

# The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as an Adjunctive Treatment for Trauma Survivors: An Experimental Approach

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**ABSTRACT: Background and Method:** *The consequences of surviving trauma are complex, making it difficult to formulate a recovery and treatment plan. The most common defense mechanism, and the toughest one to work through, is denial. Throughout human history, lack of knowledge and non-acceptance of the perpetrators misdeeds has placed the suffering of survivors behind an armored wall, perpetuating traumatic effects. No recovery can occur behind this wall of forced silence, ignorance and lack of helpful resources. Over the last two decades, research has revealed the frequency of traumatic events, and their injurious effects on a survivor's psyche. Mental health professionals have come to understand the connections between unresolved trauma and serious*

## INTRODUCTION

The approach is based on the author's book: *"Trauma and Transformation: A 12-Step Guide"* (Edery, 2013). The application in clinical practice. Unresolved and persistent psychic pain is the most powerful motivator for clients seeking mental health treatment. A poor sense of meaning in life, lack of, or lost connection to their family, loved ones, friends, and society overall. Psychic pain, as a result of unresolved trauma, is a dominant indicator that all three aspects of the survivor need to be addressed and treated: their mind, body and soul. Each stores the story in its own unique way. If their story goes untold, the story gets told in its own language, and with a hefty price. As such, it is absolutely urgent that researchers, academics, clinicians, and society in general, educate themselves and remain informed of recent theory and research that appraises and leads assessment, case conceptualization, and treatment among clients seeking relief from their pain, and sense of meaninglessness in life.

This therapeutic method is a blend of modern clinical concepts, and ancient spiritual principles. It is easy to observe what is lacking in western, modern systems of mental health treatment. Although there are over 400 clinical practices - many of them "evidence-based" - and close to 300 different clinical diagnoses for clients based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - very little focuses on the client's spiritual nature. The human being can be likened to a triangle: the strongest physical structure, and an ancient symbol of spirituality. This is the reason that 12 Step programs use this symbol. The triangle holds the secret to successful treatment. A person is composed of a soul, mind, and body, and ALL THREE must be addressed for one to heal.

Evidence-based approaches do not have "evidence" that a human being has a soul, that soul has needs, and one's sense of meaning in life stems from this place. While we were given a plethora of options to diagnose and treat the mentally ill, we were given almost nothing on the most important part of the human being: their source of meaning and pathway to peace. I thought to myself: "What would it look like if a person's spiritual needs were equally taken into account? What would be the quality of life for the suffering client? What if the powerful spiritual-based program of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous were applied to treating trauma survivors? Would it work, and why?" My reasoning continued that surely survivors have similar issues, problems and needs, and if addicts can be helped, followed was the birth of a new idea that is truly unique, effective, and clears the pathway for a survivor to seek meaning in their life.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE 12-STEP MODEL

The root process of the 12-Step model is a durable and peer-guided cognitive-behavioral method, based on the proven need for spiritual growth. The individual is improved by transpersonal and positive peer culture components, most notably accountability. As the survivor takes each step, at some point, they will face the harms that were perpetrated on to them, and how they were affected by it. Equally important, and later on in the process, they will itemize the harm that they have done to others, and how it affected them. This is how imbalance is dealt with spiritually, so there is true restoration.

## Case Report on the Clinical Application of the 12-Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

Ms. R is a 48 year old, single engineering professor with a history of severe physical abuse, multiple accounts of early childhood sexual abuse, family history of chronic alcoholism, and early childhood

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parental abandonment. She has a history of unstable romantic relationships, multiple marriages and other failed relationships, criminal conduct, interpersonal violence towards others, and debilitating anxiety and depression. By Ms. R's account, she was in therapy for a number of years, which consisted mostly of "me talking, and the therapist listening". Some work was accomplished on emotional detachment from Ms. R's extremely dysfunctional family, and eventually, she terminated her own treatment. Her symptoms persisted, and she refused to return to treatment, until her primary childhood rapist contacted her. At that point, she was in therapy for anxiety, and sought immediate help.

The Step One began with building rapport with the client, beginning where the client is emotionally. Ms. R provided a detailed history of her trauma and linked it to the cause of her intense emotional and psychic pain. This was followed by an inquiry if Ms. R believed there to be any connection between her current troubles, and trauma memories that "got stuck in the memory machine". Although the question may seem to have an obvious answer, the purpose was to gently support Ms. R in linking her history to her self-report of malignant behaviors. This was how Ms. R "admitted powerlessness" over her history and its consequences, and subsequently ended her own denial of both her pain, and her role in creating and re-creating it. Admitting that one was powerless (not weak), at the time, to stop, prevent, or interfere with the trauma, is the beginning of the end of one's suffering. Denial takes up enormous psychic energy, as there is a non-stop war between the Ego's desire to protect the person, and the ego's desire to maintain the illusion of power and control is the survivor's hidden potent rage and vulnerability. (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976). Once acknowledging this, Ms. R was ready to move towards a unique, personal solution (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981).

Step Two includes a process of believing that she is worthy of being safe and receiving healing, love, and support. Since she was in therapy for anxiety, love, and strength. Trauma recovery especially calls for this. Once the survivor *comes to believe* that a personal spiritual solution is available for them, they *decide* that they will allow for their source of safety to guide their process. Step Three, I call this the Survivor's Rock of Recovery (Bessel, Laura, Jennifer Gendler, 2006). Once the survivor has a look at her resentments, personal roadblocks, character defects, and how they have impeded on her life. She also came to realize that she was highly gifted and underutilizing her talents. Every survivor has roadblocks, some due to the trauma, and some are innate. Such a through and honest *evaluation* of strengths and weaknesses

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