

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? 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.

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.

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 it is not necessary. In many instances, the best sponsor is someone totally different. The most unlikely pairings of sponsor and newcomer sometimes work the best. 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 is not a professional caseworker or counselor of any sort, does not provide any such services as those offered by a social worker, a doctor, a nurse, or a marriage counselor.

A sponsor is not someone to borrow money from. nor get clothes, jobs, or food from. A sponsor is not a medical expert, nor qualified to give religious, legal, domestic, or psychiatric advice, although a good sponsor is usually willing to discuss such matters confidentially, and often can suggest where the appropriate professional assistance can be obtained.

A sponsor is simply a sober alcoholic who can help solve only 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.

Sponsors have been there, and they often have more concern, hope, compassion, and confidence for us than we have for ourselves. They certainly have had more experience. Remembering their own condition, they reach out to help, not down.

Someone has said alcoholics may be people who should never keep secrets about themselves, especially the guilty kind. Being open about ourselves helps prevent that, and can be a good antidote for any tendency toward excessive self-concern and self-consciousness. A good sponsor is someone we can confide in, get everything off our chests with.

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.

Whether or not we like what our sponsor suggests (and sponsors can only suggest; they cannot make anybody do anything, or actually prevent any action), the fact is that the sponsor has been sober longer, knows pitfalls to avoid, and may be right.

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.

Sponsors, like most everyone else, are likely to have some family and job obligations and there are naturally times when the sponsor is truly out of reach.

Here is the opportunity for many of us to use our reawakening wits and figure out a substitute for a sponsor. If we genuinely desire help, we do not let a sponsor's illness, or momentary unavailability for any other reason stop us from getting some help.

We can try to find a nearby A.A. meeting. We can read A.A. literature or something else we have found helpful. We can telephone other recovered alcoholics we have met, even if we don't know them very well.

We're sure to encounter sincere interest and a desire to help in any A.A. member we reach. When we really level about our distress, true empathy is forthcoming. Sometimes, we get really needed encouragement from recovered alcoholics we do not much care for. Even if such a feeling is mutual, when one of us trying to stay sober asks any other recovered alcoholic to help us not drink, all petty and superficial differences melt away.

So we have many recourses when we are unable to contact our sponsors to find answers for almost any problem troubling us at the moment.

May a newcomer have more than one sponsor?

Of course. Some people think it a good idea to have more than one sponsor, so at least one is always likely to be available. This plan has one additional advantage, but also carries a slight risk.

The advantage is that three or four sponsors provide a wider range of experience and knowledge than any one person possibly can.

The risk in having several sponsors, rather than just one, lies in a tendency some of us developed during our drinking days. In order to protect ourselves and keep our drinking beyond criticism, we often told different tales to different people. We may not have been aware of this tendency, and it was usually lacking in any evil intent. But it really became a part of our personalities in our drinking days.

So a few of us with a clutch of sponsors have caught ourselves trying to play off one sponsor against another, telling one thing to the first, something else to the second. This doesn't always work, since sponsors are hard to kid. They catch on pretty fast to the tricks of anyone wanting to drink having used almost all such wiles themselves. But sometimes we can keep at it until we get one sponsor to say something directly opposite to what another sponsor has said. Maybe we manage to wangle out of somebody what we *want* to hear, not what we need. Or, at least, we interpret this sponsor's words to suit our wishes.

Such behavior seems more a reflection of our illness than an honest search for help in getting well. So maybe if we have a team of sponsors, it would be a good idea to keep one eye cocked sharply, alert to catch ourselves if we should find ourselves getting into games like that, instead of trying to progress straight toward our own recovery goal.

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.

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.

DISCUSSION TIME

TOPIC:

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.

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.

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.

DISCUSSION TIME

TOPIC:

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.

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 new-comer 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."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS