

## President's Column

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### Is SMART<sup>®</sup> anti-AA?

SMART<sup>®</sup> assumes that because humans are diverse, many different recovery approaches are needed. Almost any approach may be of benefit to some individuals. We oppose the idea that there is a single best approach for all.

Consistent with SMART<sup>®</sup>'s view, in AA's fundamental documents there appears to be, at least in some places, an openness to the possibility that approaches other than AA might be helpful, indeed essential, for some individuals.

In practice, AA members often seem not to have the openness to alternatives that is found in AA's documents. Imagine the following scenario: An over-drinking individual who has recently suffered in a short time period several negative consequences from drinking, attends an AA meeting on the advice of a physician. At the meeting the individual is introduced to several central AA concepts, such as powerlessness, alcoholism as a disease, and the importance of surrender to a higher power. At the close of the meeting an AA member initiates a conversation with the newcomer. The newcomer confides that although the congenial welcome was appreciated, and some of the recovery stories had elements similar to the newcomer's own situation, still the central AA concepts did not seem consistent with the newcomer's other personal beliefs, such as the importance of self-reliance. The newcomer adds that even though recent events have clearly put drinking into a new light, the term "disease" nevertheless does not seem like an accurate description of the problem.

The AA member responds by saying (pick one):

A) It can take some time to see how AA might work for you, so I suggest you don't make a final decision based on one meeting. I hope you come back for a few more meetings to check us out.

B) You wouldn't be here if you weren't an alcoholic, and you better take a cold hard look at what it means to be an alcoholic. If you don't come to these meetings for the rest of your life you are going to end up in prison, dead or insane, because there is no other way to stop drinking. AA is the only thing that works for somebody like you, and the sooner you recognize it the sooner your life can turn around.

C) Well, AA isn't for everyone, although it certainly has worked for me. Maybe you should check out some of the other programs and approaches, and see if something else suits you better.

D) You need to stop using your head so much and recognize that your best thinking is what got you into this mess. If you don't surrender to your higher power and let Him guide your life, you'll never stop drinking. Of course, you may be one of the few people who is just constitutionally incapable of being honest with oneself, but if you stick around long enough maybe we could help you with that too, if you are truly willing to surrender.

Of course, a combination of the A and C responses would be best, and undoubtedly this combination occurs sometimes. A similar combination of responses would also be ideal for the skeptical newcomer at a SMART<sup>®</sup> meeting. In the scenario described, however, a combination of the B and D responses appears to be the typical response. Although there is no data on just how typical this response is, the fact that it occurs at all is a serious problem. This typical response is an affront to reason, the concept of human diversity, scientific evidence and most importantly, the individual who receives it.

The newcomer to recovery is at a highly vulnerable and confused moment in life. At such moments a turn toward recovery is possible if the individual can look within and perceive clearly the inconsistency between deeply held values and the experience of addictive behavior. This is not the time to be fighting about deeply held values, it is the time to be re-connecting with them.

Any mismatch between a program's values and the individual's values would appear to be the opportunity for greater confusion, leading perhaps to more addictive behavior or other problems.

How much damage, in varying degrees, has been done to individuals who have been the recipients of the typical response noted above?

The question "Is SMART<sup>®</sup> anti-AA" is pertinent because SMART<sup>®</sup> has taken all steps within its power to assure that individuals looking for alternative approaches to recovery are aware that alternatives exist, and have access to them. These efforts bring us into conflict with individuals who believe some variation of the typical response noted above. To some of these individuals can apparently be traced actions such as tearing down SMART<sup>®</sup> meeting flyers, refusing to list SMART<sup>®</sup> in community notices otherwise available to non-profit groups, refusing meeting space to SMART<sup>®</sup> when this space is available to other support groups, refusing to pass along information about SMART<sup>®</sup> to individuals who might reasonably be expected to desire it, and so forth. AA, as an organization, appears to have taken no steps to halt these abuses, and therefore apparently condones them.

It is not anti-AA to suggest that AA doesn't work for everyone, that very different recovery concepts (such as self-reliance) might be needed by some, or that there is little evidence to support the concept of alcoholism as a disease. Nevertheless, for some uninformed individuals, even the statement of these ideas may be seen as AA bashing. If being perceived as AA bashers is the price we must pay to state our message, we are willing to pay it. The conflict could be resolved, however, if these uninformed individuals would shift their focus from the possibility that SMART<sup>®</sup> is anti-AA, to the possibility that AA in practice is anti-alternative.