
As reviewed by Shelley J. Korshak, M.D.

Mark D. Schenker’s *A Clinician’s Guide to 12-Step Recovery: Integrating 12-Step Programs into Psychotherapy* attempts to explain twelve step recovery for clinicians, and he is successful. This is a well-written, well-organized and thorough discussion, a good introduction to twelve step recovery.

Clinical work is an art highly dependent on the particular talents of the therapist, and Dr. Schenker, a psychologist by training, is at his best when he takes the clinician through the early stages of the work with an addict or an alcoholic. He lays out the process in a simple way with clear and cogent arguments for the reader, arguments which are potentially convincing also for the patient, giving the clinician a guide for implementing therapy in a way that successfully bridges the patient, particularly an alcoholic or an addict, from psychotherapy into twelve step recovery programs.

Dr. Schenker further tells the background history of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, beginning with the personal story of Bill Wilson’s experience with recovery. He offers a thorough presentation of the key elements of the twelve step program: the steps and the traditions, what happens at a meeting, the role of a sponsor, twelve step slogans or aphorisms, and program literature. He largely deciphers program jargon so that a therapist can begin learning the twelve step language. He conveys the how the program offers the alcoholic and addict multiple avenues for recovery; for example, for some members, merely participating in the social aspect of the fellowship is enough for achieving and sustaining sobriety. He reviews the literature of what others have said about AA and Nicotine Anonymous, both psychotherapists and researchers, and he discusses how their ideas apply to these programs. He also deftly integrates the work of some major psychotherapists, including Irving Yalom, Jerome Frank, Alfred Adler, D.W. Winnicott, and others, and he clarifies the ways in which twelve step programs accomplish what these and other theorists have said is necessary for healing and transformation. He addresses some major criticisms of twelve step recovery,
drawing on research studies in his discussions, and he describes selected alternative recovery programs, as well.

The spiritual awakening from twelve step recovery, the transformative experience for those who attain it—possibly every therapist’s dream for all the patients—is difficult to put into words, and Dr. Schenker falls short of conveying the wonder and awe that can be part of recovery in general and twelve step recovery in particular. He discloses that he is not an addict, and presumably he is not in recovery himself. He cautions the reader that learning about twelve step recovery from outside the fellowship can be a “dry, academic experience” (Schenker, 2009, p. 36), and much of his writing is explanatory rather than inspiring. However, when he discusses the experience of personal transformation commonly achieved by many members of twelve step recovery, he quotes Roshi Phillip Kapleau saying, for the participant “dryness, rigidity, and self-centeredness give way to flowing warmth, resiliency and compassion, self-indulgence and fear are transmuted into self-mastery and courage” (Schenker, 2009, p. 155). He also quotes Shunryu Suzuki saying, “AA spirituality may be viewed as a home-grown American form of Zen Buddhism, in which everyday consciousness contains its own transcendence, and down-to-earth pragmatic actions are the key to liberation” (Schenker, 2009, p. 33).

More important, in discussing the rightful place of the therapist in the recovery of patients, Dr. Shenker falls short of fully understanding and conveying what can happen when psychotherapy and twelve step recovery are integrated into a comprehensive treatment plan. He says, referring to Stephanie Brown, “the individual clinician working with a (client) should regard his or her work as ancillary to the work occurring in the fellowship” (Schenker, 2009, p. 97). He correctly notes that the humble role of “coaching” some patients who are more involved with the program than their psychotherapy is entirely appropriate, particularly for those in the early stages of their recovery. However, many patients who are in twelve step recovery can use individual, family or group psychotherapy to help them access and express their anger and other feelings, or identify their defensive styles and change their patterns. Conversely, many
patients who are without any DSMIV diagnosable addiction also use a variety of twelve step programs (including Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al-anon, Codependents Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, and Workaholics Anonymous) with varying degrees of involvement, adjunctive to their psychotherapy. The twelve step community offers an array of tools, guidelines and relational experiences which can fill the needs of a range of patients, offering the clinician an opportunity to use various components of these programs to design a comprehensive treatment plan to facilitate the changes that therapists want for their patients and that patients want for themselves. Dr. Schenker underestimates both the potential relevance of twelve step recovery for non-addicts and non-alcoholics, and of psychotherapy for those who suffer from alcoholism and addictions. He has argued many salient points in the very promising conversation about how to integrate twelve step recovery and psychotherapy, and, as he says, that conversation is far from over.

Dr. Schenker’s book is a seminal work: a good introduction, and a pragmatic guide for those clinicians, researchers and theorists who are in the beginning stages of working with clients with addictions, and for those who are on the outside of the twelve step recovery community wanting an understanding of the principles and tools of the program. It is a good contribution to the field of psychotherapy: a clear, concise way to learn about the basic theory and practice of twelve step recovery, and for many clinicians and theorists, an entry into a new conversation about healing, growth and personal transformation, as well as sobriety and abstinence.
