The Role of Sponsor in the 12-Step Model

Nicole C Johnson*

California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University, USA

Submission: April 07, 2017; Published: April 17, 2017

*Corresponding author: Nicole C Johnson, California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant International University, 10455 Pomerado Rd., San Diego, California 92131, USA, Tel: (415) 378-8666; Email: nicole.caaj@gmail.com

Abstract

The role of sponsors in a 12-step program is an area of research that has received little attention. Although research suggests that sponsors play an important role in maintaining sobriety through a 12-step program, there is limited information as to what factors make sponsorship effective. Due to the fact that the 12-step model is widely used in the United States it is important for us to understand what aspects lead to greater rates of abstinence. Sponsorship has been shown to increase sobriety outcomes and a thorough examination of the qualities that make one sponsor more effective than another is greatly needed.

Introduction

The 12-step model of treatment for substance abuse is the model most commonly used in the United States [1,2]. It involves attending mutual-help groups and adhering to a prescribed set of principles which lay out rules that govern behavior [3]. It is estimated that 3.1% of American adults have attended a 12-step meeting at some point in their lifetime, with 1.5% having attended in the past year [1,4].

In recent years the effects of 12-step programs have been studied extensively, yet few studies have looked at what makes these programs work for so many people. Some research has shown that step work plays a role in the effectiveness of AA and NA [5], while other research has found that having a sponsor is an important aspect of the model [6,7], while still others have found that coping style is an important and often missed aspect [8]. When looking at drug and alcohol diagnoses separately Witdbrodt & Kaskutas [9] found that only having a sponsor and doing service were consistent in their relationship to abstinence.

Sponsorship is seen as a critical part of the 12-step model and new members are encouraged to obtain a sponsor within the first 30 days of sobriety [10]. It is commonly assumed that sponsors will have worked through all of the 12-steps or that they will have been sober from drugs and alcohol for at least one year, but these requirements are not specified anywhere and it is unlikely that someone wishing to become a sponsor would be turned away. In the AA pamphlet Questions and Answers on Sponsorship, a sponsor is defined as “an alcoholic who has made some progress in the recovery program and who shares that experience on a continuous, individual basis with another alcoholic who is attempting to attain or maintain sobriety through AA” [11]. This definition leaves much open to interpretation and, unfortunately, research in this area is sparse.

According to the Alcoholics Anonymous membership survey, 81% of members have a sponsor and 72% get a sponsor within the first 90 days of abstinence [12]. Those who obtain sponsorship tend to be younger, unmarried, and hold spiritual beliefs when compared to those who do not [13]. Some research has found that while newly sober members of 12-step programs acquire a sponsor initially, the numbers decrease over the span of a year [2,6,14,15]. Regardless, early sponsorship, as well as having a sponsor at 1- and 3-year follow ups, has been found to be significantly associated with increased abstinence [16,17] and relapse was significantly more likely when the 12-step member did not have a sponsor or was in infrequent contact with sponsor [18]. Sponsorship provides an added benefit that is independent of meeting attendance frequency [7], or abstinence-based social networks [17], and is considered an invaluable part of treatment. Sponsorship has consistently been shown to be associated with increased rates of abstinence [6,7,19,20].

Further research is needed to examine the different types of relationships that a person has with his or her sponsor and the ways in which these relationships contribute to increased abstinence rates. Until this research is completed it will be...
difficult for researchers to understand what qualities of a sponsor are more effective than others and why some people maintain a long-term relationship with their sponsor while others do not.

References