Accountability, Entry #1 of 2

Trusting each other doesn’t mean that we reject accountability; we put routines in place to protect ourselves, and our trusted servants, from the types of mistakes we, as addicts, are liable to make (Guiding Principles, Tradition Twelve, “In Service”).

“NA service taught me how to be a responsible, productive member of this society first,” a member shared. “Doing service gave me skills and knowledge that help me navigate the world outside of NA, too. I think of these as ‘the hidden curriculum’ in NA service.” From that perspective, we might consider accountability to be one of the subjects we study in this course.

Lessons on accountability begin in our first home group’s business meetings and continue as we serve in various roles. One of the first things we learn is that the order of operations is different in NA. We had previous experience with the kind of accountability that comes after we screwed up. In NA, we often focus on setting each other up for success. To avoid missteps, we try to define tasks and spell out expectations upfront, and then strive for transparency, communication, and support as we follow through. Having safeguards in place, especially when money or ego might be involved, can help protect our trusted servants and NA.

We check our worst impulses in advance and limit openings for errors in judgment. The treasurer who asks another member to confirm the count of the basket avoids temptation. The subcommittee chair who keeps the service body informed and regularly seeks direction is less likely to go rogue or be micromanaged.

This kind of preemptive accountability has applications in our personal lives, too. Managing medication after surgery is a team sport in many NA communities; transparency about pill counts protects everyone involved. We can even see accountability’s relevance to online dating in the advice of one member: “Meet for coffee while the sun’s still up and don’t shave your legs.” It’s the little reminders that help us behave.

-------------------------------------------------

I will seek out guideposts—in life and in service—to keep me accountable to myself and others.
Accountability, Entry #2 of 2

Honest self-assessment is essential to recovery, but it is only possible if we are vulnerable enough to let someone in. We choose those mirrors carefully, seeking those we can trust to be honest, helpful, and kind (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Anonymity”).

There are loads of reasons to keep coming back to NA. The fact that we can’t do this alone tops the list for many of us. We need each other. As our Basic Text puts it, “we are each other’s eyes and ears.” When we share with others in NA, we get to learn from their valuable experience and get their perspective on ours. Their take helps us better understand the past and gives us a new vantage point on what we’re doing now. Objectivity is an acquired skill. When we share honestly with our fellow recovering addicts, we can see our behavior more clearly in their reflection. We begin to gain some accountability.

Asking for such insights can make us feel quite vulnerable. One member wrote, “my outsides were suiting up and showing up while my insides remained aloof. ‘Undercover isolation’ became a way of life. I couldn’t find my way out on my own.” We find people we can trust and choose to confide in them, returning again and again to those who offer the insights we’re seeking. It’s what we mean when we tell newcomers to “stick with the winners!” Beyond simple abstinence, we need people who are real with us—and help us get real, too.

When we surround ourselves with people who are living the program, our lives improve. One member shared, “I developed a support system, and that system of support developed me!” We need people to tell us the truth when we can’t see it ourselves. Sometimes the clarity begins the minute we begin to open our mouths. “It sounded good in my head,” one addict shared, “but before I could even say it out loud to my sponsor, I realized it was total BS!”

----------------------------------------

To stay clean, I need a clear reflection. Who are my most trustworthy mirrors today?
Authenticity, Entry #1 of 2

We can be ourselves in the present moment without fear or apology, without the need for approval or justification (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Awakenings”).

Living in active addiction, many of us felt as though we were never free to be ourselves. We often needed to pretend to be someone we weren’t to get what we wanted or needed, and it didn’t take long before we were confused about who “ourselves” really were—if we ever had any idea in the first place. We were so accustomed to wearing masks that we didn’t know what our own faces looked like anymore.

The atmosphere of acceptance and welcome we found in NA was a breath of fresh air for those of us who couldn’t breathe freely for a long, long time. The Basic Text tells us, “The masks have to go,” and we notice that when the masks come off, it’s so much easier to breathe. For some of us, NA might be the very first place we have been where we suspected that we might be able to show our true selves to others. We may not feel that way in every meeting, or with everyone we know in NA, but little by little, we become much more comfortable showing who we really are.

The freedom to be ourselves flows directly out of the sense of security we develop by being welcomed and accepted in NA. Admitting that we were addicts was the first of many admissions; each time we show a bit more of who we truly are to our fellow members, we increase our sense of security and become free to learn even more about ourselves. We accept who we are and lose the need for approval from others. We no longer feel the need to justify our existence. The insecurity that defined so much of who we were in active addiction fades away, and we become who we were meant to be all along.

----------------------------------

I will take off my mask and breathe more easily, knowing that others in NA will accept me for who I am.
Authenticity, Entry #2 of 2

Our willingness and humility show as a genuine desire to do better, no matter how well we are doing—not because we have something to prove, but because we care. (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Work”).

Some members describe authenticity as “being our real selves in the real world.”

Addiction makes our worlds smaller. Our self-centeredness was so powerful that we found it harder and harder to show concern for what was going on around us. The Basic Text says, “We suffer from a disease that expresses itself in ways that are anti-social,” and many of us eventually found ourselves living lives that involved minimal interaction with others—especially anyone who wasn’t using.

In recovery, our connection to the world around us grows. No longer trapped by our obsession and compulsion to use drugs, and free from the fear of being exposed as addicts, most of us are able to pursue our genuine interests in ways we couldn’t before getting clean. We start to get involved in our own lives, in our families, and in our communities.

Whether we are exploring a new hobby, seeking out further education, or serving those around us through volunteer efforts, addicts in recovery find that we are able to follow our passions and our curiosities wherever they might lead us. As people who had been held hostage by the disease of addiction for so long, the newfound freedom to discover who we are and what we care about can lead us on unexpected journeys.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Being authentic is not just good for me—it’s good for the world around me. To connect with the world, I will begin by connecting with my own interests and passions.
Carrying the message brings us awareness of our gifts and limitations, and guides us to change (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Living Clean”).

The effort we put into our recovery—working Steps, studying Traditions, living by spiritual principles—frees us up to be ourselves. We develop a connection with a Higher Power, come to understand more about what makes us stick, clean up wreckage—past and present—mend old relationships, and build new ones. Each element of this process expands our awareness. The message we carry is enriched by personal experience with the daily application of spiritual principles.

Life can get really good, often better than we’d ever imagined. We’re free from active addiction and less consumed by self-centered fear. We might drop habits from our daily routine without paying an immediate price. We stop writing, reflecting, and meditating. We call our sponsor less often. All the external evidence indicates that we’re okay. When anxiety bubbles up, we stuff it down with ice cream, hide it beneath new clothes, or flee from it on a fast motorcycle.

Attending meetings regularly—even when we’ve slacked off on other good habits—gives us the chance to correct course. We may notice that our attempts to share feel stiff or detached. There may be some satisfaction in the nostalgia of sharing about our past, but the absence of connection to our current emotional or spiritual life reveals a bit of emptiness. We recognize the dangers of living an unexamined life. We may be in trouble, but seeing it coming is a good start.

With this awareness, we can turn to the practices that feed our recovery. We take responsibility for the brewing storm in our brains or bellies and share our sense of disconnect. By attending meetings, we can take in some gentle cues about what’s important. Awareness can bring us back from the edge if we let it.

I will conduct the spiritual maintenance needed to bolster or maintain my recovery, always seeking to continue, improve, and practice with guidance from Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve.
Commitment, Entry #1 of 3

If there was anything in our lives that required a regular commitment, chances are that we only followed through if it wasn’t too hard, if it didn’t get in the way of our self-indulgence, or if we happened to feel like it (NA Step Working Guides, Step Ten, “Spiritual Principles”).

Being committed is more than just doing something over and over, or showing up when and where we said we would. Commitment involves a conscious decision. We consider what we need or want, what we think is right, and what we are willing to devote our resources to. We take the time to think about benefits and drawbacks, time and energy required, other existing obligations, and whether we are willing to be willing when our enthusiasm goes away.

Our past experiences with phrases like “going to any lengths” and “no matter what” were quite different from commitment in a healthy, spiritual practice. Even in recovery, we remain compulsive. As creatures of habit, we may find ourselves repeating behaviors even when we don’t want to. This can show up in our commitments. We keep a commitment out of habit or because no one else has stepped up. We commit impulsively and then back out just as impulsively. Or we stick to an unwanted commitment, resenting ourselves and the commitment from start to finish. In time, we learn a healthier approach.

The daily inventory of Step Ten can improve our ability to make and keep commitments. Reflecting on our lives each day teaches us a great deal about ourselves, including the types of commitments to which we are and are not well suited. Regular inventory helps us become more disciplined and self-aware, and we experience further relief from defects and shortcomings. We grow, and our commitments become deeper and more meaningful as a result.

Commitment is more than just showing up. Today, I will draw on Step Ten and honor my commitments with mind, heart, and spirit.
Commitment, Entry #2 of 3

In joining together in a commitment to the greater good of Narcotics Anonymous, our own welfare is enhanced beyond measure (It Works, Tradition Twelve).

We are people who have a fair amount of direct personal experience with single-minded devotion to a particular cause. Before we came to NA, the cause to which we were so devoted was getting and using drugs. Or, perhaps more precisely, we were committed to our efforts to change the way we felt, predict or control our feelings, or to try to stop feeling altogether.

Once we find NA and surrender to the process of recovery, we begin to shift our devotion from changing how we feel to staying clean, no matter what we feel. Commitment means sticking with something even after our enthusiasm for it wanes, or our mood changes. We commit to our own recovery, and we commit to serving NA. Often it starts simply with choosing a home group and committing to attend regularly. We take a formal commitment, such as greeter or clean-up person. Commitment involves both our feelings and actions. Because we are grateful for our recovery, we feel a sense of commitment to helping NA. That feeling shows in what we do for the greater good of the Fellowship.

For many of us, our commitment to NA is a result of what the program has given us. As we give back, we receive much more. The first gift is the chance to stay clean and find a better way to live. We make many commitments to NA—showing up regularly, being part of one another’s recovery, serving our group and service bodies. Our commitments help the Fellowship grow and thrive. The more vibrant and thriving Narcotics Anonymous is, the more we are able to flourish and grow in our own recovery.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

When I follow through on my commitments to NA, the Fellowship is better for it—and so am I. I will honor my commitment today.
Commitment, Entry #3 of 3

Continuing to take a personal inventory means that we form a habit of looking at ourselves, our actions, attitudes and relationships on a regular basis (Basic Text, Step Ten).

“I’m in big trouble when I start to think that I’ve arrived,” the speaker shared. “Lucky for all of us, I’m committed to the daily maintenance of my spiritual condition. I continue to take personal inventory, and that gives me regular reminders that I’m a work in progress.”

The Steps lower our tolerance for living an unexamined life. Once we’ve seen the benefits of regular introspection, we can’t un-know what we’ve learned about ourselves or forget the fulfillment we find in this NA way of improvement. To turn our backs on this path creates discomfort, and our patience for that sort of spiritual pain is not what it used to be—and that’s a good thing! We commit to taking stock of our part in every situation and recommit as often as necessary when we let the pace of modern life squeeze out time for contemplation.

Some would say that this commitment is the practical exam for our recovery. We need introspection to grow the way that seeds need soil, sun, and water. Understanding the strengths of our character as well as our vulnerabilities, being aware of our motives, striving to do the right thing, and being willing to make amends when we do harm—all of this is fodder for our personal inventories. As one member noted, “My five favorite character defects may never disappear entirely, but regular inventories help me to see them coming.” With that, we can humbly ask for their removal—yes, again—and in that moment, avoid acting out, harming our relationships, and feeling ashamed. Self-reflection pays off. This makes us willing to commit.

How am I still tending to my spiritual well-being? Am I still finding my part in situations that trouble me? Do I need to recommit?
Taking a look at the difference between what we are saying, what is heard, and how people are responding to us can be the beginning of real change in all our relationships.

—Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Principles, Practice, and Perspective”

It doesn’t take much cleantime to figure out that our communication skills could use some work. We find ourselves increasingly ready to connect, really connect, with other people. We’ll have to learn to build bridges, not burn them down. Being better communicators—and better humans for that matter—will mean discarding some old patterns and adopting some new ones.

Indulging in gossip is one of those old habits of communication that we may want to rethink. We may have believed that we’d bond with others by sharing information that wasn’t ours to share. Even when the news seems harmless, gossiping makes us seem untrustworthy. We learn to resist the urge to fill in every gap in any conversation with rumor, speculation, and innuendo. We get more comfortable with some breaks in our conversations and learn the value of listening more and speaking less. We adopt a new habit of asking questions and practicing empathy and open-mindedness as we hear others’ points of view.

Some of us suffer from over-thinking, not over-sharing. We second guess the wisdom of speaking up, keeping what’s on our minds to ourselves instead. We may think we’re being considerate, but withholding our experience and ideas keeps others at arms’ length. We might come off as shallow or stuck up when maybe we’re just shy. Sure, there’s risk involved in putting our ideas on the table, but that vulnerability enables us to connect.

To complicate matters, communication involves so much more than talking and listening. All of those non-verbal cues we exchange add meaning. Communication is complicated! Often the best strategy is to check that we understand correctly or have been understood.

Today, I’ll take a closer look at how I communicate with others and identify one or two areas to work on.
Communication, Entry #2 of 2

We learn to listen carefully, and to communicate in a way that we can be heard.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Being a Parent”

Addiction does a number on our ability to communicate. We can get so preoccupied with self-obsession that it’s hard to pay attention to others—unless, of course, there’s something in it for us. For many of us, the ability to hear the message for the first time—to truly experience the hope that our message offers—was a result of desperation. A member wrote, “The people who had what I wanted shared with honesty and vulnerability. They taught me how to save my life.” We needed something different very badly, and the message of hope got through. We were home.

And then comes early recovery. Minds racing. Our bodies difficult to keep still. “When I was new, I couldn’t hear what anyone was saying,” one member wrote. “The noise in my head was just way too loud. I kept coming back, and things started to get through. The slogans began to stick. The fog in my head cleared away and I shared honestly. Others responded, and I felt connected.”

Clearing out the noise in our heads helps us communicate better in all of our relationships. We learn by attending meetings, by connecting with our sponsor, by helping sponsees—and those lessons in communication improve our ability to communicate in other areas of our lives. Our growth improves our relationships with our partners, our parents, our friends, our children. Sometimes, we simply shut up and listen. One parent in recovery shared: “I couldn’t get my child to listen to me, and my sponsor reminded me it’s a two-way street. I should try listening to my child more.” When we give our attention to others, we understand them better. If words fail us, we speak through our actions.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Recovery thrives on vibrant, two-way communication. I will listen with an open heart and share in that same spirit.
Connectedness, Entry #1 of 4

We feel a real connection with others, knowing that we’re all subject to the same insecurities and failings and that we all have dreams for the future (NA Step Working Guides, Step Seven, “Preparing to Work Step Seven”).

When we attend loads of meetings and work the NA program, the bonds of kinship and connection are part of the package deal. These are some of the perks of membership.

Meeting attendance teaches us to show up, to listen, and to be helpful. It turns out that these same activities nurture our connections and give us opportunities to relate to each other. Meetings have a way of counteracting the obstacles to connection. That sense of isolation and loneliness—a constant companion when we were using—can’t withstand the antidote we hear repeated in meetings: You’re not alone. We’re glad you’re here. Welcome home. We love you.

We show up for meetings, for life, for each other. We learn to be present and to listen, really listen. We focus on each speaker as best we can, even sitting up front to help limit distractions when suggested by a knowing sponsor. Paying full and careful attention to each member’s share is a gift we give ourselves and to others. As we empathize with our shared struggles, we find connection. And as we celebrate each other’s victories as if they are our own, we find community.

By being ourselves, we seed the ground for connecting with others. When fresh forms of unmanageability or familiar defects crop up, we share about them and find empathy. When fear suggests we stifle our ambitions, we talk it out and find encouragement. Step work clears out some of the static of addiction that can interfere with connectedness and helps us see that we’re enough.

I will keep my mind and heart open to all of the ways my NA community draws me in today. I will appreciate our connectedness and invite others to join me, to join us.
Connectedness, Entry #2 of 4

Through our self-disclosure, we feel connected with humanity, perhaps for the first time in our lives (It Works, Step Five).

As new members, we come in disjointed, distracted, and disconnected. Our divisions, our better-thans and less-thans, and our walls are firmly in place. Ego and pride, self-loathing and self-pity dictate our interactions. We look outside ourselves to justify why we don’t feel connected. But soon we begin to hear and absorb other recovering addicts’ stories, and there’s a theme that’s also reflected in our stepwork: we are the ones getting in our way of connecting with others.

The process of breaking down walls and building real and enduring connections with other NA members takes more than a single admission that we need to be more open, or that similarities outweigh differences. It takes time, and it takes effort. As we listen to others self-disclose, our courage grows, and we start to share ourselves. For most of us, our walls weren’t as heavy-duty as we thought they were; they don’t take as much time to break down—or at least begin to see over—as they did to build.

When we peer over our walls or through the cracks, others begin to see us, too. The acceptance, understanding, and, often, identification that happens when we tell the truth about ourselves encourages us to open up more. Parts of our walls may remain standing; some self-protection is only natural. But we build roads now. We find people in the rooms, usually just a few, including our sponsor, whom we allow to see and connect to the entirety of who we are. Self-acceptance and hope travel along those roads.

In NA, our purpose is to extend the connectedness that we acquire to new members, who, like us, stumble into NA not yet aware that their walls aren’t long for this world. Through sharing ourselves and through service, the road toward connectedness awaits all of us.

-------------------------------------

Today, I’ll try to dismantle my walls and build roads in their place. I’ll be unafraid to let another person know me better. Through service, I’ll be an example of connectedness.
We try to minimize distractions so that we can concentrate on knowledge arising from our own spiritual connection (NA Step Working Guides, Step Eleven, “Prayer and Meditation”).

Distractions are tricky: The more we try to get rid of them, the more power they seem to gain. As an example, if we spend the entire meeting thinking about not taking our phone out, we probably hear just as little of what is shared as if we’d had the phone out the whole time. Worse yet, if we put all of our energy into thinking about other people on their phones, how well are we really listening? As with our connection to the meetings we attend, we improve conscious contact with a Higher Power when we focus on the contact, rather than the distractions.

We all have plenty of distraction techniques that give us ways to avoid being present to the current moment. Maybe we stare at a screen for long stretches to distract us from being sad or angry or bored. Maybe we get pulled out of our meditation by hearing a dog bark or a bird chirp or... air moving. No matter what the source of distraction, internal or external, real or imagined, distractions interfere with our conscious contact— with ourselves, each other, and our HP.

How do we focus on maintaining our connection? In a meeting, it’s as simple as listening closely to what is being shared. If our mind drifts to the phone in our pocket (or the one in someone else’s hand), we simply bring our attention back to the person who is sharing. In meditation, we simply listen for “whatever’s there.” If we catch our mind drifting, we simply bring our attention back to the present moment. By focusing on where we are in the moment, we can resume our connection with our Higher Power. We listen, we share, and we often find that we already have exactly what we need.

Listening and sharing well in meetings can help me better listen and share with my Higher Power. If my mind drifts away from conscious contact, I won’t dwell on the distraction—I will simply shift my attention back to the moment I am sharing with my Higher Power.
Connectedness, Entry #4 of 4

Sharing our recovery restores our faith and gratitude. Seeing that we are not alone frees us from the isolation and alienation of addiction (Guiding Principles, Tradition Eight, opening meditation.)

Seeing this quotation from Tradition Eight might leave some members wondering, “what does a Tradition about ‘special workers’ and ‘service offices’ have to do with personal recovery?” Well, special workers and service offices are just a small part of Tradition Eight. The main portion of this Tradition speaks to one of the most personal elements of recovery in NA: how we relate to one another—in a nonprofessional manner. Most of us interacted with all sorts of people who had a professional interest in helping us before coming to NA. Counselors, therapists, psychologists, police officers, probation or corrections personnel; there’s a very long list of people whose job it was to try to handle or manage us when we were so very unmanageable.

And yet we still ended up here, in NA. In our very first meeting, we were greeted by people who weren’t “on the clock.” Members shared the message of recovery with us not because it’s our job to do so, but because that’s how we stay clean and recover. Our approach is nonprofessional. We don’t have formal training, degrees, certifications; we have our experience with addiction and recovery. That’s all we need.

This process of sharing freely shows us that we are not alone. As newcomers, we discover our connection. When we stay and share the message, we are reminded of our connection over and over, each time we share with another member. Addiction thrives on isolation and alienation, and no amount of cleantime will render us immune to the tendency to disconnect. Connecting is an active process, and we do it by sharing freely with other addicts.

Sharing in recovery is the antidote to alienation and isolation. By connecting the NA way, I will keep gratitude and faith alive.
Courage, Entry #1 of 3

There are times when we must find the courage to be the lone voice on an issue or stand up for principle against a strong majority (Guiding Principles, Tradition Two, opening essay).

Tradition Two reassures us that, as individual members, we don’t need to have all the answers. But sometimes, we do have an answer to an issue that comes up in our group, and we’re sure it’s the right one. It airtightly adheres to our primary purpose of carrying the message. It’s well-thought-out. It’s aligned with our Traditions. It’s absolutely the right answer...though no one else seems to view the issue the way we do. The group’s conscience seems to be veering away from logic, principles, and the spirit of NA. So, do we go with the flow or make waves?

When we were using, many of us lived the old standby “go along to get along.” Even though we may not have agreed with what was being said or done by those around us, we lacked the courage to stand up for ourselves, our beliefs, or other people. Working a program helps to reveal what our convictions are and how they’re aligned with NA’s. In a group situation where going with the flow might be the easier choice, we, first of all, check our motives honestly to make sure we’re driven by our common welfare and not our ego. We ask our Higher Power to help us find our voice, shaky as it might be in the face of a strong majority. Courage is the strength to stand up for what we believe in.

Courage helps us beat back self-doubt and fears of disappointing or angering others. It keeps us engaged, even open-minded, when our “right” answer is, in the end, sidelined by the majority. Humility can steady us, no matter which way it goes. And, once we find the courage, we can continue to be emboldened to keep using our voice and standing up for principles, while inviting in a Higher Power to influence our group decisions and staying out of the result.

I ask for the strength to practice courage to change the things I can. I know what I believe in and will have the courage to stand up for it—and the willingness and humility to accept the outcome.
Courage, Entry #2 of 3

We find the courage to follow our heart, to listen to the voice within, to create, to commit, to explore, and to live (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Creative Action of the Spirit”).

It takes courage to give this NA way of life a real try. Whether it’s for the first or the fourteenth time, walking through the doors to our first meeting—or first meeting back—takes real determination. And that’s just the beginning. Once we stop using, and our obsession fades, the challenges of living life on life’s terms will call on us to be courageous again and again.

Lucky for us, the NA way comes with access to some valuable, gumption-sustaining resources. We forge lasting friendships, learn from our fellow travelers, and find in them enough courage to transcend the challenges of each day. NA literature can be a source of strength and courage, too. We each find our own understanding between the lines and in the tough questions we ask ourselves. As we contemplate and apply the collective wisdom found in NA literature, we are emboldened to be more fully ourselves, drawing strength from our Higher Power.

With a firm foundation in recovery, we can move through the world with courage and confidence, though sometimes we decline opportunities to do so. “My ‘fear goggles’ kept my focus on the potential for failure or rejection. I was afraid to start or end relationships, to express my feelings, to come out. I was unwilling to be fully myself and paid a price for my lack of courage. In my effort to avoid pain, I’d also sidestepped chances to find real joy.” That’s no way to live.

The example of others and our faith in a Higher Power inspires us to live courageously, despite a lack of certainty. Life is a risky business, and things won’t always work out in our favor. “I’m not God’s little muffin,” as one addict put it. “Things don’t always go as planned. Still, I walk with courage, knowing that you folks will pick me up if I stumble.” We dare to dream—to try and fail and try again.

If I don’t risk anything, I risk everything. I will muster the courage necessary to take a leap of faith today, big or small.
It takes courage and humility to open new doors and to close old ones (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Courage”).

If we imagine life to be like a hallway full of open doors, each leading down new paths of opportunity, then active addiction basically consists of walking down the hallway, kicking doors closed. Getting clean in NA and working the program allows us to explore new opportunities or revisit old possibilities we had closed off to ourselves in our addiction. Courage and humility make it possible.

The freedom to choose our own path can be scary. After all, if we make a choice for ourselves, we don’t get to blame others if we’re unhappy with the results! Each time we choose a new door to walk through—or a door to close behind us—we build courage to keep doing so. Actively making choices helps us to see that our higher power will be present in the process, even when the initial results aren’t what we wanted. Perhaps we walk away from a relationship, home group, or job that we found unfulfilling, and then we find ourselves feeling lonely or lost afterward. We find a new partner, new group, new job—or maybe we go back to what we’d left—and our feelings change again. It’s all temporary, and we always have more chances and choices coming our way.

Some of us change relationships, jobs, and home groups the way others change socks and undies, but if we don’t get comfortable with ourselves, none of these external factors can keep us comfortable for long. Courage helps us walk through doors. Humility will help us embrace—or endure—what we find on the other side. Humility means knowing ourselves, faults and all. To be happy with our choices, we need to be honest with ourselves about who we are and what we need and want. The NA program helps us find the courage to make our own choices and the humility we need to live with the choices we make.

The Steps help me find the courage and humility I need to choose my own path. I will put my freedom to good use by living the Steps.
Discipline is not a practice that comes naturally to most addicts, and the need to say “no” to ourselves can be quite a challenge (Guiding Principles, Tradition Seven, “For Members”).

The freedom we find when we stop using drugs is incredible. We regain so much in terms of the time, energy, and other resources that were previously devoted to sustaining our addiction. Saying “no” to our disease frees up to say “yes” to things we’d been missing out on. As we revel in our newfound ability to say “yes” to ourselves, some of us find ourselves looking for relief from other behaviors. “Getting clean saved my life, but I gained so much weight my first year clean that I got stretch marks!” Another member shared, “The money I’d been spending on drugs was diverted to shopping. Retail therapy became my new self-care routine—but I was still unhappy.”

Discipline can sometimes feel like a punishment—like we’re denying ourselves things we really enjoy. If we’re free, why do we have to say “no” to ourselves? Our freedom has its limits, as do our resources. Discipline calls on us to shift our thinking from what we are denying ourselves—an extra piece of cake, or an online shopping purchase we don’t need—to what we are gaining when we use our resources wisely, like greater peace of mind and financial security.

Discipline is the willingness to say “no” to things that feel good in the moment but cost us later. We do so as a Fellowship when we say “no” to money from outside NA—and “yes” to our ability to make our own choices as a Fellowship, remaining free from the influence of outside entities. In our personal recovery, we say “no” to momentary impulses for the sake of our longer-term peace of mind. Would we rather have a little bit of fleeting comfort right now, or a deeper, lasting sense of comfort and security over time? The choice is ours.

I can’t say “yes” to everything—I will reserve my “yes” for what’s truly important to me today.
Discipline, Entry #2 of 3

Discipline is commitment in action, a demonstration of our willingness (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Commitment”).

Because of its past association with punishment, rigidity, or plain old drudgery, discipline is one of those recovery principles that we have to reimagine when we get clean. And when we realign discipline with our newfound values of commitment and willingness—and begin to practice our program of recovery—we experience positive results. Our lives change.

Discipline’s relationship with the principle of commitment definitely merits discussion. Our commitment to NA and spiritual growth is crucial to the life we want, but it’s more internal. It’s in our hearts. We can be committed or hold a commitment, but are we disciplined about that commitment? As one member observed, “We say, ‘It works when you work it.’ Not ‘it works when you think, believe, or feel it.’”

Discipline gives us the willingness to transform our commitment into action. Sometimes the commitment we’re acting on is more on the surface, say, just following sponsor direction without knowing why. Other times, it’s deeper, more heartfelt. In either case, our commitment is measured by our willingness to act. When we’re active in our commitment to the