



The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry

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An exposé of Alcoholics Anonymous, 12-step programs, and the rehab industry—and how a failed addiction-treatment model came to dominate America.

AA has become so infused in our society that it is practically synonymous with addiction recovery. Yet the evidence shows that AA has only a 5–10 percent success rate—hardly better than no treatment at all. Despite this, doctors, employers, and judges regularly refer addicted people to treatment programs and rehab facilities based on the 12-step model.

In *The Sober Truth*, acclaimed addiction specialist Dr. Lance Dodes exposes the deeply flawed science that the 12-step industry has used to support its programs. Dr. Dodes analyzes dozens of studies to reveal a startling pattern of errors, misjudgments, and biases. He also pores over the research to highlight the best peer-reviewed studies available and discovers that they reach a grim consensus on the program's overall success.

But *The Sober Truth* is more than a book about addiction. It is also a book about science and how and why AA and rehab became so popular, despite the discouraging data. Dr. Dodes explores the entire story of AA's rise, from its origins in early fundamentalist religious and mystical beliefs to its present-day place of privilege in politics and media.

The Sober Truth includes true stories from Dr. Dodes's thirty-five years of clinical practice, as well as firsthand accounts submitted by addicts through an open invitation on the *Psychology Today* website. These stories vividly reveal the experience of walking the steps and attending some of the nation's most famous rehabilitation centers.

The Sober Truth builds a powerful response to the monopoly of the 12-step program and explodes the myth that these programs offer an acceptable or universal solution to the deeply personal problem of addiction. This book offers new and actionable information for addicts, their families, and medical providers, and lays out better ways to understand addiction for those seeking a more effective and compassionate approach to this treatable problem.

The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry Details

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Programs and the Rehab Industry Lance Dodes , Zachary Dodes**

From Reader Review The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry for online ebook

Maggie says

The premise is great. Why is AA the go-to recommendation for addicts? Although it sifts through data and explains research methods ad nauseum, it puts forth a great argument that there's no scientific reason that AA should be the only treatment method for addiction. I wish they would have spent more time going into detail about their recommended alternative. But, it's a great read that's quite thought-provoking.

Michelle says

I received this book through the good reads first read program.

I enjoyed this book. It was scientific without being too scientific and could be read by someone with no psychological knowledge as well as someone with an extensive degree.

I fully support the idea that the 12 step idea is significantly flawed and unreliable.

Chris says

This is a curious book. I picked it up for a book club that I'm going to soon, but I wanted to get some thoughts down while it's still fresh in my mind.

A little backstory, I have a history of substance abuse primarily with alcohol, and have been to a few AA meetings myself. I've been sober for almost three years now. I went to AA as part of a rehab program that was mildly 12 step based, but really was just group and education based. Rehab really helped me, but the actual AA meetings themselves really put me off for reasons that the authors get into in detail.

What most people don't know is that there is no evidence that AA actually does any good for most people. AA took off and became what it is today for the most American of reasons, good marketing. As the authors of the book go through in detail, AA for most people doesn't work. In detailed studies with control groups it often does worse than doing nothing at all. Both the spontaneous cure rate (doing nothing) and AA have a success rate of about 5-10%. Why does AA have a such a terrible record? There a bunch of theories that the authors get into. The reason most people are put off by AA is the overtly religious and "moral" aspects of the program. AA is a deeply religious organization, and is run pretty much as a religion. It maintains a disease based theory of addiction even while just about all the experts now dismiss this as wrong. It maintains if AA doesn't work for you it's your fault, not AA's fault. As the authors note, if you were taking a cure for cancer and it didn't work, would you blame yourself or the cure?

So why 4 stars instead of 5? Because the authors themselves have some rather strange biases that creep into the narrative. They spend the entire book railing against AA for not using evidence based medicine, then at the end they have a strange rant against evidence based medicine. This is mainly just a medical turf war, the authors prefer psychological based treatments rather than pharmaceutical ones. It's mainly turf war stuff.

That being said, if you've ever been to a 12 step meeting or know someone who has our think should be going to one, pick this up. It's a great overview of the huge flaws in the methodology of those systems while at the same time pointing out the good that they can do.

