

Narcotics Anonymous sprang from the Alcoholics Anonymous Program of the late 1940s, and was co-founded by Jimmy Kinnon. Meetings first emerged in the Los Angeles area of California, USA, in the early Fifties. The N.A. program, officially founded in 1953, started as a small US movement that has grown into one of the world's oldest and largest organizations of its type.

Predecessors

Alcoholics Anonymous was the first 12-step program. Many people with both drug problems and drinking problems found sobriety through this program, although people without a drinking problem were not (and are still not) able to attend closed A.A. meetings. The idea for creating a 12-step program specifically to help drug addicts emerged several times; the earliest mention was in a question asked to Bill Wilson, A.A.'s founder (in 1944), who adopted the 12-step program from the Oxford Group, founded by a Lutheran pastor, Dr. Frank Buchman. The Oxford Group had four guiding spiritual practices:

1. The sharing of our sins and temptations with another Christian life given to God, and to use Sharing as Witness, to help others, still unchanged, to recognize and acknowledge their sins.
2. Surrender our life past, present and future, into God's keeping and direction.
3. Restitution to all whom we have wronged directly or indirectly.
4. Listening to and requiring God's Guidance, and carrying it out in everything we do and say, great or small.

On February 16, a group of drug addicts began to meet as part of a treatment center in Lexington Federal Prison in Lexington, Kentucky. It was founded by a man named Houston Sewell, and was based on the 12 steps of A.A. This group called itself NARCO or Addicts Anonymous, and continued to meet weekly for over twenty years. Then in 1948, one of the graduates from the NARCO program moved to New York City and started a similar group in the New York Prison System. This was the first group to be called "Narcotics Anonymous", but it did not last long, and dissolved soon after it was founded. Another group in Fort Worth, Texas followed the "Lexington model" in its own 12-step group. A similar group in Lorton, Virginia called itself NOTROL. In 1950 an unrelated group in California called the "Habit Forming Drug Group" used the 12 steps to address drug addiction. Each of these groups were largely independent, and were not a part of N.A. as it now exists; however they showed that there was a need for such an organized program.

Narcotics Anonymous was founded (as AANA) in California in 1953 by Jimmy Kinnon and others. This group differed from its predecessors in that it specifically attempted to form a fellowship or network of groups that would be mutually supporting. Throughout that summer, founding members, most of whom had found recovery in A.A., debated the bylaws of the organization, and the first documented meeting occurred August 17. On September 14, they received notice from the leadership of A.A. that they could use the A.A. steps and traditions, but not the A.A. name. The organization then officially changed its name to Narcotics Anonymous.

In 1954, the first N.A. publication was printed, called the "Little Yellow Booklet". It contained the 12 steps, and early drafts of several pieces that would later be included in subsequent literature.

At this time, N.A. was not recognized by society at large as a positive force. The initial group had difficulty finding places that would allow them to meet, and often had to meet in people's homes. The Rockefeller drug laws had made it a crime for drug addicts to meet together for any reason, making N.A. illegal. Addicts would have to cruise around meeting places and check for surveillance, to make sure meetings would not be busted by police. It was many years before N.A. became recognized as a beneficial organization, although some early press accounts were very positive. In addition, many N.A. groups were not following the 12 traditions very closely (which were quite new at the time). These groups were at times accepting money from outside entities, conflating A.A. with N.A., or even adding religious elements to the meetings. For a variety of reasons, meetings began to decline in the late 1950s, and there was a 4-month period in 1959 when there were no meetings held anywhere at all. Spurred into action by this, Jimmy Kinnon and others dedicated themselves to restarting N.A., promising to hold to the traditions more closely.

Growth

In the early 1960s, meetings began to form again and grow. The N.A. White Booklet was written in 1962, and became the heart of N.A. meetings and the basis for all subsequent N.A. literature. N.A. was called a "hip pocket program", because the entire literature could fit into a person's hip pocket. This booklet was republished in 1966 as the N.A. White Book, and included the personal stories of many addicts.

The first N.A. phone line started in 1960, and the first "H&I" group (H&I is a sub-committee of Narcotics Anonymous that carries the message into hospitals and institutions where people cannot get to an outside meeting) was formed in 1963. That year a "Parent Service Board" (later renamed the World Service Board) was formed to ensure that N.A. stayed healthy and followed closely to the traditions. Confusingly, in 1962, the Salvation Army started a group also called "Narcotics Anonymous" that followed a different "13-step" program, but this program soon died out. The N.A. program grew slowly in the 1960s, but the program was learning what was effective and what was not, as relapse rates became less common over time and friction between N.A. groups began to decrease.

The development of N.A. literature

From the beginnings of N.A., the need for official N.A. literature was evident. Unfortunately, the process of creating and approving official N.A. literature has seen some of the most contentious periods of debate within the fellowship. Although the Yellow Booklet, Little White Booklet, and Little White Book were used in the 1960s and 1970s, many people desired to have a more detailed book on recovery, paralleling the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous. Some meetings offered A.A. literature at meetings, while others considered writing their own books on recovery. One group even planned to print a [bootlegged](#) version of A.A.'s Big Book with every instance of the word "alcohol" replaced with "drugs". The need for a unified text approved by the fellowship's "group conscience" was recognized, and in October 1979 the first N.A. World Literature Conference was held in Wichita, Kansas.

While previous literature had been written by just a few addicts (primarily by Jimmy Kinnon), the N.A. Basic Text was written as a massive collaboration between hundreds of people. There were a total of seven World Literature Conferences within three years, all of them open to any addict who wished to help. It was decided that the book would use the Little White Book as its outline, filling in and expanding on the subjects discussed in that text. In May of 1982, a finalized version was distributed to all of N.A. for approval, and the text was approved with a 2/3 majority required for passage. After passage, however, publication was held up due to a spirited disagreement regarding a few key sentences which described the nature of the World Service Organization and other N.A. service groups. The book was printed in 1983, with those passages altered, and was subsequently quickly reprinted (as the second edition) with the passages reinserted. After a hasty vote on the issue, the third edition was published, substantially identical to the first edition, with the controversial passages removed again.

Professional editors and writers were hired in 1986 to improve the Basic Text so that it was more consistent in tone and style. The resultant 4th edition, released in 1988, was improperly reviewed and had many problems, including 30 lines which were inadvertently missing and text that was inconsistent with other N.A. literature. A 5th edition was released in 1991, correcting these problems, and is the version currently in wide use today. Copies are sold at cost at N.A. meetings, and are available in over 30 different languages. Millions have been sold worldwide, and have been useful to many addicts.

More recent history

In 2003, N.A. World Services approved a new text entitled *Sponsorship*. This text endeavors to help people explore the concept of N.A. sponsorship. The text is unique in that it shares personal anecdotes of recovering addicts instead of making direct recommendations. It was re-released in 2006 with the NA logo 'in clouds' on the front removed. The clouds, to some, was reminiscent of white power, and was quickly dropped.

In 2004, it was announced that a sixth edition of the N.A. Basic Text was being prepared, and would be submitted for approval in 2008. There would be no changes to the majority of the text, but the "personal stories" section would replace some older stories with new ones, so that the current diversity of N.A. members' experiences would be better represented.

In 2005, there are over 21,500 registered N.A. groups holding over 33,500 weekly meetings in 116 countries. Literature available in 47 different languages, and there are currently 119 translation projects underway. In 2006, literature is now available in 55 different languages with 115 newly translated items.

The Narcotics Anonymous program

The only requirement for membership is "a desire to stop using," and members "meet regularly to help each other stay clean," where "clean" is defined as complete abstinence from all mood and mind altering substances (including [alcohol](#)). Membership in N.A. is free, and there are no dues or fees. The foundation of the Narcotics Anonymous program is the [twelve steps](#) and [twelve traditions](#), reprinted .

Narcotics Anonymous "has no opinion on outside issues," including those of [politics](#), [science](#), or [medicine](#), and does not endorse any outside organization or institution. The fellowship does not promote itself, but rather attracts new members through public information and outreach. N.A. groups and areas supply outside organizations with factual information regarding the N.A. program, and individual members may carry the N.A. message to hospitals and institutions, such as treatment centers and jails.

The nature of addiction

N.A. describes [addiction](#) as a progressive disease with no known cure, which affects every area of an addict's life: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. N.A. suggests that the disease of addiction can be arrested, and recovery is possible through the N.A. twelve-step program. The steps never mention [drugs](#) or drug use, rather they refer only to addiction, to indicate that addicts have a disease of which drug use is one symptom. Other symptoms include [obsession](#), [compulsion](#), and self-centered [fear](#).

Addicts often first enter N.A. after reaching a "bottom" in their life, a point at which life feels completely unmanageable, characterized by "unemployability, dereliction and destruction". Every N.A. member reaches a different bottom, which can be wherever the addict chooses to stop using. In practice, it is drug use and the extreme consequences associated with its abuse that bring most addicts to their bottom.

Meetings

Regular meetings, hosted by N.A. groups, are the basic unit of the N.A. Fellowship. Meetings are held in a variety of places such as church meeting rooms, libraries, hospitals, community centers, parks, or any other place that can accommodate a meeting. Members who attend the same meeting on a regular basis to establish a recovery network and reliable routine understand this to be their "Home Group". Group members are able to participate in the group's business, and play an important role in deciding how the group's meetings should be conducted.

Formats

There are two basic types of meetings, "open" and "closed". Anyone is welcome to attend an open meeting, while closed meetings are limited to addicts and to people who think they may have a problem with drugs.

Meeting formats vary, but often include time devoted to the reading of N.A. literature that was written by and for members of N.A. regarding the issues involved in living life clean. Many meetings also include an "open sharing" component, where anyone attending has the opportunity to share. There is usually no direct feedback during the sharing, thus only one person ever speaks at any given time during this portion of the meeting. Some groups choose to host a single speaker (such meetings are usually denoted "speaker meetings") to share for the majority of the meeting time.

Other meeting formats include round robin (sharing goes around in a circle or each speaker picks the next person to share). Some meetings focus on reading, writing, and/or sharing about one of the Twelve Steps or some other portion of N.A. literature. Some meetings are "common needs" (a.k.a. special interest) meetings, supporting a particular group of people based on gender, sexual identity, age, language or other characteristic. These meetings are not exclusionary, as any addict is welcome at any N.A. meeting.

During the meeting, some groups allot time for N.A.-related announcements, and many meetings set aside time to recognize "anniversaries" or "birthdays" of clean time. Individuals are sometimes given an opportunity to announce their clean time to the group. In some meetings, and for certain anniversaries, keytags, and medallions, which denote various amounts of clean time, are distributed to those who have achieved those milestones.

"Each group has but one primary purpose--to carry the message to the addict who still suffers" (Narcotics Anonymous' Fifth Tradition). Therefore, the newcomer is considered to be the most important person in any meeting. The message of Narcotics Anonymous is hope: that there is another way to live. The one promise of N.A. is that "an addict, any addict, can stop using, lose the desire to use, and learn a new way of life" (Basic Text). According to the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text, the "Twelve Steps" are the source of this hope and freedom when worked to the best of one's ability.

Language

When sharing in an NA meeting, members are often encouraged to use "NA language" as opposed to the language of other fellowships or treatment centers. This is to maintain a clear NA message. Common terms used by NA in its literature and by members include "clean time", "recovery", and "disease of addiction" as opposed to "chemical dependency", "substance abuse" and "cross-addiction". Some NA members strongly discourage the use of A.A. terms in meetings (such as "sober" and "alcoholism") so as to avoid confusion with various substances. A drug in any form (liquid, solid, or smoke) may present itself as an addiction. Addiction does not relate itself to any one particular substance; rather, it relates to the disease.

Service

N.A. literature suggests that service work is an essential part of a program of recovery. Service is "doing the right thing for the right reason," and is the best example of Goodwill, which is the basis for the freedom promised by the N.A. program. Service may be as simple as being present in a meeting or answering a phone. Additionally, there are basic, formalized service positions at the group level to help the group perform its function: examples include treasurer, secretary and "Group Service Representative" which represents the group in the larger service structure.

The Narcotics Anonymous service structure operates at area, regional and world levels. These levels of service exist to serve the groups and are directly responsible to those groups, they do not govern. World services is accountable to its member regions, who are in turn responsible to member areas. Area Service Committees directly support member groups and often put on special events, such as dances and picnics. Area service committees also provide special subcommittees to serve the needs of members who may be confined in jails and institutions, and will also provide a public interface to the fellowship.

