

Hugs Not Drugs

It started when Jimmy K and a few fellow addicts held the first meeting in LA in 1953. 50 years on, 30,000 weekly meetings in 106 countries, prove the power of mutual support.

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'The newcomer is always the most important person in the room.'

'I was a typical middle-class junkie,' a 38-year-old called John L says. 'Nice family, public school, good at presenting a mask to the world.' He started with cannabis and glue, and got into coke when he was 22. His job took him to clubs a lot, so scoring was easy.

As a child, John felt on the outside of things. At school he had a sense of low self-worth, a feeling that continued into his twenties. But he had a good job with some glamour and believed himself to be one of those people who functioned well on cocaine. 'The one thing an addict never wants is anyone getting between them and their drugs,' he explains. 'So if anyone would ever suggest that I was maybe using too much I'd blank them out and try not to see them. If any old friends cleaned up I would cut them from my life because I was terrified of them.'

He hung on to his job throughout the 80s. 'I was doing enough coke to make me feel extremely paranoid and go on some massive downs. I used to use all night, felt terrible waking up in the afternoon, think about suicide briefly or calling an ambulance, but then I had a can of lager and I'd start feeling a bit better and think: "Ah well, I'll just see if one of my dealers is in..."' John had heard that addiction was often talked of as an illness of insanity and a good definition of insanity is repeating the same mistakes but expecting different results.

His life collapsed in his mid-thirties. He was fired from his job and felt he was going nowhere. The drugs had become the only constant. He attended a residential treatment centre, believing he'd be out in three weeks. It took three months. 'I came out probably just as gibbering as when I went in, but the great difference was that I knew I was an addict, and that if I wanted to stay clean I had to get to a meeting and not stop going to meetings.'

The meetings to which he refers are those of Narcotics Anonymous, an organisation 50 years old this month. Meetings occur each day throughout the world - there are about 500 a week in the UK. Occasionally, Naomi Campbell or a famous actor will turn up and be caught on camera, and NA will be in the news for a day or two - something it doesn't enjoy. As its name suggests, it prefers obscurity and doesn't promote its meeting in schools and church halls, nor its proven method of recovery from all forms of chemical addiction. It calls itself a fellowship and it is a unique and seemingly indestructible one. There is no

leadership hierarchy, no restrictions on membership with regard to class, religion, age or sexual preferences, no membership fee and no political allegiance or direction. Accordingly, it is a place of great possibilities and it offers what no professional treatment regime or detox centre can - the principle of one addict helping another.

Narcotics Anonymous grew out of Alcoholics Anonymous, drug users believing that their experiences required a more specialised, tailored environment. The central tenet of NA was also adapted from AA - the 12-step self-help programme. This schedule, to be conducted at the addict's own pace over a period of several months and often years, defined the road to spiritual recovery. No addict could ever consider themselves cured by the steps, for it has always been a core belief of the fellowship that one remains an addict throughout life. But the steps show a path for improvement. They are composed in the past tense, emphasising a sense of history and proportion, and suggesting that many addicts have already used the programme successfully. Step One: 'We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.' Step Two: 'We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.' Step Four: 'We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.' Step Eight: 'We made a list of all the persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.' Step 12: 'Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts, and to practise these principles in all our affairs.'

In most cases, the 12 steps are a culmination of a greater struggle, the attempt to achieve what the old-timers in NA call '90 in 90' - attending a meeting every day for three months while remaining drug-free. A gargantuan task and newcomers are encouraged to take it slowly or, in the 60s parlance of much of NA's literature, 'give yourself a break'. If you can stay drug free ('stay clean') for 20 minutes, then you can make it to an hour, then maybe three hours, then a day and another meeting. Initially, the meetings provide the focus for each day's struggle - locating the nearest one, travelling to it, feeling a sense of achievement after it - and consistently they offer the sole purpose of an addict's life. Above all, they suggest that no one should suffer alone.

'One of the easy criticisms is that we're just swapping one addiction for another and now we're addicted to meetings,' John L told me. 'My answer is that I know which addiction I'd prefer. I'm not going to cause any damage to people at meetings and meetings are a lot cheaper.' He has been clean for 13 years. When he put his drugs down, he says, he was left with a gaping hole in his life and NA replaced the drugs with spirituality. It also provided a great social life. 'That was never its intention,' he says. 'But when you first go you realise that you do have to make a whole new set of friends.

