

The 16 Steps: An Alternative To 12-Step Programs

Many therapists and counsellors who work in the addictions field have, at one point or another, found themselves stymied when challenged by a client who stated, “I will not attend 12-Step programs. They do not work for me.” This has been a dilemma because, until recently, there have not been many alternatives for us to offer these clients. Indeed, 12-Step programs have been the mainstay of the addictions recovery field for many years. In fact, reflected in 12-Step philosophy is a belief that those people who do not wish to remain abstinent using those Steps are not displaying “the willingness to go to any lengths.” Clients who prefer to find another way often feel that they have been labelled “resistant” or “ungrateful.”

As a therapist in private practice, as well as an Addictions Counsellor working in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, BC for the past 12 years, I have worked with many clients who have not found the 12-Step model helpful. As a recovering addict myself with over 15 years clean and sober, the 12 Steps saved my life when I began my journey of recovery. There are many wonderful aspects of 12-Step programs, such as the support of the fellowship and sponsors, daily meetings in almost every country in the world, and no requirements for membership other than the desire to stop using mind-altering substances. Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous help millions of people achieve and maintain sobriety all over the world. I do not question that.

What I do question, however, is whether these programs are appropriate for all people. Can every addict/alcoholic wanting recovery, either through abstinence or harm reduction, be helped only by working the 12 Steps? Is there another viable choice for those who would prefer an alternative?

There are many reasons that the 12 Steps are not a good fit for some clients. Often, people have difficulty with what they refer to as the “God-thing,” sometimes stemming back from childhood family-of-origin experiences with religion that felt shameful for them. For others, it is the patriarchal/hierarchical wording of such phrases as “His will for us” and “God as we understood Him.” Still others do not appreciate being encouraged to explore their “shortcomings” and “defects of character,” nor are they in alignment with the concept of being “powerless” over anything in their lives, including their addiction. Although for a great many people, these concepts and wordings cause no real problems, for others it can often signal the inherent difference between “working a program of recovery” and staying true to themselves. I believe that this is a choice that no addict/alcoholic who wants help should ever feel compelled to have to make. Most clients with substance misuse problems have already experienced an inordinate amount of shame and guilt. These clients need to be encouraged to find what works for them. They need to be validated for speaking their truth, and be encouraged to be in alignment with the tools they choose to use for their growth. I believe that it is counter-productive and non-therapeutic for counsellors, therapists, treatment centres and recovery programs to insist that there is only one road or model for overcoming addictive behaviours.

Thankfully, there is an alternative that sometimes works better for the “marginalized” populations of our society such as women, people of colour, people living in poverty, gays and lesbians, as well as those who do not subscribe to a Christian-based spirituality. The 16 Steps for Discovery and Empowerment, based on the work of Charlotte Kasl, Ph.D., are providing a great many “recovering” people with another way of looking at themselves and the society of which they are a part. These steps are better able to encourage self-awareness and positive change without having to ascribe to any particular model of living, especially for those clients who find the 12 Steps to be problematic. The 16 Steps are experienced by many people as inclusive and empowering. They are perceived as supporting us in developing an internal locus of control, as opposed to reliance solely on a patriarchal or external version of a higher power. They are interpreted by many clients as “spiritual” as opposed to “religious.”

The 16 Steps are as follows:

1. We affirm we have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent on substances or other people for our self-esteem and security.
2. We come to believe that God / the Goddess/ Universe / Great Spirit / Higher Power awakens the healing wisdom within us when we open ourselves to that power.
3. We make a decision to become our authentic Selves and trust in the healing power of the truth.
4. We examine our beliefs, addictions and dependent behaviour in the context of living in a hierarchal, patriarchal culture.
5. We share with another person and the Universe all those things inside of us for which we feel shame and guilt.
6. We affirm and enjoy our strengths, talents and creativity, striving not to hide these qualities to protect others’ egos.
7. We become willing to let go of shame, guilt, and any behaviour that keeps us from loving ourSelves and others.
8. We make a list of people we have harmed and people who have harmed us, and take steps to clear out negative energy by making amends and sharing our grievances in a respectful way.
9. We express love and gratitude to others, and increasingly appreciate the wonder of life and the blessings we do have.

10. We continue to trust our reality and daily affirm that we see what we see, we know what we know, and we feel what we feel.
11. We promptly acknowledge our mistakes and make amends when appropriate, but we do not cover up, analyze, or take responsibility for the shortcomings of others.
12. We seek out situations, jobs and people that affirm our intelligence, perceptions and self-worth, and avoid situations or people who are hurtful, harmful or demeaning to us.
13. We take steps to heal our physical bodies, organize our lives, reduce stress and have fun.
14. We seek to find our inward calling, and develop the will and wisdom to follow it.
15. We accept the ups and downs of life as natural events that can be used as lessons for our growth.
16. We grow in awareness that we are interrelated with all living things, and we contribute to restoring peace and balance on the planet.

For therapists and counsellors who are familiar with the 12 Steps, it may be easy to see the differences in the 16 Steps. To give just a couple of examples, Step One of the 12 Steps tells us that we are “powerless” over our addiction, and that our lives have reached the point of becoming “unmanageable.” Conversely, Step One of the 16 Steps assures us that we can, indeed, take control of our lives and that we do not have to depend or rely on anything external in order to feel better about ourselves. For many of our clients, this is a new and refreshing concept. Some who have attended 12-Step programs and had difficulty relating to them may feel shy about telling us that, for fear of being judged by us. I have found that when those clients read the 16 Steps for the first time, their faces light up, their body language changes and they begin to feel a spark of hope that perhaps there is a program for them as well. As one client put it, “I feel like I can breathe!”

Step Two in the 12 Steps says that we must rely on an external higher force to “restore us to sanity,” which implies that we are “insane” before we agree to do this. This is not an easy message for many people to accept. In the 16 Steps, Step Two talks about the “healing wisdom” we all have inside of us and our choice to open ourselves to it. This is a very different way of looking at life, the world and recovery from addiction in a hierarchical society.

The 16 Steps can be used with clients as a program of recovery in a variety of ways. In groups, these Steps can be explored by marginalized populations (i.e., cultural or gender orientation), with teens and even with men, who often do not fare very well in our patriarchal/hierarchical culture either. In addition, I regularly use the 16 Steps with individual clients by having them write the answers to the questions that Dr. Kasl poses at the end of each step in her 16-Step workbook entitled “Yes You Can.” Depending on the client, I might assign one or two steps to read and write about for homework, then following through by going over the answers in our next session. Or I might choose a step each week (not necessarily in any particular order) and assist the client to relate it to her/his problematic life experiences at that time. If my clients are attending 16-Step meetings, I might suggest that they journal after each group meeting, to help them solidify what they have learned about themselves. If they wish, they can bring parts of their journals to share with me in our sessions.

I believe that it is incumbent upon us as therapists and counsellors to meet our clients where they are in their healing journeys, and to assist them to find alternatives that will work for them. At this point in time, one of the problems that has to be overcome is that both counsellors and clients need to become aware that there is, indeed, another very viable option. Initially, it is imperative that more education about the 16 Steps be provided to therapists, so that there can then be more 16-Step groups made available to those clients who wish to follow a different road to recovery.

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