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The Patriarchy of Alcoholics Anonymous

Women who drink too much need help. But we don't need to give up our power.

By Holly Whitaker

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I got sober in 2013. It took me about six months to transition from throwing back a few bottles of wine or pints of cheap whiskey a night to total abstinence.

I didn't go to Alcoholics Anonymous. I didn't go to 90 meetings in 90 days. I didn't have a sponsor. I didn't work the steps. Most important: I wasn't required to enumerate my character defects and work to eliminate them, or to buy into the idea that an outsize ego and lack of humility were the causes of my need to numb myself with alcohol.



My eschewing the status quo by refusing to use the program scared my loved ones, signaling to them that I wasn't taking my recovery seriously. I wasn't surprised. Participation in A.A. is not the only effective way to stop drinking, but we've been trained to believe that refuting or even questioning it

means you're in denial.

The truth is, A.A. may be the foundation of global recovery, but it wasn't made with everyone in mind. It's a framework created in the 1930s by upper-middle-class white Protestant men to help people like them overcome addiction. Its founders believed the root of alcoholism was a mammoth ego resulting from an entitled sense of unquestioned authority.

A.A. was a miracle for those men who, until then, had almost nowhere to turn for help. It was radical in that it was free and it was fueled by an ethos of service. But it grew out of a fundamentalist Christian organization, the Oxford Group, and as a result, it is undergirded by the same belief system that asserts Eve grew from Adam's rib.

The values baked into its founding continue to shape the way the organization works, and it still has too many echoes for my liking of the ways women are expected to blame themselves, follow instructions and fall into line in a patriarchal society.

Participants are expected to accept the tenets of A.A. without question, and there is a common refrain that the program “works if you work it.” In other words: Don’t ask questions, and any failure is your own fault. The 12 steps include things like admitting powerlessness, turning one’s will over to God, cataloging defects of character, asking God to remove those defects and making amends for any wrongdoing.

This program, which was designed to break down white male privilege, made sense for the original members: It reminded them that they were not God and encouraged them to humble themselves, to admit their weaknesses, to shut up and listen. Perhaps these were much-needed messages when it came to the program’s original intended audience. (Keep in mind, this was just 10 years after women’s suffrage, at the height of the eugenics movement and 30 years before the dismantling of Jim Crow.)

But today’s women don’t need to be broken down or told to be quiet. We need the opposite. I worry that any program that tells us to renounce power that we have never had poses the threat of making us sicker.

I know a lot of women in recovery, in my real life and social media social circles, and through the recovery program I run. They aren’t drinking themselves numb because they are awash in oh-so-much power, or because of some pathological inability to follow rules or humble themselves, or because their outsize egos are running the show, as A.A.’s messaging would suggest. Quite the opposite: They’re drinking because they have so little power, because all they’ve ever done is follow the rules and humble themselves, because their egos have been crushed under a system that reduces their value to subservience, likability and silence.

When I entered recovery, I didn’t need to do a searching inventory to catalog all of my character defects. They had been played back to me my entire life by almost everyone around me. I was highly aware of the parts of me that were wrong, unruly and messy — those things that made me unlovable, or worse, unladylike. Ever since I could remember, I’d asked God to take those parts away. I drank to feel a sense of wholeness that had been conditioned out of me by society, to combat a powerlessness that was my birthright as a woman.

Submitting to the rules of A.A. was the last thing I needed. Instead, I tapped into a combination of existing approaches to recovery. I focused on developing self-trust, agency, compassion, self-nurturing and a reclamation of the agency I’d given up.

The antidote to my drinking problem was learning it was safe to trust myself, developing a sense of confidence and rejecting the humility women are conditioned to embrace. I also turned a critical eye on the society that helped make me sick in the first place.

In other words, the antidote to my drinking problem looked a lot like feminism.

To be sure, A.A. works for many people, including many women, and has saved millions of lives. I don't want to see it dismantled or discourage anyone from trying it out — I simply want more people to recognize it's not for all. There are many other evidenced-based options available now — from medically assisted treatments to cognitive behavioral therapy to the emerging use of psychedelics including [psilocybin](#). For most of the people I know who have found success in recovery, it isn't just one but a combination of treatments that ultimately works.

Women are the fastest-growing demographic becoming dependent on alcohol, which means we're on our way to being a majority of participants of recovery programs. There's no question that we need help. But we don't need to give up our power.

Holly Whitaker is the author of the forthcoming book "[Quit Like a Woman](#)," from which this essay is adapted.