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Sponsorship: Your Questions Answered



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, we urge you: **Do not delay**. An alcoholic who has made some progress in the recovery programme wants 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.

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 AA programme with him or her – may become the *start* of sponsorship, but by itself is not what we mean by sponsorship today.

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

How does sponsorship help newcomers?

Mainly by helping newcomers adjust to a way of life without alcohol - it assures a newcomer that there is one person who understands the situation fully and cares – somebody to turn to when doubts, questions, or problems linked to alcoholism arise. Sponsorship gives newcomers an understanding, sympathetic friend when one is needed most.

How should a sponsor be chosen?

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

Instead of looking for a sponsor, it can be helpful to ‘listen’ for one.

It’s sensible to seek a member who seems to be using the AA programme successfully in everyday life. There are no specific rules, but a good sponsor should have a good period of continuous sobriety and will have taken the Steps and can be seen to enjoy sobriety.

Our experience does suggest that it is best for men to sponsor men, and women to sponsor women. This custom usually promotes quick understanding and reduces the likelihood of emotional distractions that might affect a newcomer.

Should sponsor and newcomer be as much alike as possible?

Not necessarily - many AAs 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 AA.

What should a newcomer expect from a sponsor?

An AA sponsor does not provide services offered by social workers, doctors or marriage counsellors; nor should they be seen as bankers or cab drivers. A sponsor is simply a sober alcoholic who helps a newcomer solve one problem: **how to stay sober**.

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 AA programme 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, a newcomer can ask questions. Theirs is supposed to be an

easy, open relationship, in which both parties talk freely and honestly with each other. The AA programme is simple, but it didn't seem that way to many of us at first and we learned by asking questions.

What if the sponsor is unavailable when needed?

It is the whole AA programme – not a sponsor – that maintains a newcomer's sobriety. Sponsorship is just the best way we know of introducing newcomers to that programme.

We have many options when we are unable to contact our sponsors. We can telephone other members; go to an AA meeting; read AA books or pamphlets or our magazine, *Roundabout/Share*, to find answers for almost any problem troubling us.

May a newcomer have more than one sponsor?

Many feel it is best for a newcomer to have only one sponsor. Choosing one sponsor helps to avoid the dangerous practice of a newcomer going from person to person seeking the advice he or she wants to hear.

However, some newcomers benefit from more than one sponsor with an opportunity to share in a wider range of experience.

May a newcomer change sponsors?

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.

Is it ever too late to get a sponsor?

No. An AA 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 programme 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,

especially those with reservations about their alcoholism. For such a person, a sponsor with a firm grounding of sobriety in AA can make all the difference.

Even if we have many years in AA, we can benefit by asking somebody to be our sponsor. We may have been feeling restless, irritable or discontent because we forgot that the AA programme offers a whole new way of life, not just freedom from alcohol. With a sponsor's help, we can use the programme 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?

As it says in the chapter *Working with Others*, "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics." By helping others, alcoholics help themselves.

Can any member be a sponsor?

Yes, any member can help a newcomer learn to cope with life without resorting to alcohol in any form. They need a capacity for understanding and patience, willingness to devote time and effort to new members and be personal example of AA at work.

When is a member ready for sponsorship responsibility?

The most successful sponsors are men and women who have been in AA long enough to have an understanding of the recovery programme outlined in the Twelve Steps. A member who has been sober for years is usually – but not always – able to work more effectively with newcomers than the member who has been on the programme for just a few weeks. Thus, length of sobriety is a factor in successful sponsorship ... but not the only factor.

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 AA programme. Being honest and providing love, sponsors guide by example and show what AA has meant in their life.

The basic responsibilities of a sponsor are to help a newcomer understand and use the Twelve Steps as outlined in the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* and see that the newcomer is aware of other AA literature, in particular *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, *As Bill Sees It* and *Living Sober*.

The sponsor also encourages a newcomer to attend meetings regularly, find a home group, and get into service.

Sponsors encourage newcomers to work with other alcoholics as soon as possible, and begin by taking the newcomer along on Twelfth Step calls.

In all work with a newcomer, the sponsor emphasises the fact that it is the AA Twelve Step Recovery Programme – not the sponsor's personality or position – that is important. Thus, the newcomer learns to lean on the programme, not on the sponsor.

What will sponsors avoid doing?

A good sponsor never tries to impose personal views on a newcomer, nor gives advice on medical, legal or work matters. We help the newcomer find an appropriate source of information.

Lending money is not a good idea

The sponsor who lends money does so at risk and may even be slowing down the new person's progress towards sobriety. This does not rule out a small gift to a newcomer if that can help towards sobriety. Remember that the newcomer who turns to AA for money, clothes, or assurance of employment is coming to the wrong place for the wrong thing. AA has something far more important to offer: sobriety.

How can a sponsor explain the AA programme?

Many sponsors make sure to tell the new arrival that AA has one primary purpose: to help them both keep away from that first drink. They remind the newcomer that the First Step is the key to recovery.

Sponsors remind newcomers that AA offers a *practical* programme and that it has already helped more than two million men and women.

Some sponsors talk about the programme in a more spiritual way than others do. However, the sponsor points out that it is up to each newcomer to determine what that AA phrase, "a Power greater than ourselves," means.

Is there any one best way of sponsoring a newcomer?

The answer is no.

Some sponsors describe the AA programme as they understand it and explain what it has done for them and they leave the next move up to the newcomer.

While firm sponsorship (tough love) usually works well in convincing a newcomer, most AAs recognise that firmness overdone can upset a newcomer. It needs to be tempered with understanding.

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

The most effective sponsors recognise that alcoholics who join AA must eventually stand on their own feet and make their own decisions. There is a difference between helping people to their feet and insisting on holding them up thereafter so they avoid being overprotective of those they sponsor.

A sponsor has to decide which approach to try in each case. The experienced sponsor recognises the importance of flexibility in working with newcomers and does not rely on a single approach.

How can a sponsor handle an over dependent newcomer?

Some newcomers are so bewildered and frightened that they need to be taken to meetings. Such dependence, when carried past the earliest stages of recovery, often becomes damaging.

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 they are willing to help, when needed.

When newcomers resist “the spiritual side” of the programme, what can sponsors do?

Perhaps the sponsor might point out the distinction between the words “spiritual” and “religious”. As our Preamble says, “AA is not allied with any sect, denomination...” no sort of religious belief is required for membership – only “*a desire to stop drinking.*”

How should a sponsor deal with slips?

In order to make the return truly a new beginning, it may be wise at this point to avoid a post-mortem 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 today.

Later, the newcomer may want to check the kind of thinking that possibly led to the slip, in order to guard against its recurrence. The slip can become a learning experience for the person being sponsored as well as the sponsor.

Most sponsors emphasise to returning newcomers that people who have slipped continue to be welcome in AA.

Can a member sponsor more than one newcomer?

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

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 AA. 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.

Sponsoring into Service

Quite apart from sponsorship of the AA programme, it is suggested that new members are ‘sponsored’ into service. It is recommended that sponsors willing to undertake this vital role refer to *The Service Handbook* for guidance.