

The importance of belief, from *'The Power of Habit'*

- (extract) Charles Duhigg, (2012)

"It's in the moments of highest pressure that belief brakes down – when our trust in new routines to deliver the needed rewards, falls apart. Without belief, when things get really tense, we go back to our comfort zones and old habits..."

The evidence is clear: if you want to change a habit, you must find an alternative routine, and your odds of success go up dramatically when you commit to changing as part of a group. **Belief** is essential, and it grows out of a communal experience, even if that community is only as large as two people."

"The first cracks in the theory that Alcoholics Anonymous succeeded solely by reprogramming participants' habits started appearing a little over a decade ago.

Researchers began finding that habit replacement worked pretty well for many people until the stresses of life got too high, at which point alcoholics often fell off the waggon. Academics asked why, if habit replacement is so effective, it seemed to fail at such critical moments? And as they dug into alcoholics' stories to answer that question, they learned that replacement habits only become durable new behaviours when they are accompanied by something else.

In 2005, a group of scientists - this time affiliated with UC Berkeley, Brown University, and the National Institutes of Health - looked at the data to see if there was any correlation between religious belief and how long people stayed sober. A pattern emerged: those who believed in a higher power were more likely to make it through stressful periods with their sobriety intact. Belief was the ingredient that made a reworked habit loop into a permanent behaviour.

"I wouldn't have said this a year ago – that's how fast our understanding is changing," said Tonigan, the University of New Mexico researcher, "but belief seems critical. You don't have to believe in God, but you do need the capacity to believe that things will get better... believing that you can cope with that stress without alcohol..."

AA trains people in how to believe in something until they believe in the programme and themselves.

There's something really powerful about groups and shared experiences. People might be sceptical about their ability to change if they're by themselves, but a group will convince them to suspend disbelief. A community creates belief.

In a 1994 Harvard study that examined people who had radically changed their lives, researchers found that one of the key ingredients for enabling change was being embedded in a social group that made change easier.

When people join groups where change seems possible, the potential for that change to occur becomes more real. For most people who overhaul their lives, there are no seminal moments or life-altering disasters. There are simply communities – sometimes of just one other person – who make change believable... Belief is easier when it occurs within a community.