



# Recovery and Spiritual Change: Are They Related?

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## The Life Transitions Study

- What were we trying to find out and why
- How did we measure recovery and spiritual and religious change
- Collecting information and analyzing it
- Who did we talk to?
- Some major findings
- Caveats
- Acknowledgments

## Why might spiritual or religious (SR) change be important in recovery?

- Most people have a spiritual or religious life :
  - 93% believe in God.
  - Almost 90% believe God watches over them.
  - Only 14% have no religious preference (as of 1998).
  - Over 50% pray at least once a day.
  - Over 80% state they look to God for strength and work with God.
- Alcoholics Anonymous, an effective intervention, encourages connection with a higher power and the use of prayer and meditation and working on forgiveness, service, gratitude, and connection.
- Most individuals in recovery and many treatment professionals consider change in one's spirituality/religiousness to be important, if not crucial.
- Carl Jung's theory about alcoholism: *spiritus contra spiritum* or *spirits against spirit*.

## Is there any evidence?

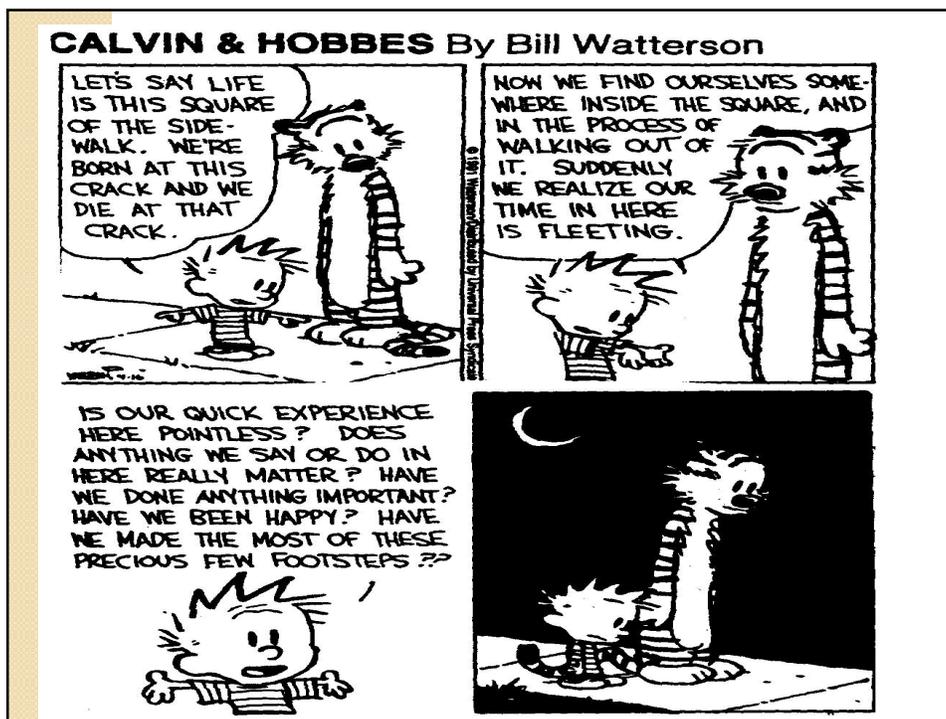
- Lower levels of alcohol & drug use among those with religious affiliation/participation.
- Some evidence that alcoholics and drug addicts are religiously/spiritually alienated.
- Significant evidence that Alcoholics Anonymous works.
- Anecdotal evidence that spiritual/religious change has been important in individuals' recovery.
  - The experience of Bill W., founder of Alcoholics Anonymous
  - Stories from the recovery community
  - *Quantum Change*
- Evidence that spiritual awakenings (or life-changing spiritual/religious experiences) play a role in recovery.
- Quantitative evidence of change in existential sense of meaning/ purpose in alcoholics from pre-treatment to post-treatment.

## Defining spirituality and religion

- *Spirituality*: an individual's feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a *search for the sacred* (i.e., a divine being, ultimate reality, transcendent truth, or existential meaning) *and for a connection* to those phenomena.
- *Religion*: the social context of that search and connection (i.e., social institutions, rituals and prescribed behaviors), usually tied to a particular cultural context.

## Primary SR Measures

- Perceptions of God: Loving & Controlling God Scales
- Beliefs & Behaviors: Religious Background & Behaviors
- Current spiritual/religious experiences: Daily Spiritual Experiences
- Values and beliefs: Meaning, Values & Beliefs
- Forgiveness: 3 scales -- Fetzer Forgiveness; Mauger's Behavioral Assessment System (Forgiveness of self & Forgiveness of Others)
- Religious coping strategies: Positive and Negative Religious Coping
- Existential meaning/purpose: Purpose in Life



## What is recovery?

A hot topic – no agreement, inclusion of abstinence varies.

“Recovery from alcohol and drug problems is a **process** of change through which an individual achieves **abstinence** and improved **health, wellness, and quality of life**” (CSAT, 2007, p. 5).

Hard to measure this.

CSAT, SAMHSA, 2007

## Assessing some dimensions of recovery

- Remission = no longer meeting DSM-IV criteria for alcohol dependence.
- Abstinence patterns at the final interview: (1) less than 30 days sober, (2) 30 days to a year sober, and (3) a year or more sober.
- Quality of life – social connections, mental and physical health, employment, housing, etc.

## Methodology – a longitudinal survey

- A longitudinal study of 364 alcoholic individuals.
- Every 6 months, we interviewed these same individuals about drinking, recovery efforts, health/mental health indicators, spirituality, religion and other dimensions of their lives.
- At final interview, 2 ½ to 3 years after baseline, 276 people (75.8%) remained in the study.

## Who was in the study?

- Respondents were recruited from:
  - Chelsea Arbor Treatment Center (CATC; n=157)
  - Ann Arbor VA outpatient clinic (VA; n=80)
  - A moderation-based program (Mod; n=34)
  - The local community through advertisements; these respondents were not in treatment at baseline (CS: n=93)
- Study recruitment criteria
  - Verified diagnosis of lifetime alcohol dependence
  - Use of alcohol in the last 90 days
  - Over 18 years of age
  - Not suicidal, homicidal, or psychotic
  - Literate in English
  - Those in treatment had to have 1 week of treatment, but less than 4 weeks.

## Who were these 364 people?

Gender, % male	65.7%	Prior alcohol tx?	52.7%
Age, years	44.0	Age at 1 <sup>st</sup> alcohol problems	25.8
Education, years	14.3	Family history of alcohol problems	86.5%
Marital status:		Alcohol problems (SIP) score	21.0
Never married	28.8%	Want to be abstinent?	72.0%
Married/cohab.	38.2%	Ever attend AA?	68.1%
Sep/Div/Wid	32.9%		
Ethnicity:			
White	81.9%		
Black	10.4%		
Other, incl multi	7.6%		
Not employed	44.0%		
Income			
<\$15,000/yr	29.5%		
>\$85,001	22.0%		

