

White, W. (2013). The history of LifeRing Secular Recovery: An interview with Marty Nicolaus. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

The History of LifeRing Secular Recovery: An Interview with Marty Nicolaus

William White

Introduction

One of the most significant trends in the modern history of addiction recovery has been the emergence of secular recovery mutual aid alternatives to 12-Step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. These alternatives have included Women for Sobriety, Secular Organizations for Sobriety, Rational Recovery, and LifeRing Secular Recovery. In late 2012, I had the opportunity to discuss the history of LifeRing Secular Recovery with Marty Nicolaus, whose leadership and writings have played an important role since LifeRing's founding in 2001. Please join us in this brief discussion of LifeRing's history and distinctive approach to recovery support.

The History of LifeRing Secular Recovery

Bill White: How would you describe LifeRing Secular Recovery (LifeRing) for those unfamiliar with it?

Marty N.: We're a mutual support group for people who want to get free of alcohol and other addictive drugs using a positive, individualized empowerment approach.

Bill White: Marty, could you share the story of the birth of LifeRing?

Marty N.: Two dozen recovering individuals from 15 states met in February 2001 at a retreat center in Florida to discuss philosophy and practice, and adopted the LifeRing Bylaws, which are the organization's constitution.

Bill White: How did you first become involved in LifeRing?

Marty N.: Four years before the 2001 conference, I organized LifeRing Inc. and LifeRing Press to publish educational and organizational materials. At the founding conference, I was elected Chief Executive Officer and a member of the Board of Directors.

Bill White: What would you consider the most important historical milestones since the inception of LifeRing Secular Recovery?

Marty N.: Major treatment centers in the San Francisco Bay area opened their doors to LifeRing meetings in the 2001-2005 period. In April 2003, the LifeRing Service Center established its own office in Oakland, CA. In the same year, I believe, we grew to have at least one meeting every day in the San Francisco Bay area, so that a recovering person could do “Seven in Seven” in LifeRing. LifeRing branches sprang up in Canada, Iceland, Denmark, Ireland, and Sweden. By 2008-2009, LifeRing was represented via speakers and/or exhibitors at major professional conferences such as the American Psychological Association, NAADAC, and CAADAC. In 2010, the organization had grown to the point where I was able to retire and hand the reins over to a new generation. It has moved forward steadily since then.

The LifeRing Organization

Bill White: What is the governance structure of LifeRing?

Marty N.: Each meeting (face-to-face or online) elects one delegate to the annual LifeRing meeting. There, delegates discuss and decide questions of governance and elect members of the Board of Directors. Delegates, directors, and officers serve as volunteers.

Bill White: How is LifeRing financed?

Marty N.: Through literature sales, basket collections at meetings, and individual donations.

Bill White: Is LifeRing affiliated with any treatment organization or outside enterprise?

Marty N.: No. LifeRing is an independent, freestanding organization.

Bill White: Does LifeRing have what would be the equivalent of AA’s Twelve Traditions to guide its organizational life?

Marty N.: The LifeRing Bylaws.

Bill White: Have you seen a shift in attitudes in the U.S. in the past decade related to greater acceptance of alternatives to 12-Step recovery?

Marty N.: Without a doubt.

The LifeRing Program

Bill White: What key concepts distinguish LifeRing Secular Recovery from other addiction recovery mutual aid groups?

Marty N.: The core aim of LifeRing is to empower the sober self. Ours is a strengths-based approach. We recognize within the addicted person not only the addiction but also a pole of healthy striving that fights to get free of the addiction. Our process reinforces that healthy pole by forging positive social connections based on abstinence and centering on everyday life

choices. We invite each participant to chart a recovery path that matches his/her individual background and needs – a Personal Recovery Program.

Bill White: What practices would distinguish LifeRing from other recovery mutual aid groups?