I wasn't going to be with my old user friends, because they say that if you hang around the barber shop long enough you're going to get a haircut.'

At every NA meeting a poster listing the 12 steps is displayed on a wall, usually near another poster displaying the 12 traditions, the closest the fellowship has to a constitution. These have provided a sense of continuity over the years, and have ensured a degree of autonomy from external pressures and internal spats. The traditions state that NA should not endorse or finance any outside enterprise and

should be self-supporting, declining contributions from anyone who isn't a member. And they emphasise the importance of anonymity when dealing with the media, 'ever reminding us to place principles before personalities'.

'When I first came to a meeting I thought they were all a bunch of nutters,' a man called Andy told me. 'But I was intrigued about them being clean, because I hadn't met any clean addicts and they were talking about their feelings. My previous experience of addiction was loneliness, isolation and fear.'

Andy started going to meetings on 1 March 1984, by which time NA was in its fifth British year (like most recovering addicts, he remembers the date as if it was a birthday). His first meeting was in a Portakabin near a treatment centre in Primrose Hill and he remembers feeling jealous. 'There were all these addicts who were laughing and joking and I wanted what they had. By that stage I had tried weird religions and yoga and meditation, and I had done the traditional clinic detox and nothing had worked. I remember at one meeting there was this guy who turned up from Manchester who was six years clean and we just fell at his feet. He had begun his clean-up at AA meetings. At that time there was no one in London who was six years clean.'

When Andy began speaking at the meetings, his story was not unfamiliar to those present. 'I've met loads of addicts who come from very happy, functional families, but I wasn't one of those,' he told me. 'My dad committed suicide when I was one, and by the age of 10 or 11 I was already smoking and drinking. I'd been to see a child psychiatrist. I had a lot of problems at school and was bullied. So when that first drug hit, I was ready for it.'

His brother, four years older, became a heroin addict and Andy took everything else - glue, amyl nitrite, dope, speed, coke, booze. Not long before his 17th birthday he checked into a psychiatric unit, where he had very bad panic attacks and dealt with a prolonged mental breakdown. He was back on drugs as soon as they let him out.

His brother cleaned up first, and introduced him to NA. 'I was there at the moment it exploded,' he says, recalling new meetings all over London and university towns. The first weeks were hellish, but things did improve. 'After about two months we used to go clubbing every Friday. We were the weirdest group of clubbers out there - the only ones not using or drinking. All your feelings come back at that stage, all your emotions of rage and love and lust, so we were all as horny as hell, but too nervous to chat anyone up. It was like a very delayed adolescence.'

Andy told me he has enjoyed huge changes in his life - marriage, two children, a house and job - but also grief. In the early 90s his brother and his brother's wife died of HIV. 'For me it's about helping other people now, because when I was taking drugs my whole existence was about taking everyone for everything I could get and ripping them off. The primary purpose is to carry the message to the addict who is still suffering, because the newcomer is always the most important person in the room.'

The room just off the King's Road in Chelsea is a school hall, adorned with the usual paintings of flowers and butterflies. On a Monday at the end of June, 45 people have assembled at 6.15pm to hear a man called Dick say, with a marked weariness in his voice, 'My name is Dick and I'm an addict.'

Dick, performing his last weekly duties after a year as chairman, is at a small table at the front of the room seated next to a guest speaker. Behind him hang curling posters of the 12 steps and 12 traditions. To his left is a table serving tea and water and to his right another with NA literature, including a yellow leaflet titled 'Am I An Addict?' This contains a tick-box questionnaire: 'Do you ever use alone? Has using affected your sexual relationship? Do you put the purchase of drugs ahead of your financial responsibilities?' Ahead of Dick and his guest is a display of keyrings in bright colours.

Everybody in the room - which is roughly two-thirds male and has an average age of perhaps 35 - says, 'Hi Dick!' in unison. Dick explains that the meeting will be an hour long and anyone displaying abusive or threatening behaviour will be asked to leave. He then turns to a woman in front of him and says, 'Annie, what is NA?'

