



## **MANY PATHWAYS OF RECOVERY**

In this, the second installment in our “**Many Pathways of Recovery,**” series, guest columnist, Julie Dostal writes about what has traditionally been the most widely recognized path, Mutual Aid Groups.

### ***Stay With the Herd***

While the term “herd mentality” is often perceived as a negative, for a significant number of people in recovery from addiction, the herd mentality can be lifesaving. In fact, finding a stable support group is a crucial step to finding recovery from the disease of addiction. And, sticking together through good times and bad is essential to learning the skills necessary for sustaining that recovery. People in long-term recovery have the opportunity to teach those who are newest to the group. In fact, mentoring and leading by example are at the core of the group’s value system.

It should therefore be no surprise that the phrase, “Stay with the Herd” is repeated at many addiction recovery support groups. In nature, smart animals that stick with the herd are the least likely to be picked off by predators. Furthermore, the most vulnerable of the species are protected when they stay in the center of the herd. Similarly, members of a support group do well when they stick with the herd; and the newer, more vulnerable members are safest when they surround themselves with those members that have been with the herd longer. In short, it makes sense that if joining a support group is a strategy one has chosen in pursuing recovery, staying well connected to the group maximizes the benefit of that strategy.

For most of the population, the terms “support group” and “recovery” used in the same sentence can only mean one thing: [Alcoholics Anonymous](#). Yet, many would be surprised to find that recovery support groups actually date back much further than AAs’ founding in 1935. To the best of our knowledge, the very first sobriety support group started in the mid 1700’s. Native Americans began to meet in [Sobriety Circles](#) which followed in the tradition of “wounded healers” —the belief that recovery from a devastating illness is the sign of a healer.

Similar groups by a variety of names followed, including [The Washingtonians](#), [The Oxford Group](#), and the [Order of Good Templars](#). While the groups differed in various ways, they had a common belief: There is nothing more healing than sharing the recovery journey with someone who has been there and lived to tell about it. For a more complete history of mutual aid groups and societies, please see [Bill White's papers on history and chronology](#).

Currently there are many [mutual aid groups](#) available to those who are recovering (or seeking recovery) from the disease of addiction. As a woman in long term recovery, I am grateful that they are out there and so plentiful. Sometime in the late spring of 1992, I made a phone call to a friend who attended a local mutual aid group and told her that I needed help. I was immediately welcomed into the herd and frankly, spent a lot of time at the center of that herd. Now, as a "senior" member of a group, I have the honor and privilege of lending support and encouragement to those who come in the doors just as frail and vulnerable as I was nearly twenty-four years ago. While my recovery has included additional components like therapy and my faith community, it began (and continues) in the caring, wise, and loving company of other people in recovery.

In addition to support and encouragement, mutual aid groups have solid plans for members to practice on their journey to (and throughout) recovery. For example, the "anonymous" groups, have the twelve steps and twelve traditions; [Smart Recovery](#) has its four points; [Celebrate Recovery](#) has twelve steps and eight principles.

We know that the impact of addiction is far-reaching. Often it's not only the individuals struggling with addiction who are hurt. It's the spouses, the parents, the children, the siblings. Addiction is a family disease and family members need their own support to cope with their loved one's addiction, as well as their recovery. Fortunately, there are also mutual aid groups that exist specifically for families and other loved ones of people with addictions. The most well-known is [Al-Anon](#), which was started by [Lois Wilson](#), the wife of AA founder, [Bill Wilson](#). There is also [Nar-Anon](#), and a variety of groups exclusively for the children or parents of someone with a substance use disorder.

Countless millions of people from throughout the world owe their lives or the lives of a loved one to the acceptance, love and support they found in recovery support groups. The groups are free, there is a common goal, they do not have political agendas, they have tried and tested recovery maintenance strategies, and they all reinforce their belief that the person with addiction does not have struggle or suffer alone. This quote from [Narcotics Anonymous](#) sums it up perfectly: "We feel that our approach to the disease of addiction is completely realistic, for the therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel."

*About the writer:*

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