

# Meeting Types



## How to Start a Secular AA Meeting



For the US & Canada under AA World Services [aa.org](http://aa.org)

*Tradition Three: The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.  
Tradition Four: Each group is autonomous except in matters affecting AA as a whole.  
Tradition Five: Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.*

*“I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help,  
I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.”*

*~ Written for the 1965 AA International Convention in Toronto*

### AA's best resources

- The AA Group (The perfect primer if you're going to start one. The meat of the process is discussed on pp. 12-24)

[https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-16\\_theaagroup.pdf](https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-16_theaagroup.pdf)

- Group Handbook <https://www.aa.org/contents-group-handbook-list>

*NOTE: If you don't plan to register your group, you can jump down to [Meeting Types](#) or [Secular Flavor](#), followed by [recovery related](#) and [secular](#) and [sober](#) themed material – good for discussion topics.*

## **To list with your local Central Office or not?**

“A central or intergroup office is an A.A. service office that involves partnership among groups in a community — just as A.A. groups themselves are partnerships of individuals. A central office is established to carry out certain functions common to all the groups — functions which are best handled by a centralized office — and it is usually maintained, supervised, and supported by these groups in their general interest. It exists to aid the groups in their common purpose of carrying the A.A. message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” [A.A. Guideline](#)

Some groups choose to remain or become private, attended by invitation-only, and will never list with their local Intergroup or Central Office. Often, these meetings consist of physicians, pilots, lawyers, the famous, wealthy and/or powerful people who cannot risk exposing their vulnerabilities to anyone but trusted members in a similar situation.

Also, many jails, prisons, treatment centers and mental health wards host private AA meetings attended by patients or clients, and their sponsors or otherwise known AA members who actively run the meeting, often without any staff present. Many of these meetings are not listed outside the facility hosting them. Other limitations to a meeting may apply and some groups will list with their Central Office clarifying what those limitations are, which is conveyed in the meeting schedule. AA members are expected to and do usually heed them.

The Toronto Intergroup's [abhorrent decision](#) to de-list secular meetings in its schedule, which aa.org forced them to re-list after a Human Rights Tribunal became involved,\* gives pause to the idea of listing your new group if it's in an area that would be hostile to atheists, agnostics or freethinkers. Maybe waiting six months and using word of mouth to generate interest would serve group survival better before deciding to formally list with your local Intergroup. [\*Per [Roger C.](#), AA's General Service Board reported in October 2016:

“A motion was made that AAWS, Inc. remove all database directory listings of the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup based on their response to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal that they are a religious

organization. The motion was adopted unanimously by the AAWS Board.” [In response, the GTAI re-listed the secular groups in its area.]

Different AA Areas handle the registration process differently, so be sure to check with your local Intergroup. This is the process developed in the [Cleveland District Office](#) since its inception in 1945.

- Usual 6-month lag to ensure meeting survives before listing nationally
- Then, Central Office registers your group with the General Service Office (GSO) aa.org
- Contact person receives a huge welcome packet from aa.org with several pamphlets and meeting cards. See <https://www.aa.org/contents-group-handbook-list>

Loner Groups (no Intergroup or Central or District Office) If you want a Group ID#, contact the Loners International Meeting Hub <https://www.aa.org/contact-lim>

NOTE: Secular AA [www.aasecular.org](http://www.aasecular.org) is an “AA International Contact.” Secular AA is part of the global A.A. community and serves the secular community. (Further defined by AA at <https://www.aasecular.org/about-us>)

SAFETY: Before listing your online Zoom meeting, adjust your admin settings to protect against bombers. See the Zoom Safety Guide <https://bit.ly/Zoom-Safety-Guide> or full link at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/12AFTKiXTE2r0PZay047LwdKpRrykus8jEAKQ8DHlzrl/>

Online meetings can also be listed at:

- Online Intergroup of AA <https://aa-intergroup.org/> Under Filters, checkbox Secular, among others that may apply to your group
- Worldwide Secular Meetings <https://www.worldwideseccularmeetings.com/meetings>
- Spreadsheet  Online Secular AA and Recovery Meetings.xlsx

**Two Service Positions** open up once your group is registered with aa.org and your local Intergroup (Central Office or District Office): Intergroup representative to monthly area meetings, if they exist; and GSR - General Service Rep to Area and District meetings which can be monthly, bimonthly or longer apart. These are explained in detail at [p.22](#) of the AA Group pamphlet. The one who’s registered as a GSR usually has at least 2 years of sobriety but each group elects as it sees fit, or not at all.

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## Meeting Types

### In-Person, Online or Hybrid? Men's, Women's or Mixed? Special Interest? Open or Closed?

- More than a coffee pot & and a resentment: Is there actual interest in your group and and an unmet need your group will fill (day/time/locale/flavor)? Will 10 people commit for 10-12 weeks? Will 5? The long form of Tradition 3 says “any two or three gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group.” In practical terms, the more people involved in the beginning, the more likely it is that the meeting will survive and eventually thrive. The commitment is for a good three years if you really want to see that meeting thrive.
- Think about your intended meeting format: speaker, discussion, music, films, youtubes, rotating, etc., and what potential members will favor. A varied format can also be offered, e.g. the first week is a step study, the second week a topic, third week a quote from recovery material, fourth week a speaker. A group that meets daily usually prefers a varied format for each day of the week, adding a meditation meeting, a book study, etc.
- Usually, only one person will have to give their full name (break personal anonymity) for the rental contract and/or online video license. They will likely hold that position in perpetuity, so requiring at least 3 years of continuous sobriety is recommended, or even longer, for these service positions.
- Service positions are discussed in more detail in [The AA Group](#), p. 19, which doesn't begin to cover the jobs created in the online format: co-hosts who handle the door and bombers, chat scribes who post relevant info during the meeting, screen sharer, timer, new member contact, and more.

#### **In-Person Meetings:**

Often, meetings may start at someone's house and may not have to be announced anywhere until you're sure your meeting will survive. Instead this “private” AA meeting may move to a neutral place and begin announcing it locally.

Check around for prices. Churches, halls and community centers are usually open to giving a reduced rate for AA groups. Roger C., author of A History of Agnostics in AA [adds](#),

“A perhaps surprising but common location for secular AA meetings is the Unitarian Universalist Church, which has decades of history of supporting agnostic groups in AA. The first ever agnostic AA meeting was held at a UU Church in Chicago in 1975. And the first ever secular AA convention was held at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Santa Monica, California.

“Other locations that agnostic groups have used include men or women’s clubs, treatment centers, community or senior centers, association facilities (i.e. Moose Lodge, Finnish Hall), non-profit organizations (i.e. United Way), college or university facilities or library facilities. And some agnostic groups have also used Alano Clubs for their meetings.”

Check for adequate parking and a safe and well lit walkway into the building. Is it wheelchair accessible? Mixed bathrooms on the same floor as the meeting? Are kitchen facilities adequate? Is there space for a literature table or stand? Do you want to put anything up on the walls? Are you allowed to?

### **Online Meetings:**

In March of 2020, the Zoom software company had 8 million customers. In April of 2021, after the pandemic shutdown, Zoom’s customer base reached 200 million subscribers. Some have argued that Zoom’s importance to 12-Step meetings has now converted it into a public utility, and this has implications given their annual price increases. Cheaper, less interactive, options exist (e.g. [Google Meet](#)) but many attendees have now become familiar with Zoom and may be unwilling to try a new meeting in a new format. It may be best to stick with what most people use.

The obvious advantage of online meetings is that like minds can find each other from around the world, or be exposed to new ideas or unfamiliar ways of looking at ideas, behaviors, etc. This is especially so for secular meetings which allow for non-Conference-Approved literature. Instead, modern science and rational thought are the higher power.

Hybrid meetings are where an in-person meeting runs the online video room and broadcasts it to their live meeting.. They face tech and audio challenges, but some groups do well at overcoming them.

### **Special Interest Groups:**

Gender and sexuality seem to be the only two special interest groups that openly ignore the tradition of non-affiliation, with good reason and impunity. Though specifically rejected in Bill W's mind when writing our Traditions, groups do tend to form and thrive when their members have more in common than just recovery from alcoholism. He didn't want Republican or Catholic meetings, and they don't call themselves that, but like minds do flock together.

Regarding the group name, AA Traditions have specific ideas about what a group should call itself. See [The AA Group](#), p.17.

### **Open, Closed or Limited Groups:**

Anyone can attend an open AA meeting but usually only AA members can speak. This means cops, investigators, neighbors, insurance agents – anyone can attend an open AA meeting. Originally, discussion groups held closed meetings while speaker meetings were open. That is no longer the general practice today.

Closed meetings are for those with a desire to stop drinking or stay stopped. Limited meetings can vary in meaning, but often mean they are closed to alcoholics and their loved ones, who can all share in the meeting.

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## **Secular Flavor**

### **Opening & closing scripts**

Most secular groups read variations on a theme of free expression and the tradition of promoting inclusivity to reach more alcoholics. Bill Wilson himself commended atheists and agnostics when he applauded us for widening the doors of AA. And of course, he

relied on atheists Hank Parkhurst and Jim Burwell in writing the Big Book and getting AA off the ground and out of the hands of the Oxford Group, where AA gestated.

Should you read the AA Preamble?

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organizations or institutions; does not wish to engage in controversy; neither endorses or opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

The Secular Preamble?

This AA agnostic meeting endeavors to maintain a tradition of free expression and conduct a meeting where alcoholics may feel safe to express any doubts or disbelief they may have, and to share their own personal form of spiritual experience, their search for it, or their rejection of it. In keeping with AA tradition, we do not endorse or oppose any form of religion or atheism. Our only wish is to ensure suffering alcoholics that they can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else's beliefs or having to deny their own.

Some secular groups include this quote from a letter written by Bill W to Father Marcus O'Brien in 1943:

**“It must never be forgotten that the purpose of AA is to sober up alcoholics. There is no religious or spiritual requirement for membership. No demands are made on anyone. An experience is offered which members may accept or reject. That is up to them.”**

Should you read the original 12 Steps? Or a secular version? (Some secular examples [here](#), provided by Toronto AA Agnostics.) Founder Bill W. spoke at the 1953 General Service Conference on 'Variations in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions,' commenting, "The more we insist on strict conformity with these Steps and Traditions,

the more resistance against them we create." Embracing the slogan, "Take what you like and leave the rest," the secular AA community has published many different versions of the Steps, each capturing the principles raised. Several recovery books not "Conference approved" by AA now illuminate a path for the recovering alcoholic who rejects religious thought. Many are listed [below](#).

The Opening script for online meetings often includes some behavioral expectations. These scripts tend to become modified as problems arise, but Rule 62 cautions us that a brief script with few meeting rules fosters a more welcoming and relaxed meeting. Problem behaviors can be addressed privately without adding to the script every time something uncomfortable happens. Quick and simple. Alternatively, check out the online meeting production at [www.omagod.org](http://www.omagod.org)

The most widely used tool in AA, the Serenity Prayer, was adapted from Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) who was an influential American theologian. He wrote it for a sermon, and used it in a variety of forms, including a much longer version. Here's one secular adaptation of it:

Grant me the serenity to acknowledge the things I cannot change  
The courage to change the things I can  
And the wisdom to know the difference.

Grant me patience for the changes that take time,  
An appreciation for all that I have,  
Tolerance for those with different struggles,  
And the strength to get up and try again one day at a time.

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## **Relevant links/material published by aa.org**

**Living Sober** book \*Excellent for newcomers\* 30 secular Tips & Tricks to staying sober  
<https://www.aa.org/living-sober-book>

One Big Tent: Atheist & Agnostic AA Members Share Their Experience, Strength & Hope book <https://www.aagrapevine.org/store/one-big-tent>

### **Pamphlets:**

**\*The AA Group** (The perfect primer if you're going to start one)  
[https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-16\\_theaagroup.pdf](https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-16_theaagroup.pdf)

A Newcomer Asks [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/p-24\\_anewcomerask.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-24_anewcomerask.pdf)

Is AA for You? [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_us/p-3\\_isaaforyou.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_us/p-3_isaaforyou.pdf)

20 Questions about drinking [http://aahalton.org/pdf/20\\_questions.pdf](http://aahalton.org/pdf/20_questions.pdf)

Emotional Maturity (\$0.22) <https://www.aacle.org/product/emotional-maturity/>

Q&A on Sponsorship [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/p-15\\_Q&AonSpon.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-15_Q&AonSpon.pdf)

A Member's Eye View of AA

[https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-41\\_amemberseyeviewofaa.pdf](https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-41_amemberseyeviewofaa.pdf)

The God Word: Atheist & Agnostic stories

[https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/p-86\\_theGodWord.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-86_theGodWord.pdf)

Faith Leaders Ask About AA <https://www.aa.org/faith-leaders-ask-about-aa> esp. see pp. 6-8 & 11

The A.A. Member—Medications and Other Drugs

<https://www.aa.org/aa-member-medications-and-other-drugs>

A.A. for Alcoholics with Mental Health Issues and Their Sponsors

<https://www.aa.org/aa-alcoholics-mental-health-issues-and-their-sponsors>

Safety Card for A.A. Groups

[https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/f-211\\_en\\_0422.pdf](https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/f-211_en_0422.pdf)

4-minute overview of the **12 Concepts** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qN6t4jAXJd0> which simplifies the principles to be used in group conscience, business or general service meetings. Do you know the 3 Rights we all need to be conscious of in our group conscience votes?

- Right of Decision given to our trusted servants (Concept 3)
- Right of Participation - everyone can voice their opinion and vote (Concept 4)
- Right of Appeal - Listen to the minority voice; require substantial majority (usually 66% or 75%) before making major changes; pause (Concept 5)

\*Bill Wilson on Emotional Sobriety

<https://www.saltlakeaa.org/2019/08/letter-to-al-written-by-bill-w-may-13-1953/>

## **Secular materials not published by AA**

**Websites and Podcasts:**

- Secular AA - AA International Contact. [www.aasecular.org](http://www.aasecular.org) Secular AA is part of the global A.A. community and therefore does not geographically limit the A.A. groups it serves and is accountable to. Further defined at <https://www.aasecular.org/about-us>  
Youtube Channel: [@secularaa7795](https://www.youtube.com/@secularaa7795)
- AA Agnostica [www.aaagnostica.org](http://www.aaagnostica.org)
- Rebellion Dogs [www.rebelliondogspublishing.com](http://www.rebelliondogspublishing.com)
- Bill Schaberg on Big Book history <https://www.youtube.com/@billschaberg8911>
- Orlando Omagod [www.omagod.org](http://www.omagod.org)
- We Agnostics KC MO <https://weagnosticsaa.org/>
- Cleveland Westside Agnostics [www.westsideagnostics.org](http://www.westsideagnostics.org)
- Freethinkers Tus Nua (Ireland) <https://tusnua.eu/>
- Share What Works for You <https://sharewhatworksforyou.wordpress.com/>
- All Night Place <https://www.allnightplace.com/>
- Sober She Devils [www.sobershedevils.com](http://www.sobershedevils.com)
- A Secular Meditation Meeting <https://secularmeditation.org/>
- Reason and Recovery <https://www.reasonandrecovery.org/>
- Toronto Beyond Belief <http://www.aatorontoagnostics.com/> YouTube Channel: [@BeyondBeliefSobriety](https://www.youtube.com/@BeyondBeliefSobriety)

Discussion topics can be derived from many sources, including:

### **Books:**

- Daily Reflections for Practical 12 Step Recovery, Bob K., 2024
- We're Not All Egomaniacs: Adapting the Twelve Steps for Alcoholics with Low Self-Esteem, Beth Aich, 2021
- Modern 12 Step Recovery, Glenn Rader, 2021
- 12 Essential Insights for Emotional Sobriety, Allen Berger, 2021
- Staying Sober Without God, Jeffrey Munn, 2019
- Twelve Secular Steps, Dr. Bill W, 2018
- A Secular Sobriety, Dale K. 2017
- The Alternative 12 Steps, Martha Cleveland & Arlys G, 2014
- Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life, Joe C., 2013
- Living Sober by Barry Leach, AA World Services, 1975, 2019

### **Historical Books**

- Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers: Biography and Recollections of Early A.A. in the Midwest, AA World Services, 1980
- Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, Ernest Kurtz, 1991
- Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous, Mary C. Darrah, 1991, 2001

- Ebbly: The Man Who Sponsored Bill W, Mel B., 1998
- A Biography of Mrs Marty Mann: The First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous, David R. and Sally Brown, 2001
- Carl Jung and AA: The 12 Steps as a Spiritual Journey of Individuation, Ian McCabe, 2018
- A History of Agnostics in AA, Roger C., 2017
- Writing the Big Book: The Creation of A.A., William H. Schaberg, 2019
- The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from AA to Oprah Winfrey, Trysh Travis, 2019
- Bobbie B. The Untold Story of AA's "Fantastic Communicator" in the 1940s, Gary Neidhardt, 2022
- Key Players in AA History, Bob K., 2023

### **Other Sober Themed Books**

- ➔ Dry Humping: A Guide to Dating, Relating, and Hooking Up Without the Booze, Tawny Lara 2023
- ➔ Fairy Tale, Stephen King, 2022
- ➔ Again, Rachel, Marion Keyes, 2022
- ➔ The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober, Catherine Gray, 2017
- ➔ Waiting: A Nonbeliever's Higher Power, Marya Hornbacher, 2011
- ➔ Drinking: A Love Story, Caroline Knapp, 1997
- ➔ Goodbye Hangovers, Hello Life, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, 1986

### **Sober Movies**

#### **Where at least one gets/stays sober:**

- Bill W, 2012 documentary <https://youtu.be/6cedUs3Gp9U>
- A Good Person – Morgan Freeman & Florence Pugh, 2023
- Four Good Days – Mila Kunis & Glenn Close, 2020
- Rocketman (re: Elton John), 2019
- The Anonymous People, 2013 (OpEd documentary)
- Flight – Denzel Washington, 2012
- 28 Days – Sandra Bullock, 2000
- Drunks – Faye Dunaway and Richard Lewis, 1997
- When a Man Loves a Woman – Meg Ryan & Andy Garcia, 1994
- My Name is Bill W – James Woods and James Garner, 1989
- Clean and Sober – Michael Keaton & Kathy Baker, 1988
- Days of Wine and Roses – Lee Remick & Jack Lemmon, 1962

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Find this pamphlet at

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TC-SJDfcvRBMPucUum4DTr6Ax81018DMzAsmeVxev3o/edit?tab=t.0>

# Secular Flavor



Tab 3



Tab 4

