

# President's Column

## July 1998

### **What is a quality SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> Meeting like?**

Our meetings are the primary service that we offer. We are judged by others on the their quality. Such judgments will determine whether we thrive as an organization, or not.

When an individual in addictive crisis seeks out a SMART<sup>®</sup> meeting, or a professional refers someone to a meeting, what is being sought? What do regular participants want, and is it any different? Among the many experiences meeting participants might seek, I suggest that the following are relevant to both newcomers and regulars, and crucial to whether we are providing a quality meeting experience.

1. The opportunity (but not the demand) to participate. Newcomers are often scared about their first meeting. If they were completely scared, of course, they wouldn't show up. If they do show up, they are probably ambivalent about participating. How can this ambivalence be responded to? The basics include warmth and friendliness, and sincere but limited attention. Ideally newcomers can sense that the meeting will happen even if they don't participate. With luck they won't be given the sense that just by walking through the door they have committed to joining something they don't yet understand.

The opportunity to participate means that one or a few individuals don't dominate the conversation. Perhaps the worst example of a poorly lead SMART<sup>®</sup> meeting is one in which the Coordinator seems to think of the meeting as a continuing forum for informing the world about his or her opinions on nearly anything. By contrast, a well lead meeting may hear very few opinions from the Coordinator, who is busy encouraging others to participate, enforcing equal time for those who want it, and maintaining a friendly atmosphere.

2. Keeping reason as the ultimate (if sometimes unknowable) authority. SMART<sup>®</sup> is based on the idea that active inquiry and reasoning about one's own addictive behavior can lead to permanent changes in that behavior. The SMART<sup>®</sup> 4-point program (motivation, urge-coping, problem-solving, lifestyle balance) is a guide to the issues that almost everyone with addictive behavior will need to address in order to make successful change. However, exactly how to cope with urges, for instance, will not always be clear, and reasonable participants may find themselves having different opinions on various aspects of this issue. Even a question brought to the Professional Advisor may get the response "Well, it depends..." Is it better to focus on the costs of the addiction, or the benefits of stopping, as an urge coping device?

When might a substitute addiction be helpful? How long does avoidance of high risk situations need to occur? How helpful is it to think of the urge as an enemy, or could it be considered a part of me that needs to be assimilated?

When differences of opinion arise the effort to explore why these differences exist is often worthwhile. Even if the differences don't diminish everyone can learn more about the underlying issues, leading to better personal decisions on these highly personal issues. If mistakes are made these can be brought back to the group for further discussion.

3. Structure. A well lead meeting has a clear structure, a beginning, a middle and an end. The recommended meeting outline is in itself not essential, but something like it is. The participants need to know what to expect, so they can prepare to participate in ways helpful to themselves and others. "I know that the group allows about 10-15 minutes for someone to focus on a specific personal issue. I need to figure out how to present this problem in 5 minutes, so we can have 5-10 minutes to discuss it." If the Coordinator makes a copy of the meeting outline (in the Coordinator's Manual), and gives it to everyone in the room, everyone can help keep the meeting on track.

4. Comparisons to other programs for clarification only. In SMART<sup>®</sup> we think of addictions as maladaptive behaviors, not diseases. We emphasize self-empowerment, not powerlessness. We believe that many individuals are capable of a psychological not spiritual resolution of these problems. Perhaps the best description of how these perspectives can work is shown in a well running meeting. The meeting is not the place to debate these issues. Those who would prefer another approach can be encouraged to seek it elsewhere. We need to spend our meeting time not defending our perspective, but acting on it.

5. Group leadership of the meeting. In a well running meeting experienced participants involve themselves in its leadership. They do not fight the Coordinator for control, but from time to time they do jump in to make statements or ask questions that guide the discussion in a useful direction. If they don't like how the meeting is turning out, they may say so, and suggest alternative courses of action. SMART<sup>®</sup> meetings are not for individuals who want to be spoon-fed "the truth." Personal truth is gained only at the price of personal inquiry. If the meeting is not facilitating personal inquiry, say so!

I will from time to time discuss how to make SMART<sup>®</sup> meetings a good learning experience for all involved. SMART<sup>®</sup> meetings are perhaps a bold experiment, but there is precedent for them. In a democracy the activity of government is every citizen's responsibility, not just the politicians'. In SMART<sup>®</sup> Recovery<sup>®</sup> the activity of recovery belongs to everyone who wants to participate in it, not just professionals.