Marty N.: LifeRing meetings generally convene in a circle so that everyone can make eye contact. Opening statements are very short. The usual topic is “How was your week?” This invites participants to report the highlights and heartaches of their recovery since the last meeting, and to look ahead to the next week. After each person has reported, others may ask questions or provide positive feedback. The atmosphere is like a conversation in a living room with sober friends: open, helpful, and often humorous. We pass around signup sheets to allow people to contact one another between meetings and become sober friends. If informal mentor-mentee relationships form, that’s fine, but our focus is on supporting individuals to find their personal recovery path.

Bill White: You have authored two important LifeRing texts—*Empowering Your Sober Self* and *Recovery by Choice*. Could you describe these works and how they are used by LifeRing members?

Marty N.: *Empowering Your Sober Self* (ISBN 978-0-470-37229-6) is a book-length effort to describe the LifeRing theory and practice in the context of current thought about addiction and recovery issues in a language accessible to the interested lay reader. Personal testimonials by a number of LifeRing participants enhance the book. The work serves as an in-depth introduction to LifeRing for treatment professionals as well as for people with addiction issues and their loved ones.

Recovery by Choice (ISBN 978-0-9659429-3-5) is a 300-page workbook for the person wanting a structured approach to building a Personal Recovery Program. What I did basically is to take the voices heard in more than ten years of LifeRing meetings, sift them, organize them, and add a bit of explanation. The result is a broad spectrum of topics to think about and choices to make. The organizing concept is the work area or domain; there are nine of these. The book is one available tool for LifeRing participants, and it’s also coming into wider use in other settings where there is a call for a structured approach to sober self-empowerment. It’s been quite a successful effort and is now in its fourth edition.

Bill White: What other literature about the LifeRing program would you recommend be read by persons in recovery and by addiction treatment professionals?

Marty N.: There’s a handbook for LifeRing meeting facilitators (convenors) called *How Was Your Week* (ISBN 0-9659429-4-5) that distills some experience and has some useful background. There’s a small but growing list of journal articles. I would also strongly recommend that people peruse the LifeRing website, www.lifering.org, for additional reading and up-to-date information.

LifeRing Members

Bill White: What do we know about the profile of LifeRingmembers in the U.S.?

Marty N.: Based on the most recent membership poll, LifeRing members have an average sober time of 2.78 years, are mildly above average in terms of education and occupation, are slightly less church-going than average, and tend to be or to have been clients of professional treatment providers. As a whole, participants are very enthusiastic about LifeRing meetings, wish there were more of them, and recommend them to their friends.

Bill White: What is the expected frequency or duration of participation for LifeRing Members?

Marty N.: Because the strategic aim is empowerment of the sober self, and the paths taken are personal to each individual, there can be no set formula for frequency or duration. I personally have been clean and sober more than 20 years as of this writing, and I intend to stay in touch with the organization for the rest of my life. I don't know if I need to, in order to stay sober, but I like it.

Bill White: What are LifeRing's views or policies related to smoking?

Marty N.: About eight years ago, I was nearly tarred and feathered for expressing the hope that one day LifeRing would be a smoke-free organization. Addiction to nicotine had a firm grip on a number of members and has not completely disappeared. But the tide has turned, and today more and more members understand that one can't model freedom from addiction with a cigarette hanging from one's lips. LifeRing remains open for people who are still smoking tobacco, but the internal culture is turning smoke-free. My one regret is that during the great smoking war eight years ago, I did not hang tougher and insist that all LifeRing members quit smoking, even at the cost of splitting the organization. Perhaps not during my lifetime, but one day, LifeRing will be a smoke-free organization.

Bill White: Are persons on medication for co-occurring physical or psychiatric conditions or who are on medications to support addiction recovery welcome in LifeRing?

Marty N.: Yes, such persons have always been among the LifeRing membership. Our view is that medications for physical and/or psychiatric conditions are sobriety tools provided that (1) the patient has been completely honest with their physician about their addiction history and (2) the prescribing physician is competent in addiction medicine. If those conditions are met, we urge LifeRing members to take the medication as prescribed. We do not interfere in the physician/patient relationship.

Bill White: LifeRing is often thought of as an alternative to AA and other 12-Step groups, but I'm wondering if there are some people who participate in both LifeRing and 12-Step meetings?

