

Making the Decision to Ask for Help

Hi my name's Kelle, and I'm an alcoholic. I'm also an Alaska Airlines Flight Attendant.

Earlier this month, you received an email from our AFA Employee Assistance Program/EAP folks on the subject of substance abuse and recovery. April is Alcohol Awareness Month. Speaking for myself, I was "aware" of alcohol every minute of every day for a good long while until I started my recovery. In the next few paragraphs, I'd like to share some of the supports services I found available once I made the ever so challenging call for help.

Let me first start out by saying that AFA EAP is not a management program. It's a union one with confidentiality at the top of its values list. While we get a great deal of procedural support from management and management may reference "AFA EAP" in their Drug Program communications, this does not mean that management has access to your information. You control your health information when you call AFA EAP.

When I reached out for help around my drinking, I was told I could be on a plane to an inpatient treatment program that day, Sunday. It's that quick and that simple to get help. I elected to wait until Tuesday to get my affairs together (that might not be the best approach for everyone). Within the hour, I had an email with a confirmation code for a flight Tuesday afternoon to start my recovery journey.

That Sunday, I told my kids that I was going into treatment for my drinking. While I didn't get any "well it's about time..." neither did I get any "what are you talking about, you're fine!" response. I contacted my ex and he agreed to come live at my house during the 4 weeks of my treatment. That seems kind of odd to share I know, but, I wanted to give you an example of support systems you might not think you have.

I also received emails from the treatment center with information about what to pack and what I could and couldn't bring. Your AFA EAP reps will coordinate with you and the facility to have the proper medical leave paperwork submitted once you get to treatment, but, you might also want to print and review the Medical LOA handbook on line from the FA website. I called in sick for my Monday trip. Contractually you can call in sick for up to 5 days if you just want to have that off your mind. You can also use Short Term Disability and coordinate using sick leave if you have any. The sick leave will keep your insurance going, but, if you don't have any, FMLA will allow you up to 12 weeks of leave and continued insurance at your current rate.

A staff member from the treatment facility met me at the airport when I arrived on Tuesday. My first step was detox. For three days, I received medical management services and withdrawal medication to ease my body's transition into an alcohol free state. Once I transitioned into the treatment phase, I discovered there were other flight attendants there too, both from AS and other carriers. With this discovery, treatment began getting lots less scary.

While you are in treatment, you might be singularly focused on the 4 weeks of inpatient treatment to which you committed. Heads up though, our Medical Leave can be used to stay out after you return so you can get continuing outpatient care once you get home. That will be discussed and arranged for you before you leave treatment. Continuing care is also covered by our insurance. It is a great way to ease back into your environment with support. Please don't think that 30 days will cure this disease. But don't also underestimate the value of inpatient treatment. My inpatient stay provided me something I couldn't get at home, and arguably didn't want at home....time to think about how my drinking had spiraled me to a place where I didn't want to be; Time to understand how to manage my disease one day at a time; And a place to accumulate enough sober time so I could keep the momentum going once the protective walls of the treatment center went away.

I'm 2 years sober now. I didn't think, even while in treatment, that I was the AA "type". I was wrong, but I'm not going to get preachy here, just suggesting strongly you keep an open mind on that. I know I wouldn't be here without the community support it affords. But remember, there are other recovery support communities if AA isn't the right fit for you.

Please never let yourself say you can't do anything about your alcohol or drug use until you have "time" to go to rehab. I spoke to a friend after I made the call for help. I shared that I was worried about not being there for my kids for 30 days. Her response was so spot on. She pointed out that my drinking was already keeping me from being a support for them. This sacrifice would actually insure that I was truly there for them in the not too distant future.