

11 Availing yourself of a sponsor

Not every A.A. member has had a sponsor. But thousands of us say we would not be alive were it not for the special friendship of one recovered alcoholic in the first months and years of our sobriety.

In the earliest days of A.A., the term "sponsor" was not in the A.A. jargon. Then a few hospitals in Akron, Ohio, and New York began to accept alcoholics (under that diagnosis) as patients - : a sober A.A. member would agree to "sponsor" the sick man or woman. The sponsor took the patient to the hospital, visited him or her regularly, was present when the patient was discharged, and took the patient home and then to an A.A. meeting. At the meeting, the sponsor introduced the newcomer to other happily nondrinking alcoholics. All through the early months of recovery, the sponsor stood by, ready to answer questions or to listen whenever needed.

Sponsorship turned out to be such a good way to help people get established in A.A. that it has become a custom followed throughout the A.A. world, even when hospitalization is not necessary.

Often, the sponsor is the first person to call on a problem drinker who wants help - or the first recovered alcoholic to talk with the inquirer if he or she goes to an A.A. office - or the A.A. member volunteering to "sponsor" an alcoholic about to be released from a detox or 'rehab unit, a hospital, or a correctional facility.

At A.A. meetings, people often recommend that an A.A. beginner get a sponsor, and it is left up to the newcomer to pick someone as his or her sponsor, if one is wanted.

One reason it is a good idea to have a sponsor is that you have a friendly guide during those first days and weeks when A.A. seems strange and new, before you feel you know your own way about. Besides, a sponsor can spend far more time with you, and give you far more individual attention, than a busy professional helper possibly could. Sponsors make house calls, even at night.

If you do have a sponsor, some of the following suggestions may help. Remember, they are based on thousands of A.A. members' experience over many, many years.

A. It's usually better if men sponsor men and women sponsor women. This helps avoid the possibility of romance rearing its lovely head - a development which can hideously complicate, if not destroy, the sponsor-newcomer relationship. By trial and error, we've discovered that sex and sponsorship are a very bad mix.

B. 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.

C. An A.A. sponsor is not a professional caseworker or counselor of any sort. 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 the sponsor has only one tool to use - personal experience, not scientific wisdom.

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.

D. It's agreeable when the sponsor is congenial, someone who shares our background and interests beyond sobriety. 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.

E. Sponsors, like most everyone else, are likely to have some family and job obligations. Although a sponsor will, on occasion, leave work or home to help a newcomer in a real bind, 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. And we can telephone or visit the nearest A.A. office or clubroom for A.A. members.

Even if the only person we find to talk to is someone we have not met before, 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.

F. 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 even learned how to manipulate people, in a sense, so the people-environment would practically condone, or even encourage, our drinking. 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. We, the newcomers, are the ones most hurt when this happens. 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.

G. Being recovered alcoholics themselves, sponsors naturally have their own unique strengths - and foibles. The sponsor (or any other human being) without flaw or weakness hasn't turned up yet, as far as we know.

It is a rare occurrence, but it is possible that we can be misled or given a bum steer by a sponsor's mistaken advice. As we've all found by doing it ourselves, even with the best intentions, sponsors can goof.

You probably can guess what the next sentence will say.... A sponsor's unfortunate behavior is no more a valid excuse for taking a drink than anything else is. The hand that pours a drink down your gullet is still your own.

Rather than blame the sponsor, we've found at least 30 other ways to stay away from a drink. Those 30 are laid out in the other sections of this booklet, of course.

H. You are under no obligation ever to repay your sponsor in any way for helping you. He or she does so because helping others helps us maintain our own sobriety. You are free to accept or reject help. If you accept it you have no debt to repay.

Sponsors are kind - and tough - not for credit, and not because they like to "do good works." A good sponsor is as much helped as the person being sponsored. You'll find this to be true the first time you sponsor someone.

Some day, you may want to pass such help on to someone else. That's the only thanks you need give.

I. Like a good parent, a wise sponsor can let the newcomer alone when necessary; can let the newcomer make his or her own mistakes, can see the newcomer rejecting advice and still not get angry or feel spurned. A sharp sponsor tries hard to keep vanity and hurt feelings out of the way in sponsorship.

And the best sponsors are really delighted when the newcomer is able to step out past the stage of being sponsored. Not that we ever have to go it altogether alone. But the time does come when even a young bird must use its own wings and start its own family. Happy flying!