Spirituality

Narcotics Anonymous is not a [sect](#), [cult](#), or [religion](#). It is a spiritual program of recovery from the disease of addiction. The N.A. program places much importance on developing a working relationship with a "higher power". The literature suggests that members formulate their own personal understanding of a higher power. The only suggested guidelines are that this power be "loving, caring, and greater than one's self." Members are given complete freedom in coming to an understanding of a higher power that works for them. Individuals from countless spiritual and religious backgrounds, as well as many atheists and agnostics, have developed a working relationship with a higher power in Narcotics Anonymous. Some members who have difficulty with the term "God" substitute "higher power" or read it as an acronym for "Good Orderly Direction."

The twelve steps of the N.A. program are based upon indispensable spiritual principles, three of which are honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness, embodied in the first three steps. These principles, when followed to the best of one's ability, allow for a new way of life.

N.A. meetings often close with a prayer, such as the [Serenity Prayer](#) or the *Third Step Prayer* ("Take my will and my life. Guide me in my recovery. Show me how to live.")

Sponsorship

One addict helping another is an essential part of the N.A. program. It is therefore highly recommended that members of Narcotics Anonymous find a sponsor. A sponsor is a member of N.A. who helps another member of the fellowship by sharing their experience, strength and hope in recovery and serves as guide through the Twelve Steps. A substantial number of N.A. members suggest getting a sponsor of the same sex (or of opposite sexual preference) with over one year clean time, although there are no such rules. Any N.A. member is free to choose any other member as a sponsor.

Anonymity

"Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities." (Basic Text)

N.A. members identify themselves in meetings by their first name only. The spirit of anonymity is about placing "principles before personalities" and recognizing that no individual addict is superior to another, and that individual addicts do not recover without the fellowship or its spiritual principles. The Twelve Traditions state that N.A. members "must always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films."

Anonymity means that each NA member is equal in their membership and opportunity to recover. Everyone's input is valued, and no one person knows as much as all of us do together. We can put this principle into action by using an objective planning process to provide direction to our service bodies. This direction comes from our combined experience rather than individual opinion.

In conversational settings, anonymity may allow people to reveal personal history and feelings without fear of later embarrassment. Electronic conversational media can provide physical isolation, in addition to anonymity. This prevents physical retaliation for remarks, and prevents negative or taboo behavior or discussion from tarnishing the reputation of the speaker. This can be beneficial when discussing very private matters, or taboo subjects or expressing views or revealing facts that may put someone in physical, financial, or legal danger (such as [illegal](#) activity, or unpopular, or outlawed political views).

NA Groups and Organizational structure and

Members meet at N.A. Groups, representatives of which are organized into an area service committee (ASC). Several ASC representatives form a regional service committee (RSC), and the RSCs make up N.A. World Services. The foundation for this structure is the twelve concepts of N.A.

An N.A. Group is a number of N.A. members who meet regularly; usually at the same time and place each week. Some Groups have more frequent meetings but are considered to be part of a single Group. Groups have a single purpose which is to bring more addicts into recovery. Groups are largely independent from one another and members of N.A. are encouraged to choose a home group to belong to, a group they attend regularly and where they will be missed if they are absent. Each Group elects four leaders, or "trusted servants", to serve the needs of the Group: a secretary, a treasurer, a GSR, and an alternate GSR. This election process is carried out by the Group Conscience which is a business meeting made up of the members of the Group who strive for consensus based decisions. The secretary is responsible for opening the meeting, choosing someone to chair the meeting, making sure coffee gets made, etc. He or she also arranges for purchasing supplies and keeping group records. The treasurer keeps financial records and pays the group's bills. The group service representative (GSR) attends the Area Service Committee meetings and represents the group to the ASC. The alternate GSR assists the GSR and prepares to replace the GSR when need be.^[15] With these four positions, the group's needs are met, and the group is able to have a place in the larger N.A. structure. In some smaller groups, one person may serve in multiple roles, but all home groups have these roles fulfilled.

Area service committees and Regional Service Committees

An ASC is made up of all the N.A. Groups in a given Area. The GSRs and alternate GSRs from each Group in an Area meet regularly together for a business meeting where issues are raised and discussed in order to better meet the needs of the groups in the Area. Each ASC elects its own officers: the chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and regional committee members (RCMs). Frequently an ASC will have various subcommittees (such as a "Hospitals and Institutions" sub-committee or a convention-planning subcommittee) which are led by subcommittee leaders that are elected by the entire ASC. An RSC is composed of the regional committee members (RCMs) of all the ASCs in a region. It is similar in organization to an ASC, but involves a larger number of people and is further removed from the day-to-day activities of individual home groups. Many of the issues dealt with by RSCs are the same ones that will come before the World Service Conference, with the RSC being the best way for local groups to help craft policies that will affect N.A. as a whole. In some cases, only the RCMs in a region will meet to vote on issues; in other situations, all GSRs in a region will be invited to attend an RSC meeting. The RSC elects a member to attend the World Service Conference.

