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# Anonymous but not alone

**Local recovery groups are staying connected online for support**

*Editor's note: sources for this story asked that their anonymity be protected.*

BY ASHLEY LODATO

When Washington state's first "Stay at Home" order went into effect March 24, in-person gatherings ground to halt — including the support group meetings that are a lifeline for members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

For people who rely on such groups not just for their well-being but also for their survival, the temporary moratorium on public and private gatherings of any size could have been a devastating blow.

But as a creative population with a commitment to supported recovery efforts, Methow Valley AA, NA and Al-Anon members are finding alternate ways to provide support for themselves and each other. And like so many other organizations, the fellowship groups in Winthrop and Twisp are learning that video and phone conferencing are adequate solutions, at least in the short term.

AA and NA are 12-step fellowship groups for those in recovery from substance abuse. Al-Anon is a fellowship group for family and friends of alcoholics.

Says one Twisp AA member, "We have been using Zoom [an online streaming service] for a while, to hold larger meetings with members from all over eastern Washington. Not everyone can get out and travel long distances for these types of meetings, so it already made sense to hold them online."

But when COVID-19 cases really started showing up in our area, says the Twisp member, "we ramped up our Zoom options." The member explains that the local AA chapters had already decided to hold the regional quarterly assembly via Zoom, since attendance was expected at more than 100 people. With a Zoom app available, attending virtual meetings became widely accessible. "We sent out an email to all the members giving them the link and password to the two weekly meetings we scheduled," she says.

"The first local AA Zoom meeting was really cool," continues the Twisp member. "I was in tears. We hadn't seen each other in a while, and it was just amazing to have this new way to connect with each other. Connection is what we do. Now, more than two months later, we're all becoming old pros at it."

## Missing the newcomer

The Twisp AA member acknowledges, however, that "there are bumps in the road." These bumps are less about technological limitations and access than one might think, say several of the AA and NA members interviewed for this article, although one NA member notes that "those without access are typically those who are

newer to the program and more at risk of relapse."

"The thing that concerns me most is missing the newcomer," the Twisp AA member says. "It's hard enough to go to your first meeting under normal circumstances. The online component makes it more daunting. Even some of the old pros are scared of the virtual meetings. That's a real roadblock if you're coming in new. We're seeing some of the newcomers slip away during this time. I hope they'll come back."

The Twisp member continues, "The initial weeks of seeking sobriety are horrible to do alone. In 'normal' times, one of us might say to a newcomer, 'don't drink until 6:30, and then I'll show up to pick you up and take you to a meeting.' That's not possible these days. We can't offer that physical support, we can't show up for them that way. So we're giving out our phone numbers and emails, reaching out, trying to make people realize they're not alone."

Another Twisp AA member notes that "Getting together is a major component of early treatment. If you don't get a chance to go to a meeting in person, it's hard to get started." Zoom meetings are more productive, this member says, for those who have been committed to recovery for some time. "Once you get a certain amount of sobriety under your belt, you can handle it on your own a bit more."

Of the challenges of being new to recovery, an NA member says, "I'm incredibly grateful I'm not a newcomer trying to get through this. I'm not sure I would have made it."

All those in recovery interviewed urged newcomers to reach out, to find a meeting, to call the numbers listed in the Methow Valley News, and to visit the AA and NA websites to find virtual meetings. "There are Zoom meetings hosted every day of the week throughout the greater Okanogan region," says an NA member. "And in an unexpected cool twist, we also have access to meetings around the world that we previously didn't unless we traveled there. I have heard of people attending Zoom meetings in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain, among other locations."

The NA member notes that there are other platforms being used for recovery support groups, such as Blue Jeans, Discord, WebEx, Jitsi and Skype, but that Zoom is "by far the most prevalent."

## Supporting others

"Our primary purpose is to help the still-suffering alcoholic," the Twisp member explains. "When I went to my first meeting I thought I had this unique situation that no one else could understand. Then I heard all these people telling their stories, and they were telling my story. And realized that aside from a few irrelevant details, I was just like everyone else there. My story wasn't unusual; we all have the same disease."

"That's partly why I keep going back," says the member, who is a longtime member of the Twisp group. "It's so

I can share my experience, strength and hope with someone who is new. Others did that for me, and now I do it for newcomers."

The second Twisp AA member says it's a privilege to provide this type of support for others. "It's an honor to save lives," he says. "At the beginning, no one knows they're dying. But this support really is a matter of life and death."

The first Twisp AA member echoes this concept. "Once you've been here a while, you realize that these are life

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A Twisp AA member

and death situations for people. We don't take the support lightly. Our lives depend on us going to meetings. People die from this disease all the time. So even though we can't meet in person right now, we need to keep holding meetings however we can."

## Stigma and isolation

Both Twisp members address the stigma around being in recovery. "We are all addicts," the first Twisp AA member says, referring to both AA and NA members. "We are all struggling. And then there's this stigma, this image of the bum drinking out of a bottle in a brown bag under the bridge, or shooting up. There's the idea that our addiction is just a matter of lack of self-control."

Addiction is a mental disorder, the second Twisp AA member notes. But socially, it carries a greater stigma than, say, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Recovery becomes more possible for an addict, says that Twisp AA member, if the stigma is lifted, and this involves understanding the disease and finding support — support that continues to be available even during the pandemic.

