

INTRODUCTION to an FA Meeting

Although the tragedy of substance use disorder (SUD) is well known in today's society, few people are aware of how disastrous SUD's effects are on the *families* of loved ones who have this disorder. People who have not faced the challenges of SUD in their families cannot understand the special hell that becomes a "new norm" of life: daily crises, frequent confrontations, and the extreme stress of chronic anxiety.

There are few frustrations to compare with that of watching helplessly while an addicted loved one is heading down a path toward self-destruction.

As people with SUD engage in increasingly dysfunctional and sometimes dangerous and illegal behaviors, they often become caught up in the law-enforcement system. Their family members then face the new challenge of responding to pleas for bail and demands for legal help. Hardworking, honest, conscientious people can eventually find themselves drained of both hope and resources.

Family members are typically too embarrassed and ashamed to confide in, or discuss their problems with, their relatives or closest friends. Even if seeking counsel from psychiatrists, therapists, clergy, or other professionals, most family members find themselves also needing more practical help and support from people who are actually coping with the same insanity in their own lives.

There *is* an organization of "fellow travelers" that offers such proven, beneficial and practical support:
FAMILIES ANONYMOUS® (FA®)

More than 400 FA groups meet weekly throughout the United States and in many other countries around the world. FA members traditionally gather together at face-to-face meetings, as has been done for decades; nowadays, though, they can also

participate in meetings online or by phone. These latter alternatives make the FA program available to people who have no groups nearby, are unable to travel to a meeting location, or desire more frequent and active participation than is available in their local communities.

WELCOME to an FA Meeting

Newcomers find a warm welcome when they enter an FA meeting for the first time. They see young and old, men and women, people from all walks of life, coming together and interacting with each other.

Each week a different member volunteers to serve as the meeting's "leader." That person follows an approved meeting format that explains FA's tradition of anonymity and the importance of our using first names only. Various other members are called upon to read aloud the five readings that form the basis of the FA program. These five readings—*About Substance Use Disorder* (formerly *About Drug Abuse*), *The Four Destructive Forces*, *The Twelve Steps of FA*, *The Twelve Traditions of FA*, and *Helping*—distinguish the FA philosophy from that of other Twelve Step programs.

During FA meetings, members share their personal experiences: what brought them to FA, what they were like before they began working the FA program, and how they have changed. People may choose to speak or to simply listen. FA meetings are safe havens where all attendees are welcome to share their personal experiences in a setting that is free from judgment, guilt, blame or shame.

Some meetings focus on one of the Twelve Steps or Twelve Traditions. Others may deal with a particular topic: perhaps an FA slogan, a piece of FA-approved literature, or a reading from our daily-thought book, *Today a Better Way*™. Members are encouraged to think about the meeting-theme's relevance to them personally; to share their feelings about it; and to

describe how they have, or have not yet, applied it in their own lives. They can speak freely of their challenges and struggles, trusting that their fellow FA members—who have been through many of the same horrors—are people who will understand, who will care, and who will respect their anonymity.

They also share things that are positive and promising. Learning that someone else's loved one has chosen to enter a rehabilitation program, for example, can give others hope that *their* loved ones, too, may choose the path of recovery. Sharing positive experiences as well as negative ones can reinforce the mutual bond that draws members together.

As members unburden themselves, newcomers are sometimes shocked to hear stories as bad as, or even worse than, their own. What they quickly realize is that they need no longer suffer their personal tragedies alone. They discover that what they thought was their own private horror story is not, in fact, unique. With everyone at the meeting having had similar experiences, new members find they have a place and space in the "FAfamily."

Having once broken the ice, newcomers will hopefully become increasingly receptive to the wisdom available from the experiences of others. Part of the FA credo is that members do not give advice; instead, they relate their own experiences, describe how they have handled life's challenges, and talk about how the FA program has worked for them.

As longtimers describe their daily struggles—like trying to establish and maintain boundaries, wrestling with whether to refuse or put up bail, deciding when it might be time to ask their addicted loved ones to leave home, or using legal means to protect themselves—newer members may feel relief as they recognize the principle that makes such consequential decisions necessary: *You have the right to protect your own well-being and to protect what is yours.*

As members discuss the reality of substance use as a disease, newcomers begin putting their own admitted powerlessness into perspective by acknowledging the validity of FA's "Three Cs":

1. WE DIDN'T CAUSE IT.
2. WE CAN'T CONTROL IT.
3. WE CAN'T CURE IT.

Parents and other family members can begin laying their guilt to rest once they realize that no one *causes* another person's substance use disorder, no one can *control* that person's use of drugs, and no one but that person can decide to *change* course and begin working toward recovery. As members discuss, read, and learn more about substance abuse, they also come to recognize and accept that *they* are part of the problem. They, too, have an addictive disease: the disease of codependency.

With greater understanding and a change of attitudes, family members can begin relieving the tensions that stand in the way of recovery—both their own recovery and the recovery of their addicted loved ones.

In accordance with our 7th Tradition, which states that "every group ought to be fully self-supporting," a basket is passed at meetings, either physically or virtually (see the FA website for information on virtual donations). No fees are required to attend, but voluntary donations, made by the meeting's attendees, cover expenses such as rent, FA literature purchases, and donations to FA's World Service Office. FA is wholly supported by its members and member groups, with no donations being accepted from any source outside the fellowship.

FA meetings traditionally close with members joining in the recitation of the "Serenity Prayer":

*God, grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can, and
wisdom to know the difference.*

... followed by a concluding slogan, such as:

Keep coming back! It works!

*To order additional copies of this
or other FA literature,
to find a local group or
an online meeting, or
to obtain information about starting
a new group in your community,
please contact:*

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