

AlcoholNZ article

Title

Online recovery – Open, accessible, powerful

At a glance

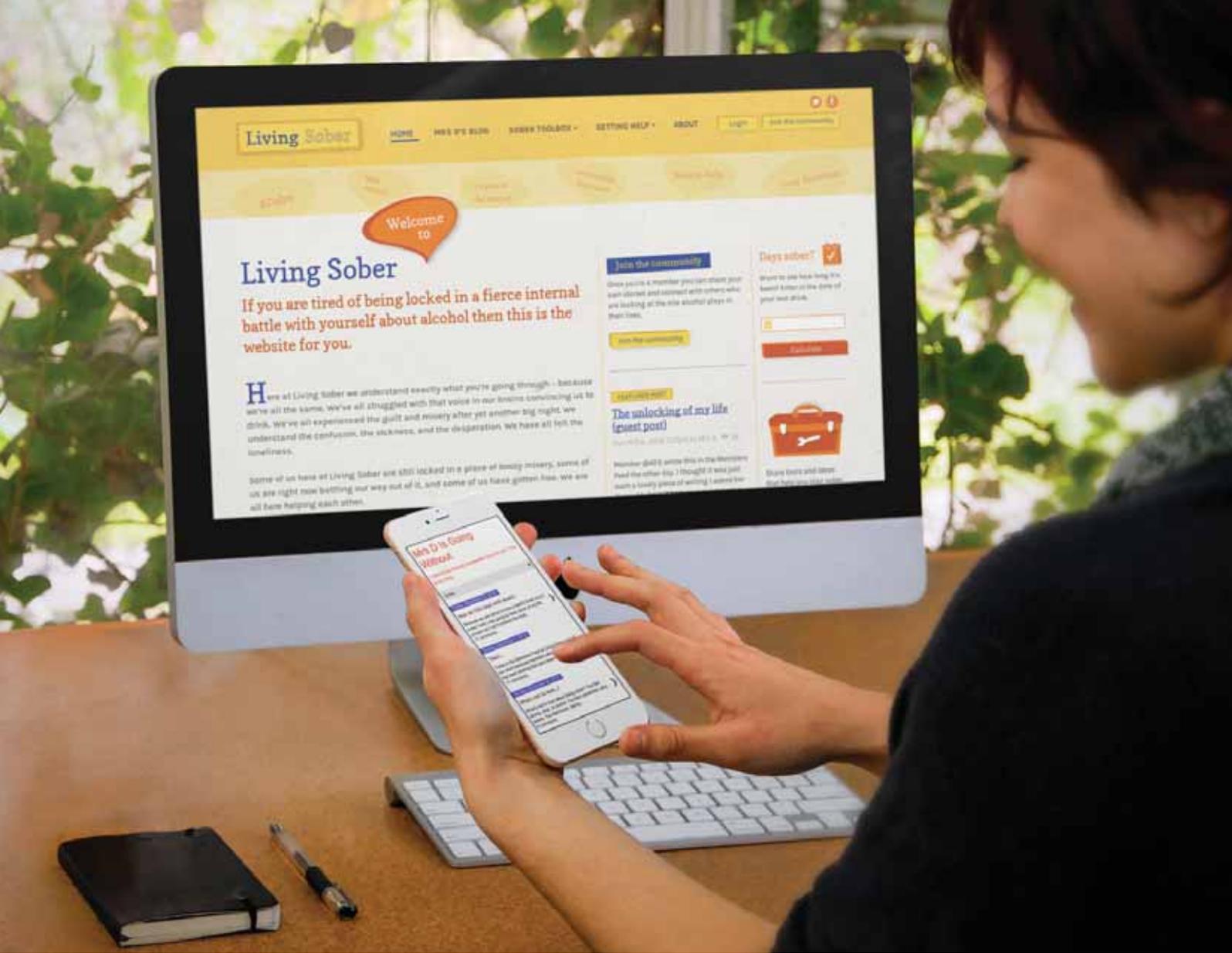
- This article was published in print form in HPA's January 2015 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz).
- Lotta Dann is the author. She draws on her personal experience and expertise in managing an online consumer recovery website to discuss:
 - online recovery
 - her personal story of how she got sober with the help of an online community
 - learnings from starting and managing an online community recovery forum – Living Sober (livingsober.org.nz)
 - the key benefits of online recovery
 - useful blogs and websites.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the named author of the article.



Online recovery

Open, accessible, powerful

The following article has been prepared by
Lotta Dann.

Introduction

I spent the first 20 years of my professional life working as a journalist, TV producer, director and reporter, writer, and researcher. I have a communications degree from the Christchurch Institute of Technology and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Auckland. I am a wife, and a mother to three young sons.

I am also an alcoholic who has been in recovery for over three years. I write a popular sober blog called 'Mrs D Is Going Without' and recently had a recovery memoir of the same name published by Allen & Unwin. I currently manage the community recovery website 'Living Sober', which is supported by the Health Promotion Agency, Matua Raki – National Addiction Workforce Development Centre, and the New Zealand Drug Foundation.

In this article I will explain how I got sober with the help of an online community and outline in detail what I understand the key benefits of online recovery to be.

What is online recovery?

At its most basic level, online recovery involves the coming together of addicts online. There is a powerful and growing network of blogs and community forums online which are helping thousands of addicts around the world get and stay sober.

Individuals can choose to participate in online recovery to varying degrees, but most commonly participation involves addicts sharing about their personal struggle and supporting and interacting with others who are doing the same. There are many reasons why online recovery is beneficial – the two most fundamental being the power of community and the opportunity for honest, unfiltered communication.

Any addict with a computer or smart device would gain a measure of help and support by tapping into online recovery. For some addicts, online recovery alone will be enough for them to achieve a robust and lasting sobriety. For others, more personal one-on-one, face-to-face support and interventions may be required, but online recovery would still be beneficial working in tandem with these treatments.

Online recovery works because it is free, it's easy, it's accessible, it's safe, it's supportive, it's kind and it's healing.

Personal experience

I got sober solely with web-based support. I had no other interventions in terms of doctors, counsellors, mentors, face-to-face meetings, or 12-step programmes. I self-identified as having an alcohol addiction and helped myself beat it by starting a personal blog in which I documented my thoughts and feelings as I transitioned from living as a high-functioning alcoholic to living sober.

My blog, 'Mrs D Is Going Without', was set up with the free service Blogger and has the web address www.livingwithoutalcohol.blogspot.com. From the day I stopped drinking, I wrote posts in this personalised online space, documenting my thoughts, feelings and experiences while learning to live without alcohol.

The process of blogging, articulating and externalising my thoughts and feelings was incredibly powerful and healing. I figured stuff out as I was typing it out, and because I was protected by an anonymous moniker I wasn't filtering my communication for any audience. By sharing my secrets with brutal honesty on my blog, my shame started to lift and I began to heal.

Furthermore, the feedback and interactions I received on my blog posts were hugely helpful and made me realise I was not alone in my struggle. Support flowed around my blog in many different directions. All of the visitors to the blog were helped by reading about my struggle and recovery journey. Some readers left comments offering advice and support and in turn I would help other sober bloggers by leaving supportive comments on their blogs.

Powerful content

The written content provided by addicts online is raw, emotional and compelling, and the human connections made through interactions are warm, wise and supportive. Despite being without a formal structure, online recovery is extremely powerful, tangible and real.

The communication pathways that addicts share online are disjointed, amorphous and ever-changing, which makes it very difficult to quantify participant numbers and success rates. However, the unquantifiable nature of online recovery does not diminish its effectiveness. In the past three years that I have been a participant in online recovery, in addition to experiencing my own robust recovery I have 'witnessed' numerous others get and stay sober through blogging.

Here in New Zealand, we're extremely fortunate that the addictions sector has recognised the power of online recovery and embraced this global movement by backing a community recovery forum. 'Living Sober' (www.livingsober.org.nz) brings all of the transformative and powerful aspects of online recovery into one virtual space. Not only does it offer multiple benefits for individuals wanting to get sober, but simply by existing it legitimises sobriety as an acceptable, attractive and attainable life choice.

