



Sponsorship, Revised

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One of the first suggestions many of us hear when we begin attending NA meetings is to get a sponsor. As newcomers, we may not understand what this means. What is a sponsor? How do we get and use one? Where do we find one? This pamphlet is intended to serve as a brief introduction to sponsorship.

Our Basic Text tells us that “the heart of NA beats when two addicts share their recovery,” and sponsorship is simply one addict helping another. The two-way street of sponsorship is a loving, spiritual, and compassionate relationship that helps both the sponsor and sponsee.

WHO is a sponsor?

Sponsorship is a personal and private relationship that can mean different things to different people. For the purposes of this pamphlet, an NA sponsor is a member of Narcotics Anonymous, living our program of recovery, who is willing to build a special, supportive, one-on-one relationship with us. Most members think of a sponsor, first and foremost, as someone who can help us work the Twelve Steps of NA, and sometimes the Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts. A sponsor is not necessarily a friend, but may be someone in whom we confide. We can share things with our sponsor that we might not be comfortable sharing in a meeting.

“My relationship with my sponsor has been the key to gaining trust in other people and working the steps. I shared the total mess that was my life with my sponsor, and he shared that he had been in the same place. He began to teach me how to live without the use of drugs.”

WHAT does a sponsor do?

Sponsors share their experience, strength, and hope with their sponsees. Some describe their sponsor as loving and compassionate, someone they can count on to listen and support them no matter what. Others value the objectivity and detachment a sponsor can offer, relying on their direct and honest input even when it may be difficult to accept. Still others turn to a sponsor mainly for guidance through the Twelve Steps.

“Someone once asked, ‘Why do I need a sponsor?’ The sponsor replied, ‘Well it’s pretty hard to spot self deception...by yourself.’”

Sponsorship works for the same reason that NA works—because recovering members share common bonds of addiction and recovery and, in many cases, can empathize with each other. A sponsor’s role is not that of a legal advisor, a banker, a

parent, a marriage counselor, or a social worker. Nor is a sponsor a therapist offering some sort of professional advice. A sponsor is simply another addict in recovery who is willing to share his or her journey through the Twelve Steps.

As we share our concerns and questions with our sponsors, sometimes they will share their own experiences. At other times they may suggest reading or writing assignments, or try to answer our questions about the program. When we are new to NA, a sponsor can help us understand things that may confuse us about the program, from NA language, meeting formats, and the service structure, to the meaning of NA principles and the nature of spiritual awakening.

WHAT does a sponsee do?

One suggestion is to have regular contact with our sponsor. In addition to phoning our sponsor, we can arrange to meet up at meetings. Some sponsors will tell us how often they expect us to contact them, while others don't set those kinds of requirements. If we cannot find a sponsor who lives close to us, we can look to technology or mail to keep in touch. Regardless of how we communicate with our sponsor, it is important that we be honest and that we listen with an open mind.

“I rely on my sponsor to give me general direction and a new perspective. If no-thing else, she's an important sounding board. Sometimes all it takes is saying something out loud to someone else for me to see things differently.”

We may worry that we are a burden to our sponsors and hesitate to contact them, or we may believe our sponsors will want something in return from us. But the truth is our sponsors benefit as much as we do from the relationship. In our program, we believe that we can only keep what we have by giving it away; by using our sponsors, we are actually helping them to stay clean and recover.

HOW do we get a sponsor?

To get a sponsor, all we need to do is ask. While this is simple, it may not be easy. Many of us are afraid to ask someone to be our sponsor. In active addiction, we may have learned not to trust anyone, and the idea of asking someone to listen to us and help us may feel alien and frightening. Nonetheless, most of our members describe sponsorship as a crucial part of their recovery. Sometimes we finally gather our courage, only to have someone say no. If that happens, we need to be persistent, have faith, and try not to take his or her decision personally. The reasons people may decline probably have nothing to do with us: they may have busy lives or many sponsees, or they may be going through difficult times. We need to reaffirm our faith and ask someone else.

“When I picked my sponsor, I looked at it like an interview. Are we a match? What are your expectations and what are mine? I looked for someone open-minded who I felt comfortable talking to.”

The best place to look for a sponsor is at an NA meeting. Other places to seek a sponsor are NA events, such as service meetings and conventions. In seeking a sponsor, most members look for someone they feel they can learn to trust, someone

who seems compassionate and who is active in the program. Most members, particularly those who are new to NA, consider it important to find a sponsor with more clean time than they have.

A good rule of thumb is to look for someone with similar experiences who can relate to our struggles and accomplishments. For most, finding a sponsor of the same sex makes this empathy easier and helps us feel safe in the relationship. Some feel gender need not be a deciding factor. We are free to choose our own sponsor. It is, however, strongly suggested that we avoid getting into a sponsorship relationship that may lead to sexual attraction. Such attraction can distract us from the nature of sponsorship and interfere with our ability to share honestly with each other.

“When I got clean, I was insecure, lonely, and willing to do anything for some comfort and company. My natural tendency was to satisfy those desires and not have to focus on what was necessary to build a foundation for my recovery. Thank God for the integrity of those members who supported me and didn't take advantage of me in the early days of my recovery.”

Sometimes members wonder whether it would be okay to have more than one sponsor. While some addicts do choose this route, most caution against it, explaining that having more than one sponsor might tempt them to be manipulative in order to get the answers or guidance they are looking for.

WHEN should we get a sponsor?

Most members consider it important to get a sponsor as soon as possible, while others explain that it is just as crucial to take a little time to look around and make an informed decision. Going to a lot of meetings helps us to determine who we are comfortable with and who we can learn to trust. While we are looking for a sponsor, if someone offers, we do not have to say yes. One thing to remember is that, if we get a sponsor to help us in our early recovery, we are free to change sponsors later if that person isn't meeting our needs.

“I compared the timing of when to get a sponsor to drowning. I needed that life-saver/sponsor immediately!”

When we are new to the program, we need to reach out to other addicts for help and support. It is never too early to get and use phone numbers and begin sharing with other recovering addicts. Our program works because of the help we can offer each other. We no longer need to live in isolation, and we begin to feel part of something larger than ourselves. Sponsorship helps us to see that, in coming to NA, we have finally come home.

You may have questions about sponsorship that this IP did not answer for you. While there may not be “right” or “wrong” answers to your questions—the experience of our fellowship varies from community to community and member to member—we do have a book on sponsorship that addresses many issues related to sponsorship in greater depth.