

The Higher Power Project

newsletter

Project Background

A Study of Contemporary Spirituality in Addiction and Twelve Step Recovery

The Higher Power Project is a qualitative study of the diversity of the language of Higher Power used by people in twelve-step recovery from addiction. The twelve step approach to recovery identifies the problem of addiction as rooted in the powerlessness of the individual over the substance or behaviour which is causing them or others harm. Given acceptance of this, an alternative power must be sought.

The twelve steps emerged in 1930s America, from a Christian context, and originally 'Higher Power' was understood in religious terms. Through an analysis of the language used by people in recovery, the Higher Power Project explores whether this remains the case today.

The Project seeks to generate a contemporary phenomenology of the language of Higher Power used



by those in twelve-step recovery, both in anonymous fellowships and in other treatment settings in the UK. The findings of the Project will be of value to the addictions treatment professions, criminal justice professions, social workers, health workers, local authorities and policy makers.

Funding Success

The Higher Power Project has recently received a grant of £25.8K from The Sir Halley Stewart Trust to enable it to continue its investigations of ideas of Higher Power used by those in twelve-step style recovery. This will enable the team to interview members of a range of twelve step fellowships

and those from different twelve-step treatment backgrounds about their experiences of Higher Power and ideas about spirituality.

The project has also received approximately £12K from the University of Chester for Research and Knowledge Transfer work.

Addiction

- *Addiction to alcohol costs the UK around £22bn per annum in health, welfare and social care and prison costs. (BBC)*
- *In 2010 there were 8,790 alcohol related deaths in the UK, and 1,784 deaths caused by drug abuse and the rates continue to rise. (Office of National Statistics)*
- *Expectation that more than 200,000 people will die prematurely of alcohol related liver disease in the next 20 years. Alcohol related liver disease mortality is increasing at a time when mortality from most other diseases is decreasing. (Lancet 2012)*
- *Addiction respects no boundaries of race, religion, social class, level of education or wealth.*
- *As well as damaging or destroying health, addiction damages individuals, families and communities.*



The research so far...

To date thirteen former residents at a twelve step addictions treatment centre have spoken at length with the project team about their recoveries, their sense of a Higher Power, how they work the Twelve Steps, and what they think about religion and spirituality.

Claims that the Twelve Steps are religious and claims that they are not religious are shown by the data to be equally inadequate.

"My wish to help another drunk is the key to my spiritual wellbeing." Huw

The Twelve Steps

There are many different addiction treatment methods, and not all understand the problem in this way. However, the 12-Step programme is based on the premise that the individual addict becomes personally powerless over their addiction and needs outside help to stop using drink, drugs or addictive behaviours. Addiction is seen as a complex condition with several components:

- Physical – an inability or powerlessness to stop drinking/using
- Mental – an overwhelming obsession/compulsion/craving to use/drink
- Spiritual – the loss of a sense of connection and ability to relate to others
- Emotional – the inability to manage emotions coupled with feelings of desperation and hopelessness

A new language of postmodern 'negotiated' spirituality must be found. Participants in the project all speak about a personal journey, in which they make their own sense of twelve step literature, the language of the fellowships and Higher Power in negotiation with their pre-existing world views and influences from literature, popular culture, abstinent friends and other significant individuals.

The Steps provide a framework that enables the addict to:

- Understand the nature of the addiction and its consequences
- Recognise that, with outside help, there is a solution and commit to the recovery programme
- Come to terms with the reality of their behaviour and its consequences for others
- Seek help to change themselves and their behaviour towards others
- Make amends for harm done to others
- Continue to develop (spiritually) by using a daily discipline and helping others

The 12-Step programme is abstinence based and individuals are initially supported by experienced members of the Anonymous Fellowships or professionals/support workers in Treatment Centres. Those that choose to continue to attend Fellowship meetings and work with others have a lower probability of relapse. (Humphreys, 2006)

My Higher Power is...

- ...not me! But everything I want to be*
- ...a power greater than myself that gives life*
- ...now a constant part of my life rather than something I happen to notice now and again...*
- ...closer to the spiritual sort, the Universal Spirit*
- ...God my keeper and God my creator*
- ...the spiritual force of good that binds the world on earth together through love*
- ...something bigger than me... well, ultimately something that's not me*
- ...the flow of energy in the universe, the creative force which brings life*
- ...personal and undogmatic*
- ...within all of us*
- ...the fellowship and friendship in AA*
- ...a loving presence that gives me a sense of connectedness with other people and the earth*

My Higher Power is] linked to my "inner self", and guides my path through life... I see the hand of a Higher Power in the miracles of recovery I have witnessed.

*I'm pleased to say I've been able to separate God from religion... it's not the archetypal fellow with the white robe, the grey beard and the halo over his head and all that s**t... [it's] caring, loving and only wants the best for me.*

I don't really talk about my Higher Power with other people. Part of this is because I cannot really articulate clearly what my High Power is but it is important to me and so I don't want to debate it.

...so when I'm working with other people it's not me that's doing it, it's my Higher Power, I'm trying not to use religious words here, but I'm only a vessel for what happens.

[My Higher Power] has evolved over the course of my recovery from a theistic being to whom I appealed and is now more of a loving presence that gives me a sense of connectedness with other people and the earth...

I don't need to go to church.

I feel that my spiritual awakening is more gradual rather than a flash. It is more about feeling better about myself, being able to relate to other people in a kinder way and starting to feel more at peace within.

I describe God in the feminine because my concept of 'life giver' is exclusively purported to the feminine of all species.



Outputs from the Higher Power Project

Conference

Addiction, a spiritual illness with a spiritual solution? (University of Chester, 14th March, 2012):

Inaugural conference of the Higher Power Project, co-hosted by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies and the Centre for Faiths and Public Policy. Speakers included Prof Chris Cook (Durham), Prof Jim Orford (Birmingham) and Dr Ashraf Khan (Birmingham Medical School).

Papers

Religion and (In)Equalities. British Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Study Group (University of Chester, 28th-30th March 2012):

Wendy Dossett presented a paper 'A consideration of the language of "Higher Power" in recovery'

Alternative Salvations. (University of Chester, 18th September 2012):

Wendy Dossett presented a short paper 'In return for a bottle and a hangover we have been given the Keys to the Kingdom' (The 'Big Book' Alcoholics Anonymous): Reflections on the language of salvation in twelve step recovery'

Emerging challenges in addiction psychiatry; Alcohol: harm, interventions and policy; The research base for Policy; Recovery. Society for the Study of Addictions Annual Symposium (York, 8th & 9th November 2012):

Wendy Dossett gave a paper entitled 'A consideration of the language of Higher Power as "post-modern negotiated spirituality'

London Buddhist Vihara. Women's Day Celebrations Dec 16th 2012

Wendy Dossett is giving a public lecture entitled 'Women, Addiction and Recovery: Some stories of hope and lovingkindness.'

Awareness Raising/Training

Rhosserchan Treatment Centre Reunion. Rhosserchan, Near Aberystwyth, 4th August 2012

Wendy Dossett and John Stoner attended to give informal feedback on the preliminary findings recruit further volunteers to participate in Phase 1 of the project.

Service user Celebration Day: Organised by Association of Voluntary Organisations Wrexham (AVOW) (Wrexham Memorial Hall, 5th October 2012)

Display of Higher Power Project preliminary findings, extending network of Service Providers and workshop participation ("Harm Reduction" and "What is Recovery") by John Stoner.

Awareness Raising Event hosted by Alcoholics Anonymous for Professionals and Assembly Members at the Senedd in Cardiff.

Presentations by three AA Board Members Networking and informal feedback on progress of research.

Addiction and Twelve Step Recovery. Awareness raising/training day for staff from Hafan Wen Detox Centre, CAIS, AVOW and representatives of AA (Hafan Wen, Wrexham, 21st November 2012.

Three training sessions were facilitated by John Stoner on:

- Twelve-Step recovery programmes as a process of change
- The spirituality, practice and experience of Twelve-Step programmes
- After-care and avoiding/overcoming relapse

Publications

Dossett, W (2013 forthcoming) 'Addiction, Spirituality and the Twelve Steps' in *International Social Work*. May, Vol. 56, No.2.

February 2013 Conference & Workshop with special guest Professor Keith Humphreys

FAITH-BASED SOLUTIONS TO ADDICTION

WEDNESDAY

20TH FEBRUARY 2013

9.30am – 4.30pm

Distinctive features of faith-based resources available to support recovery from addiction? To what extent do they intersect with other approaches such as TSF, CBT and MET?

Day Delegate Rate

(includes lunch and refreshments):

£80 waged / £25 unwaged

RECOVERY FROM ADDICTION: TRANSATLANTIC INTERPERSPECTIVES

7.30pm – 9.00pm

Prof Keith Humphreys Professor (Research) of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University: Recovery – the US Experience. Mark Gilman: Strategic Lead for the National Treatment Agency: Recovery – the UK Experience. Panel Discussion.

£10 waged / £5 unwaged

HIGHER POWER PROJECT PRACTITIONERS' SEMINAR

THURSDAY

21ST FEBRUARY 2013

9.15am – 4.30pm

Twelve Step recovery programmes – Contemporary spirituality and some available resources.

Recovery is back on the political and policy agenda. What is Twelve-Step Facilitation (TSF) and does it have a role to play in delivering recovery in the new political and organisational landscape?

Day Delegate rate to include lunch and refreshments:

£80 waged / £25 unwaged

Booking

Early booking is advised as places are limited. Please register by January 31st at the latest with Carly McEvoy, c.mcevoy@chester.ac.uk. Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ. Telephone: 01244 511031

Keep in touch with the project

www.chester.ac.uk/higherpowerproject

higherpowerproject@chester.ac.uk

07917 092757

Follow us on Twitter
[@higherpowerproj](https://twitter.com/higherpowerproj)



*"I was told that the spiritual life
was not a theory, I had
to live it." Helen*

Volunteer for the research?

The Higher Power Project team is looking for volunteers who work the twelve Steps as part of their recovery programme and have six months or more clean time or sobriety. Participants will receive a questionnaire and a follow-up a thirty minute phone call from a member of the project team, to talk about their answers in greater depth.

If you would like to volunteer to participate in this study, please send an email to higherpowerproject@chester.ac.uk. Please include the email address of a fellowship member or counsellor who knows that your length of clean time/sobriety is six months or longer, and is willing to vouch for this. Please ask their permission first before including their address.

More from our data so far....

I cannot rely on my own will and direction and that I must actively seek the guidance of and connection with a natural force outside of myself.

I pray rarely as I'm not sure to what I'm praying, but I do pray, especially when I am struggling with resentments and deep feelings of loneliness.

I feel that my conception of my Higher Power as connection/connectedness is my path to spiritual health and consequently, continued sobriety.

[my sense] of a Higher Power can change day by day. I describe God in the feminine because my concept of 'life giver' is exclusively purported to the feminine of all species.

With thanks to the
organisations supporting
the Project

The Sir Halley Stewart Trust

**The Centre for
Faiths and Public Policy,
University of Chester**

**The Centre for
Research into the
Environment and Health**

Alcohol Research UK



Dr Wendy Dossett

PhD, PGCE, PGCertHE



Prof John Stoner

OBE, PhD, MCIWEM, FIFM

The Team • Wendy is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies and John is a Professor of the Environment and Human Health. They are a couple as well as a professional team. Wendy and John have a combined experience of nearly twenty years of working with addicts and alcoholics in recovery, and have worked at a residential drug and alcohol addiction twelve step treatment centre in West Wales. The Higher Power Project is also helped by volunteers whose skills and efforts are gratefully acknowledged.