

Being “13th stepped”

I am a [middle-aged] woman. The first time I walked through the door of an SAA meeting was [about five years ago]. It was a Sunday afternoon, and the meeting was inside of a church. I was running 15 minutes late because I had gotten lost. When I walked into the room, it was a group of 6 men, having an open, around-the-table cross-talking discussion about “how much masturbation is normal?” I was immediately sickened, and my heart sank. That was certainly not a conversation that I was willing to participate in.

I sat quietly and listened. I’d been in 12-Step programs before, and had attended countless meetings ... but, never in my life had I heard such inappropriate banter going on “as an open discussion” at a meeting before. My first thought was: “Is THIS what SAA meetings are like?? OMG – It CAN’T be!!!”

When a friend of mine encouraged me to go to SAA, I kept telling them “No, just because I like sex a lot, doesn’t mean that I’m an addict!!” What I DIDN’T tell them was, that the reason I felt that I didn’t belong in SAA was because, what I THOUGHT those meetings were all about, was perverts and sexual deviants sitting around tables discussing all of the sordid disgusting things they’d done to children, and how they barely escaped a prison sentence merely because they’d never been caught. Needless to say, when I walked into this meeting, and heard what they were saying, my worst fears seemed to be true.

I’d been in healthy meetings before, and this wasn’t one of them. BUT, knowing that it’s recommended to attend 6 meetings before deciding whether I belong there or not, I continued going. I had the courage to say something about how the format of this discussion was inappropriate, and stayed after to talk with the moderator about it.

The 2nd time I went, after the meeting ended, one of the guys walked beside me, making small talk as we exited the church heading out to our cars in the parking lot. He asked me for my phone number. When I told him that I was uncomfortable giving it, that I’d just ended a relationship, and that I was confused, and unsure whether that would be a good idea, he comforted me by saying “I’m just offering to be your friend, that’s all.” I believed him, so I gave him my number.

To make a long story short, within two weeks, he had manipulated me into “acting out” with him. I was devastated. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know who to tell. I didn’t know even if I’d told someone whether they’d care, or do anything about it. I felt demoralized, hopeless, untrusting, scared, and alone. I was consumed with shame, and remorse, disgust toward him, disgust toward myself. Humiliated. Even though I didn’t like what was happening, I was powerless to stop it. I acted out with the guy several more times, and I kept going to the meeting because I knew that I needed help.

It took an entire month for me to gather up the courage, and strength to ask that man to leave me alone.

At the time, I'd never heard the term "13th Step." I'd hated what happened to me with a long-term member of SAA, and that's a phrase they used to describe what happened. I Googled it. Here's the description: "Simply put, the 13th Step is a colloquial term for when a 12-Step old-timer hits on a group newcomer with less than a year of sobriety. It can be for a variety of reasons — emotional, financial, physical – but either way, it's someone in a position of power trying to take advantage of someone who is weak

I found a different meeting to attend. That first one disbanded about 2 months later. I never saw that guy again. It took me nine months to be able to speak of this in my new home group. Everyone who heard the story at the time was deeply disturbed by what had happened to me.

Since this incident, I've tried to become an "advocate" of sorts for people who've experienced similar situations themselves. Sadly, 13th-Stepping happens in our program way more than most people want to admit, or talk about. Quite a few people I've met over the past 3 ½ years who attend our SAA telemeetings have confided in me of how something similar had happened to them. It's not just men taking advantage of women. I've heard stories of sponsors acting out with sponsees... women taking advantage of women... men taking advantage of men ... women taking advantage of men. I'm taking a stand. I'm talking about it. I'm asking Higher Power for guidance about how to discuss this issue, and how to keep our meetings safe for all.

Just a couple of months ago, yet again, I was informed that something similar happened to a new member at an SAA retreat we'd both attended. I couldn't believe it. I called the director of the retreat to share with them what had happened. They admitted that there had been a similar incident in the past, but that it had been years ago. It's sad, and yes it's been happening for years all across our program. It's distasteful, disgusting, and flat out WRONG that a predator would use SAA meeting places to prey on the weak.

I advocate for safety. I advocate for comradery. I advocate for truth. Don't let 13th Stepping continue here! Especially to those new members, or anyone who's struggling with this addiction who are vulnerable, scared, white-knuckling it, wrestling with their own compulsions, and unsure of who to trust. This is a shout-out to everyone. Be on guard! Talk to others in program about whether something similar has happened to you. Bring this article up at your meetings! Roaches in a dark room scatter when you shine a flashlight on them. Let's all work together to shine the light on this, and do our best to make every effort to eradicate this problem from our fellowship.