

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. Sponsorship can be a long-term relationship.

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 (see *What procedures can a group set up to sponsor new members?* page 23).

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

prospect is willing to be helped, admits having a drinking problem, and decides to seek sobriety as a solution.

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. However, 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 helps our members stay focused on the A.A. program. Some gay men and lesbians feel an opposite-sex sponsor is more appropriate for similar reasons.

Must the newcomer agree with everything the sponsor says?

No. If the sponsor's ideas sound strange or unclear, the newcomer had better speak up and ask questions. Theirs 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 the program and helping them continue in A.A.

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 clubroom for sober alcoholics; or 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?

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

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 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. 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. Most A.A.s feel that sponsorship is a vital part of their ongoing growth and progress in recovery, including persons who have long-term sobriety.

Sponsorship can be the answer for the person who has been able to achieve only interludes of sobriety or who has attended meetings casually and has not really taken the First Step. 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: sponsorship should be avoided whenever a romantic entanglement might arise between sponsor and sponsee. 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?

Our primary purpose is to carry the message of A.A. to the alcoholic who still suffers. A.A. members who have actually worked the Steps of A.A. as a way to attain sobriety are often in the best position to share their experience, strength and hope. The most successful sponsors seem to be men and women who have been in A.A. long enough to have a good understanding of the A.A. program outlined in the Twelve Steps. Many of us