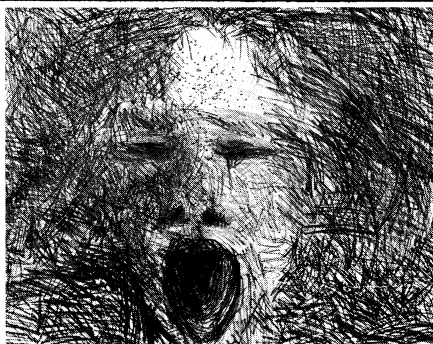


Self-Help Groups for Alcoholic Women – An Interview with Nancy Poole



Dianna S. Bain Bracker

Essais d'aide personnelle pour groupes de femmes alcooliques

Nancy Poole discute des facteurs contribuant à l'alcoolisme chez la femme, du besoin de meilleures conditions de traitement et du rôle que devraient jouer les féministes pour aider ces victimes "invisibles" du sexisme.

Is alcoholism in women on the increase or is it just reported more often?

When I first came into this field I read that there had been only twenty-seven studies done in the English language on alcoholism in women. This is pretty incredible considering the high incidence of alcoholism in women and the health hazards involved. Very clearly, I think alcoholism in women *is* on the increase, amongst teenage women as well, and that we're hearing about the problem more often because concerned women are beginning to throw some light on the subject. It has been a subject the world has not wanted to look at. It is too threatening to think of women (who are seen as important social and moral symbols which are the bedrock of society) as the abusers of alcohol. For this reason there has been a real reluctance to look at the women's issues associated with women's use of alcohol. Fortunately, the Women's Movement has forced some attention on the factors contributing to alcohol abuse by women, and it has encouraged women to speak up instead of being secretive about their problems.

Is there an 'in the closet' attitude in women alcoholics?

Definitely. If society does not want it looked at, attitudes are set up which make it difficult to acknowledge you have a problem with alcohol. There is a special stigma attached to women alcoholics. For a man it is different. He has got to have his beer. The whole macho thing makes alcohol use and abuse more acceptable with men. The same tradition of social attitudes dictates that women who drink too much are not 'nice'. They are prostitutes; they are bad mothers. A whole set of moral attitudes colours the problem of women alcoholics.

Do women tend to drink in isolation more than men?

Very much so. The statistics so far have shown that right across the board isolation has been one of the key factors associated with women's use of alcohol and, as well, governing their pattern of drinking. The two are interconnected. I'm not sure that this is going to remain the case. There are more women in bars now than there were before. The original pattern showed that women began drinking at a later

age than men — in their thirties and forties — and the process of alcoholism developed more quickly for them. They came for treatment at about the same age, but they started drinking later. I think this is something that is definitely changing.

The point is that if I wanted to get drunk, I don't think I would do it in a bar. You are much safer as a woman if you are in the house.

That's right. Actually some women alcoholics talk about that. They actually plan it. I have heard women talk about it in a way that men never do.

You think about 'rubbies' getting rolled and women getting raped after leaving a bar but you don't think about three-piece-suiters getting rolled after a heavy bout of drinking.

It is interesting to look at the whole concept of 'rubbies'. Skid row alcoholics comprise less than ten percent of the alcoholic population. Yet we have always considered them to represent the reality of alcoholism. It allows us to say, 'Yes, we do have alcoholics but they are those people over there.' It serves to divert us from examining our own use and abuse of alcohol.

It is also interesting that our research shows that even women on skid row tend to drink in isolation. The men get together and there is a camaraderie. This pattern may be part of women's conditioning not to trust each other.

You just don't see old women sitting in groups with a bottle on a bench in Allen Gardens. You just don't see it.

At downtown women's hostels we see a few women like that. However, the group we have overlooked is the middle class housewives. They are the ones who are cross-addicted to alcohol and tranquillizers like Valium. Their addiction often occurs because their doctors said, 'I will give you something that will get you off alcohol,' and gave them Valium.

Can we talk about the process of starting self help groups — how they started and who began them?

I was hired to do educational work around women and addiction. The most obvious lack when I began my work was treatment for women. Alcoholism has traditionally been considered a man's problem. The estimates until very recently were that there were ten men for every woman alcoholic. There was a myth that there were no women alcoholics so treatment specific to their needs wasn't necessary. Starting self help groups for women seemed desirable. They would avoid the difficulties of trying to find funding for another women's service. Furthermore, in self help groups lies the important principle of women getting together and helping

each other. The issues that are looked at in these groups are the very basic ones of women's experience — their lack of self-esteem, their guilt feelings and sense of inadequacy.

In my research I ran into a programme that had been designed by a woman alcoholic in the States — Jean Kirkpatrick — who has written a book called, *Turnabout: Help for a New Life Style*. She founded the Women for Sobriety organization. Using the Women for Sobriety programme, we have started five self help groups for women in the Toronto area.

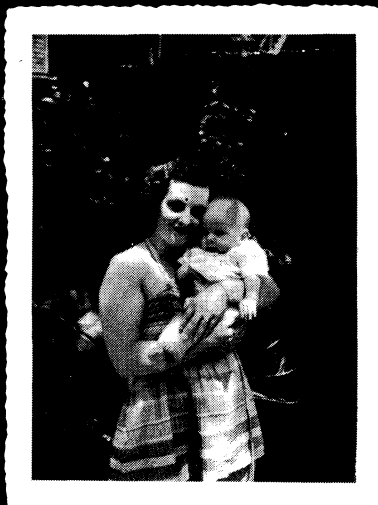
It must be a major leap for a woman alcoholic who is isolated to come out to a group. Is the treatment that Alcoholics

Anonymous (AA) offers her something that you have to get past before the self help programme can succeed?

AA and WFS are both self help options. They have different programmes and structures.

AA's greatest strength, I think is its accessibility. It has many groups and because it's been around for forty-three years, has the credibility of having helped people all those years. One of the difficulties for women with AA is the central role of the higher power in the programme — the notion of turning your problems over to HIM. I think this reinforces women's sense of powerlessness. The WFS programme looks at

'nice ladies
don't drink'



'nothing worse than a drunk woman'

women as capable individuals, able to take an active stance vis à vis their problems. It has a more positive basis.

The two programmes also place a different emphasis on the past. WFS sees the past as gone forever, and tries to alleviate the guilt women feel about the past. AA stresses the past more; members make testimonials about their drinking history. Many women don't have great drinking stories — all they can say is 'I drank at home.' Many women also have trouble standing up and speaking in a mixed group.

The format of WFS groups is more informal. The groups, which meet once a week, are moderated by a woman alcoholic with two years sobriety. The group discusses the principles of the programme or topics such as depression, each woman reflecting on the topic and bringing her own experience to it.

What cause alcoholism?

As with many of our major health problems, no one knows. I personally think it is a multi-determined health problem — a number of economic, social, psychological and emotional processes are involved. Research indicates that women are more able than men to identify specific precipitating stresses which led to the onset of heavy drinking. You can guess what those stresses are. They relate to the mothering/wife role — separation, divorce, widowhood, the death of a child, the children leaving home, and so on. It has been estimated that nine out of ten men leave alcoholic wives, but one woman in ten leaves an alcoholic husband. Separation seems closely associated with women's alcoholism.

The other interesting statistic is that many women alcoholics have fathers, brothers or husbands with drinking problems. It is difficult to stop drinking in an environment where there are other heavy drinkers. Our society has accepted heavy drinking in men. The three martini lunch is OK; three beers after work are OK. (Three martinis when the kids return home from school, of course, is not OK). Men are more likely to slip into alcoholism from the heavy drinking which is part of their conditioning. Women are less likely to slip into it gradually and tend to begin drinking heavily when a crisis occurs.

Is there any pattern to what women drink?

None at all. The myths that wine is more ladylike and that women tend to get drunk on wine are unfounded. Women alcoholics drink everything. It is interesting that one shot of liquor, one glass of beer and one glass of wine all contain approximately the same alcohol content.

Do women tend to become violent when they are drunk? Wife abuse and child abuse run in tandem with male alcoholism. Do women also become more abusive?

Alcohol has a disinhibiting effect. If you have been an angry person and you have been suppressing anger, then that behaviour is going to show up when you drink. Some women alcoholics abuse their kids.

What about self-directed violence?

It is much higher among women alcoholics than women in general. Women alcoholics have more frequent 'home accidents'.

How do women who come to self help find you? Are they referred or do they seek you out?

Both. I speak to women's services, health services and agencies, so that staff may make referrals. Most often, women come to the groups on their own initiative. They have come to a crisis where they finally acknowledge they must have help. They then phone up a service and ask where they can get help.

As a woman is cured does she drop out of the group?

One is never 'cured' of alcoholism. As a woman becomes secure in her sobriety, she may decide to leave the group. It would be great to see her begin another group.

I don't know if you can talk about the treatment. The hows. But what is the greatest need in the treatment of women alcoholics right now?

First, we must start providing responsible day care for women alcoholics, otherwise women have to choose between getting treatment and looking after their children. It is an appalling choice to lay on them. Built into effective daycare should be a programme for the children which is educative about alcoholism and which addresses their need for healthy relationships. Such a programme gives women space to look at their own needs and can also teach them about effective parenting.

In any form of treatment for women we need women counsellors who share a feminist perspective on women's emotional distress. The focus in traditional alcoholic services has been on getting these women 'dry' and getting them back into the family. That is not the only way to go! Women have to be introduced to real vocational choices and alternative lifestyles. In other words, we must address the conditions in women's lives which affect their drinking.

Given our total population, how many women's centres for alcoholics are needed?

Estimates are that one in twelve people becomes an alcoholic. Therefore we need *many* more services addressing the needs of women alcoholics: day treatment, residential treatment, self help groups and one-to-one counselling. There is only one treatment centre specifically for women in Ontario — the Amethyst Women's Addiction Centre which has just opened in Ottawa.

We need to reassess and change many of our patterns of behaviour if we're going to reduce our overall tendencies to rely on alcohol.

What kind of re-educating are you involved in? Do you go into colleges and schools?

I have an excellent educational tool, *Women and Addictions: A Resource Kit** being used in colleges, health and social services and women's services and groups. It was produced by a group of women called the Caucus on Women and Alcohol and Drugs. The Kit provides factual information and deals with the issues surrounding women's use of alcohol and minor tranquilizers.

I would very much like to see more discussion of this problem as a women's health issue in colleges, health services and in the feminist community at large. I think the feminist community is prone to viewing and using alcohol in traditional ways. I would like to see women examining our alcohol use and to consider how it blocks the creative energy which we could be using more productively. It's important that we address our personal attitudes toward women alcoholics. We must include their needs for acceptance and treatment in our growing demands for social change. Alcoholism and drug addiction in women are intrinsically related to the socialization process and emotional pressures connected with traditional gender roles. Women alcoholics and women addicted to minor drugs are part of the feminist cause. They must not be forgotten in our struggles to end the victimization of women by patriarchy.

***This kit is available from:**

Health Promotion Directorate
102 Bloor St. W.
Suite 1004
Toronto, Ont.
phone 416-966-6483