

Perspective

The History of Narcotics Anonymous

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) is best understood in the cultural context of the 1950's, the decade in which the notion of "good" and "bad" drugs crystalized. After World War II, heroin and cannabis were demonized with the opiate addiction epidemic. Harsh new anti-drug laws were enacted, addicts were arrested for "internal possession" and prohibited from associating due to "loitering addict" laws. Gatherings of recovering addicts for mutual support were subjected to police surveillance. From this inhospitable soil, NA emerged [1].

THE LEXINGTON BEGINNINGS OF NA

The founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the opening of the United States Narcotic Farm, a prison hospital in Lexington, Kentucky, were critical events in the rise of recovery groups for drug addiction. Within four years the founding of AA in 1935, individuals addicted to opiates and other drugs explored mutual support and the 12 steps as a means to recovery. It was first discovered that the Alcohol Anonymous program could also be applied to those addicted to narcotics at The United States Public Health Service Hospital (Lexington) in Lexington, Kentucky, which treated individuals who were addicted to narcotics and sentenced for federal drug-related crimes or who voluntarily applied for treatment.

Dr. Tom, a physician who suffered from alcohol addiction, who later also developed a 12 year addiction to morphine, entered Lexington in 1939 and found a newly published book, Alcoholics Anonymous, which changed his life. Later that year, he and three other men held the first AA meeting in North Carolina. Dr. Tom was one of the the first known people to have achieved recovery from morphine addiction through AA, and his group became a resource for inquires about drug addiction for the AA headquarters in New York.

Early experiments in applying the AA model to opiate addiction made AA more aware of the need to address other drugs. The AA Grapevine published a series of articles, which addressed narcotics, sedatives, tranquilizers, and amphetamines. These articles gave rise to a series of pamphlets dealing with drugs of abuse. These early exchanges prompted Dr. Tom to suggest an AA group for narcotic addicts at Lexington. Two and a half years later Houston S. turned this dream into a reality.

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Prison based AA groups had grown throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. Houston S. was an alcoholic without a history of drug addiction, who became sober through AA in 1944 and developed an evangelical fervor for helping others. Houston helped an executive, who was addicted to both alcohol and morphine, and although he managed to sustain remission from alcohol, he was unable to stop using morphine despite treatment at Lexington. As a result of his friend's experience, Houston S. became interested in AA members who were dependent on other drugs. He contacted Dr. Vogel, the medical director of Lexington, and was permitted to form a group called Addicts Anonymous in the hospital. The group met regularly from 1947 to 1966. AA in Kentucky provided volunteers to speak to Addicts Anonymous at Lexington. The meetings followed a format similar to AA meetings and recovery was based on an adaptation of the 12 steps of AA. After discharge from Lexington the Addicts Anonymous communicated with former group members through a newsletter, The Key, and many were helped by local AA groups in their communities. The Alcoholics Anonymous General Service Headquarters was supportive of the Addicts Anonymous group.

THE NEW YORK SCENE

The spread of Addicts Anonymous into the community began with Danny C., who like Houston S., was a recovery evangelist. Danny C. had a 25 year addiction to morphine and heroin and was admitted to Lexington in 1935. He had eight subsequent admissions in the next thirteen years. Houston S. mentored Danny C. and following his final discharge in 1949, Danny C. founded an Addicts Anonymous group in New York City, which he called Narcotics Anonymous (NA) to avoid confusion between the two AAs. The first NA meeting was held at the Women's House of Detention, where Major Dorothy Berry of the Salvation Army worked with female addicts. Major Berry offered the use of the Lowenstein Cafeteria at the Salvation Army in Hell's Kitchen, and by January 1950, the first community based 12 step meetings for addicts were started.

"The application for the incorporation of NA was dated January 25, 1951." (1) Danny C. also created the National Advisory Council on Narcotics as an umbrella organization for NA; however, in 1953, it was unsuccessful in soliciting funds for public education and for hospitals for the treatment of addiction.

Few organizations welcomed NA, and the “early efforts were plagued by lack of money and meeting space” (2) In addition, some people in the community felt that it was “just a ruse for addicts to meet to exchange drugs” (3) and addicts feared that it “was infiltrated by police, undercover agents, and informers.” (4) Danny C. lead the New York NA until his death in 1956, and the leadership passed to Rae. L. the New York NA remained small and had only four meetings per week in 1963.

The New York NA also published pamphlets in which addiction was characterized as “a disease of the whole person-physical mental, emotional, and spiritual” to which NA was the best solution. In addition, the NA Newsletter was produced in the early 1960s. During the 1950s and early 1960s both the New York NA and the Lexington Addicts Anonymous achieved marked visibility through books and articles in multiple newspapers and magazines.

There was also growth outside of New York City, and by 1965, there were chapters in 14 cities, 10 states, and 3 foreign countries; however, the NAs created by Danny C. and others were isolated groups that lacked a common service structure. Some of the groups chose names other than Narcotics Anonymous. These early groups that began under the leadership of Danny C. “dissipated in the mid-1960s and early 1970s in the wake of harsh new anti-drug laws and the death of Rae L. in 1972.” (5) However, a new NA, as it is known today, had been developing in the West Coast in Los Angeles.

THE LOS ANGELES SCENE

Betty T. left Lexington in 1950 and subsequently corresponded with Houston S., Danny C., and Bill W. about her interest in starting meetings for addicts in Los Angeles. Betty T. had been a nurse and addicted to narcotics, alcohol, and Benzedrine prior to her recovery through AA in 1949. In 1951, firs hosted the Habit Forming Drugs meeting in her home. This was a closed meeting for AA members, who were also recovering from additional drug addictions. Over time she became concerned whether this group should be under the umbrella of AA or separate, and she shared her concerns with Bill W. through a series of letters.

Betty T. agreed with Bill W. that drug addicts, who were not alcoholic, could attend open AA meetings but could not attend closed meetings or be Alcoholics Anonymous members. She realized that this excluded pure drug addicts; however, she knew that Addicts Anonymous was not accepted in Los Angeles and felt that Narcotics Anonymous in New York City were not adhering to the Twelve Traditions. They dropped alcohol from the steps and “did not stress the danger of alcohol as a substitute for drugs.” (6) Bill W. noted the mutual aversion between alcoholics and drug addicts and that in some places there had been “violent opposition to drug addicts attending AA meetings” (6). Early AA newsletters reflected this ambivalence and resistance. A 1953 issue of *The Night Cap* stated, “It is our studied conclusion that there is no place in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous for the narcotic or barbiturate addict,” and a 1954 issue of *The Key* stated, “All manner and kinds of people are made welcome, the thieves, con-men, crooked gamblers..., but ‘NO DOPE ADDICTS’ are permitted there [AA meetings].”

THE BEGINNING OF NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS IN LOS ANGELES

Jimmy K.’s excessive use of codeine, pills, and alcohol left him “bankrupt, physically, mentally, and spiritually” (7) and “an abject failure as a man, a husband, and a father” and in 1950, he began recovery with AA. He “developed an early interest in helping those with multiple addictions.” (8) He attended meetings of Hypes and Alcoholics and of Habit Forming Drugs, and he communicated with Danny C. about the NA group that he had started in New York City. In 1953, Jimmy K. and five others began an NA group in Van Nuys, California with bylaws that stated, “This society or movement shall be known as Narcotics Anonymous, and the name may be used by any group which follows the 12 steps and 12 traditions of Narcotics Anonymous.” Jimmy K. was nominated president in September 1953 and the purpose of this NA was published in *The Key* in 1954. The first sentence read, “This is an informal group of drug addicts banded together to help one another renew their strength in remaining free of drug addiction” and the last sentence read, “It shall be the purpose of this group to endeavor to foster a means of rehabilitation for the addict and to carry a message of hope for the future to those who have become enslaved by the use of habit forming drugs.”

Meetings were established. Most of those in attendance were heroin addicts, and most of the meetings were held in homes. The California NA differed from the New York NA in that the New York groups had more “pure” morphine and heroin addicts, and little concern about alcohol and little contact with AA. Whereas three founders of the California group had alcoholism and emphasized adherence to the Steps and Traditions of AA. When the West Coast group strayed from AA principles, those with alcoholism returned to AA. The East coast NA exerted little influence on the West Coast, and the West Coast evolved into the NA of today.

A very significant change in Step one of the West Coast NA was the substitution of *addiction* for either *alcohol and drugs*, *narcotic drugs*, or *drugs* in step one. “Addiction” was a rarely heard in AA circles and NA trustees later wrote, “... The one thing we all share is the disease of addiction. It was a masterful stroke. With that single turn of a phrase the foundation of the Narcotics Anonymous Fellowship was laid.” In contrast to the East coast NA, which formed on the shared history of narcotics, the West Coast NA forged its identity on the shared process of addiction. Basing the organization on addiction had three effects: first, it addressed drug substitution by renouncing all drug use including alcohol, second, it opened NA to those addicted to drugs other than narcotics and third, it defined addiction as a “disease” and the addict as a “sick” person.

THE NEAR-DEATH, REBIRTH, AND EXPLOSIVE GROWTH OF NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

The meetings of the West Coast NA were periodic and sporadic between 1953 and 1958. In 1954, Cy M. became Chairman of NA; however, personality conflicts due to his style of leadership lead to the resignation of all of the original founding members. The tenor of the meetings had changed due to Cy M’s confrontational technique. As conflict grew, Cy M. withdrew from leadership, and NA meetings stopped for a short time in the fall of 1959. Later that year, Jimmy K., Sylvia W., and Penny K. rekindled NA. The West

coast NA had no money, no members, and no literature. Members came and went; however, Jimmy K. held the group together.

Previous members returned, new members joined, and NA began a slow growth, which markedly accelerated. The number of meetings grew exponentially over several years showing more recognition of the drug epidemic and attempt and motivation to overcome and fix the problem. Growth of NA also increased abroad with 3 countries in 1972, over 12 in 1983, 60 in 1993, 127 in 2007, 131 in 2010. In May 2016, 67000 meetings were held in 139 countries.

The growth of NA in the United States and around the world may be attributed to Jimmy K's encouraging addicts to start meetings in their communities, to holding the 1978 8th World Convention outside California in Houston, Texas, to the growth of the addiction treatment centers, and to the publishing of NA's Basic Text with 7.3 million copies distributed in 18 different languages.

REFERENCE

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