Marty N.: Yes, in our last membership survey, about a third of the people attending LifeRing also attended 12-step meetings. They're using what I call the belt-and-suspender approach. Whatever works!

LifeRing Online Community

Bill White: The Internet has been a great boon to online recovery support for LifeRing. Could you describe the various online recovery supports offered through LifeRing?

Marty N.: The LifeRing website, lifering.org, is the entryway for a broad range of options for online involvement. There is a social network (lifering.ning.com), a Facebook page, a Delphi bulletin board, a number of chat rooms, and an array of email lists on various topics. There are also links to LifeRing websites put up by local or national chapters. One could easily spend hours each day in online activity related to LifeRing.

Bill White: Do you think we will see a day where more people are utilizing online recovery support than face-to-face recovery support meetings?

Marty N.: We may have reached that day years ago without knowing it. Metrics of online involvement are poor, poorer even than metrics of face-to-face meetings. I personally know people who have years clean and sober with online support alone. It doesn't work for everyone, but then nothing works for everyone.

Closing Reflections

Bill White: What do you see as the future of LifeRing?

Marty N.: My crystal ball is in the shop, but it seems to me that LifeRing has a bright future. The legacy solutions and the institutions built on them aren't going to last forever. LifeRing has a positive, refreshing approach that's both easy to grasp and scientifically supportable. It has a short but commendable track record, and the concept scales well. With continuing effort and development, I think that LifeRing will become a major presence in the recovery landscape.

Bill White: What is the best way for people to get more information on LifeRing or access face-to-face or online meetings?

Marty N.: Through lifering.org or with a phone call to the LifeRing Service Center, 1-800-811-4142.

Bill White: Are there any final reflections you would like to share with our readers about LifeRing Secular Recovery?

Marty N.: I recently celebrated 20 years clean and sober. I'm very grateful to all the many LifeRing participants who shared pieces of their sober lives with me at one point or another during these years. Couldn't have done it without you.

Bill White: Marty, thank you for sharing some of this history of LifeRing with our readers.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse

Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.

Appendices

Welcome to LifeRing!

This brochure contains a summary of basic information about LifeRing.

LifeRing is a network of people who support one another in living free of alcohol and other non-medically indicated addictive drugs.

LifeRing meetings, in person and online, are friendly, confidential, non-judgmental gatherings of peers. The atmosphere is relaxed, practical, and positive.

LifeRing members believe that complete abstinence from alcohol and other non-medically indicated drugs is the necessary foundation for us to lead a better life. The desire to stop drinking/using is the only requirement for membership in LifeRing.

In LifeRing meetings, your religious and spiritual beliefs, or lack of them, remain a private matter. There is no religious or anti-religious content in the meeting process.

LifeRing does not require participants to follow any particular steps or guidelines, other than staying clean and sober. Each participant builds a personal recovery program tailored to their individual needs. Our meeting format and literature provide a structure for this project.

More details about LifeRing are inside this brochure. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask them at the LifeRing meeting.

Welcome to LifeRing!



To find out more about LifeRing:

Browse to www.lifering.org, the Internet voice of LifeRing Secular Recovery. Join LifeRing **email lists** and **chats**.

Read *Recovery By Choice: Living and Enjoying Life Free of Alcohol and Drugs, A Workbook*. (ISBN 978-0965942935) A 300-p. self-help workbook that helps you build your personal recovery program.

Read *Empowering Your Sober Self, The LifeRing Approach to Addiction Recovery* (ISBN 978-0470372296) A book-length introduction for people in recovery and treatment professionals.

Read *How Was Your Week?* A handbook for LifeRing meeting facilitators and others wanting an in-depth look at the LifeRing approach. Buy at www.lifering.com.

Read *The LifeRing Bylaws*. How LifeRing is organized and self-governed.

Buy these books at LifeRing meetings or online from www.lifering.com, the website of LifeRing Press.

LifeRing will be happy to send a speaker or speakers to address your audience.

Contact LifeRing:
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You can find a LifeRing meeting at:



Welcome to LifeRing

LifeRing
in a Nutshell

LifeRing Service Center
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www.lifering.org
1-800-811-4142