All AA and NA members interviewed for this article commented on the stress of isolation. The first Twisp AA member notes that "One of an addict's character defects is that we tend to isolate. Even in sobriety we isolate, telling ourselves 'Nah, I don't need to go to this meeting.' When we start to pull away from the program, we get in trouble. We need this program."

In a time of enforced isolation, this member says, "It can be scary for the addict. But what's really nice about our community is that we know each other and we're great about reaching out. We are looking out for each other, making sure that the others in the group are OK."

An NA member notes that isolation is likely more dangerous for people in recovery. "Recovering addicts use drugs of all kinds to mask feelings," she says. "The risk of relapse is high right now, partially due to loneliness."

She has friends newer to the program that she reaches out to frequently, and says she has individual meetings with her sponsor [a mentor or guide who has been in recovery for some time and helps others navigate the process] via Zoom.

The NA member also points out that so much of the recovery programs is "personal." She says, "We meet. We hug. We hang out. We gather. We socialize. We have events, together." With the isolation enforced by the pandemic, everyone is under the pressure of uncertainty. For addicts, "isolation and stress are major triggers for using."

While Zoom meetings offer "some measure of relief" and are "better than nothing," the NA member says, "I think most of us are just hanging on until we can meet in person again." She describes her early days of getting clean, saying "When I quit using ... it took every ounce of willpower I had to make it each day until I could get to another meeting. If I could just make it to a meeting, I'd be okay. I found relief from the all-consuming thoughts of using at meetings. That relief the meeting offered, the feeling that everything would be OK, it's lesser in Zoom meetings than it was in personal meetings. I don't know why, but there is a very real and distinct difference for me."

"The Zoom meetings aren't 100% what we need," says the first Twisp AA member, "but they've been a godsend for us. What would we have done if this pandemic came 15 years ago without the option to meet online? That's scary."

## Social pressure

Even in pre-pandemic times, substance use features prominently in society as a coping mechanism. Relaxing with a drink, socializing with friends, cocktail hour—"it's always there!" says the NA member. During the pandemic, the social focus on alcohol in particular seems more intense, with social promotion of clever drinks like the "Quaran-tini" martini-style cocktails. "It's glorified consumerism at its worst," says the first Twisp AA member. "The pressure to drink right now is really intense. Lockdown drinking is very real."

That pressure is something that "each individual has to cope with as part of their recovery," says the NA member, but it's more difficult now, without the ability to attend regular in-person meetings.

For Al-Anon members, who are coping with friends or family members with drinking problems, regular meetings are a key component of the program. The advantage of in-person meetings, says a local Al-Anon member, is "being able to see each other and get non-verbal feedback and acceptance." The member notes that when the virtual meetings began, "It seemed strange, like talking to yourself."

The local Al-Anon group uses freeconferencecall.com, which provides only audio, not visuals. It took a while to get used to it, says the group member, but everyone is adapting. And there

have been some silver linings, such as reconnecting with former members who have moved away and having local residents be able to include distant family members on calls. "Each member has sent out information to anyone who may wish to attend," says the Al-Anon member. "We have had members join from as far away as New York."

Reaching out to others, continues the Al-Anon member, "helps us not feel so alone. This pandemic can fill us with fear. Many of us are feeling grief for the life we have lost, not knowing when things will go back to what was our normal. Taking care of ourselves is important."

Like AA and NA members, Al-Anon members are creating routines that include reaching out to others. "I miss those healing hugs," says the Al-Anon member. But in the meantime, she and others are focusing on staying connected through phone calls, emails and chats.

## Connecting with a meeting

Getting the word out about meetings has been more difficult since the Stay at Home order, without regular meeting times in established venues. "In 'normal' times," says the NA member, "we just inform the community when and where to meet, and anyone can attend."

But since the Zoom meetings began, she says, the groups have had some troubles with hacking and spamming. "Due to this," she says, "we now have passwords on all our meetings. [but] we want new people to be able to attend, [but] we want to keep our members safe."

In the Zoom meetings and conference calls, members share stories and struggles, offer support, and hold each other accountable. There are moments of raw vulnerability, and also humorous situations. Says one NA member, "We have one member who still can't figure out how to leave the Zoom meeting at the end, so the host has to either disconnect them or end the entire meeting."

All of the AA NA, and Al-Anon members interviewed urge newcomers to attend virtual meetings or call local connections (see the accompanying sidebar). "Announce yourself as a newcomer," says the first Twisp AA member. "We will reach out. We are on the other side of what you're going through. We are there for you."

## RESOURCES

- Find a virtual AA meeting: [www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/meeting-guide](http://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/meeting-guide)
- Find a virtual NA meeting: <https://virtual-na.org/meetings>
- Find a virtual Al-Anon meeting: <https://al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/find-an-al-anon-meeting>
- Eastern Washington AA information: <http://area92aa.org>
- Connect with local support groups: Alcoholics Anonymous (509) 429-1683 or 997-0356
- Al-Anon (206) 734-7107 or 997-0356
- Alateen (509) 341-9070
- Narcotics Anonymous (509) 341-4737