Kara says

The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry, co-authored by brothers Lance and Zachary Dodes, is a far less dry and more radically change-oriented book than its title might suggest. What makes this read so compelling and its ideas so unusual, IMHO, is the primacy of individual human beings who struggle with addiction issues -- their personal thoughts, feelings, experiences - - in its assessment of the value of treatment options for those . Because of this fresh, humanistic perspective I believe the book is likely to be of great value to both readers drawn to this topic for reasons of personal experience (broadly speaking -- I'm not just talking about the addicts themselves) and/or those interested in the problem more generally because of its impact on society as a whole and the grievous damage it does to so many human lives and human relationships.

In my view, *The Sober Truth* successfully discredits the popular assumption that 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), its various affiliates focused on other types of addiction, and the great many other rehabilitation programs that incorporate significant components of the 12-step method into their own methodology not only are unnecessary for successful recovery, but that these programs can set individuals back in their attempts to curtail their substance abuse (or other targeted behavior) and sustainably change their lives.

You may imagine, as I did, that the book's attack on the legitimacy of the 12-step treatment modality created by AA would rely on the deployment of in-depth analysis of a variety of scientific research studies on these programs' (as well as other forms of treatments') ability to provide their respective participants with successful coping methods and effect sustainable life change. While some observational studies (necessarily of less value than randomized treatment trial studies) are reviewed in the book, science is not the weapon the book uses in its argument. First of all, there is a dearth of reliable research available on the efficacy of 12-step and other addiction treatments, either individually or comparatively. Summing up the reasons for the lack of "good science" available on this topic, the authors state:

"A poor understanding of these issues--the need for randomization, the difference between correlation and causation, and the power of the compliance effect--has colored much of the research that has been conducted to date about the effectiveness of 12-step membership and attendance" (p. 33).

Existing research is surveyed in greater detail with applicable limitations set forth straightforwardly and specifically in the book's chapter: "Does AA work?"

However, the authors make clear their belief that numerical data would not be the most effective fodder for an attack on ineffective treatment modalities. In Chapter Nine, "The Failure of Addiction Research and Designing the Perfect Study," they explain the foundation of their approach:

"These days, virtually every addiction journal assigns far more value to statistical studies than to clinical findings. The primary claim is that words are not rigorous; number are. Yet this perspective fails to account for the complexity of human beings, who are, let's face it...more complex than any number could possibly assimilate" (p. 157).

Accordingly, most of the argument involves straightforward discussion of the particular history and practice of the 12-step programs, which highlights their origins in ideology rather than science and experience, and more critically, their rigidity and dogmatism. The 12-step programs hold themselves out as the only likely effective -- approach to addiction problems of manifold particularities experienced by a diverse cross-section of people in our society.

This book is at its best when it points out the poor reasoning behind some of AA's cherished dogma and the very real threat some of its bad ideas pose to participants' chances of recovery. If you only read one chapter of this book, make it "The Myths of AA" in which the authors quickly and powerfully expose the contradictions between people's experiences of addiction and the one-size-fits-all narrative of addiction and recovery that underlies the 12-step system.

All this said, *The Sober Truth* as Dr. and Mr. Dodes tell it is not hopeless. While AA's 12-step model is knocked down, psychotherapy is held up as an alternative that can meet people's individual needs with a depth of empathy and flexibility of response unavailable in the former modality. What is powerfully persuasive about this and all the ideas propounded in the book is the openness to change and an implicit expectation of dialogue among treatment participants (before, during, after), clinicians, loved ones and other people with relevant experience in a continuing public discourse about how best to fight the problem of addiction and ameliorate affected lives. This openness is communicated in various ways throughout the book.

Most explicitly, a long chapter includes extended narrative accounts by people with 12-step program experience. Some positive views are expressed; most assessments are mixed or largely negative. The relative range of viewpoints presented, and especially the lack of heavy editing of these narratives, demonstrated to me the value of the personal particulars of these stories to the authors. They didn't cherry pick for useful quotations, or ones that clearly and succinctly set forth particular views, or ones particularly expressive of the full spectrum of positive and negative experiences with 12-step treatment. I got the sense that the authors took these contributors' ideas as they found them, more or less, and that spoke volumes to me. I think this book is really worthwhile reading.

Please be advised I received a free copy of this book from the LibraryThing Early Reviewer program in return for a promise to publish an honest review. Thank you for reading my ideas; I hope they prove helpful to some of you.

Stefano Bittasi says

Not a bad book per se, but there is some misleading and deceptive bias in this book if you look at the cover! The book addresses mainly the scientific-medical ratio of success of AA program put in relationship with the legal court-orders to follow a 12-steps program and its reliability from a scientific-medical point of view. Fair enough! This is what part of the title states. THEN, the book starts to address the rehab industry which is based on the 12-steps program (with the brouhaha of money, frauds, non professionalism ...) ... more than fair, but this point is against the "industry". So why transform it in an attack to 12-steps programs? It is like to criticize the industry related to pseudo-therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists ... to demolish Psychology as such???

THEN it starts to address the problems of therapy related to addictions and SURPRISE ... the 12-steps program works for a range of addicts (and surprise ...) LIKE EVERY OTHER APPROACH!!! So the book says at the end that the major skill is to identify the better approach for every individual, and the 12-steps programs can really help some patterns ... like every other method or approach.

Now ... you see why the Cover of the book is so misleading?

Leigh Sewell says

I became a heroin addict after witnessing my fiances murder. In and out of in patient and out patient rehabs as well as countless NA and AA programs, the 12 step program never worked for me. I congratulate those it did work for but being out spoken about it not working for me in this community, well, I may as well have shouted hail Satan in church. I'm really looking forward to reading this. Fingers crossed to win the giveaway.

Oh PS I'll have five years clean in a couple months. :)

Scott Helms says

AA works...about 5% of the time.

rehab isn't much better and is EXPENSIVE!

this is tragic.

we need real medical AND psychological solutions to help with substance abuse problems in our world.

Kathleen says

"The program works if you work it," is one of the least rigorous statements ever made. Any evidence of the efficacy of twelve step programs is entirely anecdotal, and proponents of the programs openly admit that there is a high recidivism rate. Yet there have been very few studies about the long term efficacy of twelve step programs and those that have been done suggest that rehabilitation isn't nearly as successful as the common lore would have it.

I could have done without the testimonial chapter in a book that is all about looking at the problem of addiction in a deeper, more scientific way. As heartbreaking as the family that misread the signs of an imminent suicide as making amends, I don't think an emotional appeal is necessary to make the point. Real medical and psychiatric treatment by professionals would be superior to encouraging laypeople to take control of care.

Overall, I found this argument persuasive, though there is a lot to be said for AA as a freely accessible service available anywhere in the country. As expensive as rehab might be and as unpalatable as the religious aspect of twelve step programs might feel, the cost of better treatment might make AA the only option for a lot of people.

This book is definitely worth a read, as the subject is one that deserves serious consideration.

Sarah says

As a therapist who frequently works with clients struggling with substance abuse, I'm baffled that I've never considered the fundamental question of whether the AA model is actually effective, and under what

circumstances it may be contraindicated. How have I gone so long taking such care to provide individualized treatment in relation to mental health issues, but blindly relied on a cookie-cutter approach to substance abuse? One-size-fits-all thinking and treatment represents the direct opposite of my values as a helping professional.

So where does this seemingly incontestable reverence for the 12-steps come from? The outlandish claims of AA's overwhelming success, as Dodes points out in this book, are based almost wholly on bad science and flat out unsubstantiated propaganda. In fact, from the data that is available (admittedly limited), AA has only a 5-10% success rate for those who join.

This is particularly disconcerting as I contemplate my training as a therapist and the fact that, of all the mentors and teachers I've had (undoubtedly good, caring people), not one has questioned the validity of universal AA referrals. Moreover, lack of "success" in recovery (the definition of which being a whole other can of worms) is commonly perceived as "not being ready" or "not being committed" to addressing unhealthy behaviors.

What an outrageous assumption! And a demeaning, unhelpful assumption at that! Making that judgement is comparable to claiming that someone who isn't successfully losing weight via jogging is fundamentally "not ready" to adopt a healthier lifestyle. What about swimming? Dancing? Tennis? The idea that you're somehow failing because you've not been presented with interventions that suit your own individual preferences and personality is absurd and destructive.

While it's true that there are limited alternatives at this point, and that our understanding of addiction is far from complete, in my mind that is no excuse for not exploring the full spectrum of a client's options and thinking outside the box for interventions that offer more individually effective solutions.

Of course the argument that AA is entirely ineffective for everyone is clearly false. That said, as a culture we've somehow become brainwashed into the belief that 12-step programs are the be-all end-all of substance abuse treatment. Considering that there's no substantive evidence supporting this claim, and that the 12-step approach has been demonstrably harmful for some, the belief that AA is the one and only way is incredibly dangerous and clinically reckless.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book for anyone who is actively engaged in treating, researching, or otherwise curious about substance abuse issues. It brings up insightful questions and concerns that should be obvious, but somehow aren't, and encourages critical thinking about a problem that has plagued and puzzled people for centuries.

Lynn Kearney says

It certainly debunks 12-step programs but I'm not completely convinced by the alternatives suggested for addiction treatment.

Zoe says

Important book. People need to be more aware of the failings of the 12 step model in order to start funding research into alternative methods to beat addiction.

Joseph M. O'Connor says

Eye-opening.

I'm in AA. I've been sober for over 13 years. Throughout that time I have made my own interpretation of what The 12 Steps actually mean, and how to work them. My "renegade" attitude fits very closely with what Dr. Dodes is talking about in his more meaningful chapters.

Take note! Dr. Dodes has meaningful chapters in his book and chapters in which he just seems to vent his anger at the AA process. That really isn't productive; indeed, his invective nearly prevented me from reading further and getting to the meat of his argument. But I forgive him his rant. He's right in many respects. The most important things being that AA will NOT result in a cure; AA will NEVER "get anyone sober;" going to AA meetings will NOT help anyone stop drinking.

UNLESS THEY REALLY WANT TO STOP!

And I dare say the same is true for any other drug/drink/gambling/over-eating/over-working/sex-addicted behaviour out there. Sigmund Freud himself ain't gonna help someone who doesn't want to change.

That single factor - effecting a change in one's behaviour - is, in the final analysis exactly what Dr. Dodes prescribes as the solution to alcoholism. Find, through analysis, what the problem is, look at the behaviour it causes, and effect a change in that behaviour. In his "MD-speak" this becomes "determine what helpless feeling leads to the displacement behaviour, deal with the feeling, and find that you are able to stop drinking/doing drugs/gambling/over-enthusiastic sexual behaviour, etc., etc."

Note that Dr. Dodes does not seem to know anyone for whom AA, with all its warts and foibles, was a positive influence and led to a happier healthier life. I guess that am here to say that for some people like me, AA has helped to work wonders. It's true that I was really done with drinking. It's true that I wanted, desperately, to stop. But... aren't people like me exactly those for whom AA was created?

The AA that works for me encourages its members to seek psychiatric care. I do. It encourages its members to obtain medical treatment for depression. I do. It encourages its members to think about and study and try ANY alternative treatment; and to use that treatment if it helps. I do. And my AA - the San Francisco Fellowship - does not put down alternative treatments. It suggests them. I do, too.

And if any AA hardliner reads this review and sees my name and chooses to chastise me for "breaking anonymity," well... the Big Book was written between 1935 and 1939. Almost 80 years ago. Things change. Society evolves. Get over it.

AJ says

A detailed look into the shortcomings of Alcoholics Anonymous, The Sober Truth refutes many claims of AA's efficacy (citing many studies that have been done over the years) and contemplates what it would take to scientifically find and validate a truly effective addiction treatment paradigm.

This book is written in the same vein as Inside Rehab: The Surprising Truth About Addiction

Treatment—and How to Get Help That Works and Clean: Overcoming Addiction and Ending America's Greatest Tragedy, so I would recommend reading all three if you're interested in the topic of effective addiction treatment.

Carmen says

"You're sick. And you'll always BE sick."

- Darla, BtVS, Episode 1.7

This book is a case of very interesting subject matter, but boring execution.

I'm going to break down this book for you so you don't have to read it. Let me explain the author's views to you:

- AA programs blame, humiliate and shame addicts.
- AA has too much emphasis on religion and a higher power.
- AA promotes the incorrect and untrue statement that only addicts can treat other addicts.
- AA says alcoholism is a disease; the author states it is a behavior or set of behaviors.
- AA says you can NEVER cure your alcoholism, you are an alcoholic for LIFE. Author says you can cure yourself from addiction, you do not have to be an alcoholic for life, you can get better.
- AA can't deal with the fact that stopping drinking doesn't always make people's lives magically better. People who are still depressed and have shitty lives and/or kill themselves are NOT accepted by the AA community, they are shut down when they try to share their stories.
- Some people in AA are bad people, predators who prey on the vulnerable, and/or people who enjoy shaming and humiliating other people. People are sometimes sexually and financially preyed on by predators they are exposed to at meetings. And AA's culture of encouraging the shaming and humiliation of others can be like a fun buffet for sadists.
"..like the Catholic Church. Some parishes may be really, really great and strong and wonderful with a great priest. And others can be really, really corrupt with a pedophile [priest]. Who knows what you are going to get? That's the bad thing about therapists just telling people to go to AA. They have no idea what they're going to get."
- AA treats only the symptom (drinking) not it's cause(s).
- AA does not offer individual programs, instead it's a mass treatment that's supposed to work for everyone. This is a bad idea.
- AA often shames and discourages people from using prescription anti-depressants or other psychiatric medicine because they see it as another "addiction." Members are often shamed and scolded for taking pills prescribed by a psychiatrist.
- The author promotes psychotherapy in the place of AA. It's individual, it's compassionate, and it treats the cause of the problem not just the symptom. Of course, the author IS a psychiatrist.

Okay, that sums up the book. My personal thoughts:

- No one is going to get better unless they want to get better. You can go to AA, you can go to psychotherapy, but no one can force you to get better against your will.
- AA does push religion, sometimes to a frightening extent.
- AA does teach helplessness and eternal sickness. I can't say I think this is the best attitude.
- I hate shaming and humiliating people, I can hardly believe that would be a good idea.
- AA is a great social (and FREE) program that gives people friends and support. Much like church. However, I think if you are going to be someone who goes to AA, you should also get therapy. I understand not everyone can afford this and thus AA's appeal to a lot of people.
- It's rather scary that AA is often seen as The Only Way to treat alcoholics.
- AA works for some people, it doesn't for others - and it should be OKAY if you are creeped out by AA and its philosophies. There should be some other widely known option for treatment for people who don't want to be in AA. However, tons of people are "ordered" to go to AA, and this isn't always the best thing.

Tl;dr - Is AA really the only choice for alcoholics' recovery? Does AA even work? AA is unregulated and ungoverned, and this can lead to some shitty AA groups run by some shitty people. This author stresses that psychotherapy is a much better option for people for a wide range of reasons. However, AA is free. What's the answer? Is there an answer?

Lauren Mcarthur says

So, I thought this was an interesting book. I agree kind of with it, though I never have had to face a drug/alcohol problem I know many who did. I don't want to discount the 12 step process completely because I know it is a long hard process to become sober, and it has worked for some people I know. However, I was shocked to see some statistics in the book. Now, I don't know if they are all reliable because this book is written subjectively against the 12 step program, and I'm sure if AA were to release statistics it would be somewhere in the middle. Over all however I came out of this book with a new perspective on AA. I believe in therapy and that can help many people, but that is not a one way path, and it is tailored to the client. The 12 step process is just that, steps. Not tailored to individual needs, and obviously not everyone follows recovery in the same way.

So why 3 stars? While I liked the book, it was not really attention grabbing at some parts. This could have been because the topic does not pertain to me, and I couldn't directly relate. I do want to be a therapist, so it did peek my interest in substance abuse. I would recommend this book for professionals in the field, people who like direct facts or are extremely interested in this topic, and people who thought AA didn't work for them. If AA worked for you, I wouldn't read this book. It was a (mostly) quick read, which I liked because I have read a lot of these type books, and some of them get very tedious, repetitive, and repeat themselves too much.

I was glad I won the giveaway, so I greatly thank the author for sending me the book. I would just like to say to those who have an addiction, I bet it is scary, and daunting to give recovery a chance. I'm guessing a lot of people reading this book, have been through AA and relapsed, and there are many other way's to get better. But I promise you it can change, so please keep trying and don't give up.

