

Can Faith Rewire an Addict's Brain?

New evidence shows that 'God consciousness' can keep young people off drugs and alcohol.

By

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Young people who regularly attend religious services and describe themselves as religious are less likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs, a growing body of research shows. Why? It could be religious instruction, support from congregations, or conviction that using alcohol and drugs violates one's religious beliefs.

Moreover, frequent involvement in spiritual activities seems to help in the treatment of those who do abuse alcohol and drugs. That's the conclusion of many reports, including our longitudinal study of 195 juvenile offenders that will be released in May in *Alcohol Treatment Quarterly*.

Fewer and fewer adolescents today are connected to a religious organization. Young people are less affiliated than previous generations, with 25% of the millennial generation unattached to any particular faith, according to a 2010 Pew Research report.

The problem is more fundamental than missing church on Sunday. Young people in our study of juvenile offenders seem to lack purpose and are overwhelmed by feelings of not fitting in. Meantime, the legalization of marijuana in several states, the flood of prescription medications, and the availability of harder street drugs gives youth wide access to mind-altering substances.

How do we help them? As one troubled young woman in our study, whom we will call Katie to protect her identity, said: "I started to get better when I started to help out in Alcoholics Anonymous. When we help others, we get connected to a power greater than ourselves that can do for us what alcohol and drugs used to do."

Katie's idea, to connect those who are struggling to a "higher power," may seem too simple. Clinicians remain divided about whether AA's goal of helping alcoholics find a higher power to solve their problems is appropriate in treatment planning. But new research, including our own study, is beginning to lend support to Katie's conclusion.

There are two key elements of the 12-step program AA uses: helping others and God-consciousness. Those who help people during treatment—taking time to talk to another addict who is struggling, volunteering, cleaning up, setting up for meetings, or other service

projects—are, according to our research, statistically more likely to stay sober and out of jail in the six months after discharge, a high-risk period in which 70% relapse.

Increasing God-consciousness also appears to produce results. Our study showed daily spiritual experiences predicted abstinence, increased social behavior and reduced narcissistic behavior. Even those who enter addiction treatment without a religious background can benefit from an environment where they are encouraged to seek a higher power and serve others.

Nearly half of youth who self-identified as agnostic, atheist or nonreligious at treatment admission claimed a spiritual affiliation two months later. This change correlated with a decreased likelihood of testing positive for alcohol and drugs during treatment.

A connection with the divine and service to others both seem to enhance sobriety. That's because they provide what young people like Katie have been missing: a deep sense of purpose, opportunities to provide help to other people, connections with others, and the chance to make a difference in the world. This reduces self-absorbed thinking, something AA cites as a root cause of addiction.

Though AA was designed with Christian principles, its founders ultimately developed an approach that did not require participants to hold any particular religious beliefs. But the founders were on to something when they rooted AA core tenets in a connection with a higher power and service to others.

Why might this combination work? Neuroscientists, including Andrew Newberg in his 2010 book "How God Changes Your Brain," are beginning to uncover what happens to the mind when the unconscious neurological foundations of addiction are short-circuited by spiritual awakening and a new focus on helping others. Neuronal pathways in the brain appear to be instantaneously realigned.

Research suggests that addicts may be prisoners of the left hemisphere of their brain, which tends to ruminate on problems such as social anxiety. But when their right brains are triggered by an intense emotional experience, unexpected solutions appear. Spiritual experience can be an important catalyst to this kind of brain rewiring.

As a teen we will call Ben told us, "I am aware today in sobriety that my thinking has drastically changed. You take a telescope and move it a centimeter, and your whole world changes. Now I ask myself: What can I bring to the table? How can I help?"

How does a person rewire their own brain? There are many paths, but some adolescents agree with "Allen," who told us, "I need a power greater than myself to enter my life."

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