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MENDS

SPONSORSHIP



Sponsorship

sponsorship

sponsorship

“The heart of NA
beats when two
addicts share
their recovery.”



Sponsorship

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preface

The spiritual principles of Narcotics Anonymous are at the heart of our recovery from the disease of addiction. The steps are “the principles that made our recovery possible,” but we do not work the NA program in isolation. Sponsorship is the key to working the steps—to understanding spiritual principles and practicing them in all our affairs.

This book is focused on sponsorship in NA—its rewards and challenges, and its place in our day-to-day recovery. When world services asked the fellowship in 2000 what they would like to see in a book on sponsorship, the response was overwhelming. Thousands of pages of experience, opinion, and ideas poured in, and it became clear right away that sponsorship varies from country to country, region to region, and individual to individual. The book that resulted reflects this rich diversity. It attempts

to present a snapshot of how our ever changing fellowship practices sponsorship today.

NA's other books offer more information on the program, including the steps and traditions. The book *Narcotics Anonymous* is the Basic Text of our program. *It Works: How and Why* discusses the steps and traditions, and *The Narcotics Anonymous Step Working Guides* is its companion workbook on the steps. *Just for Today* is our daily meditation book.

Some of us will pick up this book hoping it will definitively answer our questions: Do I have enough experience to be a sponsor? How many people should I sponsor? Must my sponsor and I be of the same sex? What should I do if I don't trust my sponsor? And so on. But this is not a textbook providing a concrete "how to" for sponsors and sponsees. Rather, this is a collection of our diverse experience on sponsorship, and reading it may help us come to our own conclusions about what is right for us.

First-hand experiences appear throughout the book. The quotes in first-person were collected from members of NA around the world. While these quotes do not necessarily represent the opinion of NA as a whole, they do provide each of us with an opportunity to grow and learn if we read with an open mind and heart. Some of what we

read here may challenge our long-held beliefs, but, as in a meeting, we can take what we need and leave the rest.

If we close this book feeling that we still have unanswered questions about sponsorship, we can follow the guidance we often get when we are faced with a question we don't know how to answer: we look to the steps, pray and meditate about it, and call our sponsor....

What Is Sponsorship?



A cornerstone of the Narcotics Anonymous program

No single philosophy or belief adequately describes or defines what a sponsor is or what a sponsor does. Over the years sponsorship has become an important and basic tool of the NA program and is practiced in many ways. The sponsorship relationship, for many members, is personal and private.

An NA sponsor is an experienced member of Narcotics Anonymous to whom we turn for guidance with our own program of recovery. Many members believe that sponsorship is a vital part of the recovery process. Along with the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, sponsorship is considered one of the cornerstones of the program and the NA way of recovery. The therapeutic value of one

addict helping another is exemplified in this relationship with another NA member.

Before arriving at the doors of NA, most of us had been living on the edge of humanity, moving deeper and deeper into fear, isolation, and despair. We wanted to find another way to live, but the solution always seemed to elude us. Once we begin attending meetings and learning about the Narcotics Anonymous program, our lives start to change and we realize the importance of seeking support.

“For me, my relationship with my sponsor became (and still is) the first relationship with another human being who opened my heart to the possibilities of becoming a member of the human race.”

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“If ever I needed someone in my life, I needed my first sponsor. He was someone who made me feel a part of NA. He was a friendly face in a world of emotional pain. He was someone who helped me keep going when I could no longer walk by myself. One of NA’s greatest gifts is hearing the message carried through love and kindness.”

We need help and want to reach out to another member. However, we often fear rejection and may experience overwhelming anxiety at the thought of approaching someone to be our sponsor. While in the grip of our disease, we had distorted thinking and perceptions. Some of us believed we were invincible and powerful, while others avoided all contact with people. Now, as our minds start to clear and we awaken from our drug-induced haze, we feel vulnerable, exposed, and helpless. During this fragile time in our recovery, we see that a sponsor may be able to help us deal with these feelings so that we do not have to run from them.

“For me, acceptance is one of the most important parts of the NA program. When I came into the rooms, I was lost, lonely, hurting, and feeling like nothing mattered except death. I hated myself so much. I was broken and felt that no one wanted anything to do with me, above all, my drug problem. It took me a while to get the courage to ask someone to be my sponsor.”

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“When I first got clean I was a mess. I could barely put two sentences together, and I was afraid of everything and everyone. I didn’t know what to

make of the Twelve Steps, much less asking another human being to help me. I didn't trust anyone or believe in anything. However, I did hear that it was important to get someone as a sponsor. It was a frightening thought—talking to a stranger—but it was more frightening to think that if I *didn't* ask someone, I might just go back to using drugs again.”

While we are looking for a sponsor, we need to remember that we can still work the program of recovery; the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using. If we are new to the program, we begin developing relationships with other members and getting involved, and our trust grows. As we watch the process work in others, we start to believe it will work for us as well.

“I walked up to this woman after a meeting and waited impatiently to talk with her. I was nervous. I stuttered and whispered, but she gave me her phone number and said to call her. It was not a firm yes, but I called her anyway. I continue to learn from her today, even though it's been years and we are now miles apart. We have such a won-

derful relationship, and I know our spirits will always be connected.”

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“My relationship with my sponsor was very awkward at first. I was looking for all the answers from her, but all I saw was her living life on life’s terms. In the beginning, it was so hard to think of things to say about me. She would just talk with me about her life, and eventually I was able to talk with her about my life as well.”

A sponsor can offer us a personal link to learning more about the NA program of recovery. Particularly when we are new to the program, we may have questions about NA terminology, literature, meeting formats, the service structure, and so on. If we got clean in a treatment center or other institution, a sponsor can help ease the transition to the outside and clear up any misunderstandings we might have about the differences between treatment and NA. Our sponsors can help orient us by sharing their experience and their knowledge of the NA program.

“I thought I needed a sponsor to get into a closed meeting [a meeting for addicts only]. I thought it was a sort of secret society, like ‘He’s with me.’ I

called and asked my sponsor if that was true. He laughed and said, 'Oh no, it's okay.' I thought a sponsor was the boss of NA! Today I realize a sponsor is a teacher who teaches by example and experience."

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"I'm a smart person, but when I was new I needed a lot of help understanding the NA program. I would call my sponsor and ask her, 'What does powerless mean?' or 'What does it mean to be an "acceptable, responsible, and productive member of society?"' Those phone calls helped me develop my own understanding of the principles of NA."

Sponsorship helps us regardless of how much time we have in the program. Even though we may be working through different phases of our recovery and going at our own pace, we do have similarities. We learn to focus on these similarities instead of on our differences. One of the reasons sponsorship works is that we share the same disease, and we are all seeking recovery from that disease. Members who have accumulated some clean time can be an example to newcomers and oldtimers alike that a new way of life is possible.

“From first-hand knowledge of both addiction and recovery, my sponsor understands what I have to go through in order to stay clean. My sponsor’s success in staying clean serves as a source of hope for me.”

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“My relationship with my sponsor has helped me to become more honest over time. Since he has the same disease of addiction that I do and has had many of the same experiences, he understands the way I think.”

Vastly different definitions of sponsorship exist in NA. In our fellowship’s enthusiasm to ensure our message is clearly understood by everyone—addicts, as well as other members of society—we often try too hard to provide definitive descriptions of every detail of the NA program, including the concept of sponsorship. The beauty of our program is we each can have a personal understanding of the sponsorship relationship.

The spirit that energizes and enriches Narcotics Anonymous is found in our unity through diversity. Regardless of the differences in our practices, the foundation of sponsorship is one of selfless service, willingness, and a commitment to guide and to share a recovery journey

through the Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions, and Twelve Concepts.

“Not only is my sponsor a guide through the steps, but he is someone who helps me see myself for who I really am and who I can be. My sponsor seems to know my motives often before I even understand what those motives are.”

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“My sponsor does one thing for me that I will entrust to no one else—she guides me through the steps of Narcotics Anonymous, plain and simple. We are not best buddies. I don’t go out with her or go over to her house all the time. I call her on a regular basis, and I listen to her and talk with her.”

Some addicts understand sponsorship as an act of unconditional love. Others place conditions or requirements upon those they sponsor. Some members believe the interaction between sponsor and sponsee should be non-judgmental, while other members look for certain kinds of judgment and direction from their sponsor.

“My first sponsor was great for me when I was new in recovery. She told me what to do. She had a list of five things that I had to agree to in order for her to sponsor me. I had to call her every day, go to meetings, work the steps, do service, and pray and meditate daily. She practically spoon-fed recovery to me. She was tough and her strength scared me, but I wanted what she had to offer.”

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“My sponsor was one of the people in NA who loved me until I could love myself. When I first got clean, he asked that I eat a piece of fruit, a bowl of cereal, a piece of cake, or anything for breakfast before I started my day. I wanted to stay clean so badly. I did what he asked, although I didn’t know what it had to do with me staying clean. Soon I began to understand what he was doing—he was showing me how to love and take care of myself.”

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“My sponsor is my base of support. No matter how trivial or traumatic something is, I can rely on him and trust him with my thoughts, feelings, and life events. I can receive his suggestions and guidance through the steps with an open mind and a

trusting heart. I let him know me well—probably even better than I know myself.”

With the increasing diversity of our membership, sponsorship can take many forms that directly reflect our individuality. Regardless of these differences, many members believe cooperation, compassion, acceptance, and responsibility are some of the spiritual principles found in sponsorship.

“Being able to have a guide is the greatest gift of recovery for me. Before I had a sponsor, I was just floating along with no real direction. I hurt all the time, and I didn’t understand why. My sponsor helped me to see the reason why and offered a path to change so I didn’t have to hurt as long or as much.”

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“My sponsor is my mentor, at times my life-saver, but most of all, my friend. She is kind, gentle, loving, caring, and supportive. Knowing that whenever I need her she will be there for me is a very comforting thought. My sponsor allows me to grow at my own pace and work the steps as I am ready.”

For many of us, sponsorship can provide support as we face those challenges that can come from living life. However, there may be times when we find ourselves without a sponsor. This does not mean we are “less than” members who do have a sponsor. During these times we can look to the group and our friends in recovery for support until we find a new sponsor.

“There have been periods in my recovery when I did not have a sponsor, and I was all right. I was still growing and working the program. But the truth is I really missed having someone in my life who was ‘my sponsor.’”

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“In my recovery there have been times when I didn’t have a sponsor. I guess I was waiting for the sponsor fairy to fall down the chimney, or I just was not willing to put much effort into finding one. Relying on my friends in recovery was not the same as having a sponsor, neither was having a sponsor in name only. I believe whatever efforts I put into the relationship I have with my sponsor, the more I benefit from her experience. My experience shows that I need a sponsor to work the steps successfully.”

Some of us may be without sponsees, despite our years in the program. It may be that no one has asked us, or it may be that for one reason or another, we have chosen not to sponsor others. Whatever the reason, if we are not sponsoring anyone, there are still plenty of ways we can be of service. Working on a phonenumber, taking a meeting to an institution, welcoming and encouraging newcomers, or holding a position at our home group are just a few of the ways we can carry the message.

“I’ve been in recovery for 15 years now and have never really sponsored people. Am I a failure? Is my recovery a sham because of my ‘inability’ to fulfill this particular aspect of our program yet? I think not. I used to (half) joke to a friend of mine that I am not asked to be a sponsor because ‘no one wants what I have got,’ but that’s selling myself and NA way short. Everybody is different, and our talents and abilities lie in different areas. I give back in other ways better suited to my circumstances and my natural abilities. I do a lot of service in NA, and I have been and continue to be that person who ‘believes in me and wants to help me in my recovery’ to many friends in NA who I love.”



Narcotics Anonymous continues to grow and reach diverse communities around the world. Some of these communities are geographically isolated from any established NA communities; others may face particular legal or cultural challenges to meetings or the principles of the program. As our fellowship diversifies, it is important that we allow members to adapt the NA program to fit within their communities.

“In the early days, I was the only clean woman in my country. In desperation, I entrusted someone who traveled and knew me well to seek out a sponsor for me. It worked! My sponsor’s letters would always seem to arrive in the mailbox the days I most needed them. It was the best ‘meeting by mail.’”

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“The woman I asked to be my sponsor was visiting my country for our annual convention. She works the NA steps. She is practical, secure, and I love her. I have been working the steps with her, studying her language, and practicing faith in God, people, and myself. When I visited her last year, I shared my Fifth Step with her. Luckily, we knew someone in the program who could interpret for

both of us. I am now working on my Seventh Step, and I'm writing it in her language!"

* * * * *

"I found my sponsor over the Internet. We began our relationship by email. It took time to know her schedule, and for about eight months I had to get up at 4:30 am to phone her. We live on different continents, have different cultures, and I had to make the effort to phone someone I didn't know and to speak her language (all of my recovery takes place in another language). I write the steps and then send them to her by mail. We read them together over the phone. It can get expensive, but I make allowances. This has been the most rewarding relationship I've ever had with another woman."

The concept of sponsorship has helped to shape the program of Narcotics Anonymous we know today. Over time, we come to realize that recovery is an evolving process. We may try to go it alone through some of our life challenges. However, through unconditional love, acceptance, and unity, many of us find relief from the emptiness created by our disease.

“Over the last eight years of my recovery, sponsorship—both as a sponsee and as a sponsor—has played a significant role in my journey. In the beginning, those daily phone calls helped me to learn how to reach out. The frequent ups-and-downs of early recovery had me all over the place emotionally, and that commitment I made to call my sponsor every day helped in easing that roller coaster ride. Nothing else made me feel as accepted and loved as did the support of my sponsor.”

.

“My sponsorship relationship has changed over time. When I was new and lost, my sponsor gave me clear directions and lots of love. When she persevered through my obsessively long Fifth Step, she was gentle and told me I did a great job. She supported me when I changed careers, and later in my recovery, we became friends. Sometimes we get together just to have fun. Now I look to her for advice and encouragement to keep taking risks and growing up. Today, when she is having a hard time, she rings me to cry.”





One addict helping another

Sponsorship can offer the help we so badly need but may be afraid to ask for when we first get clean. Getting clean and going to NA does not automatically mean our lives will become trouble-free while our problems fade quietly away. If it were that simple, the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous could not contain the multitude of people who would be seeking recovery! The years we spent practicing self-destructive behavior and living in self-imposed prisons of fear, self-hatred, and hopelessness made many of us angry and distrustful. These old habits do not just go away by magic. Recovery is often a painfully slow process. If we want to get better, we need to make an effort to be honest, open-minded, and willing. Working with a sponsor can make it easier for us to learn this new way of life.

“I cannot express the importance of my first sponsor—that very first person who was prepared to listen to me and let me cry over the telephone. It was so important that he did not judge me, and that he was able to understand how I felt through his own experience. Here was someone to guide

me in my darkness, offering a hand that reached down into my personal hell and helped me to stand on my own again.”

* * * * *

“I know that having a sponsor is vital to my recovery. For me, the biggest benefit of having a sponsor is that I get a chance at learning how to live life through the Twelve Steps. I have leaned on my sponsor for advice and help when I just didn’t know what to do next. I’m sure my sponsor is not aware of the number of times and ways he has helped me over the years.”

Cautiously letting down our defenses, we reach out to another addict and begin to break the patterns of emotional isolation and false independence that have marked our lives for so long. We learn that it is possible with the help of others to accomplish what we could never do alone. We now have the opportunity to experience for ourselves the therapeutic value of one addict helping another.

“Being a very independent and self-sufficient addict, I have learned a lot about the need to use my sponsor and ask for help. It is not always easy,

but I do it. My sponsor has shown me so much compassion, love, and tolerance, and I'm trying to pass along those spiritual principles to my sponsees."

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"What struck me the most with my first sponsor was that for the first time, at age 42, it was okay to have an intimate relationship with another man. I was able to let him in and to let him get to know me well, so that he could confront me whenever I acted out. It was okay to tell him I loved him and needed him in my life."

Sponsorship, for many of us, can be our first relationship involving trust and intimacy—that is, real honesty and closeness with another person. Some of us feel a bond of trust with our sponsor or sponsees right away, while others build trust through our honest sharing over time. We can learn how to build, rebuild, and heal relationships. The sponsorship relationship often offers support through empathy and unconditional love. This bond can help to free us from the isolation and distrust that comes with the overwhelming obsession and compulsion of active addiction.

“Working with my sponsor has enabled me, for the first time in my life, to trust someone and to honestly tell another person about myself. I stopped feeling alone, hopeless, and lost. I felt supported, and I still do.”

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“I first learned how to develop trust in another person when I got a sponsor (and became a sponsor). My sponsor didn’t blame me, shame me, or tell me I was wrong. As time went by, I learned to trust, and I learned to be trustworthy.”

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“Sharing my secrets with my sponsor was my first act of trust and humility, and it was the first act of breaking my isolation. In this relationship, I began to have objectivity and a balanced perspective on my life’s situations.”

As the loneliness and alienation of addiction begin to fade, many of us start to find comfort in the identification we find in Narcotics Anonymous. The relationship between sponsor and sponsee can become a mutual support system. We experience unconditional love and a connection with other people. We begin to appreciate the

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As the loneliness and alienation of addiction begin to fade, many of us start to find comfort in the identification we find in Narcotics Anonymous. The relationship between sponsor and sponsee can become a mutual support system. We experience unconditional love and a connection with other people. We begin to appreciate the generosity of spirit, companionship, and responsibility that this relationship generally offers. The skills we learn in sponsorship can give us the ability to participate in our own lives again. For some of us, this is the first time we have the opportunity to become a part of society. We may find jobs, go back to school, reunite with family and/or friends, and realize lost dreams.

“Today, sponsorship has evolved to a much deeper level than I ever dreamed it would. Step writing has been a very important part of my recovery, and the love and care shown to me by my sponsor when going over the steps has helped me tremendously in the areas of honesty and trust. The bond we have as a result of working the steps together has been very powerful.”

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“When I first came to NA, I felt that no one could understand the intense feelings of desperation, hopelessness, and shame I was experiencing. At my first meeting, I met a man who would soon become my sponsor. He handed me a pamphlet and asked me to read the part ‘Who Is an Addict?’ As I read, I began to feel that piercing chill of fear that I had carried for so long subside. That simple suggestion from a fellow addict was the beginning of a deep and loving relationship with mutual respect and honest sharing.”

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“I couldn’t understand why my sponsor was so happy and content with the little things he had in

life. He told me that it was more important to contribute than to demand. Later, I realized that this was the key to becoming a part of society.”

Our work with sponsors and sponsees often helps to give meaning to many of our experiences—both past and present.

“I remember the first Fifth Step I worked with a sponsor. I shared my deepest, darkest secrets. I thought my sponsor wouldn’t want anything to do with me. Instead, she shared some of her past with me, and I realized I wasn’t the worst person on earth. In fact, my sponsor helped me see that some of the things I was most ashamed of—some of my early sexual experiences—weren’t my fault at all.”

Through the course of working and living the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, the illusion of self-sufficiency can be gently broken, even as we become more accountable for our own recovery. By sharing openly and honestly, both the sponsor and the sponsee begin to learn from each other. We realize we are no longer alone and

we do not have to face the process of recovery by ourselves.

“My sponsor is a teacher, a role model, a confidant, a listener, a comforter, a mirror, a sounding board, and the dispenser of the truth he sees in me. He is a barometer of my recovery and, to the extent that I allow, he is the voice of reason when I’m making difficult and confusing decisions.”

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“Sponsoring others reinforces my recovery and keeps my gratitude alive by sharing recovery freely. Selfless service is the antidote to self-centeredness, which is the core of my disease. If I suggest a sponsee should go to a meeting or work the steps, I am far more likely to do these things myself.”

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“Having a sponsor has given me a sense of accountability. This relationship has helped me to regain trust in other human beings. I have learned over the years that I can speak with complete confidence to him about anything I think about or do.

He maintains the confidentiality between us, and he does not judge me.”

The sponsorship relationship is humanity in action, providing compassion and support no matter what life experiences each member may be going through.

“I still need to have a sponsor after being in the program for many years. Today the topics are not so much *how* to stay clean, etc., but more about the everyday problems that crop up as a result of being and staying clean. I often find out that I still believe in the illusion that being clean means automatically leading a life without problems. And, usually, I find out through a talk with my sponsor that I have a normal life, just like anyone else who is not taking drugs.”

During our active addiction, the only commitment most of us had was getting and using more drugs. In NA, many of us make a commitment to work with a sponsor and, often later in recovery, a sponsee. We are no longer running from our responsibilities. Following through

with our commitment to sponsorship can help us feel the self-worth that comes from facing our fears.

“Asking someone to be my sponsor was a big commitment for me. It meant I was going to give more than lip service to my recovery. I was going to ask someone to commit to me and that was scary. I had so many issues with trust, but in the end, I realized my biggest issue was with courage.”

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“My commitment to sponsorship has helped me develop into a loving, trustworthy, and supportive person. Before assuming the responsibility as a sponsor, I was selfish, self-centered, and self-seeking. As a result of my work with the people I sponsor, I have discovered the true meaning of commitment. Today I am committed to the people I sponsor; I show up to share their joys and sorrows, to listen with an open mind and open heart, to love unconditionally, to accept and respect them just as they are. Most important is my commitment to guide them through the steps and support them in their process of recovery.”

Sometimes the sponsor/sponsee relationship can be challenging. Misunderstandings can develop, and feelings may get hurt. For one reason or another, we may feel our needs are not being met. However, most of us discover the emotional and spiritual healing that can come from sharing with a sponsor/sponsee is well worth the effort.



Someone who believes in me and wants to help me in my recovery

A sponsor can be a mentor, a teacher, and a role model, not only to those new to the program, but to members with substantial clean time as well. Sponsorship can help us learn healthy ways of living and can offer a sanctuary of support and empathy during times of grief, loss, and other life trials. A sponsor can also join us as we experience those joyful times that celebrate our life and our recovery.

Other members look to a sponsor strictly for knowledge about and guidance through the Twelve Steps and, for some members, the Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts. No matter how we perceive a sponsor, we can

all agree on one thing: a sponsor is “someone who believes in me and wants to help me in my recovery.”

“For me, my sponsor was the first person who I allowed to see the real me. She is my memory bank of experiences and details and patterns. It is important to have a sounding board—someone to bounce ideas and possible changes off of. Two hearts are always better than one.”

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“My sponsor is someone I trust, not just respect—though that’s important too. My sponsor is someone I can be honest with and to whom I can reveal myself. Some of the things I learn about myself shock me, and I need to be able to share those things and to be comfortable enough to allow my sponsor to reveal things to me.”

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“I was in early recovery when my father died. I adored him. He meant the world to me. I was devastated and felt powerless. I came face to face with such pain and anger. These emotions became living entities to me, and I felt they would consume

me. But my sponsor listened to me—at all hours of the day. It's not that she said anything profound; it was more about her just being there and listening and loving me through it all."

As we start to live without the use of drugs, we see that sponsorship can offer a kinship and spiritual connection with other addicts who may have experienced many of the same emotions and circumstances that we have. The bond that often forms between a sponsor and sponsee can be a powerful one as each member is able to share and identify with many of the same feelings.

"In my recovery I have experienced a realm of feelings that I refused to acknowledge. These feelings made me think I was unimportant. I didn't value myself, and as a result, I didn't have the ability to set limits. My sponsor allowed me to express myself honestly, and I learned it was okay not to know some things and to ask for help. Through the love and guidance of my sponsor, I got an idea of who I was, what kind of people I wanted in my life, and what I needed to do to achieve that. The initial

attraction for me was not having to do it *all* by myself. What I've learned from my sponsor is priceless, and the real beauty is in giving and sharing these experiences with my sponsees."

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"My sponsee and I went through divorces at the same time. I had sponsored her for years, and our relationship had truly become a two-way street. That time was one of the most difficult periods of my recovery, but talking with her and listening helped take the edge off. We vented to each other, cried together, and shared insights and tools with each other."

Some members may work professionally as therapists, lawyers, or doctors, for example. However, the responsibility of a sponsor is not that of a professional, but simply an addict sharing from the heart and carrying the message. We choose a sponsor based on his or her NA recovery. Sometimes we may need to seek professional help in one form or another. We can discuss this need with our sponsor, but we should not expect our sponsor or sponsee to provide us with a professional service of any kind.

We need to be aware that a sponsor is an addict doing selfless service and not a professional doing a job. This stems from our spiritual foundation of anonymity, which makes us all equals in NA.

“Members of the fellowship where I live are aware that I work in the drug rehabilitation field and sometimes approach me to ‘fast track’ their admission to treatment. I make my boundaries clear. I tell them that I am in NA for my recovery; I might be willing to sponsor them, but I don’t get involved in outside issues or special favors. This keeps our relationship in the fellowship equal and less open to complications.”

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“The benefits of being sponsored have served me well in this program. For a long time I was able to stay clean, make meetings, get involved in service, as well as take part in all sorts of functions, but I still felt lonely and empty inside. When I became willing to allow a sponsor to come into my life and nurtured that relationship as a part of my process, I began to grow and change and my recovery took

off. I think that wordless language of empathy that the Basic Text talks about helped me more than any doctor or therapist could have at that point in my life.”

It is important for sponsors to maintain their own identity and to be responsible for their *own* recovery, not their sponsees’, and vice versa. We want to ensure that we are carrying the message of recovery to our sponsees and not the mess of our disease. We often say “you can only keep what you have by giving it away,” but it is also true that we must have our own recovery to give “it” away. Sponsorship can be an opportunity to practice the principles of the NA program in all our affairs, where each person, ideally, is receiving the best each has to offer.

“If I don’t take care of my disease in my own recovery, then I’m passing my disease along to my sponsees.”

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“When I first went back to school, I cut back on my meetings because I felt I was too busy. I wasn’t calling my sponsor very much or reading the texts.

I was sponsoring several people, and whenever one of them would call, I would feel so burdened by them. At the end of the call I would feel used up and stressed. Funny how when I started taking the time to work on my own program, I felt less harried and looked forward to a study break to talk to a sponsee.”



The Twelfth Step in action

Sponsorship often becomes a part of the selfless service we hear about in the Twelfth Step. Many members believe sponsorship is an opportunity to carry our message of recovery and to practice the principles found in the NA program. Part of this involves a commitment to work with each other to help provide a sense of acceptance through empathy and understanding.

“There is, for me, no pressure like that of having an avid sponsee who works the steps with a passion. I feel bound to do my best to work my pro-

gram to the fullest. I feel empathy for my sponsees when they ask so many questions and work so hard to learn and understand the NA way. I also feel compassion, for I was in their shoes at some point in my recovery.”

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“My sponsor creates an attraction for me. The path he took before me brought him to this centered space. He is serene, solid, and spiritually balanced. He has a calm, simple life, a strong program, and he consciously works the Twelve Steps. Simply put, I want what he has to offer.”

Getting and working with a sponsor can often ease the confusion we may experience when getting clean. After spending years in active addiction, many of us are not really sure who we are or how to become responsible members of society. A sponsor can provide a more objective and well-rounded perspective on our reality. Through sharing their experience, strength, and hope, sponsors can guide sponsees in building a foundation in recovery.

“My sponsor gives me a whole other perspective on my life, since my baggage tends to influence my perspective and my perception.”

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“Early in my recovery, I had a bit of a ‘reputation’ because of my behavior with men. Finally, when I had a few years clean, my sponsor sort of let me have it. I was telling her how much I loved ‘bad boys,’ and she just shook her head and told me that her dream for me was that, over time, as a result of working the steps with her, I would learn to stop making such bad choices—that I would come to appreciate the true love and support I could have in a relationship. That conversation was a turning point, and as a result, I went out with a ‘nice’ man I wouldn’t have considered dating before. We’ve been together 16 years now.”

In addition to helping us see ourselves more clearly, working with a sponsor can begin to impress upon us the importance of service. Some sponsors encourage those they sponsor to become formally involved in the NA service structure; others simply act as a power of example,

giving of themselves and expecting nothing in return. Sponsorship is a kind of selfless service, and in this relationship we can start to learn how to express our gratitude through service, whether formal or informal.

“My first sponsor is the most wonderful, nurturing, loving soul who knew exactly when to hold my hand and when to let go. She gave me the foundation of my understanding of NA and the steps and traditions and concepts. She instilled in me the importance of ‘giving back’ to NA via service work. Even though she no longer sponsors me, she is still a very active part of my recovery and a close dear friend.”

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“My first sponsor wasn’t very involved in the service structure, but he never missed an opportunity to encourage me to be of service. I remember when I was very new in the program, I went to this meeting and a guy picked up a white chip. After the meeting, my sponsor said to me, ‘Did you give that guy your phone number?’ I didn’t really think I had anything to give, but he let me know that it’s never

too early to start 'giving it away.' Now I do a lot of formal service work, but I learned so much from that first sponsor about the spirit of service and how it doesn't have to do with a particular position but with a willingness to give."

Sponsorship, as with many aspects of our life in recovery, is a relationship-in-progress. A sponsor is simply an addict in recovery, not an infallible expert. While some of us may feel, at times, that we could not stay clean without the guidance and support of our sponsor, we need to keep in mind that sponsors are not Higher Powers but fellow addicts sharing their experience, strength, and hope.

"My sponsor is a human being who has joys and sorrows, needs and dreams, strengths and weaknesses, and character defects that he struggles with. For me, this is a great lesson, to see another person struggle, at times, as I do and still have faith and trust and hope and work so hard to stay grounded in the solution and not the problem."

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“I’ve had sponsees through most of my recovery. It is a wonderful gift to be able to help others and to open myself up so that others can see who I am. Often, when I am lost in myself, my sponsees pull me round. They teach me about trust and commitment. Working the steps with them is no more than working the steps myself. Often my sponsees have more answers than I have. It is a lesson in humility and service. Often their problems are mine, and their solutions are mine too. I have learned through them that I am not the only one who has a hard time or the only one who is fearful and lost.”

The simplicity of the sponsor/sponsee relationship—that of one addict helping another—can help both members get in touch with their own humanness while going through life’s struggles together. The message of recovery does not only come from the sponsor; in many cases the sponsee shares insight and wisdom. This is part of the two-way street: the give-and-take that makes the Twelfth Step such a necessary part of the recovery process. Carrying the message to other addicts and giving away what

was so freely given to us is not only an honor and a privilege, it is vital to enhancing our spiritual condition.

“The importance of sponsoring others is that it helps me become more involved with, and knowledgeable about, the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. I have to be working on my own personal recovery in order to give back to my sponsees.”

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“Recently I had a sponsee get honest about something that I had not been honest about. Now how valuable is that to my program? That’s gold.”

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“As far as being a sponsor, I try to incorporate the things I learned about how I like to be sponsored into how I sponsor. When my sponsee shares a step with me, I share my own step experience as well. One of the greatest gifts in recovery is finding the similarities in our journeys and learning about our differences. I think that the most valuable lesson sponsorship gives me is the opportunity to practice unconditional love. It deepens my appreciation for what has been given to me.”

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“For me, sponsorship, together with meetings, is the most important thing in NA. It’s a must! Sponsorship teaches me humility. I need to be humble to call my sponsor and ask for help. I also must be humble toward my own sponsees by being there and listening to them without being judgmental or controlling. My sponsor and sponsees have taught me about the importance of having relationships with other women and how to love and be loved by my own gender. From that, I have learned to love myself.”

We often hear it said that Narcotics Anonymous is “a we program,” and sponsorship, for many of us, lies at the center of a sense of community and mutual support. NA works because of the help we can give each other. And the best help an addict can get in recovery comes from another recovering addict. We, who spent so much of our lives taking, concerned only for ourselves, awaken to a world of possibility when we open ourselves to the gifts sponsorship can give us.

To the Sponsee



Why addicts seek a sponsor

We have learned from our experience as a fellowship that we need to do more than just attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings. The NA program teaches concepts and principles most of us were not conscious of during our active addiction. Now, newly clean and new to NA, we are in unfamiliar territory. Hearing other members share about “working” and “practicing” the steps and traditions or developing a conscious contact with a Higher Power may fill us with confusion and suspicion. We know it is not going to be easy to stop using drugs, but we did not realize that living a life of recovery would require so much work.

These concepts may be contrary to our way of looking at the world. We may not want to learn how to live with integrity or to offer ourselves in selfless service to other

These concepts may be contrary to our way of looking at the world. We may not want to learn how to live with integrity or to offer ourselves in selfless service to other addicts. All we want to do is stop hurting and end the awful cycle of despair and remorse caused by our disease. The last thing many of us expect to do or know how to do when we get clean is to “work” at this thing called recovery.

“When I first came into NA, I had no idea what the program could be. All I really wanted was to stop using. But over time, I read the steps, worked them with my sponsor, and did the same with the traditions. It was tough at first, but my sponsor, as well as the other recovering addicts I met, gave me unconditional love, encouragement, and shared their understanding of our program. And it has paid off: I have gotten so much more than just abstinence.”

Having a sponsor helps many of us learn about the NA program and gain insight into ourselves that would be difficult to achieve alone. A sponsor is someone with

whom we can share our deep, dark secrets and also someone who can share new ideas with us and offer us direction when we ask for it. This is true for those of us who are new to the program as well as the member who has accumulated some clean time. Most importantly for many of us, our sponsor is the person we can call when we have the desire to use.

“I didn’t wake up one day and say, ‘Hey, I think I would like to make my life a lot better by writing an inventory or making some amends or turning my will and life over to the care of my Higher Power ...,’ when I had never done any of those things before. I needed someone who was on the outside of my decision-making process to give me the push I needed in the right direction.”

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“I remember when I picked my first sponsor. I needed to find the one person I could trust 15 minutes before I used or 15 minutes after I got high. Who can I trust at that level? I didn’t give a damn about the steps. I was supposed to go to jail for a long time. He told me, ‘If you’re supposed to go to

jail, maybe that's where you're supposed to be.' I meant to say, 'Who asked you?', but instead I asked him to be my sponsor. I needed him to tell me that. It was exactly what I was looking for."

Many of us choose our sponsors because of the honesty or depth of their sharing. We may share similar backgrounds or other traits, enabling us to trust the suggestions they offer. Sometimes we just have an intuitive sense that someone is the right sponsor for us. Frequently, a special bond forms, which may lead us to share a deep spiritual connection to our sponsor.

"I believe my sponsor today (and for seven years so far) was sent by God! We met at a convention. She asked me to hang out with her, and we talked with each other all weekend. By Saturday morning, I knew that this was who I wanted to guide me through my recovery. Then, later that night, she boldly challenged me when I excused inappropriate behavior I had been tolerating for some time from a member of my support group. I was shocked! She hardly knew me. But, in fact, she knew me better

than anyone I had met. She is still the woman I most want to be like when I grow up. But I never want to dress like her!”

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“For me, my sponsor is that one special person who I can go to with my personal questions—those questions that might embarrass me or those of a very private nature. I can go to meetings and get experience, strength, and hope from the fellowship, but when I need that special attention, my sponsor is the special recovering addict sent to me from the God of my understanding.”

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“A few months before my third year clean, my sponsor moved to another city to pursue her career. Once again, I had the task of finding a new sponsor. I chose a woman who had comforted me one night when I was hurting. She seemed safe and comfortable. I didn’t think about my decision beforehand; I just asked her if she’d worked the steps and then asked her if she would be my sponsor. She was thrilled.”

When we are new to the program, a sponsor can often make it easier for us to get comfortable with becoming part of the NA Fellowship. Our sponsor can introduce us to other members who have more clean time or who have had similar life experiences. Working with a sponsor can help us to sort out aspects of the program that may be confusing to us: what kinds of things do we want to share in meetings and what might be best discussed one-on-one, when are we ready to take on certain commitments, and so on. Developing a relationship with a sponsor can make us feel part of something larger than ourselves.

“I got clean in a small NA area. We only had seven meetings at the time, so many of the members were very close. It was like this big family, and at first, I felt like an outsider. My sponsor would invite me to join him whenever the group went out for coffee or to eat. He would always include me in their conversations. It was comforting, and I soon began to feel like I was part of the group. It was the first time I felt like I belonged.”

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“When I was new in NA, my sponsor invited me to a work meeting of the service committee that translates NA literature into our language. I went there and found that I liked that service and the people doing it. I became a regular member, like my sponsor. I learned how to work together with others, and soon, many of the people on the committee became my close friends. I felt that I was a part of the fellowship and learned a lot about it.”

Sponsorship is as vital to members who have been clean for many years as to those who are new to the program. While the Narcotics Anonymous program may be simple, its principles have a richness that deepens as we mature in our recovery. Just as our disease can be progressive, so too can our recovery. The longer we stay clean and work the program, the more tools we have and the richer our spiritual life can become.

“As I continue to stay clean in NA, I have come to believe that one of my responsibilities in being a *recovering* addict is to grow by learning new ideas and trying them through action.”

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“The longer I stay clean, the more magical and mystical the steps become. It’s like staring at the clouds and watching them turn into hundreds of faces and images. I see the steps like that—changing as I grow and evolve in my recovery. I’m going through the steps once again with my new sponsor, and I know it will be an exciting journey. I pray that I never see the steps or myself as a ‘finished’ piece of work.”

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“When I was new in NA, I used to think of open-mindedness only in terms of my belief system. I was an evangelical atheist, and I had to work hard to listen with an open mind to what people shared in meetings. Now, years later, my sponsor has helped me to see that open-mindedness extends far beyond my ideas about God or a Higher Power and into ideas about what makes me happy, what I want for myself, my dreams, and so on. I love my life today, and nothing about it is as I might have imagined or ordered up for myself had I not learned how to be open to new possibilities.”

Members with substantial clean time can find that they are as vulnerable as newcomers are when facing some of life's uncertainties. Clean time does not always mean that a member grasps the principles of the NA program easily. Our disease does not go away, and we are not freed from life's problems simply because we have been clean for a certain number of years. Having a sponsor during difficult times can be invaluable.

“After seven pretty solid years of working my program and the steps with a sponsor, I gradually—but eventually—stopped calling my sponsor. The next thing I know, I’m in a hotel room in a city known for glitter and gambling with strangers who are getting high. All of this happened with about nine years clean, but I had no sponsor and obviously no ‘program.’ I was truly lost. My sponsor (today) shared with me that my Higher Power really loves me and that I was the luckiest guy in the world to survive my gamble without disaster!”

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“There have been times in my recovery when I have felt lost or abandoned or like I have lost my

connection to God and NA. But I was taught the door is always open. And sometimes, it's a sponsor or a very close friend who will take my hand and lead me back 'home.' I have always responded best to the kindness and tenderness of people. I guess I just spent so much time in my using days beating myself up that when I arrived to NA completely beaten and downhearted, what I really needed was to feel loved and accepted regardless of who I was or what I had done."

Many members look to a sponsor for help with accepting the challenges and obstacles that sometimes confront us while learning how to live a clean life. A sponsor can offer us suggestions on how to deal with "the wreckage of our past" as well as the challenges of our present.

"When my sister overdosed five months ago, I was devastated by the loss. My sponsor listened to my pain and made time for me when I was in need. We live 400 miles away from each other, but when I would call him it seemed like he was right next to me. He showed up unannounced at her funeral just

to be there for me. I know that dropping everything and getting on a plane to be there for someone is not in the 'job description' of a sponsor, but I could never find the words to say how much it meant to have him near me then and how much it helped me to get to the other side of my grief."

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"I was facing financial disaster when my ex-wife sued me for past due child support. My sponsor helped me to recognize the importance of facing the past, making amends with financial restitution, and becoming freed for my future."

Sharing intimately with another member who is like us reinforces the fact that the feelings and experiences we have are not so unique. Often, a sponsor has walked along the same path as a sponsee and can share his or her knowledge and experience with that situation. This, in turn, may help the sponsee to avoid some of the identical pitfalls the sponsor went through.

"When I had ten years clean, I was experiencing mid-life issues dealing with sexuality. I needed a

new sponsor, but I knew very few people who had dealt with these issues and who had more clean time. So I asked a woman who had a year less clean time but was ten years older than me and who had just come through these same issues. She had looked for love in all the wrong places and had learned how to love responsibly.”

Sponsorship can play a crucial role in the Second Step; many credit sponsorship as an important factor in coming to believe we could be restored to sanity. This is not to say that a sponsor is like a Higher Power, but that sponsorship helps guide us in our decision-making and self-understanding. Our sponsors can help us get better perspective on ourselves and our lives. This can be one of the benefits of having the same sponsor over a long period of time; as the years pass, they know us better and better.

“My sponsor helped me understand that unmanageability didn’t just apply to ‘outside’ things, but also to the way that I felt. She taught me about insanity and helped me to see where I was trying to do the same old (ineffective) things to solve my

problems. She did this in a loving way, without stepping on my toes.”

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“After many years clean, I got into a fist fight and subsequently became riddled with fear. I thought I had progressed beyond that kind of behavior. My sponsor reminded me that I continue to be a work-in-progress. He listened and nurtured me back to the steps. I found myself moving toward the solution and no longer lingering in the problem.”

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“My sponsor is the one who helps hold the spiritual flashlight for me.”

The reasons addicts seek sponsors are numerous; however, we find that what binds us together is that we are all seeking recovery. Many of us cherish our relationships in NA, and particularly our relationships with our sponsors, for the ways that they are sometimes distinct from our relationships outside the program. The spiritual principle of anonymity ensures that we are all equals inside the rooms of NA. The principles of our program can often help us to overcome and face our problems in a responsi-

ble and productive manner. We can stand together and know that we do not have to go through these challenges alone.

“Anonymity—the condition of bearing no name—is essential in my sponsorship relationships. A sound understanding of the Twelfth Tradition means coming to understand anonymity on many levels (it must be important—not only is it the ‘spiritual foundation of all our principles,’ it’s half our name!). One is that we keep each other’s secrets. Another, more important to me, is that we are all, in some senses, the same. My sponsor is not a better person or a better addict than I am; I have as much or more to learn from my sponsees as they from me.”



How do we know if someone “has what we want”?

Narcotics Anonymous has no strict guidelines for selecting a sponsor. However, we may want to keep in mind some basic qualities. One of those is finding someone we relate to and who “has what we want.” Many members look for a sponsor they feel will accept and respect them no matter what they share. Some members just want a guide through the steps, while others try to find a sponsor who will be their companion and friend. What we seek in a sponsor in early recovery may be different from what we look for in later recovery. It is important to ask ourselves not only what we want in our life and recovery, but also what we feel we need. As with any other element of our recovery, we can always look to our Higher Power for help in making a decision.

“I don’t want a sponsor who has what I want; I want a sponsor who has what I have and knows how to live with it.”

For some, a potential sponsor’s relationship to the program is the most significant consideration. They look for someone who attends meetings, participates in service, works the steps, has a sponsor, and is committed to the

program. Finding a sponsor with more clean time is also important to many people. Those who are new to the program, in particular, should probably seek a more seasoned member as a sponsor, unless there are no such members in their community.

In addition to looking at what people do for their recovery, we might also consider other personal qualities. A number of members look first and foremost for a sponsor who is honest and open-minded and who has integrity. For some, it is most important to find someone friendly and available who is respectful and trustworthy. Others explain that finding someone who is fun is as important as anything else.

A list of considerations could go on and on, and of course, no one person will have all of these qualities. Because our sponsor is human, he or she will have both assets and defects. We may find someone who has only one (or none) of these qualities but who is nevertheless the perfect sponsor for us. How we determine exactly what characteristics we feel are necessary is completely up to us. Some of us may want someone who gives firm direction, for example, while others may look for someone who will let us skin our own knees. When we are

new, many of us simply ask the person who makes us feel most welcome. Choosing a sponsor is *our own decision*.

“I once approached finding a sponsor with a laundry list of issues that I wanted my sponsor to address. I wanted someone whose views of the program were similar to mine. I wanted someone who had dealt with some of the same issues I had. I wanted someone who was gay like me. I wanted someone who had more clean time than me, etc., etc., etc. While these expectations didn’t appear to be unreasonable, I was unable to find anyone who met them. After several months, I met a guy in a meeting, and without even learning about him, asked him to be my sponsor. As it happened, he met each and every one of my predetermined needs. It was yet another instance when God’s plan was better than mine. I just had to get out of the way.”

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“I would watch people because sometimes what they say doesn’t match with how they live. I was so afraid of being rejected that I kept a list of three

people I could ask just in case one of them rejected me. The guy I finally asked had a gray beard and looked like I thought a sponsor should. He had something that I liked. When I asked him to be my sponsor, he said he would ask his sponsor to see if he should sponsor me. I do the same thing today whenever someone asks me to be their sponsor.”

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“I am hard enough on myself, and so for me, the most important thing has always been to find a sponsor who was kind. For the first ten years of my recovery, I could not find someone who fit all of the ‘ideals’ on my sponsor wish list. There simply weren’t enough men in my area with more clean time, emotional stability, and a good sense of humor. The one man I knew who fit that description was, ironically, already my sponsee, so I had to decide what was most important to me and compromise.”

Examining our personal motives for considering someone as a sponsor is also a good idea. When many of us arrive at the doors of NA, we are broken physically, men-

tally, emotionally, and spiritually and often in dire financial need. As newcomers to the NA program, we may find ourselves attracted to other members because of their possessions or the way they look. We may view their “money, property, and prestige” as a measurement of their status and success in recovery. We may not yet fully grasp that the NA program is an “inside job” and its rewards have more to do with spiritual growth and peace of mind than lifestyle or possessions.

“My first sponsor had a new car, dressed well, and had a great house. I thought she would show me how to get these things. Instead, she led me to the steps and an awakening of my spirit.”

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“I was looking for someone who had what I wanted: the most jewelry, the nicest car, and the most women. I found out later that I should get a sponsor who had what I needed—acceptance!”

Some members have had difficult relationship experiences with family, friends, employers, lovers, and other members of society before getting clean. Sometimes feel-

ings such as defensiveness, neediness, or desperation may make us wary of repeating past mistakes, or may encourage us to develop new relationships that seem just like the old ones we are used to. When choosing a sponsor, we may not be able to identify what kind of sponsorship relationship is going to be best for our recovery.

“My first sponsor was very strict, and I thought that this would make it easier for me to get some discipline in my life, like the little child who does the right thing because he is scared of his parents. Actually, that was the way I was brought up, and I was accustomed to being abused and forced to prove myself. This relationship lasted two encounters, and I ended up crying in my home group, feeling broken in pieces because of his severe criticism and control. I felt rejected.”

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“The truth is that, when I was new, I wanted a sponsor so that people would leave me alone about getting one. The woman I asked was, in many ways, the exact opposite of me, and that’s what I thought I should want. She was five feet tall and

blonde and always smiling. She was dating a doctor on whom I had a small crush. Her hair never seemed to be out of place, and she was very determined, which I liked. And she had more than five years, but didn't treat me like an idiot. The problem was that we were so different neither of us ever really learned to understand the other. Her most used line with me was an exasperated 'I'm trying to understand you. I'm really trying.' But she never could. And I don't remember her ever mentioning a step to me, though she gave me a lot of good nuts-and-bolts suggestions—more than I knew at the time."

Getting a sponsor can be one of the most important commitments we will make in our recovery. We need to make every effort to look within ourselves, no matter how difficult it may be to maintain objectivity. Of course, because this choice is so personal and our membership so diverse, some considerations may not be as important to us as others are. On the other hand, we might feel that certain character traits, which are not mentioned here, are crucial. Regardless, it is important to remember a sponsor is a human being who can make mistakes.

“The impulse to put sponsors, especially people who sponsor lots of other people, on pedestals profoundly isolates those members. The first time I asked an oldtimer what it’s like to have lots of clean time, he said, ‘lonely.’”

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“I actually chose my sponsor because she shared about being human and making mistakes, and I thought that this meant that she would be kind to me if I was not perfect. Her daughter was in active addiction, and my sponsor’s obsessive struggles to manage her often meant that she was not emotionally available to me or that she would not return my phone calls when I wanted her to. I learned to rely on other people for support at these times because she was the one who I wanted to sponsor me. Although she was imperfect, sometimes crazy, as far as I was concerned she was kind and loving and that was what I needed.”

Many of us find it helpful to have a sense of our own expectations for the sponsorship relationship and to be direct about these expectations when we ask someone to

be our sponsor. For those of us who are new to the program, this may be more difficult. It may take us some time in the program to develop this kind of understanding. Nonetheless, if, as a new member, we need more time and attention from a sponsor, we have to learn to ask. We may want to talk to potential sponsors about whether we can call them late at night if we get the desire to use and what their expectations are if we do use (will they still sponsor us?). Those of us with some established clean time also have to ask for what we need. If we are looking for help with working a step or understanding a tradition, dealing with a service position, or coping with a particular life situation, we can discuss these needs with a potential sponsor.

“When I asked my current sponsor if she was willing to sponsor me, I talked to her about confidentiality. She is best friends with my boss, and I needed to know that I could talk to her about work in confidence and that she would be comfortable with that. She told me her expectations as well and let me know that just because she sponsored me, that didn’t mean we would be best buddies. As it

turns out, we have become good friends (despite her disclaimer).”

By learning to take risks and move through our fear, we can develop the ability to express our needs. This is a skill that we can use in all of our relationships as we grow in our recovery.



Our experience has shown

While most members of our fellowship can agree on many aspects of sponsorship, NA as a whole has no opinion on a number of controversial issues related to sponsorship. Our individual members, however, often develop strong beliefs and, in many cases, feel there is a “right way” to approach sponsorship. Nonetheless, it is important that we, as a fellowship, do not make any one particular group of members feel left out or put forth the idea that one method of practicing the principle of sponsorship is better than another method.

More than one sponsor

Most of our members feel that it is important to have only one sponsor. These members find that having one sponsor helps them to keep it simple and to minimize the risk of “shopping” for answers; one sponsor is like the “single point of decision and accountability” explained in the Fifth Concept. Some members, however, have had success with more than one sponsor. Sometimes special circumstances, such as service work, illness, or divorce, motivate members to seek out someone with similar experience to sponsor or guide them in addition to their long-standing sponsor.

“I wasn’t supposed to have two sponsors, but I ended up in that position for a week, and it was so confusing. They both wanted me to do exact opposite things. One wanted me to continue with Step Four, and the other wanted me to restart Step One.”

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“Having two sponsors was confusing at times but really helped me to decide how honest I was going to be; what I thought, believed, felt; what was important—honesty, integrity, living with princi-

ples, etc. At first, I had back doors with each—if one tried to confront me on some defect and I wasn't ready, I'd hide behind 'Oh, I'm doing a bit on that with my other sponsor.' I paid the price. I was slower to see myself, but I think the unfolding was in God's time. I learned so much from having two sponsors that I can only say it's been very positive."

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"I got a sponsor before I even got clean. She brought me to meetings, and I began to work the steps to the best of my ability. As soon as I got clean, I became very interested in service, but my sponsor had no experience in this area, so I got a 'service' sponsor, who helped guide me in that area of my program. By the time I had three months clean, I had four time-consuming service positions. I was overwhelmed and wanted to quit everything. My service sponsor really helped. She gave firm direction that once I made a commitment, I had to fulfill it or find a replacement. I did find a replacement for one of my positions, but I completed the other commitments. This experience really helped me to develop into the person I am today. Neither

of these women sponsors me today, but I am friends with both of them, and I am extremely grateful for the guidance they gave me in different areas.”

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“When I first got clean, I had an NA sponsor plus an AA sponsor. Soon, what I was hearing from my AA sponsor did not mix with what I was learning from the NA program. Shortly, I dropped the AA sponsor and only used my NA sponsor. The lesson I learned was that if I want to learn carpentry, I need to talk with a carpenter. If I want to learn how to fix cars, then I need to talk to a mechanic. If I want to learn how to live the NA program, then I need an NA sponsor.”

Temporary sponsorship

In some regions, a practice called “temporary” or “interim” sponsorship is common, particularly for those new to the program. In fact, sometimes institutions require their clients to get an interim sponsor. A temporary or interim sponsor is someone who can work with us until we find a person we are comfortable asking to be our

sponsor. We can also ask someone to be a temporary sponsor when we have a circumstance that causes our sponsor to be unavailable for a period of time—if, for example, our sponsor is ill or we have had to relocate for a short period of time. Though this practice is popular in some regions, however, it is frowned upon in others. Some members feel strongly that seeking a temporary sponsor indicates a lack of commitment or a reservation. “This disease is not temporary,” they explain.

“My first temporary sponsor lasted four years.”

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“I’ve had enough temporary relationships; it’s time to learn how to have permanent ones.”

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“My treatment center required me to get a sponsor, so I asked the first person I met in a meeting they took me to. Both of us understood the arrangement to be temporary.”

Gender

The gender of our sponsor—that is, the question of whether or not we should get a sponsor of the same sex—is another area where opinions vary widely from community to community and addict to addict. Many addicts feel very strongly that a same sex sponsor can better help them to work through certain issues and can more easily identify with them and feel empathy for them. Others do not see gender as such a determining factor in working through issues or establishing empathy. In some smaller NA communities, the number of potential local sponsors may be limited, influencing members' choices in this regard. Regardless of what we decide about the gender of our sponsor, we should be careful that sexual attraction is not an issue in our sponsorship relationship.



“I have a loving and caring sponsor of the same sex because I can only share some of the things in my life concerning the opposite sex with someone who can relate. For example, he understands my challenges communicating with my ex-wife. We both have children who live with our ex-wives, and we both have experience trying to make that work.”

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“As a gay man, I have had a few different types of sponsors. I have been sponsored by another gay man, a gay woman, a straight man, and a bisexual woman. I believe the gender of my sponsor is only important in the following sense: that one should never be sponsored by someone where any level of sexual or romantic tension exists.”

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“I need a woman sponsor not only because of difficulties with sexual attraction/infatuation, but mainly to learn to trust, like, and love someone of my gender. That has opened the pathway for me to love, like, and trust myself as a woman.”

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“I’ve always had opposite sex sponsors because when I got clean the fellowship was just starting in my country and there were no women in recovery. I think opposite sex sponsorship can work when the only purpose is recovery. My own experience is that I approached a member who I felt physically attracted to with the idea of asking him to be my sponsor. Fortunately, he rejected me and told me that he felt attracted toward me and that he wasn’t

going to be my sponsor. He told me to look for someone else. I felt very hurt by the rejection; no man had ever rejected me, but that was the first lesson on dignity that I received in the groups of Narcotics Anonymous.”

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“When I was new and looking for a sponsor, someone explained to me, ‘Recovery is not sexually transmitted; don’t choose someone you could be sexually attracted to.’”

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“I realized that ever since childhood, men were competitors—for attention, in sports, for girls, at work for position, salary, etc. Now I have to see men in a different light. I have to see them as friends and confidants instead of competitors. That took a while. But once I got over that fear of intimacy with a man, my recovery just took off. I think that intimacy is very important for the sponsor/sponsee relationship.”

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“When I had four months clean, I asked a man to sponsor me. It was my way of rebelling; after all,

men and women are all the same, I said to myself. I thought that the suggestion of same sex sponsorship was only about sex. He wound up borrowing money from me and not paying me back. The clincher was that I found out he never asked his male sponsees to borrow any money. I realized then that men and women manipulate each other in a lot of ways besides sex.”

What if I can't find an NA sponsor?

Sometimes we are unable to find a sponsor right away. Particularly in newer or smaller NA communities, there may be few members with substantial clean time. In such a situation, some members have had to find sponsors in other twelve-step fellowships or over the Internet, and some have used co-sponsorship (a relationship in which each person sponsors the other) to help them with their recovery. Some of these arrangements work out and last for many years.

“There were no other women with my amount of clean time in my community, so I sought an NA sponsor overseas to work through the steps, tradi-

tions, and concepts. When I asked the woman, she identified as having the same problem and suggested co-sponsorship. Since then, we have communicated by email, post, and phone. For now, it's working."

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"Living in a country with a small NA community with no women with more clean time than me, I had to go to another fellowship to find a sponsor. She helped me with the steps and sponsored me for a few years. But I then realized that I was much more involved in working my program than she was. She also stopped going to meetings. I realized I had to find a new sponsor, an NA sponsor, and I started to look to a neighboring country."

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"Most of my communication with my sponsor happens online. We write regularly to one another. Writing gives us time and thought between comments, and it really shows. On the phone, I can 'sit and spin' for hours in my disease, but writing drives me to be more precise and concise. And we both benefit from having a written record of our

conversations. Of course, I get my email service through my job, so it's a mixed blessing. That means my employer also has access to all those conversations with my sponsor. It's important for me to remember that email is not a confidential or anonymous form of communication; there are some things that I simply can't discuss online."

Regardless of ...?

In NA, we are taught that the particular qualities or affiliations of our members, as individuals, have no bearing on their right to membership and their status as recovering addicts. Our Basic Text explains that anyone can belong to NA regardless of his or her race, religion, sexual identity, age, etc. Nonetheless, some addicts struggle with the question of whether they should consider these kinds of factors when choosing their sponsor; should they look for someone with similar religious or political beliefs, of a similar ethnicity or socio-economic status, from a similar culture or background? While some addicts do seek a sponsor who is similar to them in some of these respects, many others have found that such factors are negligible in relation to working a spiritual pro-

gram, and some, in fact, look for someone who is not like them.

“I knew my sponsor for seven years before I asked him for sponsorship. Five of those seven years we shared the same sponsor. He had been sponsoring me for a little over a year before I realized he was wealthy. I don’t believe I would have asked him had I known his economic status in advance. I am grateful I acknowledged his insides before judging him by his outsides.”

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“In my addiction, I was taught to despise all religions and any skin color but my own. In recovery, I was attracted to a sponsor who was a minister. He taught me, by example, that in NA, the spirit of anonymity could replace all of my prejudice; my bigotry was replaced with love, patience, and tolerance.”

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“My sponsor and I were radically different culturally and morally. We came from different parts of the country, different religions, and different social

classes. So there were a lot of odd little things we just didn't understand about each other. I got to expect and even enjoy the question, 'Is that a cultural difference or a character defect you're acting out on now?' We talked a lot about the Fourth Tradition, because being her sponsee didn't mean becoming like her—it meant that she would help me become more and more like myself. Autonomy meant not having to be the same, not having to mistake unity for uniformity.”

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“I got clean in the city. My first sponsor's race differed from mine. I didn't see color or neighborhoods. I just remember hurting so bad and struggling not to use drugs, and this addict saying yes when I asked him to sponsor me. As I see it, drugs didn't stop at the boundary of color, so why should my recovery?”

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“If I'd waited for a man of the same race to come into the rooms so I could ask him to be my sponsor, I'd be stoned by now.”

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“I had to change sponsors because my sponsor was unable to make suggestions to me without the influence of her particular belief in God.”

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“As a sponsee, my biggest difficulty was to ask my present North American sponsor to sponsor me. I had to work through my prejudice, as well as language and distance barriers. My relationship with him mainly takes place over the Internet. I learned that the language of love is stronger than any barrier.”

How each of us addresses these various differences is neither right nor wrong; it is simply how we as individual NA members address those differences. While the spiritual principles of unity and anonymity expressed in the traditions emphasize our common bonds as recovering addicts, we also hold dear the spiritual principle of autonomy, which protects our diversity. In NA, we value our unity but we do not strive for uniformity.





Reaching out

Asking someone to be our sponsor can be daunting. As new members, we might feel intimidated by another member's clean time or feel that we are somehow sicker than others. Our self-esteem may be so low that we believe we do not deserve to have a sponsor. On the other hand, our arrogance and self-righteousness may prevent us from admitting that we even need help and, as a result, we may resist seeking out another member.

"Someone else got me my first sponsor. A girl I knew in treatment brought her boyfriend over to me at a meeting. She told me she thought that he would be a good sponsor for me. I said okay and he agreed. That man was my sponsor for two years. I was shy and might not have asked on my own. I would have just tried to fit in and faked it."

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"When I first asked my sponsor to sponsor me, I was nervous and wondered if he had the time for me. I looked up to him as the 'great God of NA'!

As a result, I felt guilty whenever I asked for some time with him. I finally shared my feelings about the guilt of taking his time. His response was beautiful: 'Don't you dare take away my right to give back what was given to me.' This single sentence did more to bond my sponsor and me than any other event in our relationship."

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"I met my first sponsor at my first meeting. I had two days clean, and I was living in an abandoned building. The first guy I asked rejected me. I was very angry and tough in the early days. No one really wanted me around, but I didn't have any other place to go, so I stayed. Eventually, I humbled myself enough to ask someone else. My current sponsor is one of the most important people in my life. He used to be my sponsee brother—that is, we used to have the same sponsor. He and I have been together for 18 years now."

Newcomers are not the only ones who struggle with asking someone to be their sponsor. Members who have long-term clean time may balk at the thought of changing

sponsors. We may need to get a new sponsor for a number of reasons. As we stay clean and become productive members of society, our lives can change tremendously. After being with the same sponsor for years, we may find ourselves growing in a different direction. Job responsibilities or career opportunities might make it necessary for either our sponsor or ourselves to move away from our present NA community. Family obligations may shorten the time our sponsor can share with us. Our sponsor may become ill, die, or maybe even relapse. Whatever the reason, we may find ourselves without a sponsor and know that we have to ask someone. Many members find the idea of getting to know someone again on such an intimate level to be a difficult task.

“I worked hard to build a new relationship with a new sponsor, even though I was heavily grieving the last one. It’s not easy to choose a sponsor under any circumstance, but it can be especially hard after we’ve been clean a while. I have a much clearer idea of who I am and what I need (or think I need) now than I did when I was new and found my first sponsor. That makes it much harder to remember that I can’t sponsor myself. But it has

also meant that I can work much more consciously on building this new relationship and that I can deal with problems in that relationship much more quickly and cleanly than I did before.”

We know we can find acceptance in the NA meetings we attend, but some of us put off reaching out to ask another member to be our sponsor because we fear rejection. We may not want to risk losing that feeling of “being part of.” Nevertheless, we should not deny ourselves the possibility of being in this rewarding relationship simply because of our fears.

“With three years clean, I found myself stagnating in my recovery. I was not growing, and I felt I needed another woman to guide me through the steps. I was afraid to change my sponsor because I didn’t want to lose her friendship. I knew, though, that if I wanted to grow in my recovery, I needed a new sponsor. Today, I’m working the steps and growing in recovery with the guidance of my new sponsor.”

Regardless of how much time we have in the program, we all look for a sponsor in much the same way. We can start by going to meetings and listening to members. If someone's sharing moves us, we should reach out, get his or her phone number, and start to call. This is a good way to get to know another member, even if our life seems to be going smoothly at the moment and we do not have any problems to solve. We can also talk to other members to see if they can suggest anyone as a potential sponsor. We do not need to be at the end of our rope to reach out for help.

Conventions, workshops, service work, and other NA-related activities also provide a fertile ground for selection. In choosing a sponsor, many of us find it best to trust our intuition, while others will make this decision rationally and analytically. We may also want to consider those addicts who seem to have an interest in our recovery. It is important to remember to take our time. If someone we ask declines, then we keep looking.

“I asked five or six men to sponsor me who said no before my first sponsor said yes. I am certain it was a loving God guiding me to the right sponsor.”

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“I am a very proud woman, and when the first woman I asked told me that she could not sponsor me, I felt worthless and stupid for asking her in the first place. But I kept asking people. In the end my persistence paid off. I finally asked a woman who seemed to know how to have relationships and how to belong in NA because that was what I wanted—and she said yes. I believe that I am the kind of person who values things that are hard to get and that it was probably important for me to have to work hard to get a sponsor. The other thing that my experience with persistence taught me was how to live life on life’s terms.”

In communities with few NA members, we may need to seek a long-distance sponsor: someone we meet online, through service, at a convention, or through some similar means. Though not all members believe this option will work for them, some of us have had success with such relationships, particularly in small NA communities where long-distance sponsorship can be a vital link to the rest of the fellowship. Long-distance sponsorship can also

be a solution for incarcerated members or those of us in hospitals or other institutions where face-to-face contact is limited.

“I met my first sponsor at a regional service meeting, and although she lived over 200 miles away, I wanted what she had and I was willing to go to any lengths to get it. The miles between us made calling difficult at times, but I have a wonderful support system where I live, and we were able to stay in regular contact and work the steps together by meeting at workshops, service committee meetings, and, of course, conventions! We used to call it ‘blacktop recovery.’ Yes, I admit there have been times when I would like to meet my sponsor for a cup of coffee—AT THAT MOMENT! But I write, use phone numbers, and attend meetings on a regular basis, and I’ve learned acceptance, patience, responsibility, and too many other gifts to list.”

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“The distance just disappears when I hear my sponsor’s voice on the other end of the phone. Her experience working and living the steps of NA is

what I want from her. The key is to have other women around me, women who can help me live in spiritual principles, love me, and tell me when I need to call my sponsor.”



Developing our role as a sponsee

We can take a number of steps to ensure that our relationship with our sponsor is rewarding and fulfilling. A large part of how much we gain from sponsorship depends on our willingness to be sponsored. When we open our hearts and minds and make a commitment to work with a sponsor, we have the opportunity to learn many new things and new ways of thinking. We discover how to approach life from another’s perspective. Often, we lose our self-centeredness and become sensitive to our sponsor’s needs. We begin to develop trust as we grow within our sponsorship relationship. Many of us also learn how to develop balance in our lives.

“When I am confused and need guidance, I call my sponsor. His perspective on the issue can be different, and he can help me clear my head with a suggestion or two. I do not profess to have all the answers and experience, so I keep my ego in check by deferring to him.”

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“I had five years clean, and my sponsor at the time had just let me go because I wasn’t taking her direction. I didn’t trust her. I didn’t trust anyone. When I got my current sponsor, I was miserable and empty inside. I hung in there. I didn’t use. I did steps with my new sponsor. My sponsor gave me direction to call her every day. I hated it, but I did it. And then it got strange. Something started happening. People started sitting next to me at meetings and I would talk to them. My phone started ringing. I noticed I was laughing more. I think what happened is that I was forced—okay, maybe ‘directed’ is a better word—to build the first intimate relationship of my recovery and maybe of my life. The reason I kept having unsatisfying friendships and romantic relationships is because I wouldn’t let anyone get close enough to know me.

In turn, I was unwilling and unable to get to know myself. Working closely with a sponsor and learning to trust her has made a huge difference in my life.”

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“Every time I speak with my sponsor, I always remember to ask how he is doing. At the beginning of the relationship, I never asked. Then it was usually the last thing I asked him before hanging up. Now when he says, ‘How are you doing?’ I will share what’s going on, and then say, ‘And how are you?’ Yes, recovery is possible.”

When we choose a sponsor, we are not hiring a professional to teach, analyze, treat, or save us. Our sponsor is simply sharing his or her experience, strength, and hope with us; ultimately, we are responsible for our own recovery. Having a sponsor is more than just lip service. Being a sponsee is an action. We must do the footwork. And to do that footwork, we must reach out. Seeking that individual support from another recovering addict helps us realize that we can accomplish so much more together than we ever could do alone.

“Having a sponsor is a reminder of my responsibility to myself to move forward in the steps. By sharing this process with my sponsor, I have a witness to how much or how little work I am doing and how quickly or slowly I am moving forward with my step work. In this way, my relationship with my sponsor keeps me honest about my progress in recovery.”

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“It took me a long time to be able to tell therapy from sponsorship. Top four differences for me: Sponsorship doesn’t cost money. No one ever asked for proof of payment in an NA meeting. I can’t call my therapist every day. My sponsor never told me that ‘time was up’ when I was crying.”

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“When I was new, I would always call my sponsor and ask her to tell me what to do about situations. She would always tell me to pray. I remember pleading with her to give me direction—orders, really—but she never would. ‘I’m your sponsor,’ she would say, ‘not your Higher Power. If you don’t know what to do, just wait.’ At the time, that



used to really frustrate me, but now I can see that she didn't want to take on responsibility that belonged to me. Now I do the same with my own sponsees."

Whether we are new to the program or we have long-term clean time, communication plays a vital role in a working sponsor/sponsee relationship. Many of the principles that we learn when we are new about how the NA program works are the same for the long-time member. We have to walk through our fear, reach out, and begin to trust. If our sponsor asks us to call on a regular basis, we need to make the effort to do so. If we have the desire to use, we should call our sponsor and "tell on ourselves." By sharing honestly with and listening to our sponsor, we often can learn how to take directions, as well as risks.

"I moved around so much when I was a kid that I missed out on having a best friend for very long. When I finally arrived to NA and got a sponsor, as it was suggested that I do, I felt like I picked my first best friend. We were all pretty young in recovery back then, so sponsorship was very much a

two-way street. I remember how kind my sponsor was and how she listened with such patience and a knowing heart. I knew she knew; that's the empathy. She was most likely the first person I had truly let into my world. Sharing my most intimate thoughts and secrets with her, I felt my first connection to being a human being."

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"I just kept relapsing. The last time, I called my sponsor and told him I was using. He said he was sorry to hear it, and he told me that 'jails, institutions, and death' didn't necessarily come in that order and wished me luck. That last run was the worst experience of all. When I came back, I understood what the 'gift of desperation' meant. I knew I would die if I wasn't willing to do what my sponsor told me to do. In a sense, I turned my will and my life over to him and this program until I found my own Higher Power. Desperation brought about the surrender I needed to follow my sponsor's suggestions and to make this program my new way of life."

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“I never thought that I would have to tell anyone about the things I did, felt, or thought. I suffered a lot, selecting the things I would share with my sponsor. One day I managed to tell her the terrible things I thought of my husband, that he would get involved with a lot of women even though he was married to me, and other things. After telling her all this I realized that it was all my paranoia. Since that experience of trusting my sponsor, it has been easier for me today. I can’t go too long without contacting her, because I suffer. My best experience was to share my First Step—my confidence has increased and today I live much more happily.”

If our sponsor suggests that we attend more meetings, read NA literature on a regular basis, or begin to write an inventory, we need to make the effort to do so. We do not want to tell the addict we have asked for help, *how* to help us. When we reach out for help, we need to remain teachable.

“I have always been reluctant to call other people in recovery—even to this day. However, my spon-

sor would not progress in the steps with me until I had called at least five other people, whose recovery I admired, and asked about recovery. Making those calls has helped me get a better perspective on my life. I am working a program that includes the help and input of others. At one point in my recovery, I was seriously giving relapse some thought. I had the vision of the face of an addict whom I admired; my thoughts then became focused on all of my new associations, and the thoughts of using disappeared.”

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“For much of my recovery, I was not willing to follow a sponsor’s direction—or anyone else’s—until the agony and loneliness of doing things my own way was so great that I had no choice if I wanted to stay clean. Even then I didn’t truly believe anyone else had such great ideas, either. Over time, as my life has improved through being open to direction more and more often, I have found that almost anyone can give me better direction than I can give myself.”

There may be times when our sponsor will not be available when we need help. Many of us have found it necessary to develop a network of people in the program to whom we can turn for support in addition to our sponsor. In some communities, it is a common practice to look to the other members linked to us through sponsorship for this kind of support. Getting to know the other members who also are sponsored by our sponsor can offer us a safety net. If we cannot reach our sponsor, we can always call on someone else in our sponsorship network. In some places this network is referred to as a sponsorship “family”; in other places it is a sponsorship “line” or “tree.” Regardless of the terminology, for some members, being part of such a network is important and may give them a sense of security and of belonging to something greater than themselves.

“In my area, there are very few women who have women sponsors, and I had to go to another city where the sponsorship ‘family’ is the primary form of sponsorship. I ONLY wanted to work the steps with my sponsor and get direction from her, instead of all the compulsory socializing and long-distance traveling required in most of the local

sponsorship networks. Now I've had a sponsor in another country for almost two years and have traveled there to meet her and my 'sister' sponsees. I so much enjoyed the companionship and doing stuff together, I have decided to go back there for six months and spend time with 'sister' sponsees because I wanted to."

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"I participate in a monthly gathering held by my sponsorship line, so if ever the need arises to get a new sponsor, I already have a group of recovering addicts who I can trust, relate to, care about, and be unafraid to be intimate with."

Some members, however, consider sponsorship a very personal relationship and do not want it to include an extended "family." For these members, having this kind of built-in network attached to sponsorship can feel restrictive or that it carries certain obligations with it.

"My sponsor is part of what they call a sponsorship 'family' here, but that really holds little interest for me. Fortunately, she doesn't care if I attend

the functions. It feels a bit like being part of a flock to me to identify with dozens of women as so-and-so's sponsees or her sponsees' sponsees. I am not even fond of some of the other people in my sponsorship network. I figure I've already had one dysfunctional family. I don't need another one."

Even if we are happily part of a sponsorship network, we may be tempted, at times, to compare ourselves to others. It may seem sometimes that our sponsor cares more for some sponsees than others, or we may get an ego boost from feeling like the favorite sponsee. It is important that we recognize that each sponsorship relationship is unique. Each has its own challenges and gifts. We gain nothing from comparing ours with others.

"I've always felt the need to be the 'favorite' in every situation. I was my sponsor's only sponsee for over a year, and so I was surprised and felt insecure when she took on a new sponsee. Learning to love other people and not be jealous of others has been a long and painful process for me. When I am feeling insecure or uncomfortable I talk

it over with my sponsor. Instead of acting on my feelings, I try to reach out to the other women she sponsors. I have four 'sisters' now, and they are all wonderful women. I love them very much and I am honored to have them in my life."

Whether or not we have an extended sponsorship network, we can develop a solid support network so that we do not rely entirely on our sponsor. Building friendships with others in the program and strengthening our relationship with a Higher Power can help us get through the times when our sponsor is not available to us.

"My God is with me always; sometimes my sponsor can't be."

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"The gentle guidance I have received from a sponsor has always paid off. But I have been through periods in my recovery where I did not have a sponsor and utilized close friends in recovery as my sounding boards, and thank God for all of them. Over the years, God has always put the teacher in my life when I have asked."

Our recovery can be an amazing journey into self-discovery and self-acceptance. Together, with Narcotics Anonymous, our Higher Power, and the help of our sponsor, many of us can achieve a sense of freedom and a joy of living that we did not believe could ever exist. If we choose, as a sponsee, we can absorb the knowledge and wisdom our sponsor has to offer about the NA program. We can learn to live without the use of drugs and come to love and appreciate our new life in recovery.

To the Sponsor



My gratitude speaks: On being a sponsor

Sponsorship is at the heart of the Twelfth Step, and it is one of the primary ways we carry the NA message. Many addicts believe that sponsoring a fellow NA member is the best way to experience and express gratitude for the gift of recovery. As sponsors, we get to give back what was so freely given to us. It is a responsible relationship and part of how we can offer selfless service to others. While each of us might use different words to describe our role as a sponsor, it is quite simply the action of one addict helping another. We find that when we help others, we help ourselves as well.



“Sponsorship is one of the most important relationships in the NA program of recovery. I believe sponsorship is a two-way street in which the sponsor gains insight about him- or herself, and the sponsee gains knowledge from the experience of the sponsor. Many times I have said, ‘In times of troubles, had it not been for my sponsees, I might not be clean today.’”

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“When I first started to sponsor women, I have to be honest and say I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. It was what the program said I should do if I wanted to stay clean, and I wanted to stay clean. Today, I’ve been in recovery for quite a while, and I can’t imagine my life without these very special women. It’s like we’ve grown up together. We’ve seen each other at our worst, and yet we stayed together. I gave as much as I took, and so did they. From taking that leap of faith by ‘giving back what was so freely given to me,’ I have deep, rich relationships today that would have never otherwise come into my life.”

A sponsor often offers support and encouragement to a sponsee. The personal experience a sponsor shares can help sponsees feel accepted, understood, and guided through the program. This sharing can bring a sense of real closeness to both the sponsor and sponsee, easing some of the emotional isolation many of us can feel, whether we are new in the program or we have been clean for some time.

“Before I sponsored others I had no idea of how much joy and self-acceptance could come from loving and caring for someone else. All my previous relationships had been about getting what I wanted but still feeling unlovable and needy. To my surprise, when I started to help my sponsees and learned to give without expecting returns, I started to value and accept myself more.”

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“Being a sponsor has helped me come out of the darkness of my own self-obsession and enter into the world of real relationships. When there was only me in the world, life was boring, repetitive, and small. Although recovery helped me see that

this could change, I did not experience a significant shift until I had to understand and empathize with the lives of the women I sponsored. I love these women; sponsoring them has given me the opportunity to listen to them, learn about them, love them, and join the human race.”

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“Very early in my recovery I heard my sponsor speaking at a meeting. He said that he used to feel like he was hiding out in an all-night movie, and when he left the theater at three in the morning he would hesitate and not know which way to turn. He felt lost, lonely, and abandoned. I understood exactly how he was feeling but, at the time, was too afraid to let anyone know that I felt the same icy loneliness. Now that I have been clean for a while and am sponsoring people, I try to model what he showed me then. In countless other ways throughout our relationship he made it clear that if I wanted acceptance of ‘self,’ I had to have the faith and courage to be honest and share with other addicts about my thoughts and fears. I think I communicate the same thing to my sponsees through my words and actions.”

In this one-on-one relationship, we are encouraged—and sometimes personally challenged—to look at ourselves as we try to provide suggestions to those we sponsor. When we take on the responsibility of sponsoring people, regardless of their clean time, we try to bring the best of ourselves into that relationship.

“My three sponsees give me an opportunity to be there unconditionally for other people. Sponsoring others puts me in a position of responsibility where it is more important to be honest than to be liked. It has taught me about my motives for doing things and how to let go.”

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“As I continued to stay clean, I came to understand more deeply that one of my responsibilities in being a recovering addict and sponsor was to open my mind to new ideas and be willing to try new things. Over time, I also realized—through my own inventories—that not every addict responded well to those things that motivated me. It was not fair to others to insist that they act, or react, as I do.”

A sponsor can be a role model, providing sponsees with an example of how to live the spiritual principles found in Narcotics Anonymous. A sponsor can guide sponsees on a spiritual journey and teach them about the NA program.

“My sponsor taught me that her love is unconditional, but I have to earn her help and respect. I teach my sponsees the same. As long as I see one shred of willingness on their part to continue the journey, I will be by their side. My job as a sponsor is to lead and guide, not pull and drag.”

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“My approach to sponsoring the women in my life is to encourage them to make healthy decisions for themselves. I cannot recover for them, but I can support them as they work the NA program in their lives. Instead of making decisions for them, I try to steer them toward building recovery tools based upon the spiritual principles of the NA program.”

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“I believe it is my responsibility to prepare my sponsee to be a sponsor by helping him to practice the spiritual principles that are found in the Twelve Steps.”

When we sponsor others, we often learn about the principles of surrender and tolerance. We need to remember that we are just sharing our experience, strength, and hope with our sponsees, not dictating their every move. We try to focus on maintaining a balanced perspective about our life and our relationships with our sponsees. While we may want to prevent them from making the same mistakes we did, our sponsees' recovery is *their* responsibility, not ours.

“The philosophy my sponsor has and that I use with my sponsees is that we rarely ever give advice. We just share a similar experience if we have one or share what we might do or feel in a similar situation. Also, we don't chase after each other or give assignments. One of the great things my sponsor used to tell me whenever I was thinking about whether or not to hook up with a woman

would be to ask myself, 'Would I be willing to marry this woman?' That helped to keep me out of a lot of unhealthy relationships."

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"I have learned to love and to accept the people I sponsor as the people they are—not little mirror-images of me or any other model of recovery."

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"Sponsoring people has helped me gain an understanding of my powerlessness over others. At first, I felt responsible for their success or failure, but soon realized, with the help of my sponsor, that if I don't take credit for their success at staying clean, I don't have to accept responsibility for their relapse."

Many addicts find that being a sponsor becomes a significant part of their recovery. Being a sponsor provides us with a spiritual avenue to sharing on a deeper, more intimate level and offers us the opportunity to share our recovery with those who want and need it. We each carry a wealth of experience, and as sponsors, we can share what worked and what did not work for us. As a sponsor,

we can guide our sponsees through the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous and show them the NA way of life.

“Sponsorship has been an enormous blessing in my life. The women I sponsor often help and support me. We are all teachers and students. It’s my job as a sponsor to tell my sponsees the truth. If I’m right with my Higher Power, then I know when my Higher Power touches me with the light of the truth. It’s my responsibility to tell my sponsees the truth, but I’m not always well received when I do. Sometimes I’m met with resistance and anger. Like the saying goes, ‘The truth will set you free, but first it will make you angry.’”

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“My experience, particularly recently, is that my role as a sponsor has refocused me on the program. It has helped me to maintain the close contact with the steps that I need in order to keep my recovery on track. At the end of each call with my sponsee, he always says, ‘Thanks for listening,’ to which I always reply, ‘Thanks for calling.’ For me,

sponsorship is proving to be a two-way street—I get as I give.”

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“Being a sponsor has given me an opportunity to listen to the lives of others. I have witnessed deep courage, strong hearts, and brave spirits. I have learned to love and respect others more deeply than in any previous experience I have had.”

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Escaping the burden of self-centeredness

Sponsorship can help counteract self-centeredness and encourage a generosity of spirit within us. We can learn to nurture others—in many cases, people very different from ourselves. As sponsors, some of us achieve a new level of humility as we become aware of our limits and our strengths. This relationship can help us to put our own issues into perspective as we grow closer to other people, witness their struggles, and learn to love and accept them.

“Some of the biggest things I have learned about sponsorship are how to carry the message through example and how to practice honesty and compassion to the best of my ability. Sponsorship has taught me the necessity of ‘show, don’t tell.’”

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“Recovery seems to mature with sponsorship, when one accepts the challenge of helping another—in-depth and one-on-one. I have a chance to focus on the steps again whenever I help a sponsee work them. Sponsoring gives me a lesson in letting another person grow in the direction his Higher Power sees fit. It is a lesson in letting go and not necessarily forcing rigid rules or paths on another.”

Being a sponsor can keep us focused on our own recovery. Sponsorship provides us with a means of remembering the challenges we faced in early recovery. When we are sponsoring someone new to the program, it is hard to forget where we came from. Becoming a sponsor is usually an affirmation of growth and can enrich our recovery. Many of us find it difficult to become complacent when we are actively sponsoring others.

“Many, many times I have found myself saying something to a sponsee that I needed to hear!”

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“Sponsoring others keeps me aware of where I’ve come from and keeps me going forward in my recovery. I can only keep what I have by giving it away. Practicing the principles of compassion, caring, kindness, empathy, and sharing keeps me connected with my Higher Power while providing a service to another human being. It helps me remain accountable and responsible to a committed relationship.”

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“Being a sponsor always brings me back to my own recovery and its progress.”

Sharing our own experiences with our sponsees can be healing for both of us. Often our sponsees begin to trust us when we expose our weaknesses, recount our mistakes, and get honest about our fears. This kind of honest sharing also reminds us that we are mere mortals and not the Higher Power of our sponsee’s understanding!

“At the end of each week, one of my sponsees and I take a ride out in the country. It’s a time of peace for us both. We talk about his hard times, my hard times, the way the sunset looks—everything. It feels like we’re a million miles away and nothing can disturb or hurt us.

As a sponsor, I know more about the steps and traditions, but that doesn’t mean I can’t have a rough week. From time to time I’m the one who says hello with the very ‘un-sponsor-ly’ greeting, ‘Thank God you’re here!’”

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“I try to convey to my sponsees that no matter how we feel about ourselves, I believe God loves us all the same. When I can offer my experience to my sponsees without feeling or acting better or less than them, then I feel like I am doing my job as a sponsor.”

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“Personally, I believe as a sponsor, my responsibility is not only to put as much effort into the relationship as my sponsee does, but to add at least ‘one cent’ more. After all, I was asked to be the

sponsor because I have more experience than the sponsee. It seems to me that it should be at least a '51/49' relationship."

Over time, being a sponsor can help us learn how to listen without judgment, accept without conditions, and love without expectations. In many ways, sponsorship teaches us how to develop and maintain healthy relationships.

"It's important for me to refrain from attempting to control my sponsee. It's also important to be a good listener and not to cut off my sponsee while he's talking or put words in his mouth. Most of the time, if I let him talk long enough, the solution will pour out naturally after he talks about the problem."

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"I had a sponsee who was a self-consumed drama queen with a severe case of 'I-ism.' I sometimes dreaded hearing her voice on the other end of the phone line. Immediately, I would go to my Higher Power for help. As time passed, I got better as I

continued to practice inviting my Higher Power to guide me through the conversation. My Higher Power generally provided me with an open mind, tolerance, and unconditional love. Today, I still sponsor the *not so* self-consumed drama queen who still sometimes suffers from ‘I-ism.’

I have benefited in ways that are difficult to describe. I just know I’m a better person as a result of her teaching me many of life’s lessons. I only learned these lessons because I was willing to listen—although I thought some of the things she said sounded crazy as a box of rocks. More importantly, I grew more dependent on my Higher Power whenever I interacted with any of my sponsees.”



How do we know if we are right for each other?

As a sponsor, we want to take time to examine our own value systems and ask ourselves whether we can sponsor

with acceptance, compassion, and understanding. If we do have expectations of our sponsees and the relationship, we need to be as clear about those expectations as possible. Our personal recovery must come first. When we establish clear parameters about what we can and cannot give, we ensure that the relationship will have a good chance to succeed.

“A woman who came into the rooms was angry all the time, and this anger pushed other people away from her. One day, she approached me to ask if I would sponsor her. I was surprised and didn’t think that I had the time to give to her, so I said I couldn’t do it. Over the next few years she approached me again and again. I was touched by her willingness and the humility she was hiding behind her angry behavior. I decided that whether or not I had the time, I needed to sponsor her.

This relationship turned out to be one of the most intimate, loving, and trusting experiences of my life. It was her willingness to just keep asking over and over and to endure what she may have felt as

rejection that enabled me to see past the anger she had been using to protect herself from life.”

Before taking on a sponsee, we might want to consider how many sponsees we already have, whether we have a sponsor ourselves, whether or not we are available, and whether our current life situation will allow us to spend adequate time with our sponsee.

“I sponsor a number of women in recovery. I also have a full life outside of the rooms. There are times when I have wondered if I am available enough to meet their needs. Most of the time it balances out—when some need more attention, the others don’t. I also believe it is important for me to help them develop relationships with other women in recovery for support.”

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“It was suggested to me to wait until I did a Fifth Step before sponsoring anyone, and this is what I suggest to the women I sponsor. I don’t think clean time is as important as the ability to be honest with oneself.”

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“I try not to take on more sponsees than my schedule can handle. I must take into consideration the time I need to work my own program with my sponsor, relate to my children and grandchildren, and hold down a job. Three sponsees is about all I can handle. However, this does not constitute a formula for judging the number of sponsees I can comfortably support. Each sponsee is different; so are her needs.”

If we have never sponsored anyone, we will no doubt have to ask ourselves whether or not we are ready to do so. We may want to consider whether or not we have worked all of the steps and are prepared to guide someone else through working them. Many of us look to our Higher Power for guidance and ask our own sponsor whether he or she thinks we are ready to sponsor someone.

“I didn’t have much time in the program when I was first asked to sponsor someone. I felt extremely inadequate but she insisted that I could

help her. I had only worked the first three steps and was on my Fourth Step. Well, not wanting to say no to an NA request, I began sponsoring her. She called me every day, and I did the best I could at that time. That lasted for about three or four months, and then she met a woman at the area meeting with five years clean. She found that she had a lot in common with this woman so she let me go. She was very apologetic and thanked me for all of my time and effort. I was actually relieved. After that, I waited until I had more time clean and had worked more steps before I agreed to sponsor anyone else.”

We may have misgivings about sponsoring certain people. There are times when we do not feel “qualified” to help. Perhaps the person asking us has more clean time than we do, or maybe our life situations are radically different. Whatever the reason, we should be honest about our feelings while remembering that we were asked for a reason. It may be that all we need is faith.

“When I had about seven years clean, a woman with three months less clean time asked me to be her sponsor. Her sponsor, who was one of the old-timers, had moved away. This woman and I had been friends for the past five years, and she also had a lot of sponsees. I felt both honored that she would even consider me and very inferior because of her previous sponsor. I wondered what I would have to offer. She told me she asked because of my spiritual connection to a loving God. It has been eight years now, and I am still her sponsor. As a matter of fact, about a week ago, she celebrated her 15th year clean. Her first sponsor and I gave her a cake. It’s pretty amazing how sponsorship works: It’s not up to us to decide what we have to offer; it’s up to God. What we do is share our experience, strength, and hope.”

Sometimes someone with whom we have a previous or primary relationship—such as a family member, coworker, cellmate, or friend—may ask us if we will sponsor him or her. These relationships can present particular challenges due to our different roles. In such a situation,

we should think carefully about whether we can effectively sponsor the person who is asking us. We may want to talk with our own sponsor about the situation. Is it possible that our responsibilities in these different roles will conflict (as boss and sponsor, for example)? Will we be too affected by what we already know about the person to be helpful to them? Will we be able to “let go” and allow them to grow at their own pace? As with any sponsorship relationship, if we decide to accept, communication is the key to working well together.

“I sponsored my brother-in-law, and it was a sad and important experience for me. He asked me to sponsor him, and I didn’t take it in a frivolous way, neither was he frivolous in his request. We met in meetings and at home, and sometimes I would give him suggestions that he never followed. The longest period he stayed clean was the time we had the closest contact. When he relapsed, I knew I was powerless. I was angry with him as a relative, but I always accepted him as a sponsee.”

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“I have developed close friendships with some of the women I have sponsored over the past 13 years. Unfortunately, the friendships can sometimes have an impact on my effectiveness as a sponsor if I am not careful. The closeness of the friendship has the ability to skew my vision. Additionally, I sometimes fear calling them on their ‘stuff’ because I don’t want my friendship to be threatened. So I have to pray especially hard in these relationships so I don’t sell my friend and sponsee short. I want to give them all that this program of recovery has to offer, and it starts with honesty.”



Our experience has shown

Over the years, individual opinions, cultural differences, and other specific circumstances have given rise to a broad spectrum of opinions about sponsorship. Narcotics Anonymous has experienced incredible growth, both in members and in countries worldwide. NA communities

around the world engage in a range of sponsorship practices. Many of these practices are adapted to the culture of that particular NA community. Definitive guidelines would most likely be too rigid to address the great diversity of NA today. The following topics may present us with particular challenges when we are deciding whether to sponsor someone.

Attending other fellowships

Many members believe that we can best sponsor those members who attend only NA meetings. Some members feel that what fellowship the sponsee attends is less important than how willing that sponsee is to follow suggestions and to practice the principles of the NA program. We should, however, consider how we, as sponsors, will be affected by our decision to sponsor someone who does attend more than NA.

“I regret the opportunities I’ve passed up because of my personally rigid ‘NA-only’ views—opportunities to add new ideas and fresh perspectives to our community and way of life. Today, if someone indi-

cates he wants something that NA offers, I don't judge how much I *think* he wants it."

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"As a sponsor, I had a sponsee who felt he needed to go to another fellowship for reasons he was not clear on. I immediately felt fear, anger, and low self-esteem. I felt like I was doing something wrong in my sponsoring of this man. After looking at myself and feeling what was going on with me, I came to the decision that I would continue to love and sponsor him. I did tell him that if he wanted to work out of the other fellowship's literature, I could not be his guide because I was not familiar with their materials. After two months of him being torn between fellowships, he decided that Narcotics Anonymous met all of his recovery needs. He was very grateful for the freedom and love to make his own decision."

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"The women I sponsor are all very special individuals. Each one has her own take on recovery and how she maintains that recovery. If part of that involves attending meetings in another fellowship,

well, that's what works for her. It doesn't work for me, but that's *my* experience, and my experience is really all that I have to share. I respect their decisions, and I try my best not to judge. I've sponsored one woman for over 14 years, and she occasionally attends another fellowship. Would I give up the beautiful history we have together for that reason? Absolutely not."

Gender

Although we are all in recovery to reach the same goal, many members believe the internal process to reach that goal is different for men and women. They feel there can be a lack of understanding and empathy between members of the opposite sex. Therefore, these members are firm in their beliefs about same sex sponsorship.

"When I started going to meetings I considered asking one of the older men to sponsor me. He seemed like good protective father material, and I was interested in being looked after. One of the women explained to me that it was strongly suggested that women seek sponsorship from other

women. That was great advice. I would never have been able to share my sexual and relationship history with a man. These issues were connected with a lot of shame for me, and I needed to share them with somebody who really understood what it was like for a woman to have to compromise herself to survive as a practicing addict.”

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“I sponsored a young man (I’m a woman) for a long period of time, and we worked together with his first three steps. However, he left to go work with a male sponsor when he reached his Fourth Step. I don’t believe it’s easy to identify completely with a sponsor or a sponsee of the opposite sex. After all, women and men are equal, but we are definitely not the same.”

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“I only sponsor women now, but earlier in my recovery, a man asked me to sponsor him. He said that I had the kind of recovery that he wanted and that he did not connect with any of the men in our small NA community. I guess that I felt flattered, and because there was no sexual chemistry

between us I thought that this would be okay. But this relationship brought up all of my hidden anger with men. I asked him to do much more homework than I had ever given women, I challenged him more than I had my other sponsees, and I got frustrated with his progress. When I recognized that I was behaving like this, I didn't like it, so I told him that I thought he needed to work with men instead. I cared about him a lot but felt I was not able to give him the unconditional love that is needed within the sponsorship relationship."

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"As a gay man, I always talk with potential sponsees about the fact that I am gay. If they are interested in working out their issues about sexuality, they need to go somewhere else. Sponsorship is about the principles of NA. Some women have asked me to sponsor them since I am a gay man. There was no sexual attraction, but there were still enough differences to me to make the decision to decline any future requests."

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“I think it’s important to have a same sex sponsor. I’m a man, and I once sponsored a gay woman. I have to be perfectly honest here and say the sexual energy and desire for this woman were the same for me as if she were a heterosexual woman. I sponsored her for about a week, and I’m so grateful that I didn’t act out or hurt us both. It was a true learning experience for me.”

Some members have had success with opposite sex sponsorship. Both members stay focused on their recovery, and the relationship works quite well without any complications. In some NA communities, there may not be a balanced ratio of men and women from which to choose a sponsor of the same sex. Here NA members exercise their creativity in doing their best to ensure that they are carrying the NA message.

“I am a woman in an NA community where I was one of the first members staying clean. I found myself saying ‘yes’ to sponsoring men, since there was no one else to sponsor them at the time. From my experience, I feel these men look to me with

respect but I don't think it is that healthy for either of us. On the other hand, I believe this is a spiritual program, and if we can keep our relationship focused on recovery, all will be well."

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"As a man who has and does sponsor women, I've had to work through a few issues to remain responsible to this commitment. The first woman to ask me to sponsor her had previously been sponsored by each of the three NA women in our area who had more clean time than her. (This was in the mid-eighties, and we were a young area.) I sought guidance from my sponsor, and he gave me some rules of sponsorship, which I agreed to and continue to honor today. First of all, sponsorship is based upon the Twelve Steps of NA recovery. It is not a dating service, a political party, or psychoanalysis. Second, sponsorship is platonic. Ensuring that it stays that way requires the sponsor to work an active program that includes a regular inventory of intentions. Finally, it is essential to allow sponsees to reach their understandings in the way that works for them. Thanks to my sponsor's advice, I

am still sponsoring that woman today and our relationship works.”

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“I have sponsored a gay man (I’m a woman) for approximately eight years now. When he asked me, my first inclination was to say no since our literature in the past has suggested same sex sponsors. But I’m so glad I followed my ‘gut instincts,’ also known as Higher Power, since this particular relationship has been one of the most rewarding in sponsorship I have had. I wonder, if we suggest that heterosexuals have same sex sponsors, then how do we apply this same set of standards to the homosexual community in which intimacy is based on a same sex partner?”

If members of the opposite sex ask us to sponsor them, it is our responsibility to examine our motives as well as the motives of our sponsee. Romantic feelings or attractions on the part of either member may not be obvious. It is imperative, in opposite sex sponsorship, that we make every effort to distinguish between sexual or romantic attraction and the honest desire of our sponsee to seek

knowledge from us about the NA program. If it appears that a sponsee has ulterior motives, then it is up to us, as sponsors, to be aware of the potential for sexual attraction. That potential applies to both members involved in the sponsorship relationship. We must be sure that we are carrying the message of NA and not harboring secret desires toward our sponsee. These types of feelings usually result in a risky relationship for both members.

“I am a transgendered person, and I have successfully sponsored men in my woman’s role. During my transition, a man sponsored me. However, once my transition was well under way, I had to change to having a woman sponsor. Now, the only man I sponsor is gay.”

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“I am a man who will not sponsor women at this point in my recovery. I think I would lose objectivity, but I do think I could sponsor a gay man.”

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“As a bisexual woman, I have the possibility of a romantic relationship with people of both genders. I pray for guidance and ask to have even the slight-

est sexual attraction to be revealed. This way I can be the most help to both of us— by saying ‘yes’ to those I truly see as a sister or brother in recovery and ‘no’ to anyone I see as a potential date. To that end, I sponsor mostly straight women and gay men. I love myself and my fellow addicts enough to honor the intention of the sponsor/sponsee relationship.”

Sponsoring members in institutions and facilities

Most service committees that take meetings to addicts in institutions ask that their members not participate in sponsorship while conducting presentations. Nonetheless, some NA members do find sponsors or sponsees in institutional settings. We need to take special care when considering whether to sponsor a member who is still in treatment, in an institution, or is incarcerated. NA is a spiritual program that can be worked anywhere; however, many facilities and institutions have their own set of rules that may affect how we can interact with a member residing there.

While the principles of sponsorship are the same with members in these special circumstances, we do need to

think about how much effort we are willing to put forth, as well as how much time we can afford to give. Some of us have a greater ability to give than others do, and some of us feel the demands on our time and energy may be too much. These circumstances undoubtedly will affect our decision to take on such a sponsee. Whatever our decision, we must guard against our lives becoming unmanageable as a result of that decision. If we are incapable of being there for ourselves, then we will not be capable of being there for someone else.

“I sponsor one woman who I met when I went to speak on an institutional panel. It is not like regular sponsorship. She does not have my phone number. Each month, when I go in for a visit, I give her some writing and reading to do. We then go over the writing the following month, and I answer any questions she may have.”

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“I give my phone number to addicts in treatment and ask them to keep in touch with me until they get out of treatment. I believe that making myself

available to newcomers is an important part of my recovery.”

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“Whenever I am asked to sponsor someone who is in treatment, I do not ask them to do any writing. They already have a lot of writing assignments and packets to complete. I ask that they read the First Step every day, underlining words and phrases that have significance to them. We meet weekly and go over the steps. In this way, I feel we are building our relationship.”

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“I am currently sponsoring someone who is in an institution. It is very difficult to communicate because walls and fences separate us. We work the steps by mail and telephone, and once a month we get to visit with each other in the visitor day room. When it came to listening to his Fifth Step, it worked out well. Any information that was incriminating or sensitive we would write down in code, just to trigger the thought. Then we were able to talk more in-depth about it one-on-one, in private. We are both willing and committed to making this

relationship work—inside the walls—and so far it has been a huge blessing for us both.”

Sponsoring members from different backgrounds

The disease of addiction does not discriminate. It pulls us in regardless of our background, ethnicity, social class, religion, or lack of religion. Just as the disease does not differentiate, neither does recovery. Any addict who is willing to work the NA program can find recovery. We try our best to sponsor without discrimination. Sponsoring members with different life experiences and backgrounds can often be challenging, but the steps and traditions are universal principles that we can share no matter where we come from.

“‘How can these principles work for me when NA is about unity, and my religion is about us as chosen people?’ a sponsee with many years clean asked. I had the opportunity to look at how the traditions could work in her life. I believe many of us who ‘float out the door on a cloud of religious zeal’ do so because we cannot reconcile recovery with our religion. Part of my job as a sponsor is to take

my sponsees' struggles with our principles seriously, regardless of their religion, and help them arrive at an understanding of our principles that can work with their other beliefs. The traditions, with their firm directions against mixing NA with other belief systems or service structures, make clear that such reconciliation is possible."

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"Despite the chaos and misery in my life when I was new to NA, I know that some people would call me a 'high-bottom' addict. I grew up middle class and got clean relatively young. Today, I have an advanced degree and a comfortable life style. Recently, I got a new sponsee who was court-ordered to NA after being sent to jail. She has no money, a broken car, and no job. On top of all that, she lost parental rights to her children. I worried that I would have nothing to offer her. I never even had children; how would I know what it is like to lose them? However, over the months I have sponsored her, I have been able to talk to her about loss and acceptance and powerlessness. We do have these things in common. I feel so much love and

respect for her, and I think that's probably more important than having the same history."

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"I live in an area rich in immigrants, but my local NA community does not reflect this diversity. I think my personal recovery is strengthened by variation and diversity, so I made a commitment to be available as a sponsor to people from these groups. I'm not sure this made a difference, but I'm pleased to see more of these addicts in our rooms today."

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"One of the reasons I believe NA can reach such a diverse population is because of the freedom of choice we are given. Having the freedom to choose, especially my Higher Power, has allowed me, as an atheist, to stay and benefit from this program of recovery. The addicts I sponsor each have their very own understanding of a Higher Power. I respect that, just as I expect them to respect my choice. I encourage them to pray, meditate, and maintain a conscious contact with their Higher Power. For me, the steps offer universal truths that

cross over the barriers of 'age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion, or lack of religion.' We don't have to believe in the same Higher Power to work the steps together."

Making the decision

We want to make the best decision we can, and sometimes that decision may include saying no when asked to sponsor someone. Hopefully, with what we have learned from NA and our own sponsor, we will understand that it is okay to say no.

On the other hand, we may feel that entering into a temporary or interim sponsorship relationship might be beneficial to us, as well as our potential sponsee. As a temporary sponsor, we can help a sponsee with his or her recovery for a short time until the sponsee finds someone with whom he or she feels more comfortable. Some sponsors will ask a current sponsee or another member if they would be willing to take on a new sponsee rather than just saying no. This way we can help the potential sponsee to obtain the guidance and support of a sponsor. No matter what the circumstances are, we do not want any

addicts seeking recovery to feel alone or that they do not belong here.

“I’ve been one guy’s temporary sponsor now for almost twelve years. Why ruin a beautiful relationship?”

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“When someone asks me and I have to say no, for whatever reason, I usually get their number and call them, so they don’t feel rejected. I usually tell them if they are attracted to my recovery, maybe they’d be attracted to one of my sponsees. Then we both have an out—I can refer them and they don’t feel pushed away.”

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“I don’t know what the problem is with having temporary sponsors—seems like a viable option to me. I think it’s just a word game anyway. What is temporary? A day? A week? A month? I think it’s better to have a sponsor for a while than none at all.”





Developing our role as a sponsor

Methods of sponsorship differ from addict to addict. Some of us sponsor the way we have been sponsored, while some of us sponsor the way we wish we were sponsored. Some of us believe there really are no rules for sponsorship other than to offer unconditional love and acceptance. Regardless, the spiritual principles in the traditions—anonymity, non-professionalism, and service, to name a few—provide a common touchstone for all sponsorship relationships. The spirit of sponsorship can be found in helping others and giving back what was given to us. Many of us know how trust, faith, and honesty can provide the foundation needed for both the sponsor and sponsee to work on building our relationship.

“My biggest challenge as a sponsor has been to develop patience and surrender when I sponsored two very young addicts. They needed to live their stubbornness, not only from being newcomers but also from being young people who were experiencing some life situations, sometimes for the first time ever.”

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“I believe the purpose of the steps is to have a spiritual awakening, and it is my role as a sponsor to guide my sponsees through the steps toward the God of their own understanding. I feel the strongest conscious contact with my Higher Power when I am actively carrying the message.”

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“It is hard for me to sponsor someone without working the program directly, so it encourages me to do my own step work with my sponsor. I develop more skills with the steps through helping others to find their way on the same path.”

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“My first sponsor led by example. He took me to different meetings and got me involved in H&I. I worked through the steps with him. After we were together ten years, he became a friend I could trust completely with anything. Then he moved away, and I had to get a new sponsor. My new sponsor told me to start at Step One—powerlessness. I balked and I told him I had already worked the steps. He wanted me to work them with him on

life issues, not just drugs. It was really hard to get that trust and intimacy with another sponsor, but it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened: a new look, a new challenge, a fresh voice. Going deeper than before has been very rewarding.”

Sponsoring someone for the first time can seem overwhelming. Many of us begin by following the example of our own sponsors. Over time, we get a sense of what works best for us and for each particular sponsorship relationship. As a result, our relationship with our own sponsor may grow and change. The experience gathered as we go through the Twelve Steps together teaches us how to be a sponsor.

“I never had to call my sponsor so much in my entire recovery as when I first started sponsoring people. I felt so insecure about the direction I gave. Every time I got off the phone with a sponsee, I called my sponsor to tell him what I told my sponsee. There were many times when my sponsor would tell me something completely different. So I

would call my sponsee back and revise my direction. Today my sponsor and I don't always agree on the direction I give my sponsees. I have accepted that I am not exactly like my sponsor and that I have my own approach. If my sponsees wanted someone exactly like my sponsor they would have asked him. Instead, they asked me because *I* am the person they want to help them work the steps."

Sometimes we learn painful lessons when we try to manage, fix, or control our sponsee's life and recovery. We may not even realize we are engaging in this type of behavior. However, sponsees must learn how to make *their* decisions, not the decisions we want them to make.

"I once sponsored an addict who became suicidal. I tried unsuccessfully to refer him to a professional to get some help. I didn't know what to do, but I felt that I had to do something. I made some calls, and he was hospitalized against his will. He felt betrayed and let me go as his sponsor. Although I

have some shame, I am glad I have a former sponsee who is alive, rather than one who is dead.”

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“My main focus with my sponsees is working both the steps and traditions. We don’t just write about them, we try to practice those principles in our daily lives. Part of my job as a sponsor is to help my sponsees define their own values and not to copy mine.”

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“I was taught not to sponsor until I had worked the Fifth Step. I have since learned that I didn’t become a good sponsor until I had worked the Ninth Step. That is when I learned what it means to have a healthy relationship and that I need to resist trying to exert control over my sponsees.”

We need to be vigilant with ourselves and allow our sponsees to grow at their own pace. While we want to offer guidance through love, it is also important to allow our sponsees to suffer the consequences of their actions. This does not mean we will ignore a particular action or abandon or turn our backs on them. Rather, we leave the

results in a Higher Power's hands and support our sponsees during whatever they may be going through.

Some of us will let our sponsees stumble and grow as they make their own decisions. Others may be more instructive in their approach. As we experience the reward of watching someone grow, we also are given a chance to learn about powerlessness over our sponsees and their disease. We practice the principle of surrender and try to remember that recovery is a process.

“My sponsee was determined to continue to practice behavior that was in conflict with the principles she was being introduced to through the steps. She felt that stealing from a utility service provider was justified because they overcharged customers anyway. Unfortunately, she justified herself right into jail. Today she is still paying restitution for her crime. I told her that writing on the steps doesn't hold any stock if she doesn't incorporate those principles into her life and make healthy changes. I believe 'the same addict will use again.'

I loved and supported her through the consequences of her actions. I never had to say, 'I told you so.' I can't deny my sponsees the pain of their consequences. I can only love them unconditionally as they experience life. I make it very clear that I am supporting them and *not* supporting their behavior."

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"Yes, each addict is different and goes along the road of recovery at his or her own pace. But a rule of thumb about the pace is that, while I can't do much (if anything) to speed it up, I *can* slow it down. I believe that a major responsibility of my being a sponsor is encouraging advancement, not delay. I try to seize every opportunity I can to help my sponsees toward the spiritual awakening that I, and other addicts, have had as a result of these steps."

Some members believe that the sharing of experience, strength, and hope instead of theories helps to clarify the difference between sponsorship and counseling. Other members choose to share little of their own personal

experience and rely more on NA literature to explain how to use the tools of the program. Sometimes our most important role as a sponsor is to listen. Some of our sponsees may need more than anything to feel heard.

As a sponsor, we need to be aware of what our own resources are and what we have to offer. We want to make sure that we are carrying the message of hope and not the despair of our disease.

“One of the neatest things about sponsorship is how it helps me work the NA traditions—non-organized and nonprofessional. Ideally, it is an entirely informal relationship, and it becomes whatever the two individuals want it to be.”

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“I usually tell my sponsees at the beginning of our relationship that I am not a counselor or therapist. I encourage my sponsees to run things past me. I do my best to steer them back to the steps for guidance and answers to their problems, but I don’t try to provide the solutions. I believe the answers are found in the steps and traditions. My role as a sponsor is to talk about staying clean in

NA. I also find it helpful to talk about the Tenth Tradition—'no opinions on outside issues'—especially when we are dealing with issues such as medication, relationships with families, career moves, etc. For these and other outside issues, I try to suggest seeking professional advice or help."

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"Before I have a new sponsee read or work out of our Basic Text, *It Works: How and Why*, *The NA Step Working Guides*, or *Just for Today*, I suggest they read our IPs. This seems to be less intimidating or overwhelming and gets them accustomed to the basics very effectively—particularly when they're new and confused."

While every relationship is different, some of the fundamentals that make for a healthy, productive relationship are constant. Sponsorship depends upon trust, and as sponsors, we must be able to keep the confidences of the people we sponsor. This may present challenges if, for example, we are confronted by family members or significant others of those we sponsor. If we are sponsoring a minor, we may need to forge a relationship of some kind

with his or her parents. In any circumstances, we need to be vigilant upholding our responsibilities to those we sponsor. Our sponsee's trust is a precious gift, and we need to honor it.

“One of the most difficult aspects of sponsoring someone under 18 is that you must also sometimes build a relationship with the sponsee's parent or guardian. When I sponsored a newly clean 15-year-old, I sometimes had to call his mom and explain things to her myself, like the fact that I had told my sponsee to go to a meeting every day. And of course, I had to talk to my sponsee all the time about my conversations with his mother, making sure he always felt comfortable and respected. It took a long time, but she grew to trust me because I took the time to explain the process of recovery to her. Today my 19-year-old, 5-year-clean sponsee has an amazing relationship with his mom. She learned that she could just be his mom and didn't have to be involved in his sponsorship relationship. On the holidays they invited me over and all she could do was thank me for giving her son back

to her. I told her not to thank me, but to thank Narcotics Anonymous.”

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“At one point, I sponsored a woman who was dating a relative of mine. As time passed and their relationship became more serious, it became more and more difficult for me to be both her near-relative and her sponsor. I had information I really didn’t want to have coming from my relative and from her. I’d like to say that I realized this and dealt with it maturely, but instead I struggled until the whole thing blew up in a big fight and we each broke the other’s confidences. After things cooled down, we talked about what happened. We both agreed that she would be better off with a different sponsor. Today we are on friendly terms, and I have learned my lesson and no longer sponsor people who are in the middle of my life that way.”

When we are asked to be a sponsor, we sometimes get overly zealous in our efforts to present our knowledge of the program, especially if several members ask us to be their sponsor. The more people look up to us, the easier

it is for us to feel self-important. As hard as we may try to resist becoming over-confident and egotistical, we might find ourselves falling into the “super sponsor” trap—thinking that we know everything and are infallible!

“You never know who’s going to make it in this fellowship. I am in no position to discount anyone or anything said at a meeting, since that person or thing said just might be what I need at a future time.”

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“As a sponsor with a lot of clean time, I’ve realized that since I’ve never attended an NA graduation party, there must still be more for me to learn!”

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“I got really judgmental of my sponsees who have nine or ten years clean and didn’t call me as much anymore. But my sponsor said, ‘Don’t think you’re so important.’”

Staying aware of our limitations and continuing to take a personal inventory can avert our stumbling into this “better than” mind-set. Sponsorship allows us to grow

through experiencing our limitations. By admitting those limitations and being honest with our sponsees, we strengthen the bond between us.

“The deal here is to share experience, strength, and hope. What exactly does this mean? It means not talking about what I *would* do if it were I in that situation, but rather talking about what I *did* do in a similar situation. If I don’t have any experience, I believe it’s okay to suggest someone who has. This does not mean that I am a ‘bad’ sponsor. It means that I am a good sponsor who is not just winging my way through the relationship.”

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“I remember having 21 years clean and wanting to just die. I was in so much emotional pain, but I was afraid to share how I was feeling at my home group meeting. I had the most time in my area, and several of my sponsees were also home group members. I had heard the saying, ‘You can’t save your ass and your face at the same time.’ I finally set my ego aside and shared how I was really feeling. I knew my sponsees were going to be embar-

rassed and then abandon me as their sponsor. Instead, I picked up two additional sponsees who wanted what I had. Go figure!”

There will be times when our own experience may not be applicable to a sponsee or he or she is struggling with something beyond our knowledge. We may have to say, “I don’t know,” or refer our sponsees to others who can help them when we cannot. We do not want to offer guidance on those things in which we do not have experience. We too can go to others for advice on how to handle things, providing our sponsee’s anonymity and confidentiality will be protected. Offering suggestions to sponsees as to where they might find help does not mean we are a failure as a sponsor. It actually means the opposite. While we may not always know what is best for our sponsees, we can offer them a shoulder to lean on and assure them that they are not alone.

“By only sharing my experience, I am on firm ground. I know I am being honest and that if my sponsee does what I did, then he can stay clean. If I give advice, especially in areas where I have no

experience, I'm on shaky ground. If my sponsee follows my advice and ends up using or experiencing adverse consequences, I would be responsible. I leave the advice to professionals who know how to deal with those consequences."

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"When I say 'yes' to someone who asks me to be a sponsor, I'm making a commitment to another person and to myself, as well as to recovery in general. I see my 'job' as not giving advice, but sharing my experience, strength, and hope at a more intimate level of understanding. This begins with listening."

If we are not sure how to approach a question or request from our sponsee, we can go to our own sponsor. We are not alone in our decision-making processes. Here the chain of recovery can be seen in one of its purest forms—one addict helping another helping another. In most cases, many of us find that our sponsor provides just the right answer.

One of our biggest challenges as a sponsor may be the desire to protect our sponsees from the sometimes-over-

whelming experiences of life. We should be aware that our role as a sponsor is *not* to shield our sponsees from life, but to help them use the principles of the program to live life to the fullest.

“I tell my sponsees that growth can be painful and feel scary and lonely at times. It’s like taking the training wheels off of your bicycle. I can’t always run alongside the bike to keep you from falling. All I can do is to be there to help you back up and push you to try again, until you learn how to ride. Those scrapes and bruises will pay high dividends in the future.”

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“For me, being a good sponsor means, perhaps, that my sponsee will learn as much from *his* mistakes as from his sponsor!”

For most of us, sponsorship offers many advantages and blessings. It is a way to stay connected to NA, to be of service, and to deepen intimacy. We have the opportunity to share in the awakening of the spirit in another member. Sponsorship can develop into a healthy and

respectful relationship, and often a profound friendship. Each relationship is special in its own way. We may feel closer to some people we sponsor than others, but we try to give the best of ourselves in each relationship and to ensure that we are equally available and welcoming to everyone we sponsor.

“Many of the relationships I have entered into as a sponsor have provided me with dear friends.”

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“I don’t get too close to any of my sponsees for a few reasons that I find important. I work with them on recovery only, not as best friends, job counselor, moneylender, marriage counselor, etc. It’s important that they know my only interest is in their recovery. This gives them the ability to be honest with me and not color anything for fear that I might judge or disapprove of them. Also, believing that my only interest is their recovery gives them the ability to hear what I have to say about certain subjects.”

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“I have many types of relationships with the people I sponsor. Some are ‘best friends,’ some are more businesslike, and others are emotionally remote. I try not to pre-judge what type of relationship I should have with a sponsee, allowing the relationship to change and grow naturally.”

While our journey in sponsorship will vary between individual members and communities worldwide, we all are striving to reach the same destination in recovery. Through working the steps and traditions with our sponsees, we learn how to be consistent and willing and how to practice spiritual principles.

“I work with my sponsees in a step study group, as well as one-on-one. We use the new step working guide (*The Narcotics Anonymous Step Working Guides*) along with the Basic Text and *It Works: How and Why*. Most of the guys I sponsor have multiple years clean, and a few are new to the program. I am also a stickler about the traditions and strongly encourage adherence to the Twelfth Tradition.”

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“Before I work a step with the women I sponsor, I pray and invite God into the experience. We need to remember that God is the ultimate power. I ask for wisdom, knowledge, and the courage to see the truth and meaning of the step so that more healing can take place. After we work the step, we pray and thank God for another opportunity to heal by applying the principles. It’s amazing that we can all go so far with just the Twelve Steps!”

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“The assignments I give to my sponsees depend on their clean time. I tell all of my newcomer guys: call me every day and leave a message if I’m not home; if you lie to me I can’t help you, so please don’t; I’m not a counselor, moneylender, marriage counselor, or someone who is going to enable you; if you want to stay clean, I can help, but if you’re not going to put forth any effort, then I won’t do you any good; go to 90 meetings in 90 days and we’ll start working Step One together; if you feel like getting high, call me before you pick up. I give different direction to sponsees with more clean time. But despite the different assignments, I treat

all of my sponsees with the same respect and love. When they call, it's for both of us to get to know each other and bond."

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"Some of my sponsees meet with other women of similar clean time to work through the step working guides together. They find doing that is motivating, and they say it helps them build stronger relationships. As they complete a step, they still choose to share that step with me."

Sponsorship opens the door into our own hearts, and we can learn not to take ourselves too seriously. We share the realities of life with our sponsee—joy and sorrow, happiness and depression, courage and fear, truth and deception, birth and death. Through the simplicity of the Narcotics Anonymous program, it is possible for us to share a life of freedom beyond our wildest dreams.

The Sponsorship Relationship: Developing It and Sustaining It



Developing and sustaining the sponsorship relationship

Relationships require work. Most people have difficulty being vulnerable, learning how to trust and to be trustworthy, and making a commitment. For addicts these things are especially hard. Many of us did not have great role models when it came to mutual respect and kindness. In our addiction, we ran from intimacy, often shutting out those who cared most about us.

In sponsorship, we have a rare opportunity to learn from each other, teach each other, and care about each other. Sponsorship shows us how to work with others while getting to know ourselves. We can learn to trust.

Naturally, the relationship is not always going to be easy. We are going to make mistakes. But we become willing to take risks and face those fears that keep us from experiencing rich and meaningful relationships. Through sponsorship, we can learn to live and love more fully.

“By sponsoring other addicts, I have come to realize that I do have the capacity to care for and even love others. I’ve been forced to see that they actually need me. They have chosen me to guide them through the steps. I know now that I have something to give: my recovery experience in NA. I’m proud of this.”

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“If being in recovery only meant going to meetings, I could go on with my life and not do any work on myself. I wouldn’t really need any help. I could just go to meetings, hang out, and then go home. But that’s not reality. I do need to work on my relationships—the way that my character defects, my shortcomings, and my belief systems affect my dealings with other people. I need to do a lot of work to become the person I want to be. If I

do this without the guidance and support of my sponsor, I wouldn't grow as much. Without her insight, I probably wouldn't dig as deep as I could."

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"I am well aware of who I was before I got a sponsor: an isolated and lonely person. My sponsor has helped to guide me in building a strong relationship with my Higher Power and in working the Twelve Steps, through which I have learned how to address my addictive behaviors. My relationship with my sponsor is precious to me. I am grateful for her presence in my life."

Sometimes a sponsorship relationship unfolds easily from the beginning. Both members feel comfortable with each other almost immediately and share with open enthusiasm. Other times, making the effort to get to know someone else can seem difficult or nearly impossible. Learning how to communicate well is one of the ongoing challenges we face along the path of our recovery. Honest self-disclosure and mutual respect can provide a strong foundation upon which to build this

exceptional relationship. Frequent contact with our sponsor or sponsee may help to open our hearts and allow intimacy to develop.

“I have found that sometimes sponsorship is easy, and the relationship needs very little work at all. I have worked with a sponsee for 15 years whose vision for herself is always clear to me and whose understanding of the program has always been the same as mine. Sometimes I have wondered whether the work we do together is as spiritually important as the work I do with people who require a lot of time, energy, and prayer. And you know what? After years of drug-related dramas and hardships, I have learned that life is not always a struggle, that peace of mind is possible, and relationships that come easy are precious.”

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“In the beginning, my sponsor and I worked only on the steps and dealing with my problems. Today, because we know each other so well (over the past 16 years), we can share about everything. It’s like having a best girlfriend, which I never had in the

past because I didn't trust women. Being sponsored has made me think of another person and has given me the tools to build a lasting relationship. Sometimes it's still so hard to reach out, but I know when I do the rewards are greater than I ever imagined."

Many of us have unrealistic expectations of what a sponsorship relationship should be. We may always want to have the right answer for those tough questions our sponsees ask. We may want to be the favorite sponsee doing the right thing all the time. Some of us will see sponsorship as a way to have the best friend we never had in our lives. These desires are not wrong or harmful, but placing conditions on what we want or what we think we need limits our possibilities and may slow down our growth. Staying clean and keeping an open mind often bring gifts beyond what we ever imagined for ourselves.

"When I first came to the program, I thought a sponsor was a superhero or knight in shiny armor who'd always come to my rescue. After I got a sponsor, I soon realized that, while my sponsor

provided enormous comfort in times of difficulty, he's really there to help me work the steps."

A dynamic and meaningful bond between a sponsor and sponsee depends on a solid foundation of willingness. This includes willingness to walk through difficulties without letting fear or anger damage or destroy the relationship. Our sponsor may challenge us, asking us to look at something uncomfortable, or perhaps we may challenge our sponsor, wanting something more or something different than we are getting. Sometimes the initial reaction on either part is defensiveness. We may even exchange harsh words or say things we later regret. As in any relationship, the courage and humility required to resolve these issues often take the sponsorship relationship to an even deeper level.

"I wasn't quite prepared at first for how much sponsoring other men would challenge me to stretch and grow. I thought that as the sponsor I would be the one to challenge them. I openly invite the guys I sponsor to challenge me freely, admitting that I make mistakes and am fully human, but

when they take me up on that, my first gut reaction is often defensiveness, hurt, or anger. At other times, I am the one who says something I believe needs to be said, and they get hurt or angry or defensive. I always try to be sensitive and respectful, but sometimes the thing that needs to be said doesn't feel very good. And maybe at other times I'm just not very loving and centered, and say something hurtful that has me reaching for my Tenth Step.

I've come to see these moments of pain and conflict as opportunities to gain basic relationship skills that I can apply later in my marriage or with my children or at work or wherever. I had to learn, sometimes very painfully, that conflict and anger between people doesn't have to mean rejection or abandonment. I lived in too much fear of these moments of interpersonal discomfort before I found NA. The sponsorship relationship has been the workshop where I have learned to trust the underlying love and commitment of other men in recovery enough to stay in there and have the difficult conversations. In almost every case, if I stay in there with love and respect, and if I get focused on

principles, we come through these things with a greater bond of trust and mutual respect than we went in with. I've learned not only not to fear these times of challenge and conflict, but even to welcome them as the turning points into a deeper relationship."

Both members must be motivated to work together, committed to their own personal recovery, and willing to learn more about the spiritual principles of NA. Whether we are the sponsor or the sponsee, this relationship provides one of our most basic links to the Narcotics Anonymous program and can show us how to live the solutions the steps have to offer.

"It is imperative that I examine my motives whenever I agree to sponsor someone. Ego has no place in my decision-making process. With the guidance of my Higher Power and an earnest desire to help another addict, I am able to build a relationship based on unconditional love and commitment. Entering into sponsorship is risky. Sharing some of my most intimate truths can be scary. However, I

trust that my Higher Power is in the midst of the relationship and will help me to share freely. Truth breeds trust, and the more truths we share, the more trust develops. The more I give, the more I get, and this process helps to sustain an enduring relationship.”

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“Why is it that all of my sponsees seem to have a ‘crisis’ during my final exams in school? My solution during last semester was to record a simple outgoing message of NA on my voice mail: ‘If this is a sponsee, go to a meeting, do your step work, and then call me.’ When they wanted to tell me about all the drama in their life I simply asked them where they were with their step work. After the long silence, I told them, ‘Exactly! Do your step work and then call me back.’ I’m sure this approach wouldn’t work for everyone, but it seems to have worked really well for my sponsees and me.”

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“As a sponsee who just started working with a new sponsor, I’m learning about commitment all

over again. After being clean for over 20 years, I sometimes find myself becoming complacent and too comfortable. These are the times I need to get back to the basics—those things I did without question when I first got clean. I have to call my sponsor on a regular basis, go to meetings, and work the steps. Sometimes these things can be hard to do. The excuses that I'm too tired to go to a meeting or it's too late to call can get me into big trouble. I know I have to do the footwork. I don't want to go to my next meeting only to pick up a welcome keytag. I know that sounds dramatic, but isn't that what it's really all about? It's like the Basic Text says: 'clean time does not equal recovery.'"

Staying clean, working the steps, and working with our sponsors do not exempt us from the realities of living life. Sometimes we come face-to-face with life's most difficult circumstances. Our relationships with our sponsor and sponsees can offer the support and understanding we need to keep moving forward. We are all survivors, and we try to do the best we can. We find blessings here in NA that many people never get to experience in their life-

time. We have a common thread holding us all together: we share in the recovery from a devastating disease.

“I was recently diagnosed with an illness that doctors say will take my life within a year or so. Fear and panic washed over me at first, but then I felt a strange sense of calm. I realized the calm was my disease of addiction saying to me, ‘Hey, now it’s okay to start using drugs addictively again because you’re dying.’ I knew in my heart that I did not want to live my last days on this earth trapped in the horrors of addiction. I immediately called my sponsor! We talked, we cried, and we started to do what we have done for many years together: practice the spiritual principles of this beautiful program. I face my mortality on a daily basis by going to meetings, talking with my sponsees and sponsor, working the steps, and trusting in my loving Higher Power. You know, I always thought that I would be one of those real old guys who would stand up at a convention with 50 years of clean time, but I realize now that I have the gift of being clean just for today, and I don’t feel alone. That is where I get my freedom.”

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“When I was using, it seemed that my heart had turned to stone. I had seen and been through so much that I could no longer cry or feel, and I doubted that I ever would again. This changed for me when I was hearing my first sponsee’s Fifth Step. She shared about being beaten by her stepfather, and as she talked, I could see her little body being hurt by him. Instantly, I remembered being hit by my own father, and my heart broke open with sadness for us both. Her honest sharing was the connection back to emotional life for me. While I cried, she remained dry-eyed. She was only six months clean—the time for her own emotional awakening was yet to come.”

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“My sponsee was on the Third Step when his girlfriend suddenly left him for another NA member who had much more clean time than my sponsee. He was devastated and stayed in a lot of pain for a long time. I was worried that he wouldn’t be able to get through this clean or alive. All I could say to him was to keep trying to turn his life and will

over to the God of his understanding. To my surprise, he finally reached an acceptance of the situation. He trusted that his God's will was best for him, no matter how it felt. My own trust in God and the power of the Third Step was greatly improved by this experience."

As we grow in our sponsorship relationship, we become aware of the impact of working the NA principles. We start to see the results of applying the steps and traditions in our daily life, in the lives of those around us, and in how we see our place in the world. NA helps us to stay free of drugs, but soon we come to realize that growing in recovery goes much deeper than not picking up drugs.

"I've become less motivated by the need to be liked by my sponsees. By that, I don't mean I have become less gentle or loving, but that I've given up my people-pleasing tendencies. I can be more comfortable being honest, even when I'm talking with someone who may become defensive, angry, or hostile. I've learned how to stand up for my beliefs

and to practice the spiritual principles NA has taught me. I now have more experience in giving guidance and direction to sponsees, always trying to use the Twelve Steps as the basis of the solution.

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This, in turn, has also helped me to be a more open-minded sponsee, better able to trust my sponsor and reveal what's really going on in my head and heart. Since I trust myself more, I've learned to trust others more. I can listen more open-mindedly to constructive criticism, suggestions, and those old, hard truths I sometimes have a difficult time seeing without another person's perspective. Today I trust that my sponsor loves me unconditionally and truly understands me with a heart of empathy and helpfulness."

Through the process of working the steps together, we find that what can start out as a seemingly unbalanced relationship, with one person doing all of the helping, develops into the "two-way street" we hear so much about, with each addict helping the other. Some members

will experience sponsorship as a loving and unconditional bond, while others will see it more in terms of the instruction or even discipline that it can offer. However our sponsorship relationship develops, we do our best to help each other.

“The process of working the steps with my sponsees never ceases to amaze me. I continue to grow in my personal recovery because of the fresh perspectives their interpretations of the steps offer. Each time I sit down with a sponsee to go over step work, I get new revelations. The words on the pages of our literature seem to come alive and speak to me like never before. Sometimes it’s as if I’ve never before seen certain passages or heard a particular concept or spiritual principle. I thank God for my sponsees and their contribution to my recovery.”

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“I became really upset with my sponsor when I thought he was slacking on his commitment to work with me. I kept telling him this over and over again until he finally asked me to do an inventory

on him. This was an amazing process for me. I wrote about everything—why I chose and why I stayed with him; what he did that made me angry; what I liked about him; and what was working and not working. Then we got together and discussed it all in a very loving, mature way. He shared that he had been in a similar situation with his sponsor and had to do the same thing. I no longer felt so frustrated and alone. By getting real and honest with him, our relationship was able to continue to evolve.”



How we work the steps

When we work the Twelve Steps, we learn to walk a spiritual path. Our ability to share our thoughts on spiritual principles with another person is a powerful gift of recovery. Helping our sponsees to work the steps enriches our own spirituality. In many ways, these principles are basic elements in establishing and maintaining healthy rela-

tionships—with our Higher Power, ourselves, and another human being.

“My sponsor has helped me see that relationships with men have caused me a lot of problems in the past. She has helped me with my decision to stay away from romance until I have worked through the steps and have my Higher Power as my first and most important relationship.”

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“At one time in my journey, I was feeling spiritually inadequate, frustrated, and alone. I met with my sponsor and read to him what I had been writing for the past couple of days. It was intense, and it hurt to let out these feelings. I was judging my insides by others’ outsides, and I knew it. After listening to the reading and letting me pour out my heart, my sponsor assured me that if he believed the solution to my insanity was anything other than the Twelve Steps of NA, he would let me know. I took that to heart and moved forward. I knew, all too well, the alternative! That was four

years ago, and I know today I am never alone unless I choose to be.”

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“Working the Fourth and Fifth Steps with my new sponsor was scary at first. I already had done the steps with two past sponsors and had received a lasting sense of freedom. But my life was still being run by my desire for social acceptability in the program, and my walls were still blocking me from intimacy. My disease also was still active in my life but in new and uncharted forms. When I was writing my Fourth Step using *The NA Step Working Guides*, I had to depend on my new sponsor and my Higher Power for support, empathy, and unconditional love in order to take this searching inventory. The words my sponsor said still ring in my head: ‘Let go of the old you. You need the room because the new you is moving in.’”

Recovery is a highly personal experience. As sponsors, we have each developed our own way of working through the steps with our sponsees. Some of us utilize dictionaries, as well as the various tools of the program such as

the Basic Text, *It Works: How and Why*, and *The Narcotics Anonymous Step Working Guides*. We may ask sponsees to write about certain passages from these texts and other NA literature.

There are audio versions of NA literature to assist those of us who are physically challenged or who do not have strong reading and writing skills. Many of NA's texts and pamphlets are published in a number of languages. If we are willing to make the effort, we can find a way to work the steps and understand the NA program.

“Whenever I’ve sponsored someone who doesn’t read or write, I rely on the use of tapes. First, I have my sponsee listen to the audio version of the Basic Text. Then I tape how I want my sponsee to do the assignment. I give the tape to my sponsee to complete by recording her step work on the tape. She can always rewind the tape to the beginning if she needs to be refreshed about the assignment, which is why I record the assignment at the beginning of the tape.”

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“I only sponsor addicts who are willing to keep moving through the steps with me. I believe it is integral to their recovery and well-being.”

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“My sponsor teaches me to work the steps. She learns how to do so by writing them with her sponsor. She is open to deepening her own experience of recovery and does not act as if she has ‘got’ recovery and no longer needs to grow, even though she is 24 years clean. My sponsor has a ‘beginner’s mind,’ and seeing her willingness inspires me to have the same attitude. We have been together for over ten years. I have seen her continue to change and grow through the years. This gives me hope that I can do so too. I try to pass the concepts I’ve learned from her to my sponsees.”

The process of working the steps together can make it easier to develop trust. Some of us have found the key to building this trust is open, intimate sharing between sponsor and sponsee. A sponsor’s honest self-disclosure can help the sponsee to gain confidence in the sponsor’s directions.

“I used to find it difficult to let my sponsees know that I had experienced some of the same fear and shame they were feeling. I thought I was supposed to act and be perfect at all times. It was only through talking with my sponsor that I learned it was okay to have the humility and honesty to be who I am and to share that with my sponsees. Being vulnerable takes a certain amount of risk, and I learned that working the Twelve Steps, from both the sponsor’s and sponsee’s point of view, helps both of us develop and deepen our understanding and trust.”

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“Once I was able to talk about personal things with my sponsor, I found myself getting more and more comfortable with her. It was only after I started to trust her that I could begin the process of writing on the steps.”

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“At first I had a power struggle with my sponsor when he gave me direction on working the steps. I wanted to select which step to work on and when to work on it. He said that I needed to stop trying

to be my own sponsor and not try to control the process of working the steps. He then said that there was a reason why the steps were numbered one through twelve ... trust the process!”

Others of us find that disclosing too many personal details when helping sponsees work the steps might cause uncertainty regarding the role of a sponsor. We do not want to dump our own problems on those we sponsor, nor do we want to dominate the conversation. If we spend too much time talking only about ourselves, then we may take the focus away from our sponsees. Part of developing a sponsorship relationship is to encourage our sponsees to share their experiences. Each sponsorship relationship is unique, and we must determine what will work best for us on an individual basis.

“Developing new sponsorship relationships hasn’t always been easy for me. Encouraging my sponsees to share honestly and freely has sometimes been quite challenging. There have been times that I have felt as if I were pulling teeth. But time and experience have taught me that patience and loving

prompting are the keys that unlock the lips and the heart.”

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“As a newcomer I’d call my sponsor for support and she’d spend so much time talking about herself that I didn’t get the opportunity to express my needs or to get the guidance I wanted on the steps. I got impatient and found another sponsor. My only regret is that I didn’t talk to her about my frustration at the time.”

A number of us have developed specific methods we use when guiding sponsees through the steps. Some favor a detailed and methodical process, assigning sponsees to write at length on each step and principle, while others will not expect such a structured approach. As stated earlier, some members will use dictionaries to help clarify certain principles and concepts. Many of us have prayers we say before or after step work. It is important to remember that we do not all approach the steps in the same way.

“When I was new, there was no step guide. Back then, every sponsor had a different way of working the steps. When I finished the steps, I was shown a way to work Steps Ten through Twelve on a daily basis and how to incorporate them into my life. Every couple of years I would do another Fourth Step, sort of like a tune-up. Recently, I got a new sponsor who asked me to start at the beginning with *The NA Step Working Guides*. As I went through the first couple of steps, I started getting resentful. I felt that some of the questions were repetitive, and I worried that using the workbook might take away some of the personal guidance I value so much in the sponsorship process. However, I have come to learn that this program is about change, and if I still want this thing I must be willing to take new direction and to accept change. I have continued to learn about myself and my relationship with God and others in this new process.”

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“When working with my sponsees, I have them write on each step. When it comes time to get together and work the step, instead of having my sponsee read what he has written, I sometimes

take his writing and read his words back to him. This gives us both a very different perspective and has proven to be a powerful and effective way of sharing our experience and enhancing our relationship."

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"I help my sponsees with the Fifth Step by always saying a prayer before we begin and then relating my Fifth Step experience with my own sponsor. I tell them about the feelings I went through as a sponsee sharing my most intimate experiences for the very first time. Before my sponsees begin reading their Fourth Step, I ask what feelings they are going through at that very moment. That seems to help relax them. I try to be as honest and open with my sponsees as I want them to be with me."

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"In the Eighth Step, I ask my sponsees to make a list of persons they have harmed, taken mainly from their Fourth Step inventory, and adding anyone who wasn't on that inventory who they feel they've harmed. I ask them to pray for guidance while making the list. Then I ask them to put the

names of those persons on index cards with a brief description of the harm. We then go over all of the cards. We look for patterns of repetition and for any harms they might be taking more responsibility for. We look at the amends that can be made right now, the financial amends, any that cannot be made, and any that need to be postponed. We talk about them in detail and always remember that a Higher Power will guide us in making those amends.”

We become willing to change and begin to see that if we do not change, our recovery will stagnate. One of the gifts sponsorship offers us is a new perspective on others and ourselves through our shared experiences with the steps. When we watch a sponsee grow, we become inspired. We learn to trust our Higher Power more. Explaining the principles of the program helps us to better understand those principles ourselves.

“When I had about nine years clean, I found myself in turmoil at my job—one of the best jobs I ever had. I had been there for three years, and my

character defects were surfacing pretty strongly. I resented my boss and coworkers, got angry whenever they asked me to assist them, and was beginning to express that anger passively and inappropriately. After several run-ins with my boss, I realized I had to change something or I would lose my job.

I had worked through the steps several times in my nine years clean, but it was time to work them again—this time focusing on my work relationships. I did a Fourth Step on all my work history, and then I worked Steps Five, Six, and Seven with my sponsor. She lovingly guided me to look at my character defects, and I began to see how I could change with the help of my Higher Power. I was able to see clearly my part and begin the process of change. I am happy to say that after about six months or so, things at work got much better.

When I finally left that job for a position in a field I had always dreamed of, my boss was honestly sad to see me go. She was happy for me and said she had seen so much change in me. I never had worked the steps through a work situation like

that before. What a miracle! Without the help of my sponsor's unbiased opinion, it would have been just one more job I quit, one more uncomfortable situation I ran from, and one more opportunity to see myself as a lousy worker."



Opportunities for continued growth

We come to NA to learn how to stay clean and recover from the disease of addiction. After all, Narcotics Anonymous offers us only one promise—freedom from active addiction. But recovery is about much more than not using drugs. Recovery means facing whatever life brings and trying to see our circumstances as opportunities rather than obstacles. Sometimes being clean means that we are fully present to the challenges that confront us.

Our diversity is our strength

While the principle of anonymity makes us all the same, we do have differences that may present challenges in our sponsorship relationship. We come from a wide

range of ethnic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Our diversity extends to age, creed, religion (or lack of religion), and beyond. We may all speak the same language of recovery, but it would be impossible for all of us to *learn* that language in the same way. The differences between us offer innumerable opportunities to grow as we work together as sponsor and sponsee.

“Today, I’ve learned that color, race, or background doesn’t matter and that we are all addicts recovering from this disease. However, when I got clean, I came into an NA community that was made up of almost all members from a different culture than mine. I was also older than most of the members in my group. Growing up with my family’s beliefs and background, I was not accustomed to sharing what was going on in my life with anyone, especially someone from another culture.

I didn’t trust many people in the program at first. I finally met the member who had answered my call on the helpline and was able to connect with him. We both came from the same background. When

he shared with me that he was living one block from where I bought drugs and that he was clean for six years, I believed he was the only one who could help me stay clean and work the steps. I have grown in all areas because of his help, and this growth has helped me realize that others can help me too.”

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“I remember when I was a newcomer thinking to myself that Narcotics Anonymous is like when I was in battle during the war, and my life depended on the person next to me to survive. I sure didn’t care what race, creed, education, or social place you held, I just wanted to live another night.”

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“My greatest challenge has been to sponsor a teenager. When I started to sponsor this guy, he was about 16 years old and I had about 16 years clean! I am very careful about what I say because I know he is still learning about life. I think of him as the son I never had. He now has over one year clean and is an inspiration to me, especially with the way he works the steps. He writes his steps so

well, and a lot of times I have to ask him not to write like he is writing a book! He calls me almost every day and reminds me of how I used to be in my early recovery and how I should try to be again. He gives me a lot of hope. I don't have to be somebody else with him. I love that we have such an honest relationship."

Additional needs

As a result of our active addiction, some of us suffered physical consequences that we continue to live with in our recovery. In many cases, our health has been damaged irreparably from using drugs or from placing ourselves in harm's way to feed our addiction. Of course, not all of the additional needs of our members are related to the disease of addiction; we have to deal with the same physical challenges that affect the general population: physical disabilities and challenges from birth, and the results of accidents and illnesses.

"Early in my recovery I used to have my sponsees do what my sponsor had me do. But when I started working with a guy who was brain-injured in a

motorcycle accident, I had to regroup. If I asked him to write one page on a topic, I found that it might take him 20 to 30 hours of effort to write that one page, but he would do it—even if he couldn't understand what he had just written. So now we talk a lot about the steps and how he can apply them in his daily life.”

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“Five years ago, I had to go on medication for a disease I contracted as a direct result of my addiction. The side effects were horrible. It drained me of energy, and I slept about twelve hours a day. My sponsees really helped me during my hour of need. They were patient and understanding of the fact that I could not be there for them as much as I had in the past. As a matter of fact, they were there for me: running errands, giving me injections when needed, going with me to doctor appointments, taking me to meetings, etc. I only missed three meetings of my home group that entire year. Also, my sponsor was incredible. She called me every day, and we would talk for hours. She encouraged me and helped me apply the principles of the program, especially gratitude, acceptance, and humili-

ty, to the situation I was going through. It really showed me that this is a 'we' program. I will never forget the kindness and love that was shown to me during one of the most trying times in my recovery."

More and more of our members are accumulating clean time in this program; we have grown up in NA, and now we are growing old. As recovering addicts, many of us are living long enough to be confronted by the health problems that come with increasing years. With the help of our sponsors and the support of our sponsees, we make what changes we can and we accept what we must. Sometimes we are forced to reach out, and we grow and prosper as a result.

"One of the things I wanted from a sponsor was someone who would give me time every week. My sponsor said, 'No problem. Be here Saturday morning.' I was so excited. When I got to his house that morning, I asked him where we were going, knowing it must be someplace very spiritual. His response, 'My doctor's office.' He continued to give

me more time every week. I thought he really loved hanging out, driving around, and going to meetings with me, despite the 40-year difference in our ages. I came to find out that since he's gotten older, he doesn't like to drive as much anymore. Thank God he needed me to help him out, because it has given me so much time with him and has made for an amazing relationship. I have been given the opportunity to give back to someone who has given so much to me."

Many of us are not good writers, or we may have reading difficulties. As a result, we may feel inadequate, and we will sometimes shy away from step-writing assignments.

"I sponsored a woman who read very little with limited understanding. We would meet about five or six times a month to read the step. In the beginning, I'd do the reading, stopping to explain what sentences, words, and paragraphs, etc., meant. Once she began to trust me more, she would ask questions, tell me when she didn't understand, and

attempt to read aloud to me. I encouraged and challenged her to write on each step, draw symbols, pictures, whatever to get it done. After Step Three we agreed that she would try taping Step Four. She dropped off the tape to me at work, but I refused to listen to it this way. Instead, we listened to it together, stopping along the way for her to share and feel what was going on with her. This process was a renewal for me of the steps and it helped to enhance my understanding of them. My patience, tolerance, and self-esteem were bolstered, and she was blooming in her new life.”

For a variety of reasons, some of us struggle with completing everyday activities that come easily and naturally for others. If we are sponsoring members with additional needs, we can help them be aware of what NA has to offer. Many of our meetings offer wheelchair access, and some even have interpreters for the hearing-impaired. There are a number of audio versions of NA texts and pamphlets as well as literature in Braille and large print. We can also work the steps with our sponsees simply by sharing one-on-one. While many members believe the

best way to work the steps is through writing, there is no hard rule that will fit every member in the fellowship.

“I lived in a city where there was a long-term treatment center that specialized in serving deaf addicts. One of the clients had come from several states away to attend treatment, and I became his temporary sponsor while he lived there. This was in the day before email or online chats, and most often we communicated through a ‘relay service.’ He would type to an operator at the service who would read me the message. I had difficulty with the setup at first because I was embarrassed about some of the personal details he was disclosing to a stranger (the operator). He pointed out to me that this is what he needed to do to stay clean, and that got me straightened out pretty quick. I could identify with that level of willingness, and we began to talk much more freely after that awakening on my part.”

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“Some years ago, I was stricken with a series of devastating, debilitating illnesses. I found myself

physically dependent on others to help me get through the day. This was a complete reversal for me. I was always the one to be there for everyone else. I had been a trusted servant in Narcotics Anonymous for decades and in world service for many years. I loved being of service at all levels, but then it all changed. I had to surrender to the fact that I had to practice what I had learned about the spiritual principle of receiving. It has always been much easier for me to give than to receive. One of the greatest gifts of my illness has been that it has given my sponsees, sponsor, family, and friends the opportunity to give back to me, for which I am truly grateful. As a result, I have experienced an ever deeper sense of love and intimacy in my relationships, especially with my Higher Power.”

As sponsors and sponsees, it is our responsibility to work the steps to the best of our ability using whatever means possible. Regardless of the challenges that confront us, if we are willing to make the effort, we will find a way to work together.

Institutions and facilities

Being in a sponsorship relationship while in a correctional setting, treatment center, or another confined institution offers a different set of challenges. The need to stay focused on recovery and to work the steps will be especially important during this time, whether it is our sponsee or sponsor who is in the institution.

If our sponsor or sponsee is incarcerated, we will have to take into consideration the rules enforced by the facility and how those rules will affect our ability to communicate with someone on the “inside.” We may need to rely on communicating via telephone or writing letters. Depending on the specific situation, we may not be able to see our sponsee or sponsor on a regular basis. It may function much like long-distance sponsorship. Both members will need to be exceptionally open-minded and willing for this relationship to be effective, but it can and does work.

“When I got arrested, I only had eleven days clean. I will never know if I would have stayed clean had I not been arrested, but I like to believe so. I believe that being clean and having some NA experience at

that time was a big blessing. There was an NA meeting that came in every other week to the detention center I was in. I knew one of the guys because we had met at meetings before I was arrested. Man, was I glad to see him! I was this big, tough dope dealer, but when I saw him I began to cry—in front of everyone. Anyway, I asked him to be my sponsor, and he agreed to correspond with me. We wrote back and forth a couple of times, and he got me started on the steps. I read the Basic Text from front to back and got started on the Fourth Step. I didn't want to carry that stuff around any longer. I ended up doing my Fifth Step with a minister because the guy who was my sponsor was only allowed to visit me during the scheduled NA meeting. Eventually I did my time and was released. Today I am sometimes called out to the facility's Intensive Treatment Unit to do a Fifth Step with a guy who is about to be released. I always encourage them to get a sponsor and start working these steps as soon as they get out. It's what worked for me."

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“At 17 years clean, I found myself being locked up in an institution for over three years. I was able to stay clean during this time by working the Twelve Steps and staying in contact with my NA support group through the mail and pay phone. As time passed, I was blessed with the opportunity to sponsor four other inmates, one of whom was like me, clean in NA on the outside before he went into the correctional system. I was able to continue my sponsorship relationship not only with some of the fellows outside the walls but inside as well. What a gift! It is said around Narcotics Anonymous that we ‘never have to be alone again,’ and that has definitely been my truth all these years.”

Sponsoring a member in an institution can take a lot of our time and energy. We should be mindful of the impact that the institution may have on our sponsorship relationship. Although most service committees ask that we not sponsor members in an institution while serving on a panel, some of us have found sponsors or sponsees in such settings.

In some parts of the world, institutions, treatment centers, and courts require addicts to spend a certain amount of time with a sponsor and to work the steps in a certain way. In addition, some facilities have strict guidelines that we must follow if we are to sponsor someone there. Our vision and experience of working the steps might be different from how the facility directs our sponsee. While we do not want to abandon our sponsee, the regulations many institutions and facilities enforce may be demanding or even conflict with our vision of the program, and we should think honestly about whether we can effectively sponsor someone under these circumstances. Before agreeing to sponsor someone in a correctional facility or other institution, we should learn about the facility's requirements so that we can make an informed decision. This way we can ensure that our decision will most benefit our potential sponsee.

“I recently have had the privilege of sponsoring someone in treatment. I have sponsored people in treatment before, but this was probably the most rewarding relationship for me. She told me that the treatment center required that I pick her up once a week to take her to a meeting and that we

work the steps together. I explained that I had a family, other service commitments, and worked a 40-plus-hour week. She said she realized that I had other responsibilities, and based on each other's expectations, we agreed to work together.

However, once we started to work together, it was apparent she had different expectations of me than what we initially agreed upon. She subtly let me know that the 'other sponsors' took their sponsees out to dinner, gave them money, and let them come to their homes for weekends. I told her I would not be able to meet those types of obligations. She pouted. I got resentful. I was presented, once again, with an opportunity to work on my 'people-pleasing' tendencies. This has always been somewhat difficult for me. I had to let her be angry with me for not meeting her wants."

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"I went through a treatment program when I got clean, and I try to give back by sponsoring women there. I've found it extremely difficult at times because the center has so many tough rules that I don't always agree with. In spite of that, I realize

it's about helping the newcomer, and today I feel I have a lot to give to someone who is new."

Illness in recovery

At times in our recovery, we may have to maintain our clean time in the face of illness, surgery, or injury. During these times, we may need a sponsor more than ever. We must remember that our illness or pain is not an excuse to use. Our recovery is our responsibility, and we share about our health challenges with our sponsor and those members we trust. Our medical condition may require us to take medication that could trigger a craving to use. Whatever the cause, working with a sponsor can help us to accept that this is part of living life. We need to inform our doctors about our disease of addiction so that we are treated appropriately. Since our disease of addiction does not differentiate between using and taking medication to treat pain or illness, we must stay vigilant with our program. We are particularly vulnerable during this time, and our recovery can be threatened. Many members have relapsed because they did not follow their doctor's direction, reach out to their sponsor, or pay attention to the warning signs of an awakened menace—their addiction.

“Thank God for my sponsor and my friends in NA. I have been clean for over 25 years, and during that time I have had to undergo numerous surgeries. I was taught early in my NA recovery that my disease doesn’t know the difference between using medication for ‘real’ pain and using pain medication because of addictive thinking. Each time before having a medical procedure that requires the use of drugs, I would read the booklet *In Times of Illness*. I would pray and meditate, and, most importantly, I would let my sponsor and NA support group know that I was taking medication so that they could help me monitor my use of drugs during this critical time. I have seen far too many fellow addicts with various lengths of clean time go out and start using again as a result of underestimating the power of this disease.”

We look to our Higher Power for support and continue to practice our spiritual program. Some members of the fellowship can be judgmental about other members taking medication, and we want to make sure that this does not steer us away from what we need to do to take care of

ourselves. We gather as much information as possible so that we can make the best choices about our health. If we must take medication, we stay close to our sponsor and support network, sharing our fears and pain.

“At eight years clean, I found myself in a situation that required taking medication. I was so fearful. I feared relapse, gossip, and what my NA sponsorship family would think. Some of my fears were realized—I was judged harshly by a few of my NA family members and some gossiped about me—but I didn’t relapse. I took my medication as prescribed and maintained my recovery by praying, working the steps, making meetings, and talking about my situation with my sponsor. With the guidance of my Higher Power, the support of a loving sponsor, and a wonderful physician who knows I am an addict, I was able to make an informed decision about my health. I felt secure in the knowledge that if I kept my recovery up front, all would be well. Today I continue my journey of recovery with over 13 years of uninterrupted clean time. Thank God for sponsorship.”

As sponsors, we need to treat each situation individually by offering our experience, strength, and hope, and be mindful that what works for one person may not work for another. Our sponsees may call upon us in any number of ways. Perhaps our sponsee will need to speak to us more often. Sponsees with chronic illnesses may need our support as they maintain the health they have or as they face the prospect of death. If it is our sponsor who is ill, we may have to reach out for additional support as we try to be there for our sponsor in whatever way we can. The value of one addict helping another is how our program works. We do not have to go through this alone.

“A year ago my sponsor needed to have brain surgery. Right after the surgery, I immediately found someone I admired and asked her to sponsor me temporarily while my sponsor was so ill. Once I took care of what I needed to do for my program of recovery, I was able to be there—with love and gratitude—for my sponsor, a woman I have always believed was and is there for me.”

The symptoms of mental illness are sometimes subtle, and being in a sponsorship relationship with someone who is diagnosed with a mental illness may be challenging. We must stay vigilant to guard against any blurring of roles that can emerge within our relationship; as sponsors we are not counselors, psychiatrists, or psychologists. As in any sponsorship relationship, part of what we can do as sponsors is to help our sponsees who live with mental illnesses find balance in their lives. A focus on working the steps, in conjunction with their prescribed medical treatment, will help each of us in our recovery, even when addiction is not our only disease.

“As a recovering addict with a mental illness, I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to sponsor others who also live with mental illness. But I must remember that my role as a sponsor is to help others learn how to apply the Twelve Steps in all areas of their lives. There may be areas where a mental illness limits us, but we can recover if we practice these principles to the best of our ability. The principles of honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness are essential to recovery for my sponsees and myself.”

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“I never had an opinion regarding medication or therapy as they relate to working the NA program. However, when I began sponsoring a woman who had a mental illness, I had to acknowledge that she needed to seek outside help due to her inability to focus. My sponsee was open-minded and took the suggestion. Today she is focused and able to work and live the steps to the best of her ability. It has now been eleven years and she is living an absolutely fabulous life the NA way.”

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“One of the challenges in sponsorship for me has been sponsoring people who live with mental illnesses. Sometimes they have felt that they don’t belong. I use the pamphlet *In Times of Illness* and remind them of our Third Tradition—that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using. I want to do my best to make them feel a part of and not separate from this fellowship.”

The treatment of illness other than the disease of addiction is beyond the realm of what Narcotics Anony-

mous can address. As sponsors, we are recovering addicts, not professionals. Even if we happen to be a health or mental health professional, as a sponsor our role is not to prescribe or discourage medical treatment of any sort.

“When I made the decision to take medication for my depression, I also made the decision to change sponsors since my sponsor at that time did not believe in taking anti-depressants. I spent the first four and a half years of my recovery battling depression and figured that if I just went to enough meetings, did enough service, and worked the steps diligently enough, it would go away. I finally had to surrender to the fact that this was not something I could control, which led to the question, ‘How do I want to live my life?’ Ultimately, I am the only one who has to live with me, and I needed to feel supported enough in order to feel safe with my decision.”

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“One of my sponsees regularly becomes unstable, and I’m constantly encouraging her to stay on her

medication. I need to remind her of what may happen if she stops taking her meds—zooming around without a purpose, not calling me or going to meetings, and eventually picking up again. We have gone through this cycle a lot and it's really tough, but I love her and want to help her get better. Once she stabilizes, she starts calling me, going to meetings, and working the steps again."



In critical times within our sponsorship relationship

Sometimes we face a crisis in our sponsorship relationship such as relapse, death, breach of confidentiality, or abuse. There are many reasons why our relationship may falter. However, we address these situations when they arise and do what we can to reach a solution. We accept each other as addicts traveling along the same path in search of recovery, knowing that all we have to offer one another is our experience, strength, and hope.

The reality of relapse

No matter how long we have been clean, relapse is a possibility. While many of us struggle with various manifestations of our addiction, we can never forget that the most destructive symptom of our disease will always be using drugs.

Watching a fellow member descend into the insanity of active addiction can be heartbreaking. We may feel abandoned or insecure, especially if the person who has relapsed is our sponsor or sponsee. Regardless of our feelings, we need to make every attempt to offer our unconditional love and welcome our sponsor or sponsee if he or she comes back to the fellowship. While the dynamics of our sponsorship relationship will undoubtedly be affected by a relapse, we can still find a way to be supportive through the principles we have learned in NA. Sadly, not everyone comes back from a relapse. Some die; others live on, lost in the horrors of active addiction.

“The greatest challenge I’ve had to face since I’ve been in recovery was when my sponsor relapsed and dropped out of the recovery community. I, of course, took it personally and began to wonder

about what I had been taught. I found myself doubting and analyzing just about everything I did. I had to deal with feelings of abandonment and mistrust. I know that my sponsor is just human, but it still scared the hell out of me. After a couple of years and getting lots of support from a few friends and people in NA, I'm still clean. I finally found a new sponsor too. I'm also still a little angry, but I am stronger today."

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"After being in the same sponsorship relationship for over ten years, I called my sponsor to see if he would share for me at my tenth NA anniversary celebration. I realized that he was loaded. The process of grieving the loss of that relationship was very difficult. The sadness, anger, and fear were pretty tough to deal with. But the most difficult thing for me to do was go to the detox hospital to pick him up and take him to a meeting. What I wanted to do was kick him for abandoning me. Once I got my own selfish interests out of the way, with the help of my Higher Power, I was able to reach out to him as to any newcomer, with love and compassion—and I took him to that meeting!"

We do not have to abandon our sponsor if he or she comes back to NA after a relapse. However, we cannot stay in denial about the choice made by this person, and we will probably want to seek another member to be our sponsor. The relapse of a sponsee is different. We may be in just as much pain as when our sponsor relapses, but the sponsorship relationship has more of a chance to be rebuilt if our sponsee survives and returns. We may struggle with feelings that as sponsors we did or said something that pushed our sponsee to relapse, or we might believe we did not say enough or offer enough support. Perhaps we feel we did not encourage step work strongly enough or that we were not as available as we “should have” been. The list of “should haves” and “should not haves” can be endless. But while we try to have some influence over those we help, we need to remember that ultimately we are powerless over our sponsee and our sponsee’s addiction. Our sponsee’s relapse is neither our fault nor our responsibility. We are each responsible for our own recovery—not anyone else’s.

“I was truly devastated when I found out my sponsee relapsed, but it proved to be a very valuable lesson for me. Looking back at it today, it’s like it

all happened in slow motion. You see, since she had some clean time, I thought she had a grasp on working the program. We both became comfortable in our own lives, and we each became a bit complacent. I wasn't reminding her about step work, and she wasn't calling me as often as she used to. I mean, I didn't even realize she relapsed until she told me, which took her over a year. My recovery was really affected. It's not like I feel I actually did something wrong. No, it's more like I wasn't paying attention. I was absorbed in my own life, and I took her recovery for granted. As a result, I have learned that the value of one addict helping another is truly without parallel. However, I must be present and available if that concept is to work. Today, I always ask my sponsees where they are with their step work, and I make sure I listen and reach out as often as possible. I believe today I am a better sponsor."

How each of us, as sponsors, deal with a sponsee's relapse is, again, an individual choice. Before talking with our sponsee about whether to continue our sponsorship relationship or making any decisions, we may want to

share our feelings with our own sponsor. Naturally, many of us will experience anger and frustration or feel betrayed. We may want to let our sponsee go, or worse, we may wish to shut them out of our lives. These emotions are natural, and we need to share as honestly as we can with our sponsor or with another member we trust. One of the worst feelings we can experience when coming back after a relapse, either as a sponsor or as a sponsee, is rejection.

“I sponsored a guy who started taking medication for pain. He kept pushing away my suggestions that he seek qualified medical supervision. He kept doubling his dose, especially when he felt emotionally stressed. His behavior became more sneaky and addict-like. Sometimes he was too high even to talk. He wouldn’t work steps or take suggestions, and then he started using other drugs. Through all this he still expected me to sponsor him, even though he wouldn’t pick up a white key-tag. I finally told him I couldn’t sponsor him anymore because he refused to take any of my suggestions and was in denial about his drug use. His actions had spoken.”

If we choose to remain as a sponsor, we probably want to talk with our sponsee about what happened. Did he or she have reservations or hang out in “old playgrounds” or stop attending meetings on a regular basis? Was recovery at the center of his or her life? We may want to direct our sponsee back to those basics of early recovery—90 meetings in 90 days if possible or available, calling us on a regular basis, and sharing openly and honestly about the relapse experience. We might suggest that our sponsee start working Step One right away, or we may choose to recommend a slower pace. Some members suggest that their sponsee should detox first. Our guidance will likely depend on the situation.

We need to leave the outcome of our sponsee’s efforts in a Higher Power’s care. Our sponsee may decide the best thing for his or her recovery is to find a new sponsor. We do our best to accept and support that decision. Of course, there is always the chance that our sponsee may not successfully reenter the program and may, instead, reach the predictable ends: jails, institutions, and death.

“I had a sponsee who went through a string of relapses. When she started going through with-

drawal, she would call me, desperate for my help and eager for my suggestions. With each relapse, she assured me 'this time will be different.' But it wasn't. I never let this woman go because she always said she wanted to stay clean. She was dreadfully confused, and she really didn't want to change; she just wanted a life preserver. As long as she considered herself to be a member, I felt a duty to help her. She finally died of an overdose. I had terrible feelings over this one because a part of me felt like I had failed her by letting her pretend I was her sponsor, when in reality she didn't want what I had. Today, thankfully, I understand that she might have died no matter what anyone had done."

What happens if we, as sponsors, relapse? Pride and ego can be deadly and often prevent us from coming back to NA and staying in recovery. However, healing cannot take place if we do not face the reality of our relapse. We may feel devastated about picking up, but we cannot afford to let this keep us from coming back to meetings. It is in the meetings of Narcotics Anonymous that we will most likely find relief from the damage our relapse may have caused. We might feel ashamed about what hap-

pened, but when we admit that we did relapse, we are given another chance at recovery.

“I relapsed after having 15 years clean in Narcotics Anonymous and ended up in a treatment facility. While in treatment they brought meetings into the facility. One night the woman speaking was celebrating ten years clean, the woman chairing the meeting was celebrating one year clean, and a woman in the audience was a sponsee of one and sponsored the other. When I watched the three of them beaming because of the relationships and the love they shared, it hit me that the many women I had sponsored, some for years, were having to share that their sponsor had relapsed and also speak about the pain, confusion, anger, and fear they were experiencing. At that moment I felt the horrible pain of how the self-centeredness behind my choices had affected so many people that I loved.”

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“I was so angry at myself for relapsing. I was filled with self-loathing and felt like such a failure. It was

scary how some people still treated me as if I'd never relapsed, when I knew I was a newcomer again. However, I felt hopeless and filled with despair. I needed to surround myself with caring people who would love me and hold me accountable. My sponsor was one of those people. I felt so special when he took me out for ice cream one night after I shared at a meeting. It's not about the physical consequences, at least for me. I've been back (and stayed clean) now for over 17 years, and I never want to forget how awful I felt emotionally and spiritually."

Dealing with death

What happens if our sponsor or sponsee dies? Losing someone with whom we have developed such a deep and loving relationship is shocking, to say the least. We know that death is inevitable, and yet, even if it is expected, as with terminal illnesses, it always seems to come as a surprise. How do we begin to fill the emptiness left by the death of a sponsor or sponsee? How do we start to build a relationship with another member as a sponsor or sponsee after experiencing such a loss? Sometimes it feels

impossible that we will ever again find that special person to trust and love.

“With 20 years clean, my sponsor of 16 years died in a sudden and tragic way. The shock, sadness, and emotional upheaval I experienced were staggering. But immediately my phone began to ring daily with empathetic calls from my sponsees, asking how I was doing. This reversal of roles had a great, positive impact on my ability to work through this difficult period.”

The grief we feel over the death of our sponsor or sponsee may be overwhelming, but we find that life goes on, and we will always carry his or her spirit in our hearts. If it is our sponsor who dies, we must realize the importance of finding someone else as a sponsor. We can honor our sponsor’s memory by staying clean and continuing to share what we have learned with those we sponsor.

“I had a sponsee with 14 years clean die in an automobile accident while he was driving a newcomer home after leaving his home group meeting.

I had sponsored him for over seven years and had known him since his first day clean. Our relationship had grown to a deep level of trust and mutual admiration. When I helped carry him in his casket, I felt very sad but also honored to have experienced the blessings of being this man's sponsor and friend over the years. He died clean and carrying the message. What a legacy to leave."

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"My first sponsor took me on in sponsorship when I had less than 90 days clean. He sponsored me up until my sixth year before he became ill and passed away. He told me on the day of his passing that I had been prepared for his death through working the Twelve Steps, that our work together was helping us both to deal with this situation. I believe our personal relationship with God, Twelfth Step work, and involvement with the fellowship prepare us for relapse or illness in recovery."

When our sponsor or sponsee dies, just as when anyone dear to us dies, sharing our feelings of grief and loss with other recovering addicts may help. Some of us seek

professional counseling to help us reconcile our feelings of anger and helplessness. However we decide to work through our feelings is our choice. No matter how great the pain of our loss, we want to do everything in our power to stay connected to our recovery. We cannot afford to let grief cut us off from the benefits of sponsoring and being sponsored. With the help of time and the spiritual principles of the program, we can eventually find acceptance and begin to move on with our lives again.

Breaches of confidentiality

It takes great courage for us to begin to trust another person. For some of us, it takes years of working with our sponsor to establish that special bond where we feel secure in knowing that the secrets we share will remain just between sponsor and sponsee. But there may be times when our confidences are broken or times when we feel torn about whether to keep a confidence.

In extreme cases, some of us are confronted with issues that make us think breaching a confidence might be the most ethical course of action. During these times we should seek advice from others and guidance from our Higher Power, but ultimately we must make a personal choice about what to do.

“As a sponsor I know my responsibility to my sponsees is to keep their confidence and trust. I struggled with this when one of my sponsees confided to me that he was having an affair with the wife of one of my other sponsees! I reminded my sponsee that it says in our Basic Text that ‘our defects grow in the dark, and die in the light of exposure.’ I offered him that guidance but did not try to make the decision or dictate an outcome for him. I suggested that he write, pray, meditate, and then make his own decision about what he felt he should do and would be able to live with.”

Having our own trust broken by hearing our secret shared by someone other than our sponsor or sponsee can be devastating. We may feel violated and betrayed. Now what? Before we jump to conclusions, we should make certain that the source of the breach really was our sponsor or sponsee. If we act on suspicions before we know all of the facts, we could do more damage and hurt our sponsor or sponsee unnecessarily.

“I kept hearing things from people in my support group that I had specifically asked my sponsor not to repeat. It was unsettling, and I got really angry. I spoke to him about these things and he always denied that he told anyone else. This went on for a few years. Finally, after a dear friend of mine had been hurt by something I shared exclusively with my sponsor, I let my sponsor go. It was one of the most difficult things I ever had to do. I loved my sponsor so much and had trusted him without question. I felt betrayed. It was like he didn’t take me seriously. We talked and cried together, but I held firm. I let him go, and I got a new sponsor. We are still friends, but I don’t trust him anymore. Trusting someone is a gift. I gave him that gift and he chose to toss it away. I think that, more than anything, is what makes me feel so sad.”

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“I was sponsoring someone who told me about a very sensitive health issue he was worried about. Since I wasn’t sure how to deal with it, I asked my sponsor for some confidential advice. A few days later, to my horror, I heard my sponsor ask my sponsee about his condition. This hurt both my

sponsee and me. It is still hard to know how to deal with this because in some ways my sponsor is like the 'older brother or father' of our NA community. He helped establish NA in my country, and he believes that his interest in others is just an expression of kindness. I don't think he will change his views on this either. After my initial distress died down, I decided to keep him as my sponsor, even though he betrayed my confidence, because in other ways he continues to provide me with a sense of stability."

We need to address the issue in a recovery-oriented manner. Some of us will choose to end the relationship immediately. If our trust has been broken, we may feel there can be no other alternative, realizing how difficult it will be to rebuild our relationship again. We may not be able to repair the damage and may decide to move on.

Some of us may choose to confront our sponsor or sponsee to discuss how to reestablish our relationship. We talk about our feelings and try to reach an acceptable solution for both of us. Often our sponsorship relationship deepens when we approach these hurdles together in

a compassionate and loving way, coming out of the situation stronger and more committed.

“My sponsor shared some very personal information of mine with one of my sponsee sisters. I heard about it and confronted my sponsor. My sponsor immediately admitted that she had talked about my issues and said that she was profoundly sorry. I was angry and hurt, but also I was relieved that she was honest with me. She said she would never compromise my trust again, even if I did choose to get another sponsor. That was four years ago, and she is still my sponsor. I believe that working through that incident years earlier has made our relationship deeper and much more intimate. Forgiveness has been a very powerful tool and spiritual principle for me ever since.”

Abuse within our sponsorship relationship

Being in an abusive sponsorship relationship is demoralizing, and it can put our recovery in jeopardy. One of the many blessings NA affords us is the ability to live with dignity. Narcotics Anonymous teaches us to love

unconditionally and to help other recovering addicts. However, in recovery, we can sometimes regress, acting out in old, destructive ways. Whether we are the sponsor or the sponsee, we can inflict pain and cause a fellow addict to suffer.

In active addiction, the only way many of us knew how to relate to another human being was by being self-destructive or abusive. These old patterns can make it difficult, even when we are in recovery, to judge whether a relationship is healthy.

“My first sponsor used to ask me to do her favors, such as clean her house, run to the dry cleaners, paint, do yard work, and stuff like that. She would pay me to clean, but it seemed like I didn’t get a fair rate and there was always extra stuff she wanted me to do. I always felt like I needed to give back, and I thought that doing those jobs was all I had to give. Eventually it felt like I was being taken advantage of. It was so difficult to think about saying no or asking to be paid for extra stuff; after all, I wasn’t working at the time. It was difficult to say anything. I thought if I said no, she wouldn’t love

me any more. It was a terrible place to be. I felt so stuck and resentful. I felt like any time she called, it had to be because she wanted something from me. Now, as I sponsor women in the program, I remember how I felt, and when I find myself thinking that one of them could do something for me, I do my best not to take advantage and to pay them as I would pay anyone else.”

Saying things that are hurtful, disrespectful, or condescending may be considered subtle forms of abuse. Getting in the way of another addict’s dignity and self-respect can also be seen as abuse. On the other hand, we might engage in more extreme behaviors such as sexual harassment, threatening to harm ourselves or others to get attention, or verbally assaulting someone if we do not get our way. Abuse can take so many different forms that it would be impossible to list them all. And while some forms of abuse are blatant, others are not so obvious. What feels like abuse to some may not to others. It is important to continue to take inventory of how our sponsorship relationship makes us feel.

“I chose my sponsor because he was strong and seemed to know what he wanted in his life. I had lost my way and wanted some clear direction about how to work the program. After we started on Step Two, he demanded that I accept his religious beliefs. At first I went along with it because his idea of a Higher Power seemed to work for him. He told me that I had to make some big changes in the way I understood my Higher Power, the way I prayed, and the way I was bringing up my children. Then he told me that I would have to leave my wife if she did not accept his ideas. He said I would be damned in hell if I did not do what he said.

I was confused. I wanted to get well, and I had made a commitment to myself to do whatever my sponsor told me to, but I felt trapped and threatened. I finally talked to my friends, and they offered their support and encouraged me to change sponsors again.

It was hard to tell my sponsor that I wanted to leave the relationship, particularly when he told me that my life would become worse as a result of my decision. It took some years until I could

believe that my own Higher Power was really going to look after me again. My faith in people and the program had really been rocked. Thank God I had my good friends, my home group, and lots of time to help me get through this. Some years later, this man made amends to me. It was good to forgive him and begin to care about him again.”

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“I think that sometimes (especially when we are new) we pick sponsors who are either as sick as we are or who will reinforce our self-doubt and self-hate. One of my earliest sponsors was that way for me. I would call her and cry that I was a horrible person, and she would tell me, ‘You’re right; you need to write about it and beg God for forgiveness.’ And I would. This went on for nearly a year—until I needed surgery to remove a broken bone from my foot. She told me that I could not use general anesthesia—that I would have to use acupuncture instead—that anesthesia is a drug and would be the same as using. Well, even in my own darkness, I knew that something about that direction was just not right. So I called another woman with time who helped me begin to see the nature

of my relationship with my sponsor. Looking back, I can see that I picked her because she had a flat stomach and a balanced checking account—not because she was spiritually fit or had a good program. As always, we must be careful what we ask for!”

Is it time for a change?

Relationships evolve and naturally go through cycles. We must nurture them if we want them to continue to grow. Through the process of working the steps we are given the ability to address those difficulties that sometimes accompany any intimate relationship. As we face life’s challenges and disappointments, while working together within our sponsorship relationship, we learn how to relate to others in a healthy way.

“My sponsor has helped me learn not to expect so much of friends, family, and people in general. She’s taught me about acceptance and to allow people to be human. Of course I learned this the hard way! In early recovery, I had placed my sponsor on a pedestal—against her wishes. I got angry

and hurt when I witnessed her being human. I thought that somehow she should be a spiritual guru because she'd been clean for years and seemed to have a connection with God. Waking up to the reality that she was just a person was a shock. However, it did help me not only to get in touch with her humanness, but mine as well."

Even though we may be doing all that we can to support and contribute to our sponsorship relationships, there are times when we come to see that it is just not working. This does not mean we are failures. It simply means it is not working, and it may be time to move on.

"Over the course of 16 years in recovery, I've had to change sponsors for a variety of reasons. One sponsor moved across the country; another sponsor's work schedule changed, making regular contact impossible. Another sponsor, a professional therapist, had started to treat me as if I were a patient. By far the worst situation was the death of a man who sponsored many people in my area. While each of these situations, especially the last,

kicked up unpleasant feelings, I'm grateful for the experiences. I no longer get emotional when I change relationships with a sponsor or a sponsee. NA has given me and my various sponsors and sponsees new lives. It is wonderful when, as a result of this gift, our situation has changed, requiring us to move on. Changing sponsors need not be a sign of failure; rather, it could be a sign of spectacular success."

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"A sponsee approached me and said that he found a new sponsor. I felt a ping in my gut and immediately felt insecure. I have learned in NA that my feelings do not need to dictate my actions. I was able to say, 'That's great. I'm glad you made a positive decision for yourself.' It was so hard to say that and not mention how I truly felt, but it really helped us both move on and maintain a positive but different relationship."

If we do not take care of our sponsorship relationship, it can start to disintegrate and become unhealthy. Apathy and closed-mindedness are easy roadblocks to hit and can

knock our relationship into a tailspin. Many of us have found that the more apathetic we become, the easier it is to be dishonest or unwilling. Once we shut down and stop sharing honestly with each other, either as sponsor or sponsee, we set up walls that may grow too high to overcome.

“I just asked one of my sponsees to get a new sponsor. This was a difficult decision for me; I didn’t want to do this. I have had a 15-year relationship with this person, and she is one of my best friends, but she refused to work the steps. I could not, in good conscience, continue to let her think and say that I was her sponsor. From my perspective we were friends, but we were not on the spiritual path that I experience as both a sponsor and a sponsee.”

What we can do at this point is to examine our part and determine if we really need to move on or if we can work things out with our sponsor or sponsee. We are not wedded to our sponsor and sponsees, and we do not have to stay. If, as sponsees, we feel we are not getting our

needs met or as sponsors we are not able to fulfill the needs of our sponsee, then maybe it is time to reevaluate our relationship. Sponsorship is voluntary, and how we deal with the difficulties that may arise is ultimately up to us.

“After five years, it became apparent that my sponsorship relationship had become stagnant and was not working. I had to approach this man who helped to save my life and who taught me so much about the program and tell him it was time for me to move on in my recovery. I spoke my heart and received his support. Eventually I was able to see that it really is okay to seek growth through change. I know he loves me unconditionally enough to see me through this transition.”

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“I had a sponsee who had a different idea than I about how to work the program and about what I was supposed to do as a sponsor. I tried to keep the focus on my experience with working the steps, but he was more interested in seeking advice about things I hadn’t experienced. When he

resisted going to meetings, I became frustrated. I talked to my sponsor, who reminded me to keep the focus on me, and that if I had to break off the relationship, I should do so lovingly.

A few more frustrating weeks later I arranged to meet my sponsee at a coffeehouse. After we were comfortable, I told him that my recovery had taken a different path from where he wanted to go and that he really needed to find another sponsor. I told him that I loved him, but that it would be best for him if he sought someone else who had gone through the issues he was dealing with. I even suggested other people in our area, remembering that, whenever you are unable to serve in NA, you should always suggest someone else.

As things happened, that sponsee found someone who seemed to connect with him. Before long, I started seeing him at more meetings and more involved in the fellowship. Many years later, he's still clean and coming around. From our interactions, I learned the valuable lesson that there are many ways to work the program, and my way might not appeal to everyone."

Some of us have found great rewards by staying with our sponsors and sponsees through the tough times in the relationship. Many of us have a history of quitting and not working through anything, especially when it comes to relationships. Working through difficulties or conflicts with our sponsors and sponsees can teach us new levels of commitment, honesty, and intimacy.

“Occasionally I get caught up in my busy life and find myself drifting away from my sponsor. When I realize what is happening, I eventually give him a call. Fortunately, my sponsor is aware of these cycles I go through and tells me I need to be active in this relationship—otherwise, there is no relationship. He leaves the choice up to me. Am I willing to work at the relationship, or am I going to choose not to continue it? He helps me realize that my life is not always going to be balanced, that it’s going to have its ups and downs. However, he teaches me that I can work through this and become aware of these patterns so I can change and keep them from happening as often. I was a quitter most of my life. It would have been easy just to go on and not look back. I am grateful I

chose to continue to grow in this wonderful relationship I have with my sponsor. Clearly, I would not be the person I am today if I hadn't made a commitment to stick with my sponsor and try to be more consistent. Working through this with my sponsor has helped me become a person who is capable of having an intimate relationship."

Sponsorship teaches us how to make healthy choices for ourselves, even when we find it hard to do. It shows us things we need to know to actively participate in *all* of our relationships. Over time we learn how to be a better friend, lover, parent, partner, spouse, coworker, and so forth. Our sponsorship relationships can help us to develop those qualities we seek and gradually help us to become the person we have always wanted to be.

Sponsorship: An Ongoing Journey



The journey continues

For many of us, our first truly spiritual connection to another human being occurs when we open up and share honestly with our sponsors. The support and love we receive when we walk together on our journey through the Twelve Steps helps to free us from the self-centered fear that lies at the core of our disease. Sponsorship offers us a pathway to change and a bridge to develop other relationships.

Addiction robs us of the ability to relate. Recovery restores our connection to ourselves and the world. We now have the freedom to live a life of meaning. From the goodwill that forms the foundation both of the NA sym-

bol and of sponsorship, we are able to grow in our relationships with self, society, service, and God.



A universal program: Self, Society, Service,
and God

By staying clean and living the program, many of us discover that we are freed from the defects that plagued us during our active addiction. We learn to live responsibly, amending old behavior and seeking to understand others by forgiving them and ourselves. No longer alone, we face some of our greatest fears and remain vigilant against self-destruction. Gradually, with the help of our Higher Power, our sponsor, and other members in the program, our spirits awaken and we begin to heal.

“My sponsor has shown me how to step outside of myself. This has helped me in all areas of my life. I realize that the world doesn’t always revolve around me. Today, I have the ability to focus on something and someone other than me. My spon-

sor has also helped me to stand in my own truth and to share my truth without attacking someone else. I've learned tact. My sponsor pointed these things out in a loving and caring way without being too hard on me. Because of what I've learned from my sponsor, I've developed a healthy sense of self, and this has affected my whole family. I've been able to pass this along to my daughter, who now has her own sense of self-confidence."

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"My sponsor has been instrumental in helping me form a relationship with my partner that is built on integrity, sincerity, and love. My sponsor's willingness to share what he knows, to assist me with working the steps, and his honesty about my recovery all have helped to shape my relationship. He has never offered to be a marriage counselor and has always kept the focus on my recovery, *not* my relationship. I now know that I must continue to do the footwork if I am to grow in my recovery. A by-product of this work is that my relationship with my partner has grown stronger."

We are often amazed that someone really wants to help us. When we reach out for help, we demonstrate our commitment to Narcotics Anonymous. In return, we begin to feel deep, unconditional love for and acceptance of others, and we want to share this feeling of humility with someone else. And so the circle of sponsorship continues as we sponsor our sponsee—we want to give back what has been given to us.

“Being a good sponsor has helped me to be a better parent. I learned how to be compassionate and understanding and to look at people differently. I learned that life is about being happy, joyous, and free, not about being beaten down or downtrodden. I now look at myself as someone with frailties who is human. My sponsor has been a role model, helping me to look at some of the core issues in my life.”

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“I got clean as a teenager, and it was very difficult to sit in a meeting and get honest with what was going on. It was tough for me to reach out. My sponsor is older than me and has been involved in

a long-term relationship, owns his own business, and is very committed to the program. After I experienced a failed relationship in my early recovery, I watched how my sponsor practiced the principles of the program as he interacted with his wife. He was stable, and I just knew he was going to stay clean and in recovery. I needed to rely on someone who believed in what he told me. I could tell this just from the way he lived his life. I have a sponsor today who believes in Narcotics Anonymous, the Twelve Steps, and me. Our relationship is truly a gift.”

Sometimes through our struggles in sponsorship, we gain a greater understanding of humility. We find that we grow from all aspects of this relationship—from the uplifting experiences we share, as well as the challenging or difficult times we may go through. Part of the lesson sponsorship teaches us is to stop placing unrealistic expectations on the people in our lives. We come to realize that, although we are never really alone, no one person can *always* be there for us. However, no matter where we are, we always have our Higher Power and the principles of the program. Through NA, we are given the free-

dom to choose who and what is best for our own personal needs.

“Sponsorship has been an enriching experience for me. In the early days, because NA was just developing in my country, I was desperate to have other members. My expectations were high, and I was rigid. Through sponsorship, I have learned how to be flexible. I have learned a lot about my defects and have come to accept myself. I have started to learn about unconditional love with my sponsees. Being a sponsor has helped me to counter my self-centeredness. My sponsees know me, and they feel very comfortable challenging me. I love the two-way component of the sponsorship relationship and the ‘we’ component of this program.”

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“When I entered the rooms of NA, I was spiritually dead, insane, depressed, and had a completely unmanageable life. My marriage was on the rocks; my children were neglected and somehow survived in spite of me. Today, I am a recovering addict, a good mother, a friend, a student, and a sponsor. I

have a happy marriage, I work diligently at my job, and am an active member at my church. The most significant part of my recovery is the serenity and sanity I feel within, and the maturity with which I can now navigate through life—much of which was made possible through the help of my sponsor, the Twelve Steps, and my Higher Power. That doesn't mean others haven't been there to help, but my sponsor was, and continues to be, an instrumental part of my recovery."

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"I feel that service in Narcotics Anonymous benefits me more than any of the people I try to help. Our Basic Text states that 'the ultimate weapon for recovery is the recovering addict,' which reminds me of a statement my sponsor tells me when I become self-centered and self-obsessed—when all else seems to be failing, work with a newcomer. I have found that when I humble myself to work the spiritual program of giving, with no other motive but to help another addict, I open myself to the profound gifts that NA has for the taking."

We learn from sponsorship that relationships are never quite the way we imagine them. Sponsorship teaches us that working through real problems yields rewards that are profoundly rich and fulfilling. We take our new, more realistic understanding of relationships into the world as we work, play, and love. We start to appreciate people for who they are, not for who we want them to be. We accept ourselves for who we are and recognize the value of what we have to contribute. Our gratitude to our Higher Power and NA speaks when we put into practice the principles we learn in sponsorship.

“I never had any meaningful relationships during my active addiction. My relationships were always superficial, and my motives unclear. The first time I actually dated was when I came into NA. Since I started working with my sponsor, I’ve learned to check my motives. I’ve learned about commitment and how to be vulnerable and selfless. Through sponsorship, I got a chance to become a ‘me’ of a different nature. One of the biggest milestones was at my daughter’s wedding. Her stepfather and I walked down the aisle with my daughter as we both gave her away in marriage.”

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“My sponsor has helped me learn how to be a good wife. She would tell me to call her first and tell her the things I wanted to tell my husband. I had such trouble trusting men, and I had a ton of old behaviors that she helped me to work on. I’ve learned how to follow through with commitments. Through sponsorship, I’ve learned how not to be a doormat and how to respect myself.”

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“My first sponsor was very God-reliant and had a deep, meaningful relationship with her Higher Power. She made God seem so real and personal. I definitely wanted what she had, so I realized that I had to choose to do what she did in order to get it. I began praying and meditating on a regular basis and became willing to follow any direction she gave me to develop this special relationship. Part of her direction was to go to 90 meetings in 90 days and go straight home (no socializing) to spend an hour alone with God. This meant no television, radio, music, books, telephone, etc.—just God and me. This direction was amazing—it

worked for me! By the time I was through with the 90 days, I had a relationship with the God of my understanding, and he was as real to me as bread on the table. This gave me the foundation I have today. While I don't have the same sponsor I had then, my sponsor today is also God-reliant and continues to give me direction to practice my faith each day. The God of my understanding works in various ways, and the first language of my Higher Power is silence so I need to be still and listen to nature, others, and especially my sponsor. My experience has shown that if I keep my priorities (God, NA, and family) in order, everything else will be okay."



The circle of sponsorship

We soon come to realize that we cannot keep this remarkable gift of recovery without giving it away. We want to share the hope of living a fulfilling and rich life

with those who seek to follow the same path as us. We can do this with sponsorship.

Practicing selfless service not only benefits our efforts at living a clean life but also helps to strengthen our desire to stay in recovery. In sharing our experience and hope with another addict, we help to fortify the spirit of the Narcotics Anonymous program. Over and over again, our experience bears out what we heard in meetings from the beginning: when we ask for help, we offer another addict the opportunity to give, and when we reach out to an addict in need, we get the greatest rewards of all. Sponsorship can be where we learn to practice our new principles, and it is the relationship in which our gratitude speaks most clearly. The spiritual nourishment we receive when we give to others is one of the reasons we choose to stay in NA. Invariably, when we give freely of what we have found in recovery, we get back so much more.