

When my sponsor relapsed

I found my fourth sponsor when I was six months clean. She had exactly what I wanted when I met her: longevity in the program. I was desperate to find that special person, and there she was, accepting her six-year medallion in the church basement at the only Narcotics Anonymous meeting within twenty miles of my home. To me, six years clean seemed like forever, and if she had that kind of recovery, she was just the one I had prayed for the God of my understanding to help me find. As I congratulated her after the meeting, she mentioned that if I was looking for a sponsor, to give her a call. Now I HAD to ask! I went home, fretted the next couple of days, and forced myself to follow the suggestions of the program—and I didn't die when I dialed.

The gift of desperation was completely on my side in early recovery. Following my sponsor's suggestions was a matter of life and death to me. I feared the feeling of failure if I relapsed. With fear driving me, I was willing to go to any lengths to stay clean. My sponsor was a cornerstone of my recovery foundation that allowed me to climb, day by day, out of the pit of insanity. I depended on her encouragement, patience, love, and friendship as she guided me through the Steps and Traditions. She listened for ten hours as I shared my Fifth Step with her on 30 September 2014—a day I will never forget. I trusted her guidance and suggestions. The spiritual awakenings and growth I experienced during my first four years in recovery were amazing. I was confident that I had my lifelong sponsor, and that I was set!

About six months ago, shortly after celebrating ten years clean, she disclosed that her chronic medical problems (coupled with anxiety, depression, and other family issues) were weighing on her so heavily that she had called her own sponsor, struggling with thoughts of using. I was glad to hear she was doing what the program teaches us. That gave me confidence that she was doing the right things for her recovery. A week later, she called me again, saying she needed to talk to me about something important. I listened in disbelief as she explained through tears that she had "slipped" with alcohol, that she had let everyone down, and that she had tried reaching out for help, but the depression and anxiety she was experiencing had caused her to isolate. My immediate reaction was telling her everything would be okay, that I would support and help her no matter what. I remember crying that I didn't want to lose her as a sponsor. But what I've learned is that if your sponsor relapses, you get a new one immediately. I reached out to a woman I knew in the Fellowship who had longevity in recovery and started talking and sending emails.

Now the pain of "letting go" of my sponsor hit me square in the face. The comfort, confidence, and security I used to feel was gone. It was a very dark and dismal time in my journey. The disease within me judged everything she said and did, how she shared or didn't share. Every time she shared on social media I felt a stab of betrayal. Self-pity and anger deepened. Others in our small recovery community didn't seem to be affected like

I was. No one could identify with what I was going through. I should have been glad she jumped right back into the Fellowship and was still alive!

In the weeks and months that followed, I went through so many conflicting feelings that I thought I was going crazy! One of the craziest thoughts my disease threw at me was, "Maybe I'll just go out and relapse, too! That will show her!" I felt ashamed of my uncaring, angry, self-centered reaction. I reached out to other addicts in recovery and groups outside my regular meetings. I searched for guidance and acceptance when I felt like I didn't really deserve it. I was super sensitive that I focus on my own program, not hers, which was difficult. I realized that my recovery was quite intertwined with hers. I had been cutting corners, skipping meetings, not really working the Steps, making excuses that I needed "me time" for self-care; and I rationalized that if she was doing these things, then it was okay for me, too. I was following personalities instead of principles of the program.

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When I turned to our literature, there wasn't much there, but the *NA Sponsorship* book offered some comfort in Chapter Four in the section on critical times in our sponsorship relationship. I started thinking that the program had built up this false image of what sponsors are supposed to be. I was thoroughly convinced that I had been duped. I set out to prove my theory by researching every mention of sponsors using the index of our Basic Text. As I methodically checked off each page listed in the index, the truth unfolded. By the time I got through about a third of the sponsorship mentions listed, my theory fell apart. The recovering addicts who acted as sponsors were all just flawed human beings doing the best they could, and they make mistakes.

I read the story "One Potato" in the Basic Text and noted this passage:

I looked around the room and saw a woman I could relate to. I figured she would make a good sponsor, so I asked her to sponsor me. She told me she would, and we should get together to talk about it. That very night, she and two others got high and ended up in a car wreck. Those with her died instantly. She hung on. When I found out the next day at a meeting, I went to visit her in the hospital. What I saw shocked me. She had lost her arms and legs in the crash. I looked down at her and thought, "This is my sponsor." She died the following day."

This story was the clear, indisputable reality of the disease of addiction. I never thought my sponsor could relapse, let alone die from the disease. I thought she had it all together. This story helped me realize that sponsors are not immune from the insanity of the disease, and it helped me let go of the "perfect sponsor fantasy."

While it was difficult to find members who could relate to my experience, I still had support of the Fellowship and the NA program. By sharing my experience, I hope this can help someone else in their recovery. Here are some things that helped me stay clean and eventually find the path to serenity again:

1. I didn't use, no matter what. It's not a good idea to follow someone back into active addiction. I had to step away for a while to "find my feet again."
2. I found a temporary sponsor right away—someone I could trust who was objective and nonjudgmental.
3. I felt disconnected and isolated; like I wasn't reacting "normally," so I reached out to other trusted members in recovery and used my support base.
4. I shared my feelings with trustworthy members because I felt much of what was happening fell under "things too personal to share with the group." I didn't want hurtful things to get back to my former sponsor, but I also needed help with my mixed bag of confusing feelings.
5. I practiced gratitude and tried to beware of the "poor me" trap. Self-pity hit me pretty hard; focusing on things I was grateful for was tough, but it kept me moving in the right direction.
6. Crying helped my healing. Feelings of grief surfaced over the loss of the relationship. There were many times I thought of her and just teared up. It was very painful. Self-compassion is a gift I needed to give to myself.
7. I prayed. Feelings of rejection, which also felt like betrayal, were difficult. Even though I knew the relapse had nothing to do with me, I still felt anger. My new temporary sponsor suggested I pray for the health, happiness, and a Higher Power's blessings for my former sponsor every night for two weeks. That helped

calm those feelings and build trust with my new sponsor, as I confirmed by text message nightly that I was doing it—and I did do it.

8. I prayed some more. "God, grant me serenity," when negative or resentful thoughts popped up—and they often did. My disease attacked me with this negativity for months.
9. I wrote. Keeping a journal helped me identify what was bothering me and how I was feeling. It helped me see the root of my disease, the self-centeredness and ego that were fighting for control, and the spiritual principles I needed to practice instead of focusing on personalities.
10. My new sponsor (no longer temporary) and I started working the Steps together, and that concrete action gave me a sense of continuity and relief.
11. I was patient. Adjusting to such a major change in my foundation of recovery took time.
12. I remembered God's plan and what another recovering addict shared in the story "Breath of Life" in the "Life on Life's Terms" section of the Basic Text: *My HP sends me people so that I can learn about myself.*

I still feel pangs of rejection from the "busy-body little caretaker" inside me. That part of me feels hurt and rejected because my former sponsor made a decision that didn't include me, and I can't change that. I guess it's like feeling "not good enough" over something I am not responsible for, which is crazy.

We are now sisters in recovery, and our relationship going forward is under construction. We still need each other's support to heal and grow from this experience. That may be a future article in *The NA Way* as we navigate life on life's terms, with the help of a Higher Power and this wonderful program of Narcotics Anonymous.

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The NA Way Magazine – January 2018

