

Addiction and Your Faith Community

One of the first Principles of Unitarian Universalism is that we “covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all persons.” We believe that each person has worth and dignity, and therefore we support people on their path to recovery. Recovery is a process done by an individual, but with the support of a larger community. If you’re reading this brochure, it may be because you’re wondering if you or someone you love is struggling with alcohol, drugs, or another addiction. You may be attending a Unitarian Universalist church—or you may know of a group like Alcoholics Anonymous that meets in your local church building and wonder if anyone else has these same questions. The answer is “yes, of course!” And the good news is there’s help.

Am I an alcoholic or addict?

Only you can answer that question; no one, including members of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, will tell you if you are. A few classic signs that would indicate a drinking problem are that you feel guilty or ashamed about your drinking; find yourself lying to others or hiding your drinking habits; have family or friends who are worried about your drinking; need to have a drink in order to relax or feel better; black out or forget what you did while drinking; regularly drink more than you intended to. These categories apply to drugs and other addictive behaviors as well.

A personal story from Ken:

A big misconception that’s still out there—and this is true in the larger culture of which Unitarian Universalism is a part—is the stereotype that an alcoholic is a drunk in the gutter. That may be true at times, but it’s not exclusively true. For years, I internalized that image of the alcoholic as only the person with multiple DUIs who has drunk themselves into jail or out of house and home. I counseled people whose lives had been utterly destroyed by alcohol, but meanwhile I went on with my own life of quiet alcoholic desperation, never losing everything, but losing the respect of people I admired, losing respect for myself, losing time, and losing peace of mind until, fortunately, I reached a bottom that was just far down enough for me to realize I had a problem and needed to get help if I was going to live a healthy and whole life.

I may have a problem. What should I do?

One of the first steps might be to confide in a minister or reach out to the resources listed on the back of this pamphlet. Ministers have resources and often have experience with local Alcoholics Anonymous or other twelve-step programs. A minister might be able to connect you with a fellow church member who has had long-time recovery. A minister can also direct you to a mental health professional who has experience in working with addictive behaviors and people in recovery.

Your congregation may also have an Addictions and Recovery Team. If so, you can consider reaching out to a member of that team and asking for help. They may be able to connect you with resources in your area that can provide you with assistance. Additionally, one of the greatest struggles of addiction is the feeling of being isolated and like you have to hide from other people. Choosing to trust a minister or another person in your congregation with your struggles and questions may seem frightening to you, and it can be scary to trust someone with this part of your life. At the same time, many recovering people have found that the first step in their process of getting better was to ask for help from someone whom they experienced as trustworthy.

Won’t that compromise my privacy?

One of the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous and One of twelve-step groups is to protect the privacy of those who are in recovery. If you should happen to meet a fellow church member at a recovery group meeting, they will respect your anonymity and you, in turn, should respect theirs. Sometimes persons in recovery are more comfortable attending meetings outside their church, or even in another town. Some churches have started Addiction Ministry groups within the congregation and have determined their own boundaries about anonymity. There are others in recovery who feel that being anonymous only adds to the stigma of addiction and do not wish to maintain their own personal anonymity. The decision is yours to make for yourself.

I'm an atheist/agnostic and I think I'd be uncomfortable with AA because of all the "God-Talk."

The truth is that there are many non-theists who have found spiritual growth in the twelve steps and have made it work. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous have a saying: "Take what you want and leave the rest." Some may choose to accept the God language. Others may re-interpret it to mean the "God of their understanding." Still others may wholeheartedly reject the God language but still experience spiritual growth and enjoy the fellowship and support of others who are in sobriety.

For those who find groups like AA too theological for their liking, it's important for a recovering person to find an approach and support structure that works for them, so if people get sober in other ways beyond the twelve-step approach, that's great! Some Unitarian Universalist churches have created Addictions Ministry programs that meet to support one another in sobriety or to support family members who are affected by an alcoholic or addict. Some may choose a program that was intentionally created to avoid God-language and are more secular in nature. What's important is to reach out, ask for help, and get started on the road to recovery.

I'm a theist and I'm looking for a spiritual community of support. Would I be comfortable in Alcoholics Anonymous?

One of the reasons why Alcoholics Anonymous is seen as so successful is that the twelve steps represent a spiritual foundation of recovery. Recovery is not just about stopping the behavior that is causing suffering to self and others; it's about changing one's life. Making a significant change to one's life often requires a consistent spiritual practice and the support of others. For some, going to AA meetings or being in regular contact with others in recovery is part of their spiritual practice. To "work the steps" (as they say in AA) is really a form of increasing spiritual commitment, beginning with surrender and ending with service. Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs focus on the same components that make for a well-balanced life: honesty, unselfishness, ability to give and receive love, and compassion for self and others.

I'm worried about someone else's addictive behavior. What should I do?

Reaching out to a trusted minister or fellow congregant can help you connect with your resources and supportive relationships.

Groups like Al-Anon, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Codependents Anonymous, or AlaTeen provide invaluable resources and support for the family members and friends of an alcoholic/addict. It is vital to remember that while only an addicted person can ultimately make the decision for themselves to commit to recovery, the behavior of addicted people affects more than just themselves alone. If someone who is important to you is struggling with an addiction, it can also be important for you to get help and support for yourself.

There is hope.

If you're reading this pamphlet, you are probably considering the first step of a long journey. Although it can be

a scary time, it may also be the beginning of an amazing experience. We know. We've been there. When we decided we had to quit drinking, it was hard to imagine a life without the false comfort of alcohol. With each step we took along the way, we found strength we didn't know we had; real friendships of support; clarity and purpose we didn't imagine possible; and a deep satisfaction with life that came from fully engaging with recovery. You or your loved one can too. Take the first step. Ask for help. Call your minister or the minister of your local UU church. (You can find a congregation near you by visiting uua.org/directory/congregations.) Reach out to find a program. Welcome to the Journey of a Lifetime.

About the Authors

We are

Unitarian Universalist ministers who discovered we had a problem with alcohol and needed to get into recovery. As a result of our recovery, we decided to help others find the road to recovery.

Resources

Alcoholics Anonymous, aa.org

Ken and Cathlean, eds. *Restored to Sanity: Essays on the Twelve Steps by Unitarian Universalists* (Skinner House), available at uua.org/bookstore

Rational Recovery, rational.org

UU Addictions Ministry, uuaddictionsministry.org