Finances

Narcotics Anonymous members are not required to pay any dues or fees. Group expenses are covered entirely by voluntary contributions from its members. Groups meet costs such as meeting room rental, tea and coffee and any literature that the group provides for free from these contributions after which surplus funds are passed to the service structure. Groups often provide some literature items such as IPs (Double sided single sheet pamphlets) and keytags/chips celebrating clean time. Area Service Committees are typically funded from Group contributions plus money raised by events such as dances and recovery events attended by members. In some countries Area committees also supply literature to the Groups. Areas pass funds on to the Regions, which can also receive contributions from Groups and also raise money through conventions attended by hundreds to thousands and tens of thousands of members. Regions also sometimes run Regional Service Offices which buy literature from the World Service Office and its branch offices for sale to Areas and Groups. Because Regional Service Offices can purchase in bulk and sell at list price sometimes this surplus exceeds the running costs of the office.

Internal Controversies

The N.A. program attempts to avoid controversy through its application of the 12 traditions, which specify that "Narcotics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the N.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy." Even so, the Basic Text points out that there are still "communication problems, differences of opinion, internal controversies, and troubles with individuals and groups outside the Fellowship", and various controversies of this type have disturbed N.A. throughout its history. Early in the history of N.A., different groups emphasized different aspects of recovery. In particular, the make-up and process of creating an N.A. text was a contentious period for the fellowship. Different factions supported different versions of the Basic Text, and in the ensuing power struggle there were many accusations made and resentments cultivated. The basis of the dispute was whether the service committees were described as a part of N.A., or as a separate group with no decision-making power. This dispute reached its nadir when the N.A. World Service Organization sued an N.A. member to prevent him from distributing unauthorized and allegedly misleading versions of the Basic Text. Although there are still some "traditionalist" N.A. members who use the third edition (revised) of the Basic Text, N.A. as a whole has agreed upon the 5th edition as being the currently "approved" version.

Positions on related issues or institutions

In order to maintain its focus, Narcotics Anonymous has established a tradition of non-endorsement and does not take positions on anything outside its own specific sphere of activity. Narcotics Anonymous does not express opinions - either pro or con - on civil, social, medical, legal, or religious issues. Additionally, it does not take stands on addiction-related issues such as criminality, law enforcement, drug legalization or penalties, prostitution, HIV/HCV infection, or syringe programs.

Other 12-step groups differ in their approach to the treatment of addiction and recovery. Alcoholics Anonymous does not explicitly prohibit drug use besides alcohol, and according to A.A. literature, "only those with a *drinking* problem may attend closed meetings." [Cocaine Anonymous](#) seeks to treat [cocaine](#) addiction specifically (although it is also a program of abstinence from all drugs, including alcohol and marijuana.) Methadone Anonymous is similar to N.A., but considers the use of [methadone](#) to be a tool of recovery and not a drug. N.A. has no opinion on these groups, and in so far as these other groups follow the 12 traditions these groups have no official opinion on N.A. Some people have found the tools of these other programs to be more helpful than the N.A. program.

Some religious groups oppose N.A. (and 12-step programs in general) because it is a non-religious program that emphasises surrender to a Higher Power, without requiring a specific belief in God or adherence to any specific religious tenets. As a result of this opposition, many religious groups have created competing programs, such as [Narconon](#), as part of their own attempts to address the problem of drug addiction.

Narcotics Anonymous is entirely self-supporting and does not accept financial contributions from non-members. Based on the same principle, groups and service committees are run by NA members, for members.

Narcotics Anonymous neither endorses nor opposes any other organization's philosophy or methodology. Its primary competence is in providing a platform upon which drug addicts can share their recovery and experiences with one another. This is not to say that Narcotics Anonymous believes there are not any other "good" or "worthy" organizations. To remain free of the distraction of controversy, NA focuses all of its energy on its particular area of purpose, leaving other organizations to fulfill their own goals.