



FACTS ABOUT NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

A SOCIETY OF RECOVERING DRUG ADDICTS

Narcotics Anonymous is an international, community-based association of recovering drug addicts. Started in 1947, the NA movement is one of the world's oldest and largest of its type, with nearly twenty thousand weekly meetings in seventy countries. Here we hope to explain what Narcotics Anonymous is and what its recovery program offers to drug addicts. We will describe how NA services are organized at the local, national, and international levels. We will talk about how Narcotics Anonymous cooperates with others concerned about drug abuse in their countries and communities. Finally, we will provide information on NA's membership and indicators of the success of Narcotics Anonymous.

DEVELOPMENT

Narcotics Anonymous sprang from the Alcoholics Anonymous movement in the late 1940s, with meetings first sprouting up in the Los Angeles area of California, USA, in the early Fifties. For many years the society grew very slowly, spreading from Los Angeles to other major North American cities and Australia in the early 1970s. An assembly of local delegates was first established in 1978. In 1983 Narcotics Anonymous published its self-titled basic text, and growth rates have since skyrocketed. Groups formed rapidly in Brazil, Colombia, Germany, India, the Irish Republic, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. In the three years following initial publication of NA's basic text, the number of Narcotics Anonymous groups nearly tripled. Today, Narcotics Anonymous is fairly well established throughout much of Western Europe, the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, with newly formed groups and NA communities scattered through the Indian subcontinent, Africa, East Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe.

PROGRAM

NA's earliest self-titled pamphlet, known among members as "the White Booklet," describes Narcotics Anonymous as "a nonprofit fellowship or society of men and women for whom drugs had become a major problem . . . recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean." Membership is open to any drug addict, regardless of the particular drug or combination of drugs used. There are no social, religious, economic, racial, ethnic, national, gender, or class-status membership restrictions. Narcotics Anonymous membership is completely voluntary; no membership rolls or attendance records are kept, either for NA or anyone else. Members live in the community and attend meetings on their own time. There are no dues or fees for membership; most members regularly contribute small sums to help cover expenses at group meetings, but contributions are not mandatory.

The core of the Narcotics Anonymous recovery program is a series of personal activities known as the Twelve Steps, adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous. These "steps" include admitting there is a problem, seeking help, self-appraisal, confidential self-disclosure, making amends where harm has been done, and working with other drug addicts who want to recover. Central to the program is an emphasis on what is referred to as a "spiritual awakening," emphasizing its practical value, not its philosophical or metaphysical import, which has posed very little difficulty in translating the program across cultural boundaries. Narcotics Anonymous itself is nonreligious and encourages each member to cultivate an individual understanding, religious or not, of this "spiritual awakening."

Narcotics Anonymous believes that one of the keys to its success is the therapeutic value of addicts working with other addicts. In meetings, each member shares personal experience with others seeking help, not as professionals but simply as people who have been there themselves and have found a solution. Narcotics Anonymous has no professional therapists, no residential facilities, and no clinics. NA provides no vocational, legal, financial, psychiatric, or medical services. The closest thing to an "NA counselor" is the sponsor, an experienced member who gives informal assistance to a newer member.

The primary service provided by Narcotics Anonymous is the NA group meeting. Each group runs itself on the basis of principles common to the entire organization, principles laid out in the movement's literature. There is no hierarchical authority structure in Narcotics Anonymous. Most groups have no

permanent facilities of their own, instead renting space for their weekly meetings in buildings run by public, religious, or civic organizations. Meetings may be "open," meaning anyone may attend, or "closed," meaning only people who are there to address their own drug problem may attend. Meetings are led by NA members; other members take part by talking in turn about their experiences in recovering from drug addiction.

The Narcotics Anonymous program uses a very simple, experience-oriented disease concept of addiction. Narcotics Anonymous does not qualify its use of the term "disease" in any medical or specialized therapeutic sense, nor does NA make any attempt to persuade others of the correctness of its view. The NA movement asserts only that its members have found acceptance of addiction as a disease to be effective in helping them come to terms with their condition.

Narcotics Anonymous encourages its members to observe complete abstinence from all drugs, including alcohol, even substances other than the individual's drug of choice, though NA's only stated membership requirement is "a desire to stop using" drugs. It has been the NA members' experience that complete and continuous abstinence provides the best foundation for recovery and personal growth. However, Narcotics Anonymous takes no absolute stand as a society on the use of caffeine, nicotine, or sugar. Similarly, the use of prescribed medication for the treatment of specific medical or psychiatric conditions is neither encouraged nor prohibited by NA. While recognizing numerous questions in these areas, Narcotics Anonymous feels that they are matters of personal decision and encourages its members to consult their own experience, the experience of other members, and qualified health professionals in making up their minds about these subjects.

One more thing needs to be said about the Narcotics Anonymous program. Its members recognize that NA is but one organization among many addressing the problem of drug addiction. Members feel they have had significant success in addressing their own addiction problems, but Narcotics Anonymous does not claim to have a program that will work for all addicts under all circumstances or that its therapeutic views should be universally adopted. If Narcotics Anonymous can be useful to addicts in your care or in your community, it stands ready to be of service.