'NA is a non-profit fellowship or society of men and women for whom drugs had become a major problem.' Annie reads from a stained sheet of plastic-coated paper that Dick had given her a few minutes before. She reads for a minute more, explaining that the meetings are for everyone and can help you stay clean. 'We are not interested in what or how much you used or who your connections were.' Then there are more readings, all taken from the Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text, a 290-page manual now in its fifth edition and 48th printing. The readings answer such questions as: 'Why are we here?' and 'Who is an addict?' 'Most of us do not have to think twice about this question,' another reader answers. 'We are people in the grip of a continuing and progressive illness whose ends are always the same: jails, institutions and death.'

Then everyone in the room introduces themselves, many stating their clean-time. I'm Peter and I'm an addict, four years, three months. Hi Peter! I'm Carol and I'm an addict, 45 days. Hi Carol! I'm Joel and I'm an addict, six days. When this is over, it is time for the guest speaker. Three weeks before, the recovering wife of a famous rock star had taken this spot, which in the run of these meetings is neither here nor there. What matters is inspiration, an ability to convince those having a terrible time in the room that there are better days ahead. A man called Carl, who looks like a rugby player, does this with conviction and humility, and he tells a traditional tale of the joys of early usage and the degradation that followed. He emphasises the importance of helping other addicts with less faith in recovery. He uses a phrase that has become an NA mantra: 'You only keep what you have by giving it away.'

When he finishes, the meeting is opened to those with clean-time of less than a year. There is no shortage of speakers, some of them sweating, some confident, some mumbling. They are mostly having a very bad time. One man who has been drug-free for a month speaks of how unmanageable everything became last week when his girlfriend had an abortion; he was desperate for a drink, he says, but that would have led to other things (abstaining from alcohol is a cornerstone of NA recovery). A man in his twenties says he arrived from a treatment centre in South Africa a few days ago and is finding it almost impossible not to buy again. A woman who has been clean for two months says she recently received a mobile phone call from a dealer unaware of her recovery. 'I found it impossible to delete his name from my callers' list. I had to have a friend do it. Subconsciously I was

thinking maybe I'll need him.'

After 20 minutes, those with more clean-time begin to speak and the mood changes. Their voices are louder and their emotions are less raw. Their contributions contain some neat phrases. One person speaks of his desire to 'keep to the middle of the bed, not the edge where I might fall off'.

I am sitting next to a man called Peter who tells an alarming and comical tale of getting clean in Esher, Surrey, nine years ago. He started smoking crack cocaine in northeast Scotland in the 80s when he worked in the booming fishing industry. 'I got caught sneaking into port with non-quota fish. So I sold my boat when I was 35 and the drugs took over. I squandered everything I had - a five-bedroom house, sports car...' The turning point came when the drug squad pulled up the floorboards of his mother's house.

'I knew a guy who had run a small airline in Aberdeen who also took a lot of cocaine. I'd bought drugs off him before and he now lived in Surrey.

I called him at about five in the morning one day, completely off my head and knowing that he was usually the same. He said, "Please don't phone me again at this time, as I'm getting clean," and he told me about NA, which I'd never heard of before.' Peter went down to Surrey to see this guy. 'After years of cocaine he was going crazy. He had shaved off his eyebrows and was wearing big furry slippers outside and he thought he was the Messiah.'

After several weeks in meetings, Peter began doing 'service', which initially involves making tea or stacking chairs and leads on to becoming a greeter of newcomers and perhaps treasurer or secretary. Service is an essential part of recovery and often takes the form of 'sponsoring' a new member by becoming their advisor, usually on the end of a phone at desperate times. Those with a lot of clean-time often have several sponsees, and are in much demand.

At the end of the hour, Dick holds elections for a secretary for the coming year and initiates a collection to pay for the hire of the room. He then announces for the last time that 'at NA we celebrate clean-time with claps and hugs', and Carl begins handing out keyrings amid much applause. 'Anyone here been clean for a day?' he asks. A young woman walks up to collect a white keyring. She clasps it in her hand; I have never seen anyone hold anything so small with such relief.

'Thirty days?' Carl asks. Someone else collects an orange one, a plastic pear-shaped fob with a rope design on the edges and on the back the phrase 'Clean and serene for 30 days'. 'Sixty days?' Green. 'Ninety days?' Red. Six months is blue and a year is moonglow.