Benefits

The key benefits of online recovery that I have learnt are as follows:

1. **Participants motivate themselves into it.**

By choosing to visit websites relating to alcoholism and recovery, an individual has self-identified that they might have an issue with alcohol.

2. **Participants can do nothing but lurk.** Lurking is when an individual visits blogs and sites related to alcoholism and recovery and reads them privately but doesn't interact by posting updates or leaving comments. Lurkers feel completely hidden and protected behind their computer screen. Lurking can often be an important first step on the road to recovery. I often receive comments or emails from people saying, "I've been lurking on your blog for months but only now have I got the courage to stop drinking." Lurking is openly encouraged by active participants in online recovery.

3. **The participant quickly realises they are not alone in their struggle.** Many addicts feel locked in a private struggle and isolated. By reading other people's sobriety journeys, the participant starts to realise they are not alone and that there are many, many people going through exactly the same struggle. This can be immensely reassuring and empowering.

4. **Participants are welcome to interact anonymously.** Online recovery feels safe and secure because the participant is welcome to 'hide' by creating an anonymous profile. Anonymity is wholly acceptable in the online recovery community – participants do not judge others for concealing their full identity. Furthermore, using a cloak of anonymity does not diminish the real human connections that are formed by community members – strong identities and personalities can be developed from behind the cover of a generic moniker.

5. **Articulation.** To interact online you must use the written word and this process of writing is in itself incredibly beneficial. When blogging (or posting updates or commenting on other blogs etc), the participant is forced to choose words and formulate sentences in order to communicate feelings and opinions. Often this can result in previously unformed or unidentified thoughts being clarified. Additionally, the process of externalising (even anonymously and/or privately) previously hidden internal truths can be immensely healing.
6. **Receiving support.** Participants can receive immediate feedback, acceptance, support and understanding from other community members. The simplest direct interaction, such as "You're doing great", "Keep going", "I understand what you are going through", can be hugely powerful and make a difference right in the moment.
7. **Offering support.** Being of service to others in recovery has long been identified as a powerful tool in helping an individual stay sober. Participants in online recovery have endless opportunity to offer support to others by leaving comments on other blogs or replies to forum updates.
8. **Lamplighting.** Early sobriety is the hardest. Participants who are through the tough early months and are starting to experience (and write about) positive changes act as 'lamplighters' for those first starting out. New participants can see there is a path to sobriety that is challenging at first but ultimately immensely rewarding.
9. **It is open 24/7.** The internet never sleeps.
10. **It is mobile.** Online recovery can be fitted into a busy life because it can be accessed on any smart device anywhere.

Useful blogs and websites

Personal blogs

Mrs D Is Going Without

www.livingwithoutalcohol.blogspot.co.nz

Unpickled

www.unpickled.wordpress.com

Tired of Thinking About Drinking

www.tiredofthinkingaboutdrinking.wordpress.com

Bye-Bye Beer

www.byebyebeer.com

Running On Sober

www.runningonsober.com

Soberbia

www.sober-bia.blogspot.co.nz

Message In A Bottle

www.messageinabottleblog.wordpress.com

A Hangover Free Life

www.ahangoverfreelife.com

Mr Sponsorpants

mrsponsorpants.typepad.com

Community-based websites providing a platform for addicts to come together to share stories and offer support

Living Sober

www.livingsober.org.nz

Hello Sunday Morning

www.hellosundaymorning.org

Crying Out Now

www.cryingoutnow.com

Soberistas

www.soberistas.com

SMART Recovery online forums

www.smartrecovery.org/community

Websites devoted to alcohol, drug and recovery news and information

HPA's alcohol site

www.alcohol.org.nz

Alcohol Drug Helpline's site

www.alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

Drug Help

www.drughelp.org.nz

Like a Drink

www.likeadrink.org.nz

Rethinking Drinking – NIAAA

www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov

The Fix

www.thefix.com

Sober Nation

www.sobernation.com

Substance

www.substance.com