

4.3 Mutual supports help sustain treatment gains

Findings Latest reports from the Los Angeles Target Cities Project suggest that attendance at mutual aid groups improves and sustains outcomes from compatible forms of treatment.

The findings derive from the city's six-month outpatient drug-free programmes which saw mainly stimulant users [Nugget 3.7](#). During or after treatment three-quarters of clients attended 12-step based meetings and most attended at least weekly, raising the issue of how far the outcomes were due to this support. Based on intake and eight-month (ie, shortly after treatment had ended) follow-up interviews, report ① found that attending 12-step meetings at least weekly during and after treatment improved the chances of a client remaining abstinent from illegal drugs by about 50%, even after taking into account the severity of drug problems, motivation for treatment, time in treatment, and whether treatment was completed. Report ② revealed a similar effect for post-treatment attendance, as long as this was at least weekly. Compared to less regular/non-attenders, about half as many weekly attenders had used alcohol or drugs in the six months before the two-year follow-up. If they went on to attend meetings weekly, during the same period just 20% of treatment drop-outs used drugs; in contrast, 41% of clients who completed treatment but did *not* attend at least weekly used drugs. Report ③ found that abstinence during and after treatment was strongly associated with a conviction that 'successful' use of a drug to which one has become addicted is impossible. No other 12 step beliefs were associated with abstinence even though some did promote attendance at meetings.

In context Apparently contradictory findings from the DATOS study ([Nugget 4.2](#)) could be due to the fact that the programmes in Los Angeles were more consistently 12-step based. In DATOS and other studies, the benefits of 12-step groups have been most apparent among clients whose initial treatment was also 12-step oriented. Two factors seem to have been important. The first was gaining support for one's treatment goal through regular contact with others who shared that goal. The second was a conviction that achieving that goal was essential to one's recovery from addiction. Other ways of gaining support (eg, from family, friends, or other clients) are also effective for the same or for other goals, but may not be available to addicts who have become isolated from non-drug using contacts.

Practice implications Especially where treatment is 12-step based, facilitating frequent attendance at groups such as Narcotics Anonymous augments the gains made during treatment and helps sustain these after it has ended. Even those less motivated to remain abstinent can benefit. Patterns of attendance at meetings set early in treatment tend to remain stable and those who drop out of treatment can nevertheless benefit from the meetings – arguments for introducing clients to 12-step groups early.

Only clients who attend at least weekly benefit, [LINKS](#) [Nuggets 4.11 4.2 3.7](#) a finding which could be used to encourage regular attendance. Tactics which maximise uptake include emphasising the importance of mutual support and persistently encouraging attendance, and proactively putting clients in contact with a local group member who prompts and facilitates attendance. Simply telling clients about the meetings will probably mean that many who could have benefited will not attend.

Alternative groups which do not entail admission of dependence on external forces (whether a higher power or the group itself) would probably attract more people and be just as effective as NA.

Featured studies ① Fiorentine R., *et al.* "Drug treatment and 12-step program participation. The additive effects of integrated recovery activities." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*: 2000, 18, p. 65–74 ② Fiorentine R. "After drug treatment: are 12-step programs effective in maintaining abstinence?" *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*: 1999, 25(1), p. 93–116 ③ Fiorentine R., *et al.* "Exploring the additive effects of drug misuse treatment and twelve-step program involvement. Does twelve-step ideology matter?" *Substance Use and Misuse*: 2000, 25(3), p. 367–397. Copies: for all apply DrugScope.

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