



Common misunderstandings about AA and DV

Powerlessness – The big book states that alcoholics are powerless over alcohol. AA believes that true alcoholics cannot control the quantity or period of time that they drink once they've had the first drink. In addition, AA believes that sober alcoholics cannot keep themselves from having the first drink without the help of a power greater than them. This is not a metaphor or symbolic statement, it is a fact of life for people who have an abnormal reaction to alcohol and can't control their use.

Although it is often said at AA meetings, the Big Book does not say alcoholics are powerless over people, places and things. This statement is helpful for many AA members. The message they take from this saying is to focus on changing their own thinking and behavior rather than trying to change other people's thinking and behavior.

For most people this statement does not present a problem and they can take it or leave it with little thought. However, problems can arise for people who have experienced domestic violence:

- Batterers can use the former statement to minimize their responsibility for their assaults. (See "The 'I Was Drunk' Question")

Batterers can also use the former statement as a basis for rejecting the concepts of "power and control" taught in batterer intervention programs. The fact is that batterers exercise enormous control over their victims through intimidation, coercion and violence.
- Victims of batterers may interpret these messages as encouragement to stay in an abusive relationship and try to accept their circumstances.

Treatment providers should be aware of these potential problems and educate their clients before a problem arises.

The disease concept applies to battering – While AA expresses a belief in a disease model of alcoholism, it makes no attempt to apply this model to any other issue or problem. AA literature in no way makes any insinuation that battering is a disease.

Treatment providers should think carefully before making any attempt to apply the disease concept to anything other than chemical dependency and should warn their clients about this as well. They need to not only ask themselves if science supports it, but also if it might assist a batterer in avoiding accountability for his abuse.

AA and the 12 steps will sufficiently address my partner abuse – I just need to do a 4th step and then make amends – AA is clear that it offers a solution to alcoholism and does not suggest or imply that it is the solution to other problems. In fact, AA recovery requires that we take responsibility for all of our actions during our use. In addition, AA literature recommends taking advantage of professional help for other problems.

Treatment providers must be aware that, in their excitement about their newfound recovery, new members of AA often think that AA and the 12 steps are the answer to all of their emotional and behavioral problems (Unfortunately other AA members often support this belief). It must be pointed out to these treatment clients that while the 12 steps may be useful tools for addressing their abuse, they are not a sufficient intervention. Additionally, 12 step programs emphasis on assuming full personal responsibility for one's actions is consistent with taking a conservative approach and seeking professional help.