At the end, everyone gets up to stand in a huge circle and hold hands as if it is time for Auld Lang Syne. They say: 'God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.' And then the meeting is over, and there is a choice of where to gather tomorrow: Kilburn, Soho, Bethnal Green, Highbury, Waterloo, Tottenham, Crouch End, Earl's Court, Hampstead, Willesden, Stockwell or Twickenham. Or there is Bristol, Slough, Amersham, Camborne, Carlisle, Plymouth, Bournemouth, Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Sheffield, Bangor, Sunderland, Norwich, Brighton, Bury-St-Edmonds and several others. In San Diego, 25,000 people who really should be dead by now gathered along the bay earlier this month to acknowledge the fact that drug addicts do recover.

This was Narcotics Anonymous's 30th world convention and 50th birthday celebration, a four-day extravaganza of concerts by KC and the Sunshine Band and BB King, trips to Sea World and San Diego Zoo, midnight cruises and comedy shows, workshops and exhibitions.

The scale of the event was best witnessed at the Merchandise Ballroom, a hangar in the convention centre that on Friday morning opened for business with 25 different NA product lines and by Saturday lunchtime had only 10 left. You could buy five different NA mugs and a pair of espresso coffee cups, three types of notebook, a vast array of T-shirts, fleeces, leather jackets and fridge magnets, all with various logos and slogans, the most common of which was: 'A simple way has been proving itself'. The queues to enter were so long that people were given colour-coded wristbands in the atrium with a dedicated shopping time and encouraged to come back at their allotted hour.

While waiting you could browse the glass cases containing NA souvenirs from all over the world, including clean-time key rings from Israel, Korea, India, Japan and Peru. 'We're all trinket junkies,' a man called Ron told me, explaining that one of the earliest NA books now changes hands for \$1,500. Ron, a computer technician who had been drug-free for 24 years, was a volunteer on the World Service board responsible for co-ordinating relations between the international fellowships. He told me of his drugs days in Fargo, North Dakota, and took me through a timeline of NA's development. The early star of the show was Jimmy K, who, with five friends, established the first meeting in Sun Valley, a suburb of LA, in July 1953. Growth was slow, and many drug users feared the meetings were a police stakeout. In 1959 the fellowship almost died after some members relapsed and others disagreed over policy - the 12 traditions were established not long after. The organisation gradually took a foothold: in 1979 there were fewer than 200 groups in three countries; in 1993, 60 countries had more than 13,000 groups; today, 106 countries have 20,000 registered groups holding about 30,000 weekly meetings, many of them in hospitals and institutions.

It is quite impossible to sum up the sort of people attending the San Diego convention, other than to say that every wash of human life was there. Parents brought very young children. Sixteen-year-old girls brought themselves. Elderly people had all sorts of walking supports. A survey conducted at the last convention in Atlanta produced a reliable demographic of its members: 55 per cent were male; 49 per cent were white and 39 per cent African American; 75 per cent were in full-time employment; the mean average of clean-time was 7.2 years; 11 per cent were aged 21-30, 32 per cent were 31-40 and 41 per cent were 41-50. Asked to name their drug of choice, 26 per cent of respondents chose crack cocaine, 21 per cent cocaine, 20 per cent opiates such as heroin, 10 per cent cannabis, 10 per cent hallucinogens and the rest barbiturates (many, of course, used more than one substance). The survey was repeated this year and asked whether members also attended any other meetings. Overeaters Anonymous? Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous? Al-Anon or Nar-Anon (for families and friends)? Emotions Anonymous?

Ron told me that after 50 years there were still discussions about the appropriateness of the name. 'The problem is,' he said, 'an alcoholic is a person, but a narcotic is not a person.' Technically, a narcotic is a drug that induces

sleepiness, but at NA the name now means far too much to too many people to ever be changed.

Aside from the big concerts and outings, the main business of the convention took place in bland meeting rooms. Groups discussed 'Intimacy in Recovery', 'The Lost Art of the 12th Step Call' and 'The Basic Text - Are We Ready For a Sixth Edition?' There were specific meetings on how best to tackle each step. Relief from these could be found in the form of Rocky Recovery and the Self-Obsessions, a burlesque blues show from a 12-piece all-addict British band. The band played in a room at the Marriott Hotel and after the show the audience was encouraged to sign a large white sheet from Her Majesty's Prison, Coldingley, Surrey. 'Recovery is happening at our unit,' it read, and people supported this with personal messages. 'Hugs not drugs... Love across the sea... Love yourself... It works if you work it.'

Most people agreed that the highlights occurred at the keynote meetings held in the evenings in a vast hall that had most recently been host to shoe and chair salesmen. Unlike the smaller gatherings, these had a stage design, big screens and impressive sound systems. It was like attending a rock concert and there were huge cheers when the lights dimmed and the host for the event said, in studied actorly tones, 'I'm Michael and I... am... an... addict!'

Talking to British NA members who had attended these kind of things before, I had been told to prepare myself for much whooping and hollering, and I was not disappointed. It was impossible for someone on stage to break wind without receiving rapturous acclaim. But I was also deeply moved by the tales of courage and devotion that had brought people here. At its heart, the convention was a celebration of reclaimed lives. One meeting featured Ahmed Al H from Kuwait, Brut K from Japan, Fernando S from Costa Rica, Nors M from Singapore and Yunia B from Switzerland. Monica A from Norway spoke of being 12-stepped in Ibiza by two people who told her later that they thought she was too far gone to recover. 'After that I decided to go back to Norway and clean up my country. Hardly anybody came to the first meetings. I was sharing my experience with this one guy and he fell asleep and I was so offended. But I was a member of NA even if I was alone and it meant everything to me.'

Ahmed Al H, who fancied himself something of an entertainer, said that at first he thought NA was a programme that only worked for Americans. But he set up a group in Bahrain with another man. 'We hated each other. I mean badly. We fight in NA, we swear, we do lots of bad things that I am ashamed even to share with you now, but my God when I see this guy coming into the meeting when I'm sitting there alone, I feel so good.' He then established meetings in Saudi Arabia and translated some of the literature. 'It booms,' Ahmed Al H said.

Outside the main hall, a man garlanded in hibiscus handed out bags with details of the next world convention in Honolulu in September 2005 and people took the information with great resolve.

'Do you know about the 13th step?' a woman known as Mary P asks me back in London. 'That's the one where you sleep with a newcomer.'

Mary P is an old hand at Narcotics Anonymous, having first attended a meeting at Chelsea in 1981 and setting up what she thinks was only the third NA meeting in the country, in Weston-Super-Mare, later the same year. 'We went on a

recruiting drive and opened meetings everywhere, but we were fairly clueless,' she says. 'Reliant on scraps of information from America. There wasn't a great deal of experience, strength and hope.'

Her addiction was another case of middle-class anomie and boredom. She came from Hertfordshire; she doubts whether her parents had ever seen a joint. She was a model for a while before her liking for alcohol at Bristol University ruined her figure. At the time of punk she entered 'the golden triangle' of three pubs at the end of the King's Road, and snorted her first heroin in the toilet of the Fulham Road cinema. 'It was like, "Why didn't someone tell me before?" I thought I'd discovered the meaning of life. I just felt like I'd always wanted to feel. Then I got an ex-boyfriend to teach me how to fix. Shooting up was obviously the best way to take it. But I was a very bad junkie - my arms were a battlefield.' She stole from her family, who fixed her up with expensive clinics. Her father offered to buy her a bottle of champagne every day if she'd stop sticking needles into herself. When a friend first mentioned NA she said she'd like to go, but she had already arranged to score.

But she did go, eventually, and her clean-time lasted five years. She relapsed after a nervous breakdown brought on by her job and other pressures and used again for another four. 'I thought I couldn't possibly go back to NA after my relapse - just too ashamed,' she said. 'But of course that wasn't an issue.' The difference between the first time and the second was that the second time she worked the 12 steps, and she believes you have to go through them to understand yourself. She has now been drug-free for 13 years. 'NA is not for everyone,' she says. 'It doesn't have a monopoly on recovery. And I don't like everyone who goes to the meetings. But I wouldn't be here without it and nor would many of my friends.' I ask her what she would change about the fellowship and without pausing she says that there is nothing at all.

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