

Inside Alcoholics Anonymous with the people who reveal how addiction nearly killed them

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The famously private organisation has allowed our writer in to share the stories of those who struggled with alcohol



In the AA Meeting in London, professionals say they thought alcoholics were other people

In the back room of a suburban church hall a group of people sit clutching coffee mugs.

They're a diverse bunch. From the middle-aged barrister in the corner to the timid checkout girl at the back, they could hardly be more different.

Yet they're all part of what has been called the most exclusive club in the world, where the 2.2 million members have one thing in common: a crippling addiction to booze.

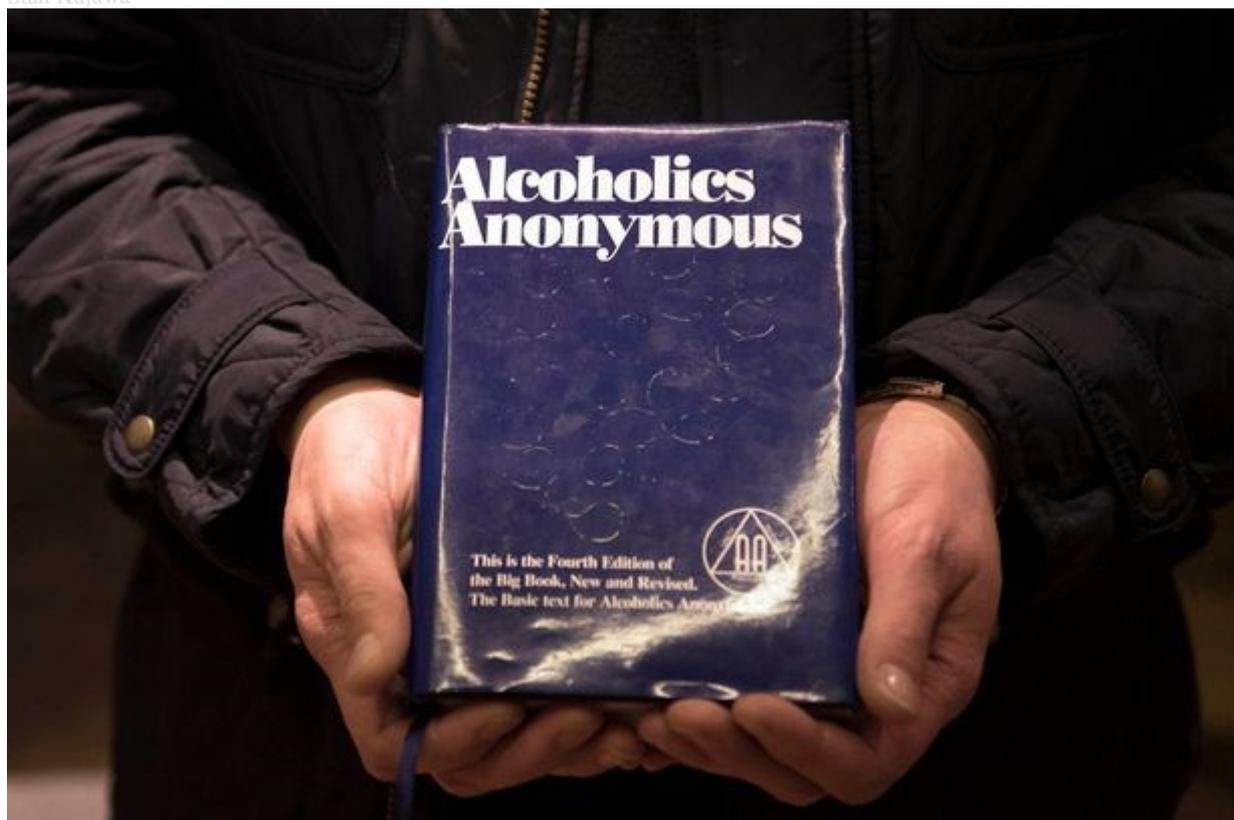
This is one of thousands of meetings of [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) taking place every day.

First to speak is the barrister. "Hi, my name's James," he says. "And I'm an alcoholic."

Confident and Cambridge-educated, he is not the kind of person you'd expect to find here. Yet he used to drink from dawn until dusk – a litre of spirits, three bottles of wine, countless cans of beer and cider.

James says: "I thought alcoholics were homeless people on park benches. I wore £1,000 suits and drank wine worth hundreds of pounds.

Stan Kujawa



The bible for alcoholics, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings give these books to attendees

“But I’m here, just like you, because alcohol nearly killed me.”

His addiction cost him his marriage, his home and his well-paid job.

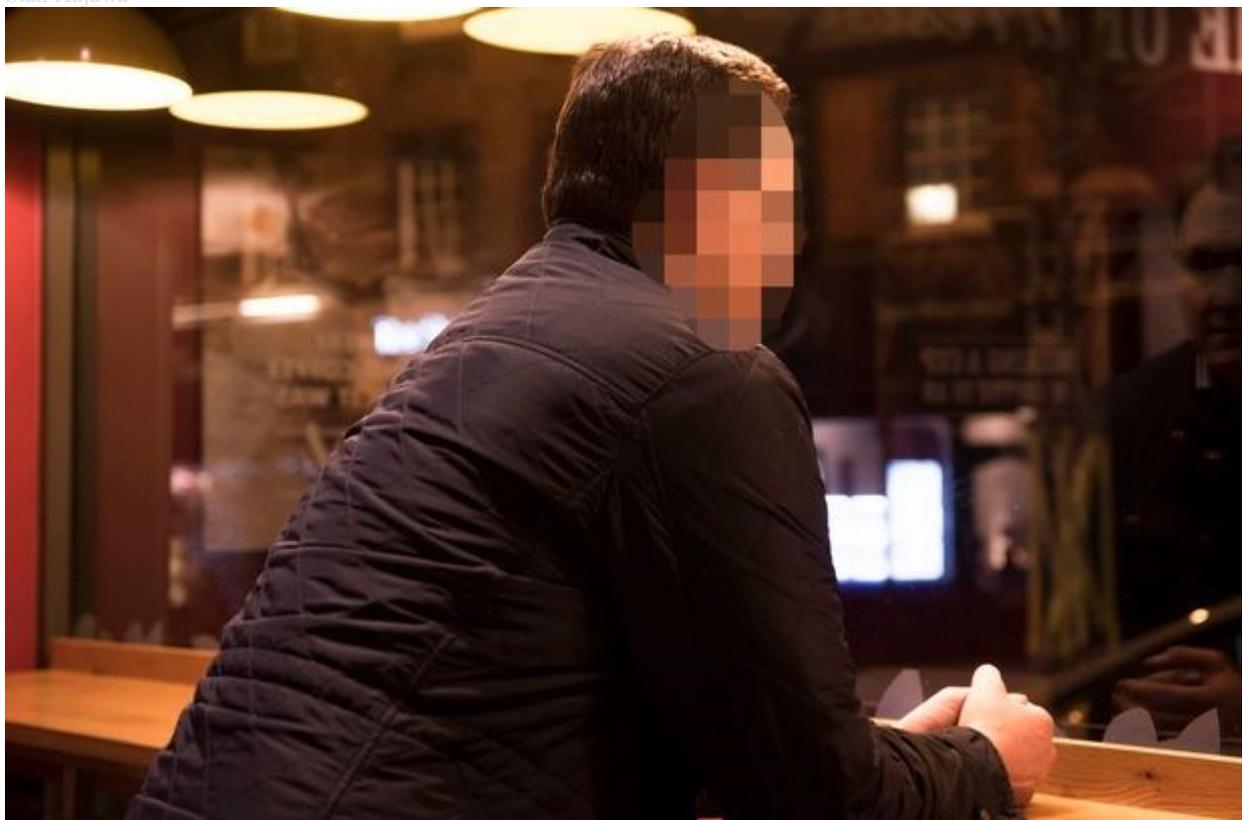
By the time he hit 50, James was lying in his own filth, drinking Special Brew in a dingy one-bedroom flat. And he knows he’d be dead if he hadn’t found his way to AA five years ago.

The fellowship of AA began in 1935 in Akron, Ohio, when Bill Wilson met Dr Robert Smith on a business trip.