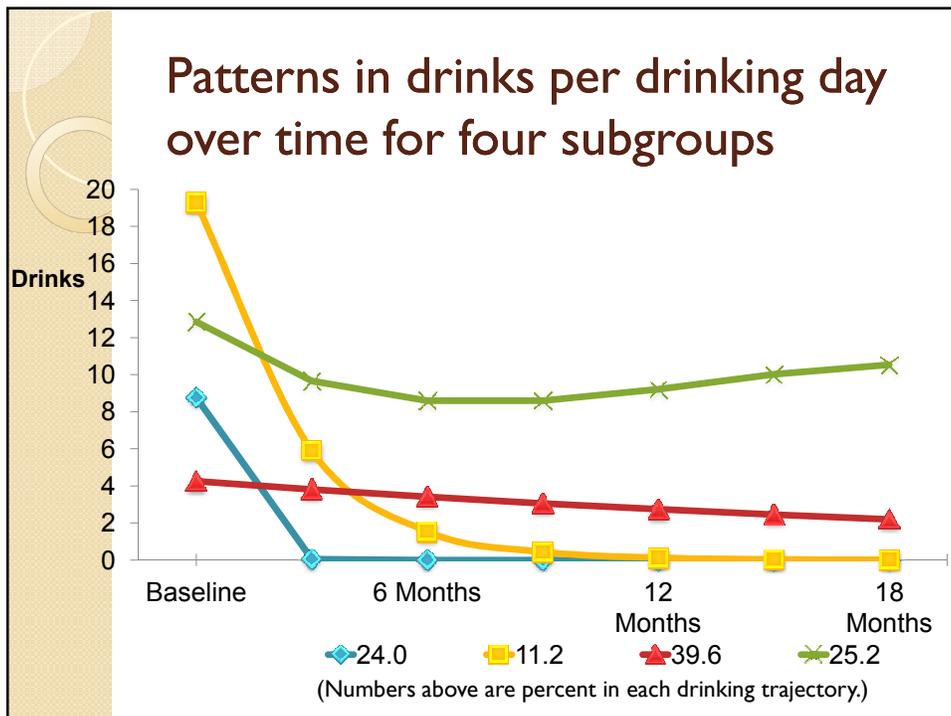
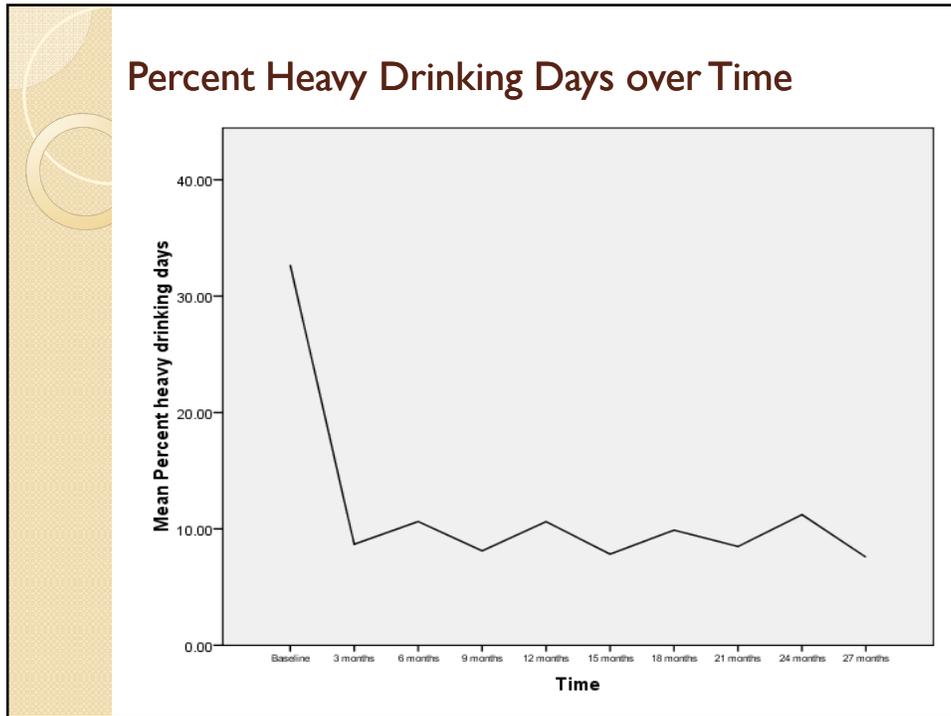
## Drinking in last 90 days at baseline from Time-Line Follow Back (Means & SD)

TLFB Variable	Total Sample	CATC	VA	Mod	CS
Percent days abstinent (PDA)	56.1%	59.8%	71.2%	35.5%	44.6%
Percent heavy drinking days (HDD)	32.7%	33.6%	24.2%	34.9%	37.6%
Drinks/drinking day (DDD)	9.5	9.3	12.6	4.6	9.2
Days since last drink (DSLDD)	25.4	33.3	40.7	6.9	5.7

Differences between sites are significant.

## Some findings from the study

- Changes in drinking
- Changes in spirituality and religiousness
- Changes in SR and subsequent drinking
- Perceptions of AA's helpfulness
- Life-changing spiritual or religious experiences
- Loss of faith and gender differences



## Some Baseline Spiritual/Religious (S/R) Characteristics

Believe in God	74%
Do not believe in God	8%
Agnostic; don't know/can't know	18%
% without a current religious preference*	35%
% brought up in a religious tradition	70%
% currently practice that religion	23%
% involved in a religious congregation	25%

\*In a 1998 national sample, only 14% of the US population had no religious preference.

## Rating one's religiousness and spirituality

1=Not at all; 4=Very

	LTS sample	GSS-1998 (national sample)	p
To what extent do you consider yourself religious?	2.26	2.65	.000
To what extent do you consider yourself spiritual?	3.01	2.72	.000

## What is the relationship between change in SR and subsequent drinking?

- Which SR dimensions change from baseline to 12 months?
- Does significant change in a SR dimension predict drinking at 15 months, controlling for AA involvement and how much people were drinking at baseline?

## Are there 12-month changes in spirituality and religiousness? Yes.

Measure	Baseline	12-month
Loving God	25.13	25.40
Controlling God	10.89	10.42
Belief scale	3.81	3.89
<b>Private Religious Practices</b>	<b>16.11</b>	<b>16.77</b>
<b>Daily Spiritual Experiences</b>	<b>54.29</b>	<b>56.64</b>
Meaning, Values, Beliefs	17.33	17.44
<b>Fetzer forgiveness</b>	<b>9.02</b>	<b>9.34</b>
<b>Mauger forgiveness of self</b>	<b>7.42</b>	<b>8.81</b>
<b>Mauger forgiveness of others</b>	<b>10.34</b>	<b>10.84</b>
Positive Religious Coping	23.07	23.58
<b>Negative Religious Coping</b>	<b>12.64</b>	<b>11.69</b>
<b>Purpose in Life</b>	<b>93.17</b>	<b>97.12</b>

## Drinking levels at 15 months are predicted by increases in these SR variables:

- Private Religious Practices
- Daily Spiritual Experiences
- Forgiveness of Self
  
- Purpose in Life (marginally significant)
  
- Not predictive: perceptions of God, beliefs, religious coping, forgiveness of others, meaning, values & beliefs.

Controlling for baseline drinking and AA involvement.

## Perceptions of AA's helpfulness: Research Questions

- What proportion of alcoholics in a mixed sample of treatment seekers and non-seekers perceive AA as helpful or unhelpful?
- Which respondents found AA helpful or not helpful?
- Do perception's of AA's helpfulness or unhelpfulness relate to drinking outcomes?
- What elements of AA are perceived to be helpful or not helpful in managing drinking problems?

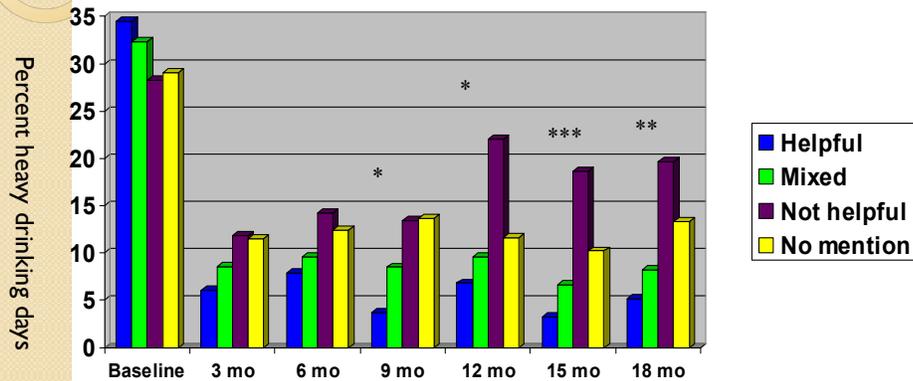
## AA-related responses to the question: “What do you think helps people with alcohol problems?”

- Of the 286 respondents interviewed at 18 months:
  - ◆ 20% made no mention of AA
  - ◆ 42% had found AA helpful to them
  - ◆ 18% gave mixed comments about AA’s helpfulness to them
  - ◆ 19% (55) had found AA unhelpful to them

## Who found AA helpful?

- Prior history of alcohol treatment
- Family history of alcohol problems
- High levels of alcohol-related problems
- More severe alcoholism
- Want to be abstinent
- Had attended AA before
- No differences by demographic variables

Those who did not find AA helpful, are more likely to be drinking heavily at 12, 15, and 18 months.



\*\*\* Significance:  $p < .001$

\*\* Significance:  $p < .01$

\* Significance:  $p < .05$

Note: Heavy drinking days for men  $\leq 5$  standard drinks, for women  $\leq 4$  standard drinks.

## What did people say is helpful about AA?

- The fellowship – sharing, talking, listening, having someone to talk to, being around others who've been there, sober people to be with.
- The program -- steps, meetings, sponsors, admitting the problem, Big Book.
- Other mentions -- spirituality, advice, guidance, "it helps you not to drink."

Based on 173 respondents' comments.

## What is not helpful?

- Can't relate to others in groups/meetings, don't like groups in general
- Looks too much at negative, too much complaining, too depressing
- Don't believe in God/Higher power; too religious
- Thought I could handle it on my own
- Dislike model, structure, language of AA
- Court-ordered people
- I'm not "that" bad, not like "those" people
- People talk too much about drinking
- People are hypocritical/phony
- Needed more than AA
- Vague: "waste of time"
- Other comments mentioned by 1-2 people: makes people want to drink, don't want to admit being out of control, people with non-alcohol issues, too male, too cult-like, dogmatic, never wanted to stop drinking, court ordered, looks too much at the past, stories are repetitive

Denominator = 107 people who found AA unhelpful to some degree

## Spiritual/religious events: Life-changing SR experiences and loss of faith

- At each time point, we asked respondents if they had ever had a life-changing spiritual or religious experience, a gain in faith, or a loss in faith.
- At baseline,
  - 47.4% had a life-changing SR experience (vs. a national sample in which 39.1% did so).
  - 41.8% reported having experienced a loss of faith (no national data).

## What are these life-changing SR experiences?

- Danger: “I should/could have died”
- Deliberate efforts to connect with God/Spirit/the Transcendent
- Other experiences, ranging from the mundane to going to AA, talking with someone, being in nature, creative work.
- Experiences were generally positive (at peace, consoled, felt a presence, connected, accepting, physical sensations)
- Some experiences were negative (scared, judged, alienated, questioned God, angry at God)

## Those who report at baseline that they have had a life-changing SR experience use less alcohol

Ever had a life-changing SR experience?	Percent Days Abstinent	Percent Heavy Drinking Days	Drinks/ Drinking Day	Days since last drink
Yes (n=172)	60.6%	27.6%	9.6	27.7
No (n=191)	51.9%	37.4%	9.5	23.3
Total	56.1%**	32.7%**	9.5	25.4

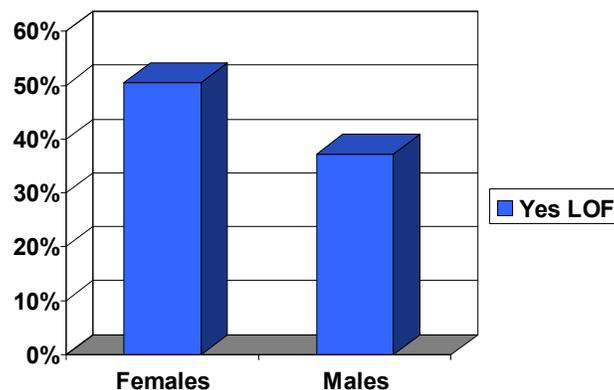
\*\* Indicates difference between “yes” and “no” is statistically significant at .01 level.

## What are LOF experiences?

- Disillusionment: gradual loss of involvement in faith/religion (27.6%)
- Alienation/Rejection from religious congregation, doctrine, priest, or God (11.8%)\*
- Death of family member or close friend (23.7%)
- Other negative events (ex. divorce, abuse, affairs, natural disasters, war, accidents, mental illness) (22.4%)\*
- Using alcohol or drugs (10.5%)
- Other or vague responses (3.9%)

\* significantly more common among women

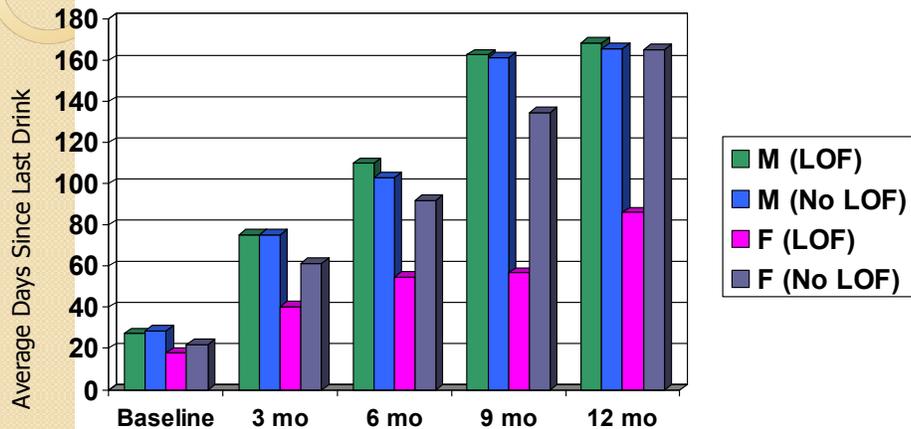
## Gender differences in baseline reports of Loss of Faith (LOF)



\* The difference between groups is significant ( $p < .05$ )

Price, Robinson, & Brower, 2009

## Days since last drink by gender and LOF, over the first 12 months



## Age of onset of alcoholism and age at LOF

- For men, no significant correlation between age of onset of alcoholism and age at LOF ( $r^2=.07$ , ns).
- For women, significant and strong correlation between age of onset and age of LOF ( $r^2=.54$ ,  $p<.001$ )
- Exploring the data more closely indicated that for women, the LOF occurred shortly before the onset of alcoholism; for men, LOF occurred after.

## What have we learned?

### Changes in alcoholics' spirituality and drinking outcomes

- Alcoholics may be religiously alienated, but don't necessarily appear to be spiritually alienated.
- Changes in three dimensions of spirituality are associated with subsequently less drinking: private SR practices, forgiveness of self, and daily experiences of spirituality. Increases in purpose/meaning in life may also contribute to less drinking.

## AA's helpfulness

- AA is perceived as helpful to some degree by 60% of the sample.
- Those who find it helpful were more likely to have experience with prior recovery efforts and to want to be abstinent.
- Perceiving AA as helpful is associated with better drinking outcomes.

## Life-changing SR experiences and Loss of Faith

- Life-changing SR experiences appear to be more common in alcoholics than in the general population.
- Women alcoholics are much more likely to report having had a loss of faith than are men.
- Those women who experienced a loss of faith struggle harder in recovery than women without a loss of faith or men.

## Caveats (warning)

- This is only one study, only one particular sample of alcoholics.
- We don't know if these findings would generalize to all alcoholics or to addicts or to non-midwestern/80% white samples.
- What would we find among alcoholics who don't think they have a problem?

## Acknowledgements

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