

## BACK TO BASICS FOR ADDICTS

*The Muckers say A.A. has lost its course.*

"Up there," says James, a slim, muscular Bay Street executive in his early 40s, as he points to a gleaming office tower in Toronto's financial district. "That's where I work. Up on the 50th floor." On a noon-hour stroll through a downtown park, James admits that he is lucky to still hold a job anywhere. For years, he confides quietly, he was addicted to cocaine, a problem he kept concealed from his blue chip employer. At the height of his addiction, he confesses, he routinely blew \$1,000 a weekend on the potent white powder. By Monday morning, he was exhausted, often unable to work. But a year ago, after numerous attempts to quit, James turned to a small but growing self-help organization called The Muckers Anonymous Inc. "My cravings went away and never returned," he says. "It was like someone with terminal cancer waking up one day to discover the disease was gone. It was remarkable."

There is, however, nothing remarkable about the Muckers' technique. According to a 52 year old recovered alcoholic named Jim who helped start the Toronto-based group in early 1995, the Muckers rely on intense study of the 57-year-old book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, known to A.A. adherents as the Big Book, and the Twelve Step approach outlined in the first 103 pages. Nevertheless, the group has become embroiled in a dispute with A.A. and several other self-help groups that resembles a battle between fundamentalists and mainstream Christians. Among other things, those groups say that the Muckers, so named because they frequently

muck up the Big Book by underlining key passages and phrases, have a zealous approach to recovery from addiction that excludes anything but the twelve step method. "There's a huge backlash from the established groups," says James.

Last fall, A.A. representatives in Toronto removed the Muckers from their list of approved groups after discovering that their meetings covered various kinds of addictions, rather than just alcoholism. In May, A.A. ousted two members from elected positions as co-ordinators of treatment center meetings because they had been espousing the Muckers' philosophy. Representatives of A.A. are reluctant to comment on the Muckers or to discuss the relative merits of their approaches. "The Big Book hasn't changed," said Ron, a high-ranking official for eastern and central Ontario. "Its worked for almost sixty years."

Some treatment centers have also rejected the Muckers. Alpha House Inc., a rehabilitation facility treating various addictions, has instructed staff and residents to avoid the Muckers. "The bottom line is that Muckers seem to be obsessed with their way being the only way," stated a memo to employees. On the other hand, the Donwood Institute, a well established, Toronto recovery facility, has allowed the Muckers to hold weekly meetings, which Donwood clients can attend. "Some of them found it quite helpful," says Dennis James, vice-president of the Donwood health recovery program.

The Muckers contend that they are maintaining the original traditions of A.A.. They charge that

A.A. has drifted away from the Big Book and the 12-step approach that its founders, Bill Wilson, a New York City stockbroker, and Bob Smith, a physician from Ohio, developed in the mid-1930s to cope with their own alcoholism. According to the Muckers, many A.A. groups pay lip service to the sanctity of the Big Book but no longer insist that a recovering alcoholic must use it. "A.A.'s message has become broader and diluted," says John, a 35-year-old alcoholic, drug addict and staunch Mucker. "We stick to the original text."

The cornerstone of the Mucker approach is called "booking," in which a member of the group works one-on-one with a recovering alcoholic or addict. They spend up to three hours a day, usually over a two-to-three-week period, studying the Big Book, line by line and phrase by phrase. Among other things, the recovering addict must admit personal failings and weaknesses and make amends to people he has harmed through his addiction. Some Muckers who belonged to A.A.

say they became disenchanted by that organization's move away from its original policy of one-on-one therapy in favour of personal or group study. And some longtime A.A. members confirm the trend. "You just don't see a lot of people going through the book one-on-one anymore," said Gord, who has belonged to A.A. for 35 years.

The Muckers have been booking about 100 people a month, according to Jim, and the fellowship now has about 2,000 members, almost all in the Toronto area. Some recently recovered addicts say they have experienced moments of profound spiritual contentment while being booked. "I had this sense of absolute peace," recalls Tory, a film-maker in his mid-30s who was battling alcoholism and heroin addiction. "I couldn't see anything or hear anything. It was almost like the first few seconds of a drug overdose." Since then, Tory says, he has not been tormented by his old cravings. And for that, he is both relieved and grateful.

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