Both alcoholics, they found that by sharing their experiences they could help each other.

By 1939 the fellowship published its textbook – now known as the Big Book – and the organisation’s development was rapid.

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The NHS estimates nine per cent of British men and three per cent of women show signs of alcohol dependence, with 10.8 million adults drinking at levels dangerous to their health.

In the UK alone, almost 5,000 AA groups meet in church halls, community centres, hospitals, prisons, former courts, even the House of Commons.

It's free to attend. Anyone with an addiction to alcohol can join, but access for non-members is virtually unheard of as anonymity is key.

The Sunday Mirror has been given permission to attend this meeting in Beckenham, South London, on the basis we don't identify anyone.

Members share stories of their very personal battle as they work through a 12-step programme of acceptance and change to achieve lasting sobriety.

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Recovery involves admitting they are powerless over alcohol and making amends to those who have been harmed by their drinking.

New members are encouraged to find a sponsor – another recovering alcoholic to help guide them.

Rob, a building trade worker in his late 40s, gave up drinking 22 years ago after booze landed him in jail and drove him to [the brink of suicide](#) .

Lisa, a publicist, will celebrate 12 years of sobriety this May. She used to sink five bottles of wine a day.

“I was killing myself,” she admits. “I found AA and the compulsion to drink left me. I found a power in the rooms of AA like nothing else and this helped me to a new life.”

Stan Kujawa



In three months, supermarket worker Natalie blew £10,000 inheritance from her gran on alcohol

Supermarket worker Natalie, 22, would get drunk on the school bus and buy cheap lager at lunch. By 18, she was drinking an astonishing 48 bottles of Stella Artois a day.

In three months, she blew £10,000 inheritance from her gran on alcohol. She nods in recognition as barrister James tells how he first got a taste for alcohol aged 10, after sipping a light ale on Christmas Day.

Natalie later tells me: “My friends called me the girl who could drink anyone under the table and I wore it as a badge of honour.

“By 18, my relationship with my parents was falling apart. Whole days disappeared. Only when I was arrested did I realise how addicted I was.

“My mum was devastated and sobbed as she begged me to get help. She checked me into the Priory and I haven’t had a drink since. It’s only because

of AA that I've been able to stay off alcohol. I've now got a job and I'm at college."

Next to Natalie sits Danielle, 31, a stylish charity worker.

Stan Kujawa



The NHS estimates nine per cent of British men and three per cent of women show signs of alcohol dependence. She speaks of frequent blackouts and says: "I had no respect for myself or my body. I'd wake up not knowing where I'd been, what I'd done, who I'd been with. At university I'd sit in lectures drinking vodka from a water bottle.

"Every morning, I woke up wishing I'd died in my sleep. I'd reach for the vodka. I have a memory of collapsing on my mum's lap sobbing nine years ago. She was crying too and telling me it was breaking her heart.

"Next day I went to AA. I've now been sober for nearly eight years. I'm so grateful to have been shown how to live again, and for a deep sense of peace."

Jennifer, a 42-year-old mortgage adviser, nods in agreement. Drinking left her £20,000 in debt before she gave up in 2009.

She says: "I hated nights out because no one could keep up. I'd say I was going to the toilet and sneak to the bar to do a round of shots on my own.

“One day I woke up with yet another brutal hangover and thought, ‘I have a problem’. I went to my first AA meeting that day and I haven’t drunk since.”

Stan Kujawa



AA meetings allow people to share and relate across professions and lifestyles

Despite their awful experiences, these people insist they are the lucky ones. At the end they join hands in a circle to recite the “serenity prayer”.

As they part, many hug and kiss the great friends they have made. Some have found love. One woman met her partner through AA and tells me she wouldn’t want to kiss anyone with alcohol on their breath.

James, too, has a new girlfriend he met at AA and has started practising criminal law again.

At his lowest point he spent six weeks in hospital. Staff sent him to AA and James is eternally grateful.

He adds: "I might not be the kind of person you think of when you hear the word alcoholic, but these meetings have literally saved my life."

For help call Alcoholics Anonymous on freephone 0800 9177 650 or contact help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk