



Anarchist Experiences in  
*and*  
Explorations of Alternatives to  
Twelve-Step Programs



# Intro

This is a zine for and about anarchists who are alcoholics and drug-users. Being an addict is hard enough when this is encouraged in society, and can be especially alienating when these views are perpetuated in radical/anarchist spaces. For just socialising alone, there are very few completely sober events, and those that exist can have a lacklustre feel, like the addicts being relegated to a smaller corner. Addiction itself is something rarely addressed in radical spaces, leaving anarchist and radical addicts without many options.

One of the options to go to for help and peer support is twelve-step meetings. Whenever I've voiced criticism about this, I've received some pushback about having to be careful about raising these concerns over a fear that criticising such programs would discourage people from seeking the help they need. When I've suggested that anarchists create alternatives, others have also voiced their concerns about whether DIY replacements could actually meet people's needs. So, I've assembled this zine by collecting essays from different people with differing opinions to help further the conversation.

The following essays are from anarchists or radicals in twelve-step programs. This zine is not about convincing anyone to avoid going to twelve-step programs. Rather, it's about looking at the positives and the negatives, and seeing what an alternative could look like.

# Activism, Addiction and Twelve Step Programs: How Narcotics Anonymous Has Helped Me In Becoming A Better Activist

Alex

## Introduction

My name is Alex, and I'm an addict.

For the whole 26 years of my existence I have lived in the Netherlands. Born in a moderately left wing middle class family, I slowly became politically conscious in my teens and eventually began to radicalize. When I was 19 I joined the Vrije Bond (Free Union), the principal anarchist organization/federation in the Netherlands. During the same period, I started using drugs.

Instead of alcohol, I mostly used weed as I liked the way it stimulated my imagination and helped me relax.

What seemed at first as a fun habit that made me feel socially available and creative, became obsessive and bleak abuse during my early 20s. I continually broke promises, failed to do anything with my life, fell into depression and isolation, and mixed my substance use with risky activism.

Eventually I got into contact with Narcotics Anonymous (NA), where after relapsing multiple times I found recovery. Though I have always struggled with my relationship with NA, it is without a doubt the reason why I'm currently 2 ½ years clean and at times experience a deep sense of happiness and inner freedom.

This essay will focus on why my experience with NA has been mostly positive and why I think it is important for initiatives like it to be around. I will also mention some downsides and what an anarchist alternative might look like.

## Shelter

One of the main strengths of Narcotics Anonymous to me is the fact that it works like a refuge. People who frequent NA, like me, are people who have lost or severely damaged their sense of dignity, livelihood, relationships and health. They have almost killed themselves through use, either directly or indirectly. Put simply: They are at the lowest points in their lives, having harmed themselves and the people around them.

The power I've experienced from the program is that these people, including myself, who committed themselves to the Twelve Steps became reinvigorated and came to terms with life again. That anger, resentment, fear and sadness turned into hope, responsibility, patience and calm. The fact that I could confide in people

who just like me cant deal with the uncertainty and hardship of life and started to use because of it, helped me to recover and to learn healthier coping mechanisms.

This was all possible because I was always welcome in these meetings, despite the fact that my behavior had harmed people around me. This was in mild contrast to Anarchist spaces, where though I never felt rigidly socially controlled or explicitly rejected, I've never felt the same kind of therapeutic suspense of judgment and recognition of my problems as I did in NA.

The strong sense of rehabilitative justice and solidarity between addicts that is central to the philosophy of NA is absolutely crucial for its effectiveness.

Solidarity between addicts also means that a sense of unity within the different groups and the fellowship in general is important.

## Political Armistice

Though I work under no illusion that politics suddenly stops permeating every aspect of human relationships inside the fellowship, the inherent divisive nature of politics can seriously jeopardize this sense of unity. Because it's something people feel strongly about and in a group that tries to welcome people from every walk of life, there is bound to be a significant divergence in political alignments.

I prefer to label it as a political armistice. As with many shelters and places of healing, the recovery and mental safety of the people involved should be the first priority. I would find it awful for example if a ward for cancer patients suddenly starts to become politicized in such a way that certain people wouldn't feel safe anymore to get the treatment they need to survive. The political divisions of the patients don't magically vanish, neither do the inherent political dynamics of our healthcare system. But if division threatens the fulfillment of the patient's needs, something has truly gone wrong.

This of course also has its downsides. A place where unity is prioritized has the tendency to implicitly enforce the social privileges of a dominant group, and therefore to further marginalize already marginalized communities. I can speak from personal experience (and also as a gender queer person) that cisnormativity is still very much maintained in a lot of meetings through the wording of formats and some service roles. Efforts to change this may risk getting shut down as bringing divisiveness into the space, which can result in the unintentional exclusion of gender nonconforming individuals. Meetings where I go are also remarkably white, but as I mostly visit only a handful of meetings in my place of residence I can't really accurately judge how much of a structural problem this is or whether it's based on a limited and biased sample.

It also has to be said that NA offers lots of possibilities to self organize meetings that are more suited for particular demographics, like queer meetings or

those serving immigrant communities.

## Serenity Prayer

*God, grant me  
the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and wisdom to know the difference.*

Like many radicals I have a problem dealing with the abysmal state the world is in. Our planet is on the verge of ecological collapse, fascism is once more on the rise in Europe and North America, the genocide on Palestine continues virtually unhindered, and many other examples of domination and oppression are easy to find. This despair and anger over the many structural injustices and forms of violence played a major part in fueling my addiction. When getting sober meant for me to reconcile my burning desire for a just world (and endorsing radical means to achieve that) with the message of contentment and patience of NA, I struggled. I feared that working with the program meant to let go of revolutionary politics and that I had to become an obedient citizen, minding my own business and not demanding too much of the world. In other words, I focused a lot on the first part of the Serenity Prayer.

But throughout working with the steps, I came to a more nuanced conclusion. What was destructive in my relationship towards the world wasn't necessarily that I was angered by its many injustices, or that I wanted to change the world in a radical way with radical methods. No, what was destructive about my relationship with the world was that I lived in fear and hatred of the world around me. That there was a deep resentment within me and that I felt alienated from the world because of it. The Serenity Prayer came to mean acceptance of the fact that I'm limited in my influence on the world, that a lot what happens or what happened in the world is outside of my sphere of influence; to get the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

But, very crucially, also to be motivated by hope and compassion in wanting a better world, to push for change through collective power and to do my best to change this world for the better; courage to change the things I can.

The Serenity Prayer is of course focused on a God. When I first joined NA, I was skeptical and hostile to the idea of involving a God into my daily life. But the beauty of NA is that it doesn't demand you to worship a God in the Christian sense. The spirituality of the program is profoundly pluralistic and leaves a lot of room in how you define God or your Higher Power.

I eventually found God as a pantheistic appreciation of our interconnected world and all the beauty that resides within it.

## Conclusion: Anarchist Alternative?

An anarchist alternative to AA or other 12 step programs needs to hold true to the message of rehabilitative/restorative justice of those programs. It needs to have the same praxis of confidentiality, mutual aid and focus on unity as NA, wherein we might put more emphasis on the structural forms of oppression than Twelve Step programs usually do, but without resorting to political debates and creating an atmosphere of hostility and division. It also needs to have a clear framework of differentiating between actionable solidarity to address those structural inequities and how addicted comrades can learn to better cope with their own shortcomings and way of dealing with the world around us. This may sound applicable to all kinds of radical community building, but for me it's especially important within the framework of getting sober.

Though it may look different to the spirituality of NA, I do think that a spirituality of some kind is necessary within such an alternative, and be committed to safeguarding a sense of pluralism.

These kinds of things could be a place to start, though I do have reservations of how successful and viable such an alternative would be. I feel like NA is something unique in its focus on how to grow as a person and to reconcile with the harm you have done.

# Can't Take the Risk

Elijah SM

I hit rock bottom (a term I learned within AA) in the context of living as part of a community in a house project in Berlin. That was 2020, at the same time a new devastating virus came into the world and kind of slowly we understood that it was a serious thing, and states and countries started to demand safety rules. It was scary, and it is still today, at least for some of us immunocompromised folks\*.

I went to AA then because I was not able to stop using alcohol and cocaine on a daily basis even if I wanted it.

I certainly agree with how Dr. Gabor Mate describes addiction — that's my experience — but I couldn't grasp it for over 20 years. My addiction was an attempt to stop my pain. It was a symptom, and alcohol and drugs were how I self medicated. When I started to go to AA meetings and meet people who had lived the same or similar, identification and being understood helped me to not take that first drink or use drugs the first blurry days and still today. No one among the people I was living with and close to were having this problem directly, or not anymore, and basically part of my efforts was hiding from them my "secrets" habits. It wasn't a secret for anyone, but it was the way it was, I was defensive and I wouldn't listen to anyone who would have said to me "You have a problem."

My problem was my solution to cope with life and at the same time escape from it. I wouldn't have listened. But in that house, I found a reason to try to sober up. I could listen to another alcoholic and addict, that worked and still does today. In meetings very often I hear, take what works, leave what doesn't.

That it is my experience, I can't take the concept of god, but I use the word and I pray even. I broke up with god when my mother passed because of cancer when I was 18 years old. That god made it possible, so I can't come back to that god. That experience throws me to hate everything around religion and spirituality.

For many years I tried to fulfill that wound with art and community, but also with party and substances. It worked until it didn't anymore, the obsession and the drink and lines came before anything and anyone else. I wish myself and the people around me knew more about addiction. I think that it is one of the most important needs to prevent it and to support and create spaces for those who suffer from it. To get rid of the prejudices, to understand that in some point isn't a choice anymore, that self will isn't the solution, community and understanding are.

You may pick up an idea, concept, something higher than yourself, many people chose AA to be that, the fellowship.

I can see great anarchy as a higher power. AA isn't the only way to stay sober



and enter recovery, it is the way that works for me. But I wonder if addiction was better known, if I would have been able to get sober in that community in 2020, if I would have been able to listened there, to have felt like I'm not alone and that shame will be replaced by compassion and love. I don't need to think today about an Outside of AA, because I can't take the risk, because I need a community and connection to build a life without alcohol and drugs (just to write this text triggered a relapse dream!). Thanks to AA I talk to my mother today, no one judges me for that, and that is crucial, no judgment. So here you have an AA believer, longing for more spaces and communities to unlearn and learn about addiction together. My ideology or militancy had little priority since years, for different reasons but the main one, never able to connect long term with people through politics and never experienced no hierarchy, also in anarchist spaces. Not saying I am not part of the of a hierarchical system; my white ass benefits from it every day, and I try to be better about it.

For me today, AA is what I rely on to be sober. Maybe one day, it would be possible to be part of AAA too, Alcoholics Anarchist Anonymous, but until that day, I'll keep coming back!

# The Burden of the Unwashed Masses and Their Problems

Korrupt

This essay was translated from its German original *Die Bürde der ungewaschenen Masse und ihrer Probleme*.

Korrupt here, not an avowed anarchist, but full of sympathy for their named goals, additionally an alcoholic/polytox and (thanks in part to NA) not consuming for around 17 years.

“Anarchist Alternatives to Alcoholics Anonymous” is inspired by the following line from ‘Anarchy and Alcohol’:

“Alcoholics Anonymous... is just another example of a quasi-religious organization that satisfies a social need that should already be covered by the self-organization of an anarchist community.”<sup>1</sup>

The title of this essay is in turn inspired by the continuation of the passage, which roughly translates as:

As it is everywhere, we anarchists must ask ourselves: do we represent our positions only to feel better about ourselves in the face of the unwashed (well, washed) masses — or because we actually want to offer accessible alternatives? Anyway, most of us who don’t suffer from any substance dependency can be grateful for our privileges and good fortune; this imposes a responsibility on us for those who have not been so privileged and fortunate — or however they describe it.”

The obvious questions are:

- Can you take on this responsibility?
- Should you do it?

Before answering these questions, it should be clear what AA/NA do and what means they use to do it. You should also be clear about what you, as part of an anarchist collective, can do and what means you are willing to use, and whether, under these circumstances, those affected can be helped adequately or better.

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<sup>1</sup>Editor’s note: These two lines were part of the call for submissions to this zine.

Self-help according to the AA/NA model works because you come together with people in exactly the same situation and in the same struggle, because nothing is criticized/commented on, and — and now it gets difficult — because you condition yourself. This is a big club and you shouldn't swing it lightly against yourself, but the opponent is an addiction. You shouldn't go against it without heavy equipment, because it won't work and will cause further damage. (It also works not least because it is anonymous, and that is a claim that an anarchist collective can hardly make for itself. But that's just a side note.)

There are reasons for functional differentiation in society, and not every task can be performed by any actor of good will. However, the contribution of an anarchist collective in the context of addiction does not have to be a small or marginal one. It can play a major role in ensuring that one's own existence and actions are perceived as meaningful, thus preventing typical root causes of addiction and sedation from arising in the first place. A collective can support the assumption of personal responsibility that comes with getting clean. It can help with enduring phases in which activities that were previously bearable/attractive due to addictive substances become more difficult to endure or simply disappear. Of course, it can also help with avoiding triggering situations and cravings, but that's where it gets difficult: addicts can't rely on such an environment and they should not have to rely on it, because triggers and cravings will happen sooner or later and need to be endured.

The requirement that a collective must be able to offer a continuous group to addicts where they can exchange ideas and help each other to stay clean. This goes beyond what is achievable. Even the existing "structures of society as a whole" reach their limits regionally: an NA group is not always easy to reach, and in addition to urban centers, where a meeting is available practically every evening, there are also regions where the only option is once a week, and not as a self-organized 12-Step group, but rather sponsored by, for example, a church social agency or a support group.

There is a witticism about addiction support groups that their effectiveness diminishes when their members have relevant social science or psychological training because they see through the methods used. Personally, I tend to believe that these methods can and should be understood, and that only a little relevant training is necessary to do so. But they work anyway. A large part of the communication in 12-step groups consists of mutual visualization and reassurance that it is possible to resist addiction. That this is possible even under difficult circumstances, and in case of doubt "just for today."

It consists of the continuous practical demonstration that others also manage it, sometimes under easier, sometimes under more difficult or even catastrophic

circumstances. It also consists of the presentation of the consequences of consumption, but this is no longer “institutionalized communication,” rather it is addressed or not at the discretion of the addict. Exchange formats and rituals are designed for these forms of mutual reinsurance between addicts. I call this, somewhat directly, “self-conditioning.” One can argue about the terminology, but an addiction is also, to a large extent, a disease-related behavior that takes place beyond rationally striven goals and must be stopped in the same way as rational behavior. The self-conditioning that takes place in NA/AA is a viable option. The rational insight that addiction is a problem that is fraught with consequences and no longer bearable is, however, a prerequisite for successfully getting clean, but not the way to get there. If we assume that the setting of the 12-step programs actually works and works for the reasons mentioned, then by definition it simply cannot be replaced by a group of mostly non-addicts, regardless of all goodwill and reflection.

At this point, one could answer the two questions asked at the beginning, whether one can or should take responsibility in this regard: it is difficult at best and a highly unsafe setting for everyone involved, and one should avoid it if the alternatives from addiction self-help are available.

Does this mean that the collective has failed in a task that it was supposed to accomplish, or is attending a 12-step group even a vote of no confidence in one’s own community? The opening quote at least points in that direction, and that’s where we’re treading on thin ice. In the worst case, people do not accept a potentially helpful offer in an emergency situation because — to put it bluntly — a few of the organizations’ texts speak of a “power greater than oneself” or even a “God.” Fortunately, it is up to each individual to think of whatever they like in response to the term. A “power greater than oneself” can be anything, including an anarchist or “just” an addicted community.

Furthermore, taking responsibility for oneself and for others includes knowing what one is capable of achieving individually and in a group, and what not. Typical paths out of addiction include addressing the problem with family and/or friends, which is met with at least some degree of subjective awareness of the problem. However, the subsequent path out of addiction no longer takes place primarily within the circle of family and friends, because they simply cannot provide the support needed. In the worst case, they can be further affected by consequential problems such as co-dependence.

From this perspective, I tend to view the opening quote as a single, regrettable overshoot in an otherwise highly gratifying polemic against a drug culture that is often enough formed and developed out of power structures and that people are happy to oppose.

