA that influence outcome; and individual-, community-, and health organization-level controlled studies of the health care cost consequences of 12-step interventions.

This chapter reviews evaluation research on Alcoholic Anonymous self-help groups and 12-step alcoholism treatment programs and suggests future directions for scientific work in this area. This is a selective review limited to studies that highlight key findings and unresolved issues in this research area and within the U.S. substance abuse treatment system.

Although "Alcoholics Anonymous" and "12-step treatment" are sometimes used interchangeably, they differ in a number of important respects.

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