

# Questions and Answers on Sponsorship

*ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS* is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

- The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.
- A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.
- Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

*Copyright © by The A.A. Grapevine, Inc.; reprinted with permission*

Copyright © 1976, 1983  
Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.  
475 Riverside Drive  
New York, NY 10115

*Mail address:* Box 459  
Grand Central Station  
New York, NY 10163

[www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

275M-5/01 (FYI) Printed in U.S.A.

## Contents

### What Is Sponsorship?

#### For the Person Seeking a Sponsor

- How does sponsorship differ from Twelfth Step calls?
- How does sponsorship help the newcomer?
- How should a sponsor be chosen?
- Should sponsor and newcomer be as much alike as possible?
- What should a newcomer expect from a sponsor?
- Must the newcomer agree with everything the sponsor says?
- What if the sponsor is unavailable when needed?
- May a newcomer have more than one sponsor?
- May a newcomer change sponsors?
- If a newcomer has received a thorough course of treatment and indoctrination in an alcoholism program outside A.A., will a sponsor still be needed in A.A.?
- Is a special approach needed?
- Is it ever too late to get a sponsor?

## **For the Person Wanting to Be a Sponsor**

How does sponsorship help the sponsor?  
Can any member be a sponsor?  
When is a member ready for sponsorship responsibility?  
What does a sponsor do?  
Is there any one best way of sponsoring a newcomer?  
How can a sponsor explain the A.A. program?  
Should a sponsor recommend hospitalization?  
How can a sponsor work with an alcoholic's family?  
Should a sponsor lend money to a newcomer?  
Should a sponsor intercede with an employer?  
Can a sponsor be too firm?  
Can a sponsor be overprotective?  
Can a sponsor be too casual?  
How can a sponsor handle an overdependent newcomer?  
How can a sponsor work with a newcomer who rejects help?  
When newcomers resist "the spiritual side" of the program, what can sponsors do?  
How should a sponsor deal with slips?  
Can a member sponsor more than one newcomer simultaneously?  
When and how does the sponsor let the newcomer go?

## **For Groups Planning Sponsoring Activity**

How does sponsorship help a group?  
What procedures can a group set up to sponsor new members?  
How may "outside" A.A. groups help groups and members in institutions?

## **Service Sponsorship**

Summary

# **What is sponsorship?**

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS began with sponsorship. When Bill W., only a few months sober, was stricken with a powerful urge to drink, this thought came to him: "You need another alcoholic to talk to. You need another alcoholic just as much as he needs you!"

He found Dr. Bob, who had been trying desperately and unsuccessfully to stop drinking, and out of their common need A.A. was born. The word "sponsor" was not used then; the Twelve Steps had not been written; but Bill carried the message to Dr. Bob, who in turn safeguarded his own sobriety by sponsoring countless other alcoholics. Through sharing, both of our co-founders discovered, their own sober lives could be enriched beyond measure.

What does A.A. mean by sponsorship? To join some organizations, you *must* have a sponsor - a person who vouches for you, presents you as being suitable for membership. This is definitely not the case with A.A. Anyone who has a desire to stop drinking is welcome to join us!

In A.A., sponsor and sponsored meet as equals, just as Bill and Dr. Bob did. Essentially, the process of sponsorship is this: An alcoholic who has made some progress in

the recovery program shares that experience on a continuous, individual basis with another alcoholic who is attempting to attain or maintain sobriety through A.A.

When we first begin to attend A.A. meetings, we may feel confused and sick and apprehensive. Although people at meetings respond to our questions willingly, that alone isn't enough. Many other questions occur to us between meetings; we find that we need constant, close support as we begin learning how to "live sober."

So we select an A.A. member with whom we can feel comfortable, someone with whom we can talk freely and confidentially, and we ask that person to be our sponsor.

Whether you are a newcomer who is hesitant about "bothering" anyone, or a member who has been around for some time trying to go it alone, sponsorship is yours for the asking. We urge you: *Do not delay*. Alcoholics recovered in A.A. *want* to share what they have learned with other alcoholics. We know from experience that our own sobriety is greatly strengthened when we give it away!

Sponsorship can also mean the responsibility *the group as a whole* has for helping the newcomer. Today, more and more alcoholics arriving at their first A.A. meeting have had no prior contact with A.A. They have not telephoned a local A.A. intergroup or central office; no member has made a "Twelfth Step call" on them.

So, especially for such newcomers, groups are recognizing the need to provide some form of sponsorship help. In many successful groups, sponsorship is one of the most important planned activities of the members.

Sponsorship responsibility is unwritten and informal, but it is a basic part of the A.A. approach to recovery from alcoholism through the Twelve Steps.

We hope that this pamphlet will provide answers to some of the often-asked questions about the rewarding two-way street called sponsorship - for people who may be seeking sponsors - for A.A. members who want to share their sobriety through sponsorship - and for groups that wish to develop sponsorship activity.

## **For the person seeking a sponsor**

### ***How does sponsorship differ from Twelfth Step calls?***

A Twelfth Step call - visiting an alcoholic who has asked for help and talking about the A.A. program with him or her - may become the *beginning* of sponsorship, but by itself it is not necessarily sponsorship.

Sponsorship, with its *continuing* interest in another alcoholic, often develops when the second person is willing to be helped, admits having a drinking problem, and decides to seek a way out of the trap.

Sponsorship is Twelfth Step work, but it is also *continuing responsibility* for helping a newcomer adjust to a way of life without alcohol.

### ***How does sponsorship help the newcomer?***

It assures the newcomer that there is at least one person who understands the situation fully and *cares* - one person to turn to without embarrassment when doubts, questions, or problems linked to alcoholism arise. Sponsorship gives the newcomer an understanding, sympathetic friend when one is needed most. Sponsorship also provides the bridge enabling

the new person to meet other alcoholics - in a home group and in other groups visited.

### ***How should a sponsor be chosen?***

The process of matching newcomer and sponsor is as informal as everything else in A.A. Often, the new person simply approaches a more experienced member who seems compatible, and asks that member to be a sponsor. Most A.A.s are happy and grateful to receive such a request.

An old A.A. saying suggests, "Stick with the winners." It's only reasonable to seek a sharing of experience with a member who seems to be using the A.A. program successfully in everyday life. There are no specific rules, but a good sponsor probably should be a year or more away from the last drink - and should seem to be *enjoying* sobriety.

### ***Should sponsor and newcomer be as much alike as possible?***

Often, a newcomer feels most at ease with a sponsor of similar background and interests - another physician or another homemaker, another churchgoer or another agnostic, another Irish-American or another black. But many A.A.s say they were greatly helped by sponsors totally unlike themselves. Maybe that's because their attention was then focused on the *most important* things that any sponsor and newcomer have in common: alcoholism and recovery in A.A.

A.A. experience does suggest that it is best for men to sponsor men, women to sponsor women. This custom usually promotes quick understanding and reduces the likelihood of emotional distractions that might take the new-comer's mind off the purpose of A.A.

### ***What should a newcomer expect from a sponsor?***

An A.A. sponsor does not provide any such services as those offered by a social worker, a doctor, a nurse, or a marriage counselor. A sponsor is simply a sober alcoholic who helps the newcomer solve one problem: *how to stay sober*.

And it is not professional training that enables a sponsor to give help - it is just personal experience and observation. A sponsor was once a newcomer, too, and has tried to use the A.A. program to deal with problems similar to those the newcomer is facing now.

### ***Must the newcomer agree with everything the sponsor says?***

If the sponsor's ideas sound strange or unclear, the newcomer had better speak up and ask questions. There is supposed to be an easy, open relationship, in which both parties talk freely and honestly with each other.

The A.A. program is simple, but it didn't seem that way to many of us at first. Often, we learned by asking questions, at closed meetings or - most especially - in conversations with our sponsors.

***What if the sponsor is unavailable when needed?***

It is the whole A.A. program - not the individual's sponsor - that maintains the newcomer's sobriety. Sponsorship is just the best way we know of introducing a newcomer to that program.

So we have many recourses when we are unable to contact our sponsors. We can telephone other members; go to an A.A. meeting; phone or visit the nearest A.A. office or club-room for sober alcoholics; read A.A. books or pamphlets or our magazine, the A.A. Grapevine, to find answers for almost any problem troubling us at the moment.

***May a newcomer have more than one sponsor?***

Of course. In fact, a good sponsor sees that the newcomer meets many other seasoned members as soon as possible. The newcomer with more than one sponsor shares in a wide range of experience and hears a great variety of ways to use the A.A. program. In addition, here is a means of averting the crisis mentioned in the preceding question - it's unlikely that two or more sponsors would all be unavailable at the same time.

***May a newcomer change sponsors?***

Again, the answer is yes. We are always free to select another sponsor with whom we feel more comfortable, particularly if we believe this member will be more helpful to our growth in A.A.

***If a newcomer has received a thorough course of treatment and indoctrination in an alcoholism program outside A.A., will a sponsor still be needed in A.A.? Is a special approach needed?***

The alcoholism programs of government, industry, and other agencies are referring more and more alcoholics to A.A. These newcomers usually reach us in a physically dry condition, at a somewhat later stage in recovery than the shaking newcomer of the past. Detoxification is often weeks and even months in the past and the physical compulsion to drink is gone. But the mental obsession with alcohol may still be there and, as A.A. groups that have welcomed such newcomers generally believe, sponsorship is necessary as soon as possible to help overcome that obsession.

This newcomer may have learned many medical facts about the disease of alcoholism. But learning *about* alcoholism in an institutional setting is one thing, and functioning as a sober alcoholic in a drinking world is quite another, we find. The sponsor is ready to share experience in how to cope with this situation.

*Learning* about the A.A. program is not the same as *living* it. Chances are the newcomer has already learned some facts about alcoholism - but has had no experience in using A.A. as a continuing program of sobriety maintenance. Again the sponsor's personal experience can enable the newcomer to find guidance in applying A.A. principles to everyday life - just as any other newcomer does who arrives at A.A.'s doors for help.

### ***Is it ever too late to get a sponsor?***

No. An A.A. who has been in - or "around" -the Fellowship for many years often finds that getting a good sponsor, talking frankly, and *listening* can make the whole program open up as it never did before.

Sponsorship can be the answer for the person who has been able to achieve only interludes of sobriety. Perhaps such a member has been associating with people who stay on the fringes of A.A., attend meetings casually, but have not yet truly taken the First Step. This can nourish secret reservations about one's own alcoholism. Or the member may have drifted into the company of others who slip repeatedly. Obviously, it's impossible to learn from them what they haven't learned themselves. For such a person, a sponsor with a firm grounding of sobriety in A.A. can make all the difference.

Even if we have many dry years behind us, we can often benefit by asking an A.A. friend to be our sponsor. We may have been feeling discontentment or real emotional pain because we forgot that the A.A. program offers a whole new way of life, not just freedom from alcohol. With a sponsor's help, we can use the program to the full, change our attitudes and, in the process, come to enjoy our sobriety.

## **For the person wanting to be a sponsor**

### ***How does sponsorship help the sponsor?***

Sponsorship strengthens the older member's sobriety. The act of sharing sobriety makes it easier for a member to live without alcohol. By helping others, alcoholics find that they help themselves.

Sponsorship also offers the satisfaction that comes from assuming responsibility for someone other than oneself. In a very real sense it fills the need, felt by most human beings, to help others over rough spots.

### ***Can any member be a sponsor?***

There is *no* superior class or caste of sponsors in A.A. *Any* member can help the newcomer learn to cope with life without resorting to alcohol in any form.

In most instances, A.A. custom does suggest one limitation, already noted: If the group is large enough to allow a choice, sponsor and newcomer should be of the same sex. The reasons are the same from both viewpoints; we A.A. members, no matter how long we have been sober, remain thoroughly human, subject to emotions that might divert us from "our primary purpose."

### ***When is a member ready for sponsorship responsibility?***

The most successful sponsors are men and women who have been in A.A. long enough to have some understanding of the suggested recovery program outlined in the Twelve Steps. The member who has been sober for months or years is usually - but not always - able to work more effectively with newcomers than the member who has been on the program for only a few weeks. Thus, length of sobriety is a factor, but not the *only* factor,

in successful sponsorship. Of equal importance are an individual's capacity for understanding and patience, willingness to devote time and effort to new members, and personal example as a representative of A.A. at work.

### ***What does a sponsor do?***

A sponsor does everything possible, within the limits of personal experience and knowledge, to help the newcomer get sober and stay sober through the A.A. program:

- Shows by present example and drinking history what A.A. has meant in the sponsor's life.
- Encourages and helps the newcomer to attend a variety of A.A. meetings - to get a number of viewpoints and interpretations of the A.A. program.
- Suggests keeping an open mind about A.A. if the newcomer isn't sure at first whether he or she is an alcoholic.
- Never takes the newcomer's inventory except when asked.
- Introduces the newcomer to other members, particularly to those who may share the new person's occupational or social interests.
- Sees that the newcomer is aware of A.A. literature, in particular the Big Book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, and *Grapevine*, *As Bill Sees It*, *Living Sober*, and suitable pamphlets.
- Is available to the newcomer when the latter has special problems.
- Goes over the meaning of the Twelve Steps, and emphasizes their importance.
- Never tries to impose personal views on the newcomer. A good sponsor who is an atheist does not try to persuade a religious newcomer to abandon faith, nor does a religious sponsor argue theological matters with an agnostic newcomer.
- Urges the newcomer to join in group activities as soon as possible.
- Impresses upon the newcomer the importance of all our Traditions.
- Does not pretend to know all the answers, and does not keep up a pretence of being right all the time.
- Tries to give the newcomer some picture of the scope of A.A., beyond the group, and directs attention to A.A. literature about the history of the Fellowship, the Three Legacies, the service structure, and the worldwide availability of A.A. - wherever the newcomer may go.
- Explains the program to relatives of the alcoholic, if this appears to be useful, and tells them about Al-Anon Family Groups and Alateen.
- Does not hesitate to help the newcomer obtain professional help (such as medical, legal, vocational) if assistance outside the scope of A.A. is needed.
- Quickly admits, "I don't know" when that is the case, and helps the newcomer find a good source of information.
- Finally, the sponsor encourages the newcomer to work with other alcoholics as soon as possible, and sometimes begins by taking the newcomer along on Twelfth Step calls.

In all work with a newcomer, the sponsor underscores the fact that it is the A.A. recovery program - not the sponsor's personality or position - that is important. Thus, the newcomer learns to lean on the program, not on the sponsor. A sponsor who has been truly putting the program first will not take it as a personal insult if the newcomer decides to change sponsors or to go to other A.A.s for additional guidance.

### ***Is there any one best way of sponsoring a newcomer?***

The answer is no. All members are free to approach sponsorship as their own individual experiences and personalities may suggest. Some sponsors adopt a more or less brusque, "Take it or leave it" approach in dealing with newcomers. Others exhibit extreme patience and great personal interest in the people they sponsor. Still others are somewhat casual, content to let the new person take the initiative in asking questions or seeking help in special situations.

Each approach is sometimes successful and sometimes fails. The sponsor has to decide which to try in a particular case. The experienced sponsor recognizes the importance of flexibility in working with newcomers, does not rely on a single approach, and may try a number of different approaches with the same person.

### ***How can a sponsor explain the A.A. program?***

Sponsors *will* want to explain A.A. in the manner that each finds most natural and most likely to be clear to the newcomer at hand.

Experience shows that the newcomer usually cannot absorb the entire A.A. program in the first few months. Certainly, "little steps for tiny feet" applies here.

Many sponsors make sure to tell the new arrival that A.A. has one primary purpose - to help them both keep away from that first drink. They remind the newcomer that the First Step - recognizing that one has a problem - is a key part of recovery.

These sponsors remind the newcomer that A.A. offers a *practical* program, and that it has already helped more than a million men and women. They suggest the need for openmindedness in facing alcoholism as a personal problem, and they underscore the fact that it is up to the newcomer alone to decide whether he or she is an alcoholic and whether A.A. can help.

Nearly all members who work with newcomers look upon the A.A. program in terms of their own experience. They tell the new person that no one speaks for A.A. and that every member is perfectly free to arrive at an individual understanding of the program.

Some sponsors talk about the program in a more spiritual way than others do. But nearly all call attention to the source of strength to be found in "a Power greater than ourselves." Again, the sponsor points out, it is up to the newcomer to determine what that A.A. phrase means. It expresses an idea that people of many faiths - or of no particular faith - can and do accept with complete harmony.

### ***Should a sponsor recommend hospitalization?***

Though increasing numbers of newcomers are reaching A.A. immediately after leaving a hospital or a treatment center, the majority (from 50% to 75% surveys indicate) still arrive at A.A. as most newcomers always have - either still drinking and wanting to stop, or having just stopped on their own. Many of these people are able to survive the first difficult days of sobriety without hospitalization, but some are in poor physical condition. Hospitalization for a brief drying-out period may be indicated, or a longer period of quiet recuperation in a rest home may seem desirable.

The important thing to remember is that hospitalization is *not* part of the A.A. program and that a doctor, *not* a sponsor, is the person who should say whether it is required. Experienced sponsors are careful not to set themselves up as substitutes for doctors in dealing



with any phase of alcoholism.

With the increase in hospital facilities open to alcoholics, some sponsors are inclined to suggest hospitalization to nearly all newcomers. But many of us recovered, even though we were in bad physical condition when we came in, without going to a hospital or drying-out spot. For some, hospitalization is essential -but not for everyone.

*A.A. does not own or Operate hospital or convalescence facilities of any kind.* In some areas, arrangements have been made for hospitals to set aside space for patients admitted through an A.A. central or intergroup office. In other areas, individuals familiar with the A.A. pro-gram have opened rest homes or farms. In reaching a decision on the use of such facilities, the alcoholic, the family, and the physician should understand that hospitalization, while useful in many cases, is separate from the A.A. program.

An A.A. oldtimer offers this reminder: Hospitalization or other professional care given to a newcomer "does not in any way lessen the responsibility of the A.A. member to carry the message in the best way possible, and to furnish good sponsorship. It is not good A.A. simply to dump an alcoholic into the lap of others because we do not have enough time, or because the alcoholic is troublesome and demanding. Most of us recall with gratitude the enduring patience and great kindness older members showed us when we were new ourselves."

### ***How can a sponsor work with an alcoholic's family?***

The sponsor can explain the A.A. program to a wife, husband, or relative, and point out that most members have found it easier to live a life without alcohol when their relatives took an interest in A.A., became familiar with A.A. literature, and attended open meetings of a local group.

The family can be told that the alcoholic needs sympathy and understanding, particularly during the first days of sobriety - but is not entitled to be babied or pampered simply because he or she is living normally for perhaps the first time in adult life. Nor should the alcoholic be treated as a hero or heroine for not drinking.

In general, the sponsor can help the alcoholic's family give the newcomer every chance to make good in A.A. and can urge the family not to expect too much, too soon, from the recovering alcoholic.

In some cases, marital and other family relationships have slipped seriously as a result of the alcoholic's behavior while drinking. The sponsor should not act like a professional marriage counselor in such situations. However, many threatened marriages have been saved once the primary problem of alcoholism has been brought under control, and the sponsor can point this out.

The sponsor will also want the family to know about Al-Anon Family Groups and Alateen, made up of relatives and friends of alcoholics -alcoholics who may or may not be in A.A.

The Al-Anon program parallels A.A.'s but Al-Anon is an entirely separate fellowship. It helps relatives of problem drinkers to understand the illness and its effect on family life. In Alateen - a part of Al-Anon - teenagers who have alcoholic parents share their own experiences. Local groups of Al-Anon and Alateen meet regularly in many communities, where an Al-Anon listing often appears in the phone book.

### ***Should a sponsor lend money to a newcomer?***

This is, of course, a matter of individual judgment and decision. Involved in it is the basic fact that A.A. has a single purpose: to help alcoholics with their drinking problem. A.A. is not a philanthropic or job-finding society.

Money, or the lack of it, has never been a key factor in an individual's ability to get sober in A.A.

The sponsor who lends money to a newcomer does so at risk and may even be slowing down the new person's progress toward sobriety. This does not mean that a sponsor should not voluntarily make a small gift to a newcomer if such a gift can help toward sobriety. (If the gift is returned some day, so much the better, since the sponsor did not regard it as a loan in the first place.) It does mean that the newcomer who turns to A.A. for money, clothes, or assurance of employment is coming to the wrong place for the wrong thing. A.A. has something far more important to offer: sobriety.

Professional agencies can furnish other kinds of help if any are needed. But many alcoholics *when sober can* solve their own domestic, vocational, or legal problems.

### ***Should a sponsor intercede with an employer?***

By the time an alcoholic turns to A.A., he or she may already have lost a job or be in danger of losing one. If there is a job, it may involve working for an employer who is uninformed about problem drinkers and knows little or nothing of A.A.

Whether or not a sponsor should intercede to preserve another alcoholic's job depends upon the individual circumstances of each case. A surprising number of employers, anxious to restore competent employees to maximum efficiency, welcome the news that a worker has turned to A.A., and are interested in knowing more about the recovery program.

An informative pamphlet, "Is There an Alcoholic in the Workplace?," has been prepared to acquaint employers with the help that AA can offer.

### ***Can a sponsor be too firm?***

Some sponsors believe in being fairly blunt with a newcomer. They describe the A.A. program as they understand it. They explain what A.A. has meant to them. They point out that there is no known *cure* for alcoholism, but that it *can be arrested*.

Having done these things, they leave the next move up to the newcomer. If the still drinking alcoholic does not reach a decision immediately to join A.A., this sponsor believes in letting the situation alone.

This approach is not totally unsympathetic. Many alcoholics respect it and recognize it as an attempt to be completely factual about A.A., to avoid emotion.

The A.A. program is based on certain tested principles, which a newcomer may disregard only at risk. Firm sponsorship emphasizes this and usually works well in convincing the newcomer. Most A.A.s, however, recognize that firmness overdone can upset a newcomer. It should be tempered with sympathy and understanding.

### *Can a sponsor be overprotective?*

In their anxiety to help a newcomer achieve sobriety, some sponsors may tend to be overprotective. They worry unduly about the persons they sponsor and tend to smother them with attention. In doing so, they may run the risk of having a newcomer depend on an individual member, rather than on the A.A. program. The most effective sponsors recognize that alcoholics who join A.A. must eventually stand on their own feet and make their own decisions - and that there is a difference between helping people to their feet and insisting on holding them up thereafter.

Another danger of overprotectiveness is that it may annoy the newcomer to the point of resenting the attempts to help - and expressing that resentment by turning away from A.A.

### *Can a sponsor be too casual?*

Some sponsors prefer to adopt a casual attitude toward newcomers with whom they work. For example, they are perfectly willing to spend time with the new member who asks for it, but rarely take the time or trouble to call between meetings or help the newcomer get to meetings.

Some newcomers actually flourish best left pretty much on their own. But there may be some danger in this approach: A timid or reserved newcomer may conclude that the group and the individual sponsor are not interested in helping.

Many present members report that they did not make a firm decision to adopt the A.A. program until months or years after their first contact with A.A., simply because they were allowed to drift away from the group. A growing number of groups try to avoid this failing by establishing a program for following up newcomers during a period of weeks or months after an initial approach is made to the group (see page 26).

### *How can a sponsor handle an overdependent newcomer?*

In the first days of sobriety, a newcomer is sometimes so bewildered and frightened - or so mentally fuzzy and physically weak - that he or she needs to be taken to each meeting and perhaps helped in making personal decisions. But such utter dependence on the sponsor, when carried past the earliest stages of recovery, often becomes damaging to both parties. It has already been pointed out that we stay sober through reliance on the A.A. program, not on any one member, so the newcomer's chances in this situation may not be very good. And the sponsor may either feel harried by constant, unreasonable demands, or feel flattered and let the ego build up dangerously.

How can this dilemma be solved without leaving the newcomer disheartened? Supposedly, the sponsor has been seeing that the newcomer meets many other A.A.s; maybe now is the time to redouble the effort, seeking out those likely to be extra congenial. If this tactful gambit fails, some sponsors have tried a direct approach, talking over the problem frankly with the newcomer. And if even this has no effect, the sponsor's best solution may be to say, firmly and kindly, that he or she will no longer be available any time the newcomer wishes - **but** will keep in touch, with an occasional friendly call.

Now it is up to the newcomer. One course is to find another sponsor. Or the newcomer may have achieved enough inner strength without realizing it, and can now go on to the next stage, substitute other kinds of A.A. friendship for sponsorship, start working the program in his or her own way, and take on personal responsibility in everyday life.

### ***How can a sponsor work with a newcomer who rejects help?***

In such cases, there is little a sponsor can do except assure the newcomer of *willingness* to help, when and if needed. Occasionally, it may be wise to introduce the newcomer to an A.A. member who shares more of the newcomer's background and interests.

Sponsorship is a flexible venture, and good sponsors are themselves flexible in working with new people. It is just as much a mistake to thrust unwanted help upon a newcomer as it is to refuse help when a newcomer asks for it.

### ***When newcomers resist "the spiritual side" of the program, what can sponsors do?***

First of all, we can relax and remember that sponsorship does not mean forcing any specific interpretation of A.A. upon newcomers. Most men and women who have been in A.A. for more than a few months recognize that its program is based on spiritual principles. At the same time, they appreciate that some alcoholics have been able to achieve and maintain sobriety without any belief in a personal Higher Power.

Perhaps the sponsor might point out the distinction between the words "spiritual" and "religious." As our Preamble says, A.A. is not allied with any sect or denomination, and no sort of religious belief is required for membership - only "a desire to stop drinking." On the other hand, the help offered by our program is certainly neither material nor physical; we do not offer money or medicine - only ideas and the A.A. love of one alcoholic for another. In this sense, the entire program, rather than just a "side" of it, may be called "spiritual," and almost any newcomer can appreciate a concept so broadly defined.

### ***How should a sponsor deal with slips?***

It can be most discouraging to work with a newcomer who gets sober for a period, then has a relapse, or slip, and starts drinking again. This can be a delicate, difficult time for both the sponsor and the newcomer. The sponsor may be tempted to consider the newcomer ungrateful or even to give up. Here, we sponsors need to look carefully into our own attitudes, to steer a middle course between harsh criticism that would only build up the newcomer's remorse, and maudlin sympathizing that would add to self-pity.

The newcomer, of course, may be even more discouraged and bewildered, and may find it extremely difficult to return to the sponsor and the group for a fresh start. (For this reason, many sponsors believe it important to take the initiative and call the newcomer.) In order to make the return truly a new beginning, it may be wise at this point to avoid postmortems on the reasons for the slip. Instead, the sponsor can help guide the newcomer back to the simplicity of the First Step and the prime importance of staying away from the first drink just for the day at hand.

Later, the newcomer may want to check the kind of thinking that possibly led to the slip, in order to guard against its recurrence. Here, the sponsor's role depends completely on the two people involved. If the sponsor was aware of the danger signals beforehand, one newcomer may say, "If only you had told me!" -but another may rebel at the idea of having been "watched."

Regarded realistically, the slip can become a learning experience for both the person sponsored and the sponsor. For the sponsor, it may serve as a push toward humility, a reminder that one person cannot keep another person sober and that the Twelfth Step says, ". . . we *tried* to carry this message".

Chiefly, most good sponsors emphasize to returning newcomers that people who have slipped continue to be welcome in A.A. Successful sponsorship activity depends to a large degree on the understanding and love that the individual and group offer to a newcomer who may have one or more slips despite sincere efforts to make the program.

### ***Can a member sponsor more than one newcomer simultaneously?***

A.A. members differ in their enthusiasm for sponsorship work, in their ability to handle it effectively, and in the time they can give. Members who are winning and able to sponsor several newcomers simultaneously should certainly not be discouraged. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that sponsorship is, in a sense, a privilege to be shared by as many members as possible and an activity that helps all members to strengthen their sobriety.

Further, members who do *too much* sponsorship work may get exaggerated ideas about their abilities, may even risk their own sobriety. As in so many phases of A.A., common sense is the best guide.

### ***When and how does the sponsor let the newcomer go?***

Usually the relationship does not really end at any definite point. Without any discussion, it just changes gradually as the newcomer grows in A.A. A wise sponsor is delighted when the new member begins to take initiative in making a widening circle of friends, becomes active in the group, and extends the hand of welcome to the latest newcomers.

A successful sponsor-newcomer partnership is a special sort of bond, remembered gratefully on each side, even if the two no longer are close. But it may also develop into a lasting friendship, and when it does, both partners have been heard to say, "Now we sponsor each other."

## **For groups planning sponsorship activity**

### ***How does sponsorship help a group?***

The primary purpose of an A.A. group is to carry the message of the recovery program to alcoholics who want and ask for help. Group meetings are one way of doing this. Sponsorship is another.

In some groups, the idea of sponsorship is broadened to include working with alcoholics in nearby institutions and, through correspondence, with isolated Lone Members and Inter-nationalists (seagoing A.A.s).

Active sponsorship programs within a group remind all members of the group's primary purpose. They serve to unite a group, keep it mindful of "First Things First."

### ***What procedures can a group set up to sponsor new members?***

Carefully planned sponsorship activity within a group is often likely to produce better results than sponsorship left to chance.

A typical pattern of planned sponsorship within a local group might include the following:

- A regular *committee on sponsorship* or a *Twelfth Step committee*, with members rotating frequently. If there is an intergroup or central office that keeps a list of local groups and the members available for Twelfth Step calls, such a committee may check to see whether the group has enough of its members on the office list to fulfill its responsibility.
- Regular *beginners meetings* (also called *newcomers meetings*) - particularly in larger communities where there are many newcomers. A Guide for Leading Beginners Meetings may be ordered from G.S.O.
- Regular *assignment of members to greet newcomers* at meetings and introduce them around. In large groups, people on a hospitality committee may wear badges for the benefit of the newcomer. In smaller groups, the secretary may, during the announcements, simply ask newcomers to come up and make themselves known after the meeting, so they may be introduced to other members.
- Another *suggested announcement*: "If any person here does not have a sponsor and wants one, please see the secretary, who will arrange a temporary sponsor. " Where this practice is followed at each meeting, members say, it reminds the group of the value of sponsoring and being sponsored.
- *Closed-meeting* discussions of sponsorship problems and opportunities. Some groups schedule meetings especially for this purpose.
- A *file* of names, addresses, and phone numbers of newcomers (who wish to volunteer the information), with notations showing sponsor or sponsors for each one.
- *Table display* of Conference-approved A.A. literature on recovery (including this pamphlet).
- *Review of newcomers list* by steering committee (or Twelfth Step or sponsorship committee) -with follow up activity where it seems needed.
- *Study of Chapter 7* in the Big Book ("Working With Others").
- Regular procedure (carried out by the secretary or the sponsorship committee) for *welcoming newcomers who have just left institutions*, treatment centers, or halfway houses.

For instance, the secretary may receive word from the secretary of a prison group that a newly released person is about to attend a meeting, and the "outside" group is then alerted to the arrival of this newcomer. If it is feasible, a member of the group may even offer to meet the person immediately upon release.

### ***How may "Outside" A.A. groups help groups and members in institutions?***

This subject is fully covered in the pamphlets "A.A. in Correctional Facilities" and "A.A. in Treatment Facilities." Also see Guidelines on Correctional Facilities Committees and Guidelines on Treatment Facilities Committees, Treatment Facilities Workbook and Correctional Facilities Workbook, all available from G.S.O.

## **Service Sponsorship**

Sponsorship in A.A. is basically the same, whether in helping another individual's recovery or in service to a group. It can be defined as one alcoholic who has made some progress in recovery and/or performance or service, sharing this experience with another alcoholic who is just starting the journey. Both types of service spring from the spiritual aspects of the program.

Individuals may feel that they have more to offer in one area than in another. It is the service sponsor's responsibility to present the various aspects of service: setting up a meeting; working on committees; participating in conferences, etc. In this matter, it is important for the service sponsor to help individuals understand the distinction between serving the needs of the Fellowship and meeting the personal needs of another group member.

The service sponsor begins by encouraging the member to become active in their home group-coffee, literature, cleanup, attending business meetings or intergroup meetings, etc. The service sponsor should keep in mind that all members will not have the desire or qualifications to move beyond certain levels and, thus, the service sponsor might help find tasks appropriate to individuals' skills and interests. Whatever level of service one performs, all are toward the same end-sharing the overall responsibilities of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Eventually, the service sponsor encourages the individual member interested in this form of service to attend district meetings and to read about the history and structure of Alcoholics Anonymous. At this point, the individual beginning this work should begin to understand the responsibilities of service work, as well as feel the satisfaction of yet another form of Twelfth Step work. Such individuals should be encouraged to take an active part in district activities and consider being elected to alternate positions in the district so as to learn about the responsibilities of various jobs in the service structure.

During this process it is important for the individual to continue to learn about the three Legacies-Unity, Recovery and Service, and to understand that the principle of rotation not only allows them to move on in service, but also gives newer members the privilege of serving. Rotation also allows them to understand that no one should hold on to a position of trust long enough to feel a proprietary interest and thereby discourage newcomers from service.

Now, through knowledge and experience, the newer member is aware that service is our most important product after sobriety. With this knowledge, the individual is able to share their vision with others and ensure the future of Alcoholics Anonymous.

## **Summary**

Most present members of Alcoholics Anonymous owe their sobriety to the fact that someone else took a special interest in them and was willing to share a great gift with them. Sponsorship is merely another way of describing the continuing special interest of a seasoned member that can mean so much to a newcomer turning to A.A. for help.

Individuals and groups cannot afford to lose sight of the importance of sponsorship, the importance of taking a special interest in a confused alcoholic who wants to stop drinking. Experience shows clearly that the members getting the most out of the A.A. program, and the groups doing the best job of carrying the A.A. message to still-suffering

alcoholics,. are those for whom sponsorship is too important to be left to chance.

By these members and groups, sponsorship responsibilities are welcomed and accepted as *opportunities* to enrich personal A.A. experience and to deepen the satisfactions that come from working with others.