



“Mutual-Help Groups – They Certainly Work!”

European Mutual-Help
Network for Alcohol-Related Problems

Greeting from EMNA President

EMNA is a voluntary not for profit organisation with the aim of promoting self-help methods in the area of alcohol related problems. EMNA was established in Brussels 5th June 2004 and had been operating as an informal practice network until 2012, when it became registered as a non-profit organisation.

The “European mutual help network for alcohol related problems”, EMNA, combines 14 different self-help organizations for addicts and their families from 10 European countries, supporting around half a million people.

Our self-help organisations offer support to individuals and families affected by alcohol related problems. Mostly volunteer-run but in a professional way, each of our members offers a unique service.

Whilst the ways of working in each community is different, the success of mutual-aid is provable: with continued attendance in a self-help group, about 70 to 80 per cent of those attending with an alcohol problem remain abstinent. Part of this success is due to the support structure the group offers. With pride and joy we can therefore write about our work: Certainly it works!

Heinz-Josef Janssen, President of EMNA



The Benefits of Self-Help Groups

“They certainly work” – That is the summary of the benefits of self-help groups in the field of problems with alcohol, drugs, gambling etc. Self-help and mutual help works not only for the individual but for the partners, children and the whole family as well. Even the workplace, community and wider society benefit from recovery and changes in lifestyle.

“It made me strong, brave and most of all proud of myself, because there are people around to whom I matter and they take me the way I am.”
Member, The Netherlands

To participate in self-help groups is a very effective form of intervention when it comes to problems or addiction with substances or behaviour. It can be a catalyst, which will activate self-determination to solve the problems. Attending the group helps individuals understand the reasons behind the substance use and very effectively helps them regain responsibility for their own lives. Together it is possible to change life and find ways to solve problems, improve communication and find a better life.

Consumption of alcohol and other drugs represents a real big problem in many work places. In many cases employees and their experiences can be a real value to the company. If an employee with (former) alcohol or drug problems recovers and is stabilised on long term by attending self-help groups he/she even gives example for others in the company and helps to de-stigmatise problems with alcohol and drugs or behavioural disorders.

Society and community benefit in many ways. First of all, society gains back responsible and social engaged citizens.

Mutual-help groups give example that people are able to solve huge problems by sharing their experiences and by learning on each other examples. And a lot of participants in self-help groups who are attending these groups on long term are starting to take

over responsibility for others or initiate new groups. They help themselves by helping others – a principle called helper-therapy-principle! Self-help groups are low in cost and are supported by committed volunteers. The groups and the people involved are working together with the professional field and are building networks in community and society. And: They certainly work!

Wiebke Schneider, Guttempler in Deutschland

“Without my self-help group I would not be where I am today. Through the group I have become much closer to myself and learned to know myself better.”

Member, Germany

Scientific Evidence for Self-Help Groups

The effectiveness of self-help is based on conversations between similarly affected people, particularly when participating in self-help groups (SHGs), during social events in a group, or during counselling (Borgetto, 2004). Communication not only serves to exchange information but also strengthens social relationships and contribute to patient education and to changes in attitude in the affected patients and their social environment (ibid).

“Self-help communication” is based on the “experienced and suffered expertise” of the affected people, and should be distinguished in four dimensions of communication: exchanging experiences, conveying information, verbalising feelings, and holding conversations without specific purpose (see Daum, 1984, Borgetto et al., 2008). These dimensions are associated with various mechanisms of action known from stress research and psychotherapy research, for instance model-based learning, self-discovery, mutual emotional support, broadening of the individual knowledge base, processing of the past, etc. (see Matzat, 1999, Borgetto, 2004).

Direct evidence of salutogenic and tertiary preventive effects of SHGs has also been found, including better coping with and reduction of addictions and other health-impairing behaviors, alleviation of depression and depressive symptoms, improvement of subjective well-being, self-confidence, and quality of life, as well as better coping with diseases and disabilities. The effects of conversation-based SHGs have been found to be comparable with those of group psychotherapy (Daum, 1984).

To date, literally hundreds of studies and several reviews, of which at least five comprise meta-analyses, have been conducted in SHGs for people with alcohol dependence. Most researchers agree that SHGs support achieving and sustaining abstinence from alcohol, in combination with professional interventions (additional or interaction effect) or on their own (mere SH-effect) (Moos 2008). As a result, these conclusions are often adopted in recommendations for clinical practice as well as in clinical guidelines.

Prof. Bernhard Borgetto

World Health Organisation: ***“Treatment involves more than routine medical diagnosis, hospitalised care or even the prescription of drugs... To this end several societies and organisations, specialising both in general health improvement as well as illness-specific objectives, offer support groups as integral components of treatment”***



EMNA is a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation with the aim of promoting self-help methods in the area of alcohol related problems. It has active members across Europe, supporting around half a million people.

To find out more or enquire about membership, visit:
www.emna.org

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EMNA Members:

