



The voluntary nature of 12 Step groups has changed.

When the 12 Steps were originated the program was designed to be a *voluntary* program based on the key principle of alcoholics helping other alcoholics, (and addicts helping other addicts).

Somewhere along the way, the legal system got wind of the great things being done in the 12 Step community (for free nonetheless!) and they wanted piece of the action. 12 Step group involvement over time became a legal requirement for many drug and alcohol related legal offenders. This served as the origin of the concept of *mandatory* 12 Step attendance. Mandatory 12 Step group attendance initially was an excellent idea in theory and in practice as mandated 12 Step attendance has personally helped countless individuals to recover from addiction. At the same time, however, the increased number of mandated individuals in 12 Step groups has changed the actual dynamics of the groups themselves. Anyone who has been to an AA meeting in the past decade has personally witnessed the presence of “card signers” at many meetings. Card signers are those men and women who sit in the back of the meeting, often disinterested in appearance, simply waiting for the meeting to end so that they can get a proof of attendance card signed by someone in the group for their probation or parole officer or other legal entity. Card signers attend 12 Step meetings for one purpose only and that is to fulfill a legal requirement rather than attending meetings for voluntary self-improvement or support.

It is easy to imagine the negative effects that an increase in mandated clients in 12 Step groups has had in the program. For example, the concept of anonymity is compromised by mandated clients. There is no enforcement for anonymity in 12 Step groups, but rather it is implied as one of the accepted rules of the program. Anonymity is positively reinforced by the benefits received through open sharing among group members whose comfort and trust level is increased by the presence of others sharing their similar stories of strength and hope. Consider what a mandated person, or worse yet a group of mandated persons can do to hurt to that dynamic. Mandated 12 Step group attendees often may be present to listen but not to share as they may lack the same commitment to the program as the voluntary members. The dynamic created often is that there are people listening to others but themselves not giving back to the program through personal sharing. This can foster a lack of trust in the program which has in itself adversely affected many people’s view of 12 Step groups.

In any group program, 12 Step or otherwise, there is always a risk that there are some people attending for the wrong motive. The overall increased presence of mandated individuals in 12 Step groups can increase that risk. Mandated individuals who are not themselves invested in the good of the group are theoretically less likely to follow the rules of the group. An increase in people present who are not following the rules of the group can decrease the overall integrity of the group. A good way to illustrate this is to think about a sports team in which one or more players on the team is not giving full effort and not following team rules such as attending practice and team meetings. Those unmotivated players can hurt the entire team and their behavior is often considered to be “conduct detrimental to the team.” In the same way, mandated 12 Step group attendees who do not follow the group rules are detrimental to the group. Once again, this overall challenge to the integrity, effectiveness and efficacy of 12 Step groups has prompted a need for something new and different.

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