

Very Personal Computing Alcoholics log on

Alice hadn't taken a drink in four months. Even so, she was afraid to venture out at night for fear that the temptations of an active social life might pull her back into the bottle. "I knew I had a problem with alcohol, but I was adverse to going to an A.A. meeting," says the 43-year-old computer consultant from California. Instead she holed up with her home computer, logging on to various electronic bulletin boards late into the night. Through a modem, or phone hookup, she began frequenting the cathode-ray-lit meeting places where hackers from all over the country go to share tips and small talk on subjects ranging from the latest programs to new hardware. But one bulletin board offered something quite different from the usual technical fare - it offered hope with intensely personal messages left by others who had fought their way back from the depths of dependency. Day after day, Alice dialed up the bulletin board, and when the menu on the screen asked her to choose a "message base," she selected the one for Alcoholics Anonymous. At first she just read the message that scrolled past, but eventually she began typing in her own words, expressing her own jumbled feelings about who she is and how to stay straight.

'Instant meeting': The personal computer, which seems to have influenced every practical area of modern living, is now touching the most personal of problems - addiction. Set up and maintained by computer enthusiasts, roughly 50 electronic bulletin boards in North America now carry the message of A.A. and other self-

help groups, including Narcotics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous. At the push of a finger, a user can tap into A.A.'s complete library of recovery advice (for only the price of a phone call). And best of all, he can remain completely anonymous - to other users as well as anyone who might walk by the computer while he is logged on. "It's an instant meeting," says Bob E., whose Sober Way Out board in Miami gets 300 calls monthly. "you can be reading A.A. literature on your desk in the middle of a busy office and nobody will ever know."

The biggest bulletin-board draw is the message bases where faceless callers post their own stories and share advice with revealing intimacy. "if I'm feeling down and out I can type in a note about something that is gnawing at me and send it out," says Bob E. "Just the act of typing it in is cathartic. And the feedback you get is amazing." The boards are particularly helpful to people in rural communities. Linda G., from a Midwest farming town, says the boards give her a chance to communicate with other recovering women, since the members of her local A.A. group are mostly male. "There's a lot of junk you can't share with other guys," she says. Bill McVay, an addictions counselor based in Edmonton, Canada, has even set up a bulletin board for Indian alcoholics who live on far-flung reservations.

Experienced computer users know the boards aren't a substitute for a face-to-face A.A. meeting. But they're a good tool to help break down a newcomer's denial. Alice, who is approaching two years sober, credits the boards with luring her out of isolation. After

six weeks on the computer, she finally gave in to the urgings of one of her fellow users. "Sobriety doesn't have to be white knuckled," the message read. "Why not let me take you to a meeting?" When Alice attended her first A.A. session

outside her home, her computer friend was at her side. "If I hadn't logged on," she says, "I'm sure I never would have gotten to a meeting."

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Source: NEWSWEEK, Vol. 114, P.64, August 28, 1989.