

Online support groups for substance abuse not as effective as meetings for maintaining sobriety

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Despite the growing use of online support groups such as those on Facebook to help curb substance abuse, attending traditional face-to-face meetings may continue to be more effective for people trying to maintain sobriety, according to research presented at the American Psychological Association's 123rd Annual Convention.

"One of the most hotly debated media issues today is whether our rapidly increasing use of social networking might be supplanting face-to-face interactions and, if so, what the social consequences might prove for us as a culture," said Donald S. Grant, PhD, Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, first author and creator of the study. "Our study focused on better understanding the strengths and weaknesses of online versus face-to-face sobriety support."

Using Facebook and other online social media platforms, Grant and co-author Karen Dill-Shackleford, PhD, also of Fielding Graduate University, recruited 196 adults (141 female, 55 male) who reported using both in-person and online sobriety support systems. Participants were primarily Caucasian (86 percent) and ranged in age from 18 to older than 60 years of age. Over 90 percent of the [participants](#) reported having been in recovery for more than a year.

Participants completed a survey designed to measure their beliefs, behaviors and opinions regarding both face-to-face and online sobriety support systems. While the results showed that participants in general continued to prefer fact-to-face meetings, there was an increase in online use that corresponded with a moderate decrease in meeting attendance. Individuals who attended more meetings had greater success in achieving and maintaining sobriety, the research found.

One finding that may help explain the lower success rate of online support programs was that participants reported they were less likely to be dishonest in meetings than online, according to Grant. A commitment to honesty is a bedrock principle of 12-step programs, including Alcoholics Anonymous, and a tendency toward dishonesty could jeopardize recovery.

While it did not appear to have any bearing on the outcomes of this study, the researchers said they were surprised to find that participants were significantly more likely to be drunk or high during in-person meetings than while engaging online. Because the study revealed better outcomes for face-to-face versus online sobriety, this discovery may seem paradoxical, said Grant. But the only requirement for Alcoholics Anonymous membership is a desire to stop drinking. First-timers, those who have relapsed and individuals wishing to be sober but still struggling are all welcome to attend. Therefore, the result may make sense.

Grant called the research important because although the data do not indicate a significant shift from [meetings](#) to online support groups yet, they do suggest that a move in that direction is happening and it is important to understand what that can mean for outcomes of individuals seeking help.

"With more and more people engaging in online sobriety support, the recovering community and professionals alike wonder what impact these modern platforms could have on both the future of Alcoholics Anonymous and its membership," said Grant. "When comparing the short amount of time online sobriety support has even been accessible to the number of those participants currently engaging with it, the likelihood that its popularity will only grow seems probable."

More information: Session 1163: "Using Social Media for Sobriety Recovery? Preferences, Beliefs Behaviors and Surprises from Users of Online and Social Media Sobriety Support" Symposium, Thursday Aug. 6, 11 - 11:50 a.m. EDT, Room 709, South Building, Metro Toronto Convention Centre, 255 Front St. West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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