

ANONYMITY, Entry #1 of 8

...[A]ddiction makes us one of a kind. Our personal stories may vary in individual pattern but, in the end, we all have the same thing in common. This common illness or disorder is addiction. (Basic Text, Chapter 8: Recovery and Relapse).

By the time most of us show up at our first Narcotics Anonymous meetings, we are professionals when it comes to the difference game. Within moments of meeting someone new, we can fire off a list of ways that we are both better and worse than they are, ways in which their opinions, concerns, and experiences have no bearing whatsoever on our own lives and problems.

But something strange happens to most of us when we sit through an NA meeting. Whether it happens right away or after months or years, we look around at a room full of people who are nothing like us, and we begin to realize that we are sitting in a room full of people who are exactly like us.

Addiction comes with its own strain of terror and desperation that we recognize when we hear each other share. The pain of wanting to stop using but not knowing how, of wanting to stop disappointing the people in our lives but seeing no other choice, of wanting to stop waking up disappointed in ourselves—again!—and yet, here we are, sick and tired of being sick and tired. We hear our fellow addicts share these experiences, experiences we know so well, and we know we're in the right place.

For some of us, connecting to NA members on the level of pain and suffering is the first time in a long, long time that we have felt any connection to other people. But it doesn't stop there! First, we have only addiction in common, but when we stay and work the program, we soon have recovery in common, too.

Our sense of connection with other NA members keeps growing. We meet members from other areas, cities, and countries—they share differently, but the message is the same. We have never met, but we know each other intimately. Such is the blessing of being an addict in recovery—anonymity connects us all.

Addiction separates me from other people and from myself. To reconnect, I will acknowledge what I have in common with another recovering addict today and contact them.

ANONYMITY, Entry #2 of 8

Our spiritual foundation is not a question of whether we know each other's last names; it's that we accept each other regardless of who we are and what we have done (*Guiding Principles*, Tradition Twelve, opening essay).

What's in a name? Well, "Anonymous" is half of ours. In not using our last names, we end up sharing the same one: "Addict". But practicing anonymity doesn't end with a last initial. A principle can't be *that* simple not when it's a word that's so hard to pronounce. Go ahead, try it: *Anonymity*. ...See?

Because anonymity is, according to our Twelfth Tradition, the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, understanding what it means and how to practice it is essential to our being able to work with, relate to, and love each other, unconditionally. Our spiritual foundation is "the very rock we're all standing on," a member wrote. "But any rock can be pounded into sand by relentless forces. A slight here, a direct insult or backhanded compliment there, and on and on."

Anonymity ensures equity among us, and we can't have unity without it. None of us is too bad or too good for NA. We don't merely tolerate each other's differences and ignore our difficult pasts. Instead, we honor and embrace the people we are today. We do our damndest to rise above personality differences and having-a-bad-day reactions. We give each other the benefit of the doubt, roll up our sleeves in unity, and get to work.

Acceptance doesn't mean we endorse each other's every action. There's space for all of us at the NA table, but we must hold ourselves and each other accountable. Anonymity requires that we all have equal access to the message. So when a member's behavior prevents that from happening or otherwise interrupts the atmosphere of recovery, we need to be clear: "You are welcome. Your behavior is not." We can't expect ourselves to practice the unconditional love aspect of anonymity perfectly, but we can't let that stop us from ensuring that every addict who comes to our group has access to a message of recovery, no matter who they are, what they have done, or perhaps will do.

Today I aim to give my fellow addicts the benefit of the doubt. Practicing anonymity (say it one more time!) means I have faith that we can all grow, personalities and pasts aside.

ANONYMITY, Entry #3 of 8

In anonymity, we are free to be ourselves and to carry and receive a message of hope with the addict who suffers, regardless of whenever, wherever, or whoever they might be (*Guiding Principles*, Tradition Twelve, closing meditation).

We live in the world where—consciously and unconsciously—we adjust how we speak and behave at times to fit our circumstances. We refrain from dropping the f-bomb when talking to granny or the boss, for example. We greet each other in different ways, too. A handshake, a bow, or dapping may be called for, depending on the situation, or maybe cheek-to-cheek air kisses—one, two, or three. The point is that people—even non-addicts—adapt as a sign of respect or solidarity.

But like so many other characteristics, addicts can take this natural inclination to extremes. In active addiction, we scaled up our capacity to “read” situations and leveraged this skillset to get what we needed. Instead of being flexible to connect with others, we were cunning manipulators trying to get our way.

Recovery helps us return this ability to its proper proportions. Working the Steps helps us figure out who we are and then supports our efforts to be and do our best. What a relief! We can be more secure in our own identities and less like chameleons today. Practicing the spiritual principle of anonymity does not mean losing our individuality. In reality, the very character of Narcotics Anonymous relies, in part, on “the rough-and-tumble liveliness that arises from the diverse personalities of our members,” as it says in *It Works: How and Why*.

In being our weird, wonderful selves, we allow a broader range of addicts to connect with the message and come to believe that NA might work for them, too. Collectively and individually, we are NA’s best asset. In fact, we *are* NA. When we share from the heart, others connect. Being ourselves to the best of our ability makes way for others to do the same. There is a place for all of us in NA. We all fit in when we focus on carrying and receiving our message of hope.

I will share my unvarnished experience today, knowing that sincerity and genuineness are far more important than polish or pretense. NA needs me to be me—no more, no less. Turns out I need that, too.

ANONYMITY, Entry #4 of 8

The fact that we are anonymous means that the work we do in NA really can be selfless service. We don't want or need credit for helping others; it's what we do to save our own lives (*Living Clean*, Chapter 6, "Anonymity").

The first thought some of us have when given the chance to help someone is, "What's in it for me?" We stay clean, work Steps, experience freedom—and still, our diseased thinking whispers that we ought to be rewarded for our selflessness.

"I volunteered in the merchandise room at our convention right after celebrating ten years clean," a member shared. "I folded t-shirts and unboxed coffee mugs for hours, wondering all along what kind of goodie I'd get for doing my part. A mug? A shirt? At the end of my shift, they said, 'thanks for your service!' and gave me a hug. In a matter of moments, I went from being disappointed in them to being disappointed in myself!"

The good we do for others is not limited to our service in NA. Another member wrote, "My sponsor told me to do something for someone else and keep it a secret. On my way to a meeting, I saw someone asking for change, and I bought them a sandwich. The first thing I did when I shared at the meeting was congratulate myself for being so generous."

Perfect selflessness may be out of reach, but we can always strive to be less self-centered. We don't have to disappear completely; we simply step out of the spotlight for a moment. When we feel the impulse to make a moment about ourselves. We learn to say, "thanks for sharing," and let the impulse go.

Feeling like we are owed for our service and comparing our generosity to that of those around us are just a couple of the ways addiction seeks to separate us from others. Service and kindness help us reconnect. We keep our focus on those we are helping. We hope that the convention-goers who purchase a mug or a t-shirt look back fondly on their convention experience for years to come. We hope that the hungry person felt some relief for a little while; we hope that if we see them again, they look and feel better. We think of ourselves a bit less, we think of others a bit more, and we begin to feel gratitude.

I may never be perfectly selfless, but I can try to serve as though it's not all about me. I will make my service about others today.

ANONYMITY, Entry #5 of 8

When we treat a member as an icon rather than as another addict seeking recovery, we deprive them of the opportunity to experience the recovery they may desperately need (*Living Clean*, Chapter 6, “Anonymity”).

The principle of anonymity is meant to guarantee all of us a place to recover from our addiction today. Though the symptoms of our disease may not be as acute at a given moment, we don't stop needing to participate in our recovery. NA is meant to be free of status or hierarchies that can separate us from one another—or from our connection to our recovery.

But we don't practice anonymity perfectly. We can put our fellow members on various pedestals: wise oldtimer, circuit speaker, service position election winner, sponsor extraordinaire, the one with the perfect relationship or family, or money or status outside of NA. For those of us who are subjected to the pedestal, we may end up sacrificing our needs, because we feel like we shouldn't have them anymore. No thoughts of using or acting out on defects! No complacency! Gratitude and service only! We have to maintain the aura of perfection and champion NA at every turn. We don't dare disappoint, so we don't share our pain and doubt. We end up with secrets, and that puts us at risk.

And, honestly, sometimes we give people more credit than they deserve. Cleantime doesn't necessarily equal recovery. Some of us end up believing our own hype and think the rules don't apply. We use our status as a shield or even a bludgeon. But we must resist standing by, perhaps waiting for that huge ego to be brought down a peg. We've watched our fellow members tumble down from their pedestals. Some have lost their lives in that fall.

Sometimes we need to get over ourselves! We don't have to participate in constructing and maintaining our pedestals—or anyone else's. No matter who we or who others think we are, we need willingness to share honestly, courage to call each other out, and open-mindedness when someone does. We can share pride in our successes, while staying connected to where we came from. We need NA, even when we experience life's gifts, prosperity, and luck.

No matter what, I'll remember that I need the message and the group. And I'll make space to support any addict, no matter who I think they are or should be.

ANONYMITY, Entry #6 of 8

NA has no classes of membership and no second-class members. The common denominator in NA is the disease of addiction. We are all equally subject to its devastation. We share an equal right to recovery (*It Works*, Tradition Three, “Applying Spiritual Principles”).

Tradition Three, which insists that there’s only one requirement for NA members, comes easy to some of us. We found recovery in NA, after all, and no one asked us about our qualifications. We may take for granted that everyone else finds it that simple. Maybe we’d lived a fortunate life with a tight circle of friends despite our addiction, so the idea of not belonging had never occurred to us. If we shared a language and culture with others in attendance, fitting in may not have been a challenge for us. Maybe we looked around the room and saw faces that looked like our own. Or maybe our desperation had dulled our cynicism just enough to allow us to receive the warm welcome we found in our first meetings, despite any outward differences. No matter the specifics, many of us unthinkingly assumed that others felt equally welcome. The disease of addiction tries to weaponize our differences to keep us sick.

The fact is that barriers exist for many potential members despite our individual efforts to extend that classic NA welcome. Some of us struggle with accepting hospitality from members who seem different from us in all of the ways that society deems important. “I constantly disqualified myself from NA,” one member wrote, “I got clean young, didn’t use certain drugs, and I am transgender. My disease tells me that I don’t belong, that I somehow deserved to stay separate and alone.” Before we set aside our differences—as practicing anonymity would suggest—it may be helpful to recognize that identification may be a little more difficult to come by if we don’t see other members like ourselves in meetings yet.

Established NA members do well to emphasize our common disease. Regardless of the specifics in our experience, using brought us all to isolation, shame, and degradation. Identifying on an emotional level is often a good place to start. Our common path to a better life is summed up by the NA message: An addict, *any* addict, can stop using drugs, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live. The disease does not discriminate. NA must not either.

Recovery is precious, so I will strive to make it more accessible by emphasizing our similarities and taking no addict for granted.

ANONYMITY, Entry #7 of 8

In keeping with Tradition Twelve, the “I” becomes “we.” The spiritual foundation becomes more important than any one group or individual (Basic Text, Tradition Twelve).

Thanks to the Twelve Traditions, everything that happens in NA is done by us and for us. A member who was a newcomer when the Basic Text was being written shared that this was one of the qualities of NA that made her stay: “At six months clean, I was in a group business meeting. We were discussing changes to the Basic Text, and the secretary made a point of asking me what I thought. I knew right away that NA was unique.”

Anonymity calls on us to try to remain anonymous in our service to NA, but it can sometimes be more difficult than it sounds. Members who have started a new meeting may end up hearing others call it, “so-and-so’s meeting.” It can take a while to shake loose a label like that for the meeting, no matter how many times so-and-so says, “It’s the Just for Today meeting, not *my* meeting!”

Other times, we may feel less inclined to practice anonymity in our service. It’s easy to become very attached to a particular service position or role we have filled, and some of us become really reluctant to allow others to step up and serve. “I had an H&I panel for nearly twelve years, and a member with five years clean showed up at a subcommittee meeting offering to take on a panel. The subcommittee chairperson looked right at me and asked if I was ready to practice the spirit of rotation. I felt like I was losing part of myself.”

Groups and service bodies need anonymity, too. A member who served at the area level shared, “Our area nearly left our region over a resentment. The area spent hours debating a regional motion and sent in a strenuous ‘no’ vote. Then the region passed it anyway! We were mad, but our area discussed it again and decided that we need our region more than we need to be ‘right.’”

Anonymity sometimes just means being willing to let things go. We can be conscientious and take pride in contributing our best, but then we let go. We do our part, and then we let a power greater than ourselves manage the results.

My contributions to NA are important because they touch addicts’ lives. I can serve without insisting on getting my way, and I can step out of the way to give others a chance to serve, too.

ANONYMITY, Entry #8

In NA, in recovery, we are all equal...A college degree, a trust fund, illiteracy, poverty—these circumstances that so powerfully affect so many other areas of our lives will neither help nor hinder our chances at recovery (*It Works*, Tradition Twelve).

There's only so much we can say about the principle of anonymity leveling the playing field of addiction and recovery. Addicts are addicts are addicts.

Those of us with money may have gotten ourselves access to posh rehabs or lawyered our way out of jail, but that wasn't enough to keep us clean. We can't buy our way out of our disease. Similarly, for those of us who think we are ever-so-clever, we can't study or think our way out of it. For many of us, poverty or limited education may have limited our opportunities—and that may have made us more at risk for negative consequences due to our addiction. But no matter where we come from or where we end up, on day one of being clean, we all have the same opportunity to take advantage of: the program of NA.

Yes, if addiction is one great equalizer that brought us down, recovery is another that can build us back up! Recovering addicts are recovering addicts are recovering addicts. And the program is the program...for every addict with a desire to stay clean today.

Once we're clean for a while, our life might look different from the outside, but it also might not. Careers, degrees, marriages, families, homes, —or lack thereof—aren't examples of emotional healing and spiritual growth. How we treat one another is. We're not just equal in theory; we treat each other that way. How honest and open-minded we are is a good indicator of our progress. So is willingness to look at our part in conflicts, past and present, to apologize, to forgive, and to do better. Our readiness to accept responsibility, to help others, to grow through our hardships, to be grateful, to stop and breathe before we self-destruct or cause someone else unnecessary pain—these are the actions that will save our lives, because we are all equally worthy of living.

External factors—past or present—can't keep me clean or make me use again. I'll nurture my recovery internally by practicing anonymity outwardly, treating all recovering addicts as equals.