

The A.A. Member — Medications and Other Drugs

(From the US pamphlet of this name and Living Sober p87)

Because this subject involves important medical decisions, a group of physicians who are members of A.A. and two physicians who are friends of A.A. were asked to review this pamphlet.

Some A.A. members must take prescribed medication for serious medical problems. However, it is generally accepted that the misuse of prescription medication and other drugs can threaten the achievement and maintenance of sobriety. It may be possible to minimize the threat of relapse if the following suggestions are heeded:

- **No A.A. member should “play doctor”; all medical advice and treatment should come from a qualified physician.**
- **Active participation in the A.A. program of recovery is a major safeguard against alcoholic relapse.**
- **Be completely honest with your doctor *and* yourself about the way you take your medicine. Let your doctor know if you skip doses or take more medicine than prescribed.**
- **Explain to your doctor that you no longer drink alcohol and you are trying a new way of life in recovery.**
- **Let your doctor know at once if you have a desire to take more medicine or if you have side effects that make you feel worse.**
- **Be sensitive to warnings about changes in your behavior when you start a new medication or when your dose is changed.**
- **If you feel that your doctor does not understand your problems, consider making an appointment with a physician who has experience in the treatment of alcoholism.**
- **Give your doctor copies of this print-out**

From the earliest days of Alcoholics Anonymous it has been clear that many alcoholics have a tendency to become dependent on drugs other than alcohol. There have been tragic incidents of alcoholics who have struggled to achieve sobriety only to develop a serious problem with a different drug. Time and time again, A.A. members have described frightening and sobriety-threatening episodes that could be related to the misuse of medication or other drugs.

Experience suggests that while some pre-scribed medications may be safe for most non-alcoholics when taken according to a doctor's instructions, it is possible that they may affect the alcoholic in a different way. It is often true that these substances create dependence as devastating as dependence on alcohol. It is well known that many sedatives have an action in the body similar to the action of alcohol. When these drugs are used without medical supervision, dependence can readily develop.

Many A.A.s who have taken over-the-counter, nonprescription drugs have discovered the alcoholic's tendency to misuse. Those A.A.s who have used street drugs, ranging from marijuana to heroin, have discovered the alcoholic's tendency to become dependent on other drugs. The list goes on and will lengthen as new drugs are developed.

Always consult your doctor if you think medication may be helpful or needed.

Note to medical professionals

Cooperation with the professional community has been an objective of Alcoholics Anonymous since its beginnings. Professionals who work with alcoholics share a common purpose with Alcoholics Anonymous: to help the alcoholic stop drinking and lead a healthy, productive life.

As noted in the introduction, some A.A. members must take prescribed medications. However, our experience indicates that the misuse of prescription medication can threaten the achievement and maintenance of sobriety. The suggestions provided in our introduction are offered to help A.A. members find the right balance and minimize the risk of relapse.

Some alcoholics require medication.

We recognize that alcoholics are not immune to other diseases. Some of us have had to cope with depressions that can be suicidal; schizophrenia that sometimes requires hospitalization; bipolar disorder, and other mental and biological illnesses. Also among us are diabetics, epileptics, members with heart trouble, cancer, allergies, hypertension, and many other serious physical conditions.

Because of the difficulties that many alcoholics have with drugs, some members have taken the position that no one in A.A. should take any medication. While this position has undoubtedly prevented relapses for some, it has meant disaster for others.

A.A. members and many of their physicians have described situations in which depressed patients have been told by A.A.s to throw away the pills, only to have depression return with all its difficulties, sometimes resulting in suicide. We have heard, too, from members with other conditions, including schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, epilepsy and others requiring medication, that well-meaning A.A. friends discourage them from taking any prescribed medication. Unfortunately, by following a layperson's advice, the sufferers find that their conditions can return with all their previous intensity. On top of that, they feel guilty because they are convinced that "A.A. is against pills."

It becomes clear that just as it is wrong to enable or support any alcoholic to become re-addicted to any drug, it's equally wrong to deprive any alcoholic of medication, which can alleviate or control other disabling physical and/or emotional problems.