But to ask blasphemously: Does getting clean in an NA group fundamentally oppose the anarchist maxim (“Create autonomy for all to the detriment of none”)? (spontaneously answered: “rather not.”) Does the necessity of NA groups point to a failure of anarchism? (More difficult, but “no, maybe even the opposite.”) The “... on the contrary” is a fine line, but as long as addicted anarchists depend on the addicts of the majority society to create sufficiently large and available self-help structures made up of addicts, it is a good sign.

I am quite sure that thoughts such as “I want to strengthen my own autonomy by fighting my addiction” or “I want to reduce the disadvantages for others caused by my drug-induced behavior to zero” will lead to approving nods (and, according to the rules, no comments) in any NA group. You can set these goals for yourself, you can and should stand by them, especially in an otherwise politically heterogeneous group of addicts who want to stay clean. It will help everyone involved.

# To Change the Things We Can

Jon

I'm Jon. I've been sober since early 2017, and I go to 1–3 AA meetings a week.

I was sober for almost a year before I started going to AA. I'd stopped going to bars and soli events in the first year of sobriety, at first because I was worried I'd drink or use drugs if I went, and then because I got bored of being around alcohol all the time and of how alcohol and drugs were how people had fun and related, even in (especially in?) radical spaces.

I keep going back to AA meetings because the times I'd been away I'd started thinking about drinking or using again, or wondering if I really had a problem anymore, and the last time I thought like this was when I first moved to Berlin in 2015 and started abusing alcohol and drugs again after having been sober for a year.

There is a lot of stuff I like about AA and some stuff I don't. I want to talk about the things I don't like so that if we ever try to build up our own alternative, we can know what to take with us and what to leave behind.

## God

One of steps of AA is to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity, and this belief has been rather central to all the AA meetings I've attended.

Once I found a sponsor who let me choose my own idea of a higher power and themselves wasn't religious, I found I could ignore the god references a little more, particularly because in the meetings I go to, a Christian god's not brought up much even if we're encouraged to get on our knees and pray to our own higher power for guidance (mine is a cross between the fight for a better world, and Ripley from *Alien*). However, it's everywhere in the literature, along with the feeling that, although there's a lot of talk that a higher power can be anything you choose, the text is *really* hoping you'll come around to a Christian god.

There are atheist meetings, but these still reference AA's 'The Big Book,' taking what they found useful in it and seeming to ignore the religious (or even spiritual) aspects. Some I've gone to feel less like an atheistic AA meeting and more like a meeting for atheists who are addicts where the focus becomes on a lack of a god. There some out there that make religion and/or spirituality less of a focus, but since they such a big part of AA, the meetings that omit this seem a little strange, as though they're missing the stability or bedrock that structures them. Without it, it becomes just a place to talk about alcoholism in a kind of vacuum, without really examining the roots of addiction (which I'll talk more about in

‘Depoliticising AA’). This very social and political aspect could be the bedrock we need to help fight addiction and bring about social change.

## Politics in AA

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

One of the things that AA has going for it is that it keeps politics aside so that people can focus on recovering from addiction. While I don’t think that we radicals should totally isolate from people who don’t share our exact politics, the depoliticised nature of AA means we’re never able to share our values with people and possibly change their minds. The widespread meetings have the potential to be revolutionary, to unite a marginalised class and help them find unity through their shared experiences of being marketed to and exploited by greedy multinational corporations.

I haven’t found meetings that are critical of society, and people’s personal stories don’t steer into the political either. Many talk of personal fault, wanting to fit back into society, and wanting to make money. I don’t want to fit back into society as it is, or blame myself for my ability to ‘do well’ in it; I want to fight for the world to be better, or to at least be in a group that recognises that this fight is sometimes a really lonely, alienating and miserable one. Being in a group that doesn’t recognise this can sometimes feel just as alienating as addiction felt. Although he was talking about depression Mark Fisher voiced something in his book *Capitalist Realism* that I think holds true to the feeling I sometimes get in twelve-step meetings.

This pathologisation already forecloses any possibility of politicisation. By privatising these problems — treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual’s neurology and/or by their family background — any questions of social systematic causation is ruled out.

## Some Good Traditions

After a lot of trial and error and a lot of meetings, some members of AA put together some traditions that they suggested be followed.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

Ignoring — if we can — the God references, the part I like is at the end — *the leaders do not govern*. In fact, the ‘leadership’ roles rotate. Probably the longest can be up for a year, and I’ve held some positions for longer but when this happens there is a big push to get someone else in there; the subtext being these should not be held for longer in case they become positions of authority. The positions of greeters and people who run the meetings aren’t reserved for the charismatic, or the coffee making to the more introverted. All of the roles are shared and participation from everyone is encouraged, but not necessary. Even these duties are rotated, these small things, and there’s a kind of pleasure in doing the dishes and taking care of the areas.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Anonymity is important in anarchist spaces for obvious reasons, and in alcoholic spaces to avoid any stigma or repercussions. I dig the second part the most, because I think this can get lost in anarchist spaces. Minor subcultural differences and transgressions get treated as irreconcilable differences and man, we really need some unity right about now.

## The Structure

Meetings are rarely cancelled (I’ve never experienced it but it must happen now and then), and they always start on time. There can be some absences or problems with people showing up for their roles but these are covered rapidly and communicated widely.

There’s a broad focus that we all want to stop drinking and help others, and there are a number of different sub-groups (women, men, queers, inter/trans/non-binary, BIPOC, sexworkers, old timers, young people in AA), but one wouldn’t be turned away if they didn’t fit the parameters of the group, they might just be encouraged to listen instead.

For whatever reason, I like going to events where I can meet people but where there are guidelines given for how to interact. I understand what’s expected from me (honesty, waiting my turn to speak, speaking about my experiences). In a lot of other social situations, this isn’t the case. While this isn’t the most organic (and feels a little embarrassing to admit as an anarchist, *please give me rules*), it is a comfort. It’s not possible for someone to take the lead and talk endlessly (although a fellow told me once, shock in their voice, about the time they went to a meeting *with no time limit for sharing*). If there wasn’t enough time to hear everyone in the meeting there’s usually socialising afterwards (called ‘fellowship’) and if that’s not possible it doesn’t really matter because there are many other meetings to choose



from. There's also a warm feeling — newcomers are welcome and encouraged to participate and make mistakes. They're also encouraged to get a sponsor to help them read the literature, go through the twelve-steps, and check in with them. Imagine! Newcomers to anarchism being greeted warmly and given literature to help them. I've experienced this sometimes when I've tabled at anarchist book fairs — it's really exciting to be able to give people a bunch of zines filled with good ideas — but going to events can be a really different experience. I get the feeling anarchists aren't made to feel welcome in these spaces because of 'security' reasons, but surely part of security should be to welcome new people and suss them out.

And yeah, we should do the right thing because it matters, not because we're made welcome, but the world is a fucking hard place and making people feel welcome feels great.

## The Serenity Prayer

I like this. I saw some pithy post the other day about "How about I *change* the things I can't accept?"

I don't think it's about that. I take it to mean to work locally, get to know my neighbours, try to change the racists minds, maybe clean up some shitty areas, maybe get people to try practicing disability aid to let more people into their anarchist events. It doesn't mean I'm *happy* about our 'world leaders,' but obsessing over it seems like I'm working *in* the system. What things can I do in my area, what are my strengths, what communities can I build, *what can I change*, even if it's 'small?'

## Hybrid/Online Meetings

During the beginning of the pandemic, AA meetings moved online, and unlike a lot of other things, many have stayed online. There are several 24 hour meetings which people can join at any time to get help. Despite its apolitical nature, AA has offered chronically ill and disabled people many more resources and opportunities to still attend the things they need to access than a lot of anarchist groups have. Since developing long COVID in 2023, AA meetings are my most regular social events and the ones I can access the easiest.

## Conclusion

Despite all of the positives, the fact that AA doesn't criticise capitalism and drinking culture means that they're never going to be anything more than a quick fix for me, meaning that I have to go back to get band-aid solution of an hour's worth of (potential) connection connection that never quite hits right because it

fails to cover the festering wound of capitalism. The meetings feel, sometimes, as empty as drinking felt itself, as empty as what we're encouraged to do: endlessly consume in the hope it'll hide that there's something sick underneath this all, that the core is rotten.

I think about the people we could radicalise if we made these open meetings, where alcoholics could come and think about why they're still fucked up, why they still go to meetings 1, 2, 20 years into sobriety, and could realise that maybe it's not (just) the individual, that there's something larger at play here that they might not have thought about in depth before.

I worry, too, that we (and I'm included in this) accept things that are 'imperfect' or 'problematic' because there's 'no other option,' or because making another one would be difficult. I'm aware that the stakes are high and that criticisms should be made carefully for fear of driving people away. However, due what he perceived as an overly religious nature in the meetings *and* the literature, a close family member of mine could never stick with the program, and he died of alcoholism at fifty-four. These criticisms might seem like nit-picking to some; to others, they could be life-saving.

I believe that a better world is possible, and that we should do everything we can to try to make it. Part of this means not just accepting things as they are. Nothing can be perfect, but I think an alternative to AA could definitely be better.

If you want to reach out to talk about addiction, alcohol, or anarchy, you can email me at [jonomercy@proton.me](mailto:jonomercy@proton.me).

# An Anarchist in AA

Scott C.

My name is Scott, and I'm an alcoholic. My sobriety date is December 17, 2023. I have a sponsor and have worked the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I now take others through the steps. I go to three to four meetings a week. I have a conception of and relationship with a power greater than myself that has been the cornerstone to my recovery. I'm also an anarchist.

I've been battling alcoholism and addiction for a while now. The first time I realized I could not stop drinking even though I wanted to, even when my job, health, and relationships depended on it, was in 2013. Back then I was militantly atheist and, frankly, judgmental and arrogant. Some days I still am. I'm a work in progress. The first person to offer to take me to an AA meeting was a conservative older woman wearing a t-shirt with the US flag on it. I thought she couldn't possibly have access to a solution that would work for me. A few months later, still unable to stop drinking, I ended up in treatment, where we had to attend AA meetings.

I remember the first time I walked into a meeting. It was a relief that people looked normal, whatever normal looks like. They didn't look like alcoholics, whatever an alcoholic looks like. The relief quickly faded to dread when I saw the twelve steps written on a banner hanging from the wall. God was all over that thing, and God and I had parted ways when I was fourteen. God clearly wasn't the solution to my problem. God didn't exist. It was nice this deal worked for all these normal-looking alcoholics, but it certainly wasn't going to work for me. I just had to figure out another way. I'd have to do it on my own.

Several trips to rehabs, emergency rooms, and detoxes later, I was no closer to cracking the case but was in a lot more pain, with mountains of regret, shame, and damage weighing heavy on my conscience. As my first sponsor said, "You hit bottom when you decide to stop digging." I thought I was there. I knew I couldn't do this by myself, under my own willpower. But I wasn't willing to believe in God, either. Hopeless, confident only in my inability to stay sober, I made a plan to take my life. As the Big Book of AA says, "To be doomed to an alcoholic death or to live on a spiritual basis are not always easy alternatives to face." They truly are not.

Convinced by an exceptional therapist not to commit suicide, to try one more time, I begrudgingly went to AA meetings, got a sponsor, and started working the steps, all the while not believing in a higher power. My sponsor patiently explained the spiritual nature of the program to me. He parsed the steps to show I didn't even have to believe, I just had to be willing to be willing to believe.

Nonetheless, I still argued with the Big Book, writing in the margins in response to rhetorical questions such as, “Could we still say the whole thing was nothing but a mass of electrons, created out of nothing, meaning nothing, whirling on to a destiny of nothingness?” that yes, yes, I could, thank you very much.

Eventually, however, something ever so slight shifted in me. Through a series of events, I became open to the idea that there just might be something more out there. That was enough. I had a beginning. My sponsor took that and ran with it, and we completed the twelve steps. From the brink of suicide, I put together more than two years sober. But then I moved, I stopped going to meetings, I stopped calling my sponsor, I stopped working with sponsees, and shortly thereafter, I stopped being sober.

There’s a saying that “AA will ruin your drinking.” That was true for me. For years after that, I struggled on my own until a little more than a year ago, when things went from manageably bad to horrifically worse, as they always do in my experience. With my tail between my legs, I walked back into the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous to start again. I now have one year sober, and I would not trade it for anything.

For an alcoholic and addict of my type, to drink or to use is to die. Recovery is deadly serious business. Those who have suffered or are suffering the horrors of addiction know there is nothing cool, fun, romantic, or rebellious about it. We do it because we have no other solution, no other choice, no other means of survival other than to ingest what will ultimately kill us. In AA, I found a solution, a choice, a remedy to that soul sickness. I went to AA because I had to. Now I go because I want to. I believe that without AA I will relapse. I have no desire to test that theory, so I keep going.

I disagree with the idea that AA is a quasi-religious organization. There are plenty of problems with AA, but that is not one of them. I would also posit that AA has a lot to teach anarchists, though that argument would require a separate piece. If you struggle with alcohol or other substances and want help, I would not hesitate to recommend AA. Is AA the only thing that keeps me sober? Certainly not. But it is a crucial part of my recovery. Nor is AA the only way to get and stay sober. If something else works for you, use it. For me, nothing else has, and my laundry list of attempted treatments, methods, and schemes is a lengthy and expensive one.

I thought that because I was an anarchist and an atheist that AA would not work for me. I thought I was terminally unique because of my politics, my experiences, my traumas, and that there was no way I could relate to some group talking about God. I was wrong. I rejected and judged AA based not on what AA is but on what I thought it was. That attitude kept me in pain for much longer

than necessary.

What I have learned over more than a decade is that AA is not a religious program but a spiritual one, and that distinction is crucial. There is no one way to do it right, there is no credo to believe, there is no dogma to follow, there are no authority figures dictating what or who God is. Even the steps are just suggestions. And the point of the steps is to help the alcoholic form an understanding of and a relationship with a power greater than themselves that will maintain their sobriety. It is often referred to as God for the sake of simplicity and brevity, but there is no one God. One's higher power can be any myriad of things, concepts, formations, phenomena, or beliefs, as long as it isn't oneself. It can change and develop over time. Nothing is set in stone, and nothing must be figured out. The steps are there to guide one through a process whose end goal is a spiritual awakening that is personal, individual, and unique to each member. As a spiritual program, AA is capacious, flexible, open, accepting, and welcoming. Not every meeting might be, nor every person one meets in AA — we're sick people, after all — but AA is bigger than all of that. As another saying goes, "Take what works and leave the rest."

Those who are anarchists, atheists, or devout materialists need have no problem with AA. There is plenty of wiggle room and space for technicalities in the program if one needs it. All that is required to start is honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness. As for why a spiritual program is even necessary to maintain sobriety and how it is that a higher power can keep one sober are matters that would require lengthier discussion.

Nothing changes if nothing changes. If you are in the midst of alcoholism or addiction, know first that you are loved, cared for, and worthy. You are not alone in this. There is a way out. If I can do it, truly anyone can. If you have more questions, I'd be happy to talk more. I can be reached at [scott@fallingintoincandescence.com](mailto:scott@fallingintoincandescence.com).

## Outro

My opinion has wavered while writing for and compiling this zine. What started as a somewhat cynical call-out (Anarchist Alternatives to AA) quickly changed when I read the submissions and explored my own feelings towards twelve-step programs more. Maybe an anarchist alternative *would* lose some of the magical feelings I get when attending AA meetings, something I rarely have from anarchist ones, but I remain with my concerns, and I know I'm not the only one.

Again, this zine isn't about convincing anyone not to go to twelve-step programs if you need help. Maybe it's enough for you, the radical who's struggling with alcohol or drug use, to know that there are people going to meetings who are fighting outside of AA to make a better world, and you can find people who share such affinities in these programs.

And if that's not enough, then there are people who are looking for an alternative and who could offer help. The publishers of this zine are interested in hearing from you — to know more about your experiences in or worries about twelve-step programs, to talk about sober events, or to even start a support group for radicals.

There are alternatives, we've been where you are, and change is possible.



*God, grant me  
the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and wisdom to know the difference.*



# Scrappy Capy Distro

[scrappycapydistro.info](http://scrappycapydistro.info) / [scrappy-capy-distro@riseup.net](mailto:scrappy-capy-distro@riseup.net)

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