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LifeRing Offers Secular Recovery

By **Tom Moon, MFT**
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"You should write a column about LifeRing," Brad writes in an e-mail. "Hardly anybody seems to know about that program, but those guys totally saved my ass." Now in his late thirties, he's been struggling with alcohol and drug addiction since his early teens. He got serious about recovery six years ago, when his addiction to crystal meth destroyed his relationship with a partner whom he deeply loved. But Brad is also a self-described "secular humanist" and a "committed atheist." He's been in two treatment programs. Both of them were based on the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous and required attendance at twelve-step meetings. "I tried and tried to fit myself into that mold," he writes, "and I just couldn't do it. They were very welcoming and told me I could take what worked and leave the rest, but all of the "higher power" talk at the meetings made me feel totally alienated. I couldn't feel like I was a part of it, and didn't stay sober."

When a friend told him about a new self-help recovery program not based on spiritual principles, Brad located a meeting and attended it. "For the first time," he writes, "I felt relaxed in a recovery meeting. There were no "drunkalogues" no 12 steps, and - yay! - no God talk. The focus was on what's happening in our lives now. We just went around the room and checked in about how our week had gone. You could talk about any drug you were trying to quit, not just alcohol. And "cross talk" was fine. We were allowed to ask questions and make comments on what each other said. At the end of the meeting, we gave ourselves a round of applause for staying clean and sober. That was all there was to it. I loved it." Brad began attending meetings regularly.

LifeRing Secular Recovery (LSR) is a relatively new program. It evolved from an earlier organization and only began to acquire its independent identity in 1999, but since then it's grown rapidly. There are now meetings in every area of the country, as well as in Canada, Europe, Australia, and Asia, and there are regularly scheduled online meetings at its website. The program has three core values:

Sobriety: Like AA and NA, LSR is an abstinence-based program. Its motto is "Sobriety is our priority." It's a program for people who have come to the conclusion that the only solution for them is abstinence. By "sobriety" LifeRing means complete abstinence from alcohol and illicit or non-medically indicated drugs.

Secularity: LSR is an alternative to programs which stress spiritual or religious solutions to addiction, but that doesn't mean that it's just for atheists or agnostics. As explained on the Web site, "The proportion of churchgoers and others in LifeRing is about the same as in the general population. Since the LifeRing recovery process does not rely on a "higher power" or similar concepts, LifeRing participants' religious and/ or spiritual beliefs remain private and don't become an issue in the meeting." While some of its members, like Brad, don't use 12 step programs, LSR as a program supports a pragmatic, "whatever works for you" approach to recovery. Some people in LifeRing are also members of AA and NA.

Self-Help: LSR believes that sobriety is a learned skill like learning to ride a bicycle. Sometimes people fall, but if they keep getting back on the bike, eventually they learn to ride. In LifeRing, members build their own individualized recovery programs. Plenty of tools and support from others in recovery are provided. Nobody is required to call themselves an "alcoholic" or an "addict." Some choose to do it and some don't. In LifeRing "The effort to stop drinking and using and drugs is required. The self-defining labels and the theories behind them are optional."

Can such a simple approach actually help addicts recover? As far as I know, there have as yet been no scientific evaluations of LifeRing's effectiveness, although the program invites and welcomes scientific scrutiny. But judging by how it has grown, many people are apparently finding it helpful, and LSR meetings are increasingly accepted in treatment facilities as alternatives to 12 step meetings, a sign of its growing respect among treatment professionals.

As for Brad, he just celebrated his first year of being completely clean and sober. That's his longest period

of abstinence since he began drinking at age 14. "I know that's not long, compared to all the years I was fucked up, but I now know that I have the power to live without drugs and alcohol. The support I've gotten has been great, and so far I haven't had a relapse since my first meeting." Currently, he attends both of the two meetings that are available in his area, and checks in regularly with other LifeRing members.

Anyone who would like more information about this addiction recovery option can access the LSR website, www.unhooked.com. The site also contains a region-by-region listing of meetings.

Tom Moon is a psychotherapist in San Francisco. His website is tommoon.net.

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