SERVICE ORGANIZATION

The basic unit of the Narcotics Anonymous organization is the NA group. In a country where Narcotics Anonymous is a relatively new phenomenon,

the NA group is the only level of organization. In a country where a number of Narcotics Anonymous groups have had the chance to develop and stabilize, groups will have elected delegates to form a local service committee. A number of services are usually offered by these area committees, among them:

- distribution of Narcotics Anonymous literature;
- telephone information services;
- public information presentations for treatment staff, civic organizations, government agencies, and schools;
- panel presentations to acquaint treatment or correctional facility residents with the NA program; and,
- meeting directories for individual information and use in scheduling visits by client groups.

Area committees, whether serving a network of groups in a single city or all groups in a given country, are run almost exclusively by volunteer NA members, who serve on a rotating basis.

In some countries, especially the larger countries or those where Narcotics Anonymous is especially well established, a number of area committees have joined together to create regions. These regional committees handle services affecting the entire national movement, while the area committees handle local services.

An international delegate assembly called the World Service Conference, which has met annually since 1978, provides guidance for a number of committees which address issues affecting the entire organization, all assisted by NA's World Service Office in Los Angeles, California, USA. Primary among the priorities of NA's world services are activities which support young national movements and the translation of Narcotics Anonymous literature. For additional information, contact either the World Service Office headquarters in Los Angeles or the European branch office in Brussels; their mailing addresses, telephone numbers, and fax numbers appear at the end of this article.

POSITIONS ON RELATED ISSUES OR INSTITUTIONS

In order to maintain its focus, Narcotics Anonymous has established a tradition of nonendorsement and does not take positions as an organization 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, nor does it take any stands on secondary addiction-related issues such as criminality, law enforcement, drug legalization or penalties, prostitution, HIV infection, or free-needle programs. The NA movement

does not even oppose the use of drugs, stating only that if an addict desires to stop using, Narcotics Anonymous stands ready to help.

Narcotics Anonymous is entirely self-supporting and accepts no financial contributions from nonmembers. In a similar vein, it is generally understood that groups and service committees are run by members, for members.

NA will neither endorse nor oppose any other organization's philosophy or methodology. Narcotics Anonymous believes its sole competence is in providing a platform upon which drug addicts can share their recovery with one another. This is certainly not to say that Narcotics Anonymous believes there aren't any other "good" or "worthy" organizations. However, to remain free of the distraction of controversy, NA focuses all its energy on its particular area of competence, leaving others to fulfill their own goals.

COOPERATING WITH NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

Although, as previously stated, certain traditions do guide NA's relations with other organizations, Narcotics Anonymous welcomes the cooperation of those in government, the clergy, the helping professions, and private voluntary organizations. In turn, NA is happy to cooperate with others interested in Narcotics Anonymous by providing information, literature, and contact information about recovery through the NA Fellowship. NA's nonaddict friends have been instrumental in starting Narcotics Anonymous in many countries and helping NA grow.

EFFECTIVENESS; MEMBERSHIP DEMOGRAPHICS

No comprehensive surveys of Narcotics Anonymous membership have been completed to date, due especially to NA's emphasis on protecting the anonymity of the members. However, it is possible to offer some general, informal observations about the nature of the membership and the effectiveness of the program, observations believed to be reasonably accurate.

Male/female ratio

Of the 5,000 NA members responding to an informal poll taken in 1989:

- 64% were male
- 36% were female.

Socioeconomic background

The socioeconomic strata represented by the NA membership varies from country to country. Most national movements are founded by members of one particular social or economic class, but as their outreach to the entire range of the drug-addicted

population in each country becomes more effective, the membership becomes more broadly representative of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Age

Of the 5,000 NA members responding to an informal poll taken in 1989:

- 11% were under 20
- 37% were between 20 and 30
- 48% were between 30 and 45
- 4% were over 45

Religious backgrounds

All religious backgrounds are represented among NA members. In a given national movement, the membership generally reflects the diversity or homogeneity of the background culture.

Rate of growth

Because no attendance records are kept, it is impossible even to estimate what percentage of those who come to Narcotics Anonymous ultimately achieve long-term abstinence. The only sure indicator of the program's success is the rapid growth in the number of registered Narcotics Anonymous meetings in recent decades and the rapid spread of Narcotics Anonymous outside North America. In 1978, there were fewer than 200 registered groups in three countries. In 1983, more than a dozen countries had 2,966 meetings. In 1994, we knew of groups holding 19,822 weekly meetings in seventy countries.

**World Service Office
PO Box 9999
Van Nuys, California 91409
USA
Telephone (818) 773-9999
Fax (818) 700-0700**

**WSO Europe
Avenue Winston Churchill Laan 249/B15
B-1180 Brussels, Belgium
Telephone 32-2-346-1400
Fax 32-2-346-2282**

This paper was first presented at the ICAA's 18th International Institute on the Prevention and Treatment of Drug Dependence, Berlin, July 1990. It was updated in May 1995.