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## **The History of SMART Recovery: An Interview with Joe Gerstein, MD**

William L. White, MA

### **Introduction**

Since the founding of Women for Sobriety in 1975, many recovery support groups have emerged as alternatives to Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve-Step recovery support fellowships. One of the more prominent of these is SMART Recovery. In interviews spanning two years, I spoke with one of the central figures in SMART Recovery about its history and program. Launching a sustainable addiction recovery mutual aid organization requires enormous commitment and sacrifice, and nowhere are those qualities more evident than in the life of Dr. Joe Gerstein. Join us as we revisit the early days and continuing evolution of SMART Recovery.

### **Early Involvement in Rational Recovery**

**Bill White:** Dr. Gerstein, tell me the early story of your involvement in what became SMART Recovery.

**Joe Gerstein:** I'd be happy to, and just call me Joe, please. Well, my involvement came from two sources. Number one, as a practicing internist, I encountered patients who had alcohol and drug problems, and my standard practice at the time was to try to get them to go to a 12-step program of some kind. I had all kinds of tactics and strategies of doing this, but some of them simply wouldn't go for one reason or another, wouldn't stick with it, or in some cases, attended but were not helped by it. I tried all kinds of alternatives. Some of them simply stopped using and got better on their own. One I sent to a DUI program because there was virtually nothing else. He refused to go to a psychiatrist. He loved the DUI program, and he stopped the very drastic habit, got his life back together, and his wife, who'd already given a retainer to a divorce lawyer, cancelled it. I followed him for 17 years, and he never had any problems again. So, that was in the back of my mind—people didn't have to go to a 12-step program to get better even though that was what I was taught and what I had believed.

The other thread that led me to involvement was the fact that I am a humanist, an active humanist. I arranged a talk by a college professor about liberation theology, and I invited two priest friends of mine to come and comment on his talk. One was a Jesuit, and the other was a Dominican. The Jesuit rambled for about 5 minutes on virtually nothing that was pertinent. When the Dominican got up, he said "You know, the trouble with you humanists is you never do anything. You just like to talk. Why don't you get out there and help?" And this guy was tremendous—really a saint. His mother was a patient

of mine; that's how I met him. I took very seriously what he said, and I said to myself, "You know, he's right. We have to have some kind of personal involvement." About a month later, I flew out to Sacramento to an American Humanist Association conference. Jack Trimpey was one of the speakers, and I listened to what he had to say. At that time, I really had almost no comprehension of cognitive behavioral therapy. I knew that it had been used and tested in scientific studies and shown to be very effective for treatment of depression, for instance, but I was very skeptical about them. I said, "How can you get people to change the way they think? These people are severely depressed. You can't even get through to them," and so forth and so on. But I thought supporting the approach Trimpey was talking about would be an ideal project for humanists since a lot of people have difficulty with the spiritual and religious flavor of 12-Step groups.

**Bill White:** Did you express such an interest to the professional addiction treatment community in Boston?

**Joe Gerstein:** Yes, Bill, I did. I couldn't inspire any interest or involvement from anybody in the addiction care community in Boston or the academic community. I was on the Harvard medical faculty, but even that did not help generate interest. So I started some things on my own. I got an article about Rational Recovery into a weekly newspaper in Boston, *The Phoenix*, and I got Jack Trimpey on a very popular talk radio program. They kept him on for 4 hours. He was only supposed to be on for 2 hours, but the man who ran the show said, "This is the most calls we have ever gotten on this particular radio show." Most of them were antagonistic calls from people involved in the 12-step program, but the radio show loved the controversy.

We then had Jack Trimpey give a talk at Harvard under the tutelage of the Harvard Humanist Chaplaincy, and we managed to get publicity between the newspaper and the radio show for a meeting at Harvard two days later. About 100 people showed up in a torrential rainstorm. However, nothing much came of it except one Rational Recovery meeting that moved from a condo to a room in the basement of Memorial Church at Harvard. It's not really a church, but it looks like one. That meeting went along for about a month, and then the people who were participating began to fight with the woman who was facilitating it, who was a social work student. Although I had no intention of getting deeply involved in Rational Recovery at the time, the people convinced me to come to a meeting. I went because I had a vested interest in creating some alternative for my patients.

It was obvious at the meeting they just weren't going to be involved with this woman. I ended up sort of chairing the meeting in hopes we could get things straightened out. I really knew very little about the program, very little about Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), compared to a couple of college professors who were there. At the end of that meeting, I was drenched with sweat thinking, "Oh, thank God this is over." So I said, "Well, what are we going to do next week?" They said, "Well, you're going to come back, aren't you?" Of course, this was a very fateful decision. I didn't want to lose the one group that we'd generated through all this work, so I said, "Ok."

In the interim, I started reading about REBT and so forth. I came back and did the next meeting, and then I actually continued to facilitate that group for about a month. I got a telephone call from Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Somebody had arranged for a room

in the Shrewsbury Library and wanted to start a Rational Recovery meeting on Monday nights. (The Harvard meeting was on Tuesday). So, I went out there, and I got that meeting started. About three weeks later [in 1990], I got a call from a woman who had arranged for a room at a synagogue in Falmouth, Massachusetts. I repeated this activity and was running three meetings a week. A couple of them were at a fair distance from Boston, so this was really impacting my professional and family life. But I truly saw the strategic vision of this. I said, “Look, this has the ability to become a major thrust in addiction care.”

**Bill White:** What most conveyed that possibility to you?

**Joe Gerstein:** Most of the people in these early meetings had been to 12-step meetings and just either didn't like it, didn't get it, or they rebelled against some ideas in this approach, but they were very enthusiastic about Rational Recovery. So, that led me to read the scientific literature, and I found these positive studies on the use of CBT for treating addiction. What most struck me about these studies was that there was no sustained and free recovery support mechanism for people following CBT. I thought Rational Recovery could fill that role.

I became deeply involved with it—talking three or four times a week to Jack and Lois Trimpey. We were getting information, planning things, and changing the program. We continued to expand throughout Massachusetts, mostly through the action of professionals who got interested and started groups. The professionals would run them for 5 or 6 months until somebody in the group became interested enough and was sophisticated enough to take over running it. That's how most of our groups got started, but some were started by laypeople.

**Bill White:** What led to the early growth of RR groups?

**Joe Gerstein:** The big boost was an article in the *Boston Globe* in the summer of 1990 about SOS [Secular Organization for Sobriety] and Rational Recovery. That was followed by a front page story in the *New York Times* on December 24, 1990. A woman had come up from the *New York Times* to interview me and observe an RR meeting. My wife went out to get the paper on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, and she came through the door screaming, “It’s on the front page! You’re on the front page!”

There I was on the front page of the *New York Times*. Unfortunately, they were talking about spiritualism instead of spirituality. The headline writer had written something on “spiritualism,” which was incorrect. You don’t want to complain too much to the *New York Times* when they put you on the front page, so I let it pass. They also put the wrong phone number in for Jack Trimpey’s number in California. So, some little old lady in Lotus, California, got about 200 calls between 4am and 10am before they finally figured it out (the paper came out at 7:00 AM in New York).

Also that year, we got on *The Today Show*. I brought one of our facilitators, and we had about a 10-minute interview with Bryant Gumble. The facilitator started off by saying “AA saved my life, and I’m a devout Catholic.” He went on to say that AA saved his life because of the early support element, but that after 90 days and 90 meetings, he just wasn’t going anywhere with that approach. He shared coming to a Rational

Recovery meeting at a Unitarian Church in Medfield, Massachusetts, and how in his second meeting, he had what I would call a secular conversion experience. He sort of got the message in this flash of light of how he'd gone wrong, and the fact that his company fired him as a direct consequence of his excessive drinking and not because it was a crappy company and that there were concrete solutions for his drinking problem.

This early media attention spurred the early growth of meetings. After *The Globe* article in 1990, there were 400 calls. I had to run home from my medical office twice to change the tape. That really was the big impetus to getting the thing going. It was a big job because everybody called on the telephone, which was in our kitchen; they wanted a meeting list and information about the program. We had to write down their name and address and then send it to them.

**Bill White:** Now, was this the period when your wife also got involved?

**Joe Gerstein:** Yes, by this time, my wife was involved. She decided she would never see me if she didn't. We had a situation as an example where the facilitator in Hyannis went to prison. He had an old charge from three years before that had been delayed and delayed, and finally, he was found guilty. It was a mandatory sentence situation, so even the fact that he straightened out his life and was running a terrific meeting had no impact on it, and he went to prison. So, somebody called me up and said, "Hey, Ed's gone to prison. What are we going to do?" So, my wife and I ran that meeting for a year. Thursday night, she'd show up with sandwiches, and we'd jump into the car and drive two hours to Hyannis and get back home at midnight. Finally somebody rose up in the group who could take it over. This attrition of facilitators happened repeatedly (never again through a prison sentence, however) and obviously had a very profound impact on our lives and our lives together.

### **Conflict at a National Level**

**Bill White:** How did these local RR meetings fit into what was occurring with RR at a national level?

**Joe Gerstein:** At a national level, we went along for some years and formed a non-profit organization called the Rational Recovery Self-Help Network. I think that was probably in '92, and we began having national meetings. We also got a few people involved in scientific studies—very primitive studies by today's standards. The study done at Harvard was conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital and another one done by NYU was done at Bellevue. I was able to get Jack Trimpey to Harvard to give a little talk. Jack was a very, very bright, eloquent, and clever person. He made a real impression on these people, and they decided to do a study. These were survey studies, not high-powered clinical studies or anything like that, but they both showed that RR was able to engage people and that the longer they participated, the greater the likelihood of becoming abstinent.

**Bill White:** What was the source of early conflict between local and national RR?

**Joe Gerstein:** We continued to expand, but conflicts began to arise in two respects. Number one, Jack and his wife obviously had this as a financial moneymaker. I mean, this was now their occupation. Jack's income was entirely related to books that sold or from him getting involved in various ventures involving selling the Rational Recovery concept. For example, he had a little pseudo-treatment center, and he was trying to license RR to other treatment centers. We all understood him needing to support this as a new career. He was the executive director at the time, but the board said, "Look, this is not really viable with you as executive director. The self-help network needs its own executive director." Jack was just not able to put the time in to do the administrative work that was required to keep the network going and growing. At that time, we probably had 50 or 60 groups that demanded organization support. Jack agreed to that plan.

And then a number of situations arose where Jack got autocratically involved in doing things. Some situations arose where clearly the interests of the non-profit self-help network were in conflict with what Jack was trying to do in terms of establishing treatment centers. This led to some strife, and at one point, I said "Look, I have to resign from the executive committee." He did something that in my opinion clearly required discussion with the executive committee before he did it, and he didn't contact us. I made it clear that I would still support the organization, but I didn't want responsibility for his decisions if I were not involved in them.

Jack's impact on the organization began to spur increasing conflict. We went looking—we being the board of the not-for-profit—for an executive director. One of the guys on the board, Phil Tate, who'd written a book about alcoholism that was sold as part of our income, had an idea that we should advertise in one of these association management publications. They allow you to put free ads in. It sounded like a crazy idea to me. We had no money, really no organization, and we're advertising for somebody to come and be a manager. We tried to get a volunteer person to do it, and we actually had a pretty competent guy, but he was manic depressive and just before he was to start, he started getting manic, and that was the end of that. We saw that a volunteer person with a job or school was not going to be able to handle this. It was a big job, a big responsibility by that time.

So, we put this ad in, and we got 10 people who applied. We distributed it among the board members to call up three each and do an interview. That way, I think we eliminated about six of them. Four had some reasonable credentials, and one that I interviewed was absolutely terrific: Randy Cicen. I couldn't understand why he'd want to get involved; he was a real professional. It was complicated, but he had a woman who was working with him at sort of an administrative level. He was vice president of an association. And he saw that the way the association was going, his job was going to be eliminated. It was the last economic crisis in 1994. He was looking for new things to do, but he definitely wanted to take this woman with him because she was terrific. In order to do so, he had to pick up another organization to manage. The woman turned out to be Shari Allwood, who would play such an important role then and in the subsequent success of SMART Recovery.

Shari Allwood was just a fantastic person: competent, versatile, great personality and zeal. We all flew to Chicago to interview Shari's boss and Shari, and I think very honestly that Jack got frightened because he saw that this person was going to be a formidable leader for the organization of the network. He decided he didn't want any part

of that, and he tried to get an injunction against our meeting. Anyway, that was a mess. Eventually, we had a telephone meeting—I was the president at the time of the self-help network. The strategy was to change the name of the organization. He was very concerned about his trademark—Rational Recovery—which was understandable. We had a huge battle over his plan to have a lawyer present. I called the meeting to order and immediately recognized a board member, who offered a resolution to change the name to the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Self-help Network. Obviously, that doesn't have a ring to it, but it stopped the bleeding. We tried to trademark three different names without success and finally, we hit on SMART Recovery. Afterwards, we developed the acronym Self-Management and Recovery Training to be used with it.

We finally decided on the new name and to have everything rewritten, and we split. It was a very acrimonious split. I think three of the board members stayed with Jack, and six came with the non-profit as it spun off and changed its name to the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Self-help Network soon to be doing business as, SMART Recovery. I hired a former secretary of mine to contact all the RR groups so they could decide which way they wanted to go. I think probably two-thirds of them, maybe three-quarters, decided to stick with the not-for-profit. Eventually, a couple of the other groups that had stayed with Jack's organization switched over, like Chicago and Washington. Jack was really going in a different direction and saw the groups as counterproductive to his ability to sell what he was doing. Also, one of the things that had instigated us to break off was that Jack began to denigrate rational emotive behavior therapy and push his trademarked AVRT (Addictive Voice Recognition Training) exclusively. I don't know how much of his displeasure with REBT was authentic and how much was driven by his financial concerns. REBT was in the public domain per the plan of Albert Ellis. And even though Jack had championed for years that you didn't have to be a drunk to help a drunk, he began to criticize the fact that the people who stayed with the self-help network were never addicted and thus couldn't really understand addiction. So yes, the breakup became quite acrimonious. Then later, he claimed that groups were bad, that wasn't really the way to get better, and he sort of broke off with all groups. This split with Jack in 1994 marks the birth of SMART Recovery.

### **SMART Recovery Program**

**Bill White:** How was the actual recovery program evolving during this time?

**Joe Gerstein:** At that point, we started operation as a completely different organization. We also began to be aware that the motivational issue was the most important issue in addiction recovery. Early in '91, I began to read the work of Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente, and I said, "Look, we have to have a motivational module. This is absolutely crucial. If millions of people get better on their own, what the hell are they doing it on except motivation? So, we have to have that, learn how to propel people towards it and enhance the likelihood they're going to change and be motivated to use our tools. The tools themselves without motivation are useless. They're just noise." So we did add this motivational module to the program. We put it number one because it obviously is number one. We gradually accumulated tools to fill up that toolbox on motivation.

A couple years later, we realized that we also needed an additional module that related to a change in lifestyle. Depending on what phase they're in, how far down into the depths of hitting bottom they've gone, people require different levels of modification of their lifestyle as they move into recovery. So, we added that as a fourth module around 1996 on lifestyle balance: dealing with filling the void, with getting new friends, new activities, and so forth and so on. We also subsequently added a fifth module on criminal thinking errors in our Inside Out program, SMART Recovery's correctional program.

By 1996, we had solidified the program and we trademarked that: the SMART Recovery four-point program. We also did an international trademark on SMART Recovery and copyright on the SMART Recovery handbook, which has now been published in 9 languages. We did this because we had begun to see other people popping up with the word "SMART." We've had about five altercations with people who have tried to use that, either intentionally or by mistake. We trademarked the name and the program; everything else is in the public domain.

**Bill White:** Did this clarification process help distinguish SMART Recovery from AA and other recovery mutual aid groups?

**Joe Gerstein:** You've probably heard somewhere that about 25 percent of the people who come regularly to SMART Recovery and who see SMART Recovery as their primary recovery modality also go to AA meetings. We don't care. That's fine. Same with Women for Sobriety and some of the other groups as well. This dichotomy of style and philosophy really does exist I think. But the response to it is entirely related to the individual. That's why some people are atheists and get along in AA groups and other people are extremely rebellious about it and just can't handle it. I got a call the other day from a doctor in Pennsylvania who said he's gone to about 2,000 AA meetings and he's been sober for six years, but he also started to go to SMART Recovery online meetings. After all this time, he said, "I never felt philosophically comfortable in AA. I can't accept the powerlessness concept and so forth." So, now he's going to start a SMART Recovery group. He's coming to Boston in a week and will attend our training session, go to two weekend meetings, and then he'll go back and start a SMART group. As we grew, this split between SMART Recovery and AA became less and less of an issue. It's a matter of personal choice and style. However, we do have to emphasize in our facilitator's training that AA-bashing is not allowed in our meetings and to demonstrate how to quash it gently but firmly if it arises.

**Bill White:** How was the newly emerging SMART Recovery organization funded?

**Joe Gerstein:** Critical to our development was one donation that we got in the early 2000s from an anonymous donor for half a million dollars. That really revolutionized things for us. We haven't been great at getting money. We did get a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to bring SMART Recovery to correctional facilities. Most of our support still comes from passing the hat.

## **SMART Recovery in Prisons**

**Bill White:** How did the work with correctional facilities develop?

**Joe Gerstein:** In 1992, I went to visit the guy I mentioned earlier who was incarcerated at MCI Concord in Massachusetts. He told me that he had convinced the addiction honcho in the prison to let them have a Rational Recovery program. I said, “Well, that’s terrific, and you could facilitate it.” He said, “No. We have to have a volunteer come in. They won’t let the inmates do it.”

**Bill White:** Oh, I see where this is going.

**Joe Gerstein:** [Laughing] Yeah. I said, “Oh, ok.” My wife and I and Wally White went out there. We did an introductory meeting in the library. There were about 50 men, about 20 of whom decided to participate. My wife and Wally started that program. After about a month, she saw a necessity for a women’s group. So I had to take over. That meeting was 747 meetings ago.

Now, my wife developed a very special interest in the issue of women in recovery and educated herself about it. She noticed that women were dropping out of groups faster than men. She did a survey. Women initially represented about 30 percent of the groups, but within a few months, they were down to 10 percent. She interviewed women and talked to them and started reading the literature about this and so forth, and became sophisticated about it.

At the national conference we had in 1992, she presented a paper called “Women in Recovery and in Rational Recovery.” She noticed that there were two groups that had women facilitating them, and they retained their 30 percent or even went to 40 percent. So, we began retooling and redesigning and changed our training. This is before motivational interviewing became popular and she noticed that there was too much hurly burly in the meetings—the forceful disputing of irrational ideas that Albert Ellis advocated and most of our men liked. But women were a little bit unnerved by this; they were much more cautious, depended much more on having a confident relationship before they really wanted to actively dispute things.

There were also differences in emotional style of the women. In one group that I was facilitating with my wife, a woman went down to the registry to see if she could get her license back and she was rebuffed. All the women in the group said they would get anxious in that situation. All the men said, “We’d get angry.” She distilled this out and said, “Look, we’ve got to have a women’s group until we can get the male facilitators trained up.” We basically used motivational interviewing before it was developed as we know it today.

Within four or five prison meetings, I just detected very powerful changes going on—people getting out of this victim mode and into an active mode of trying to change themselves instead of focusing on escaping detection or spending all of their energies on resentment towards probation officers and guards and all of that kind of thing. So, I got very enthused about that.

We went to Danbury Prison for women in 1994. My wife, Barbara, and myself and Anne Parmenter, who was a social worker who had started three groups, and we did an in-service for all of the treatment personnel in the morning and in the afternoon, they

had us run three separate groups, each with 10 women. Those seemed to be pretty successful. The addiction specialist who brought us down there said after the groups were over, about 15 women ran down to his office, and were banging on his door saying, “We’ve got to have this here.” So, after SMART Recovery was introduced, they did a one-week indoctrination of 100 women. They told them about SMART Recovery; they told them about 12-step and had meetings in the two formats. Then they allowed them to choose which one they were going to stay in for six months. They did it for three cycles. In each cycle, it was virtually identical. About 45 percent of the women chose SMART Recovery, and 45 percent chose the 12-step. Of course, a lot of them had had previous experience with 12-step. None of them had previous experience with SMART Recovery. It was about 45-45, and about 10 percent chose a format based on what their best friend chose. I later found out that they switched the entire federal prison program to a CBT program, which I think was cribbed from SMART Recovery. As far as I know, that still exists today. And many state prison systems—Arizona, Wisconsin, Maine—began SMART Recovery groups, as did other countries such as Scotland.

### **International Growth of SMART Recovery**

**Bill White:** Tell me something of your experience with the growth of SMART Recovery internationally.

**Joe Gerstein:** We have groups in Uzbekistan, Iran, Sweden, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam, and we’re planning a group starting up in Russia. My wife and I are going to South Africa in about 3 weeks, and we’re going to start up the first group in Johannesburg, South Africa. So, it’s a program that seems to be adaptable to many cultures because it’s a secular program.

I’ll give you an example of how this growth unfolded. My wife’s Australian, so 10 years ago, we were on a trip to Australia. I went to the yellow pages and picked out some treatment programs in Sydney and Melbourne and wrote them letters, three of whom invited us to give a talk during our visit. We talked at St. Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney and then a couple of places in Melbourne. My wife and I got a very warm reception in Australia. A woman at St. Vincent’s, Bronwyn Crosby, got interested and she got a grant. About two years later, I got a call from her saying that she’d started a group. She got another grant, and she started up about 40 meetings around Sydney. Eventually, a donor emerged who put up a million dollars and started a foundation to support SMART Recovery Australia. That was around 2006 or 2007.

I got a call from somebody in the Australian prison system who wanted to put in SMART Recovery and the negotiations about Inside Out broke down because the New South Wales prison system had its own printing plant, and they wanted to be able to print the program themselves. So, they wrote up their own program based on SMART Recovery. Again, a very clever program with cartoons and illustrations and so forth, and that’s in use now in all the correctional facilities in New South Wales and reaches 20,000 men and women under their scrutiny.

It’s also used in all facilities in Tasmania—all social service and prison situations in Tasmania—and now all the prisons in Queensland. They’re introducing it into Western Australia, another big state. My guess is that it will become the standard in all the

Australian prisons very quickly. The SMART Recovery Australia Foundation has a staff of three and a half full-time professionals, and they gave up supporting community meetings because the demands on their time were so great.

It's a whole different phenomenon over there. The groups are being run in clinics and by professionals with the expectation that when people get at least 6 months of sobriety in the group and they show the proper leadership and understanding of the program, they will then take over those programs and run them within the facilities. There've been 10 or 12 of those now that have turned over from professionally run to peer-run. We're kind of staying out of it. That isn't exactly how we would do it, but that's what they decided. They said the volume of calls is so great, the demand is so great, and they experienced the same thing that the Rational Recovery Self-help Network did, that it takes a lot of administrative time to run a network of mainly lay people.

## **SMART Recovery Meetings**

**Bill White:** What are some of the continued milestones within the evolution of SMART Recovery?

**Joe Gerstein:** What's happened in the US is an effort to increase the number of face-to-face meetings and our web presence. In Massachusetts, we've had about 20 community meetings ever since maybe 1993, although some have stopped and others have started. We switched from holding meetings in churches to holding meetings in hospitals. That has added prestige to what we are doing. And we don't have to be running around after keys. It enhances the credibility of the program to have meetings at Mass General, McLean, and the New England Medical Center.

We started a website in 1997. Barbara and I put up \$3,000 to get that started. Honestly, I had no concept of what was going to happen. I figured it would just be a place where people could go and get the meeting list and download some materials. Very quickly, it turned into an interactive site. There have been more than 30,000 registrants on that site and about 1,200 individuals a day accessing the site. The site is supported by two part-time employees, and the whole thing costs us about \$35,000 a year.

Now, we get only 1 or 2 calls a week from those poor benighted souls who don't have access to the internet. We also now get over 50 percent of our referrals from professionals.

**Bill White:** Could you describe some of the tensions related to professional versus peer leadership of SMART Recovery meetings?

**Joe Gerstein:** As you know, we've had a falling out with the man who started SMART Recovery in the UK over this issue. That came on two levels. One, he is insistent that SMART Recovery should be a peer-led organization and really wants to dispense with professionals completely even though the organization had just about run out of money. We weren't ready to do that. So far, SMART Recovery has been a wonderful partnership and cooperative venture. The organization is clearly moving towards greater peer leadership. I think more than 50 percent of our Board membership is now peers—peers being people who've been through the program—and in the US, more than 95% of

meetings are facilitated by peers. Worldwide, there are about 700 meetings plus probably 100 prison meetings. We are training about 30 new facilitators a month.

## **Future of SMART Recovery**

**Bill White:** What do you see for the future of SMART Recovery?

**Joe Gerstein:** Well, one very important fact, it's now breaking even. That's from a combination of several things. One is that we've cut expenses absolutely to the bone. We don't have that many employees, but they're very dedicated and they're clearly working at a lower salary than they could get in the market place. The second thing is we've emphasized increasing the donations from the groups. We've tried to teach facilitators how to ask for money. Instead of saying "Throw a dollar in the pot," we say, "Put in the price of a drink or a bag," and give them a little spiel about how "this is a non-profit organization, but it costs money. Most of you know about the web, and the website costs us \$35,000 a year," etc. We're getting better at this.

We've had two \$50,000 grants in our history: one from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and one from SAMHSA. The SAMHSA grant was a very important grant because it allowed us to do videos at one of our conferences and then we were able to chop those videos up and do the introduction to SMART Recovery, how to run a meeting, the four point program, and so forth. That was all made from the tapes that were recorded at that meeting that SAMHSA funded. More recently, we managed to get a \$5,000 grant from a foundation for improving the website, but we haven't been terribly effective in this grant procurement arena.

Now, in terms of the future, we seem pretty solid in the US and Australia, and we are expanding in other countries. Canada is quite active. SMART Recovery has achieved what I expected it to achieve, but it's taken a lot longer than I expected. I expected people to recognize the utility of having a secular science-based program alongside a 12-step program, and it just hasn't happened the way I thought it should and would have happened. There's been such dominance of the 12-step approach that it's very difficult for the voices of alternatives to be heard. I have repeatedly tried to increase attention to SMART Recovery and other AA alternatives at the annual meetings of ASAM [American Society of Addiction Medicine], but responses have ranged from hostility to disinterest. Now there are medical institutions in which SMART Recovery is fully accepted. The addiction treatment programs at McLean Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital seem to have completely accepted the validity of the SMART Recovery program, but it has taken 20 years and thousands of meetings to achieve that. There are now three weekly meetings at McLean Hospital. Emerson Hospital in Concord, Massachusetts, has pretty much integrated the SMART program and has two large weekly meetings. So, this rejection of SMART Recovery and other alternative programs is a systemic problem. I don't know how long it's going to take. Obviously, we'd like to gain a respectable share of the total number of face-to-face addiction recovery support group meetings.

**Bill White:** I'm interested in how recovery support groups sustain themselves over time. Twelve-step groups have done that primarily by an expectation of long-term

involvement, giving back, and a system of rotational leadership. The secular groups have often taken the position to participate as long as you need to and then go live your life. Do you see that shifting at all?

**Joe Gerstein:** At SMART Recovery, we are no longer shy and now actively encourage people to “Pay it forward.” This is now part of the program.

### **Personal Reflections**

**Bill White:** Joe, let me ask a final question: What has kept you involved in promoting and running recovery support meetings for all these years?

**Joe Gerstein:** I’m still learning at every meeting. I say that I’ve done 2,500 meetings, and I still learn at every meeting. I learn something, and it is an incredibly exhilarating experience to see the light go on in someone’s eyes.

I’ve retired from the active practice of medicine. I’m 74 now. I went into medicine for two reasons I think. One, I loved the intellectual challenge of solving problems. Two, I loved the relationship with patients. Every SMART Recovery meeting is a challenge, and at every meeting, I receive feedback from people who I have come to know and care about and who appreciate what I’m trying to do. Also, you need to have a champion for innovations, and I have tried to be one of those champions for SMART Recovery.

**Bill White:** Joe, thank you for this interview, and thank you for all you have done for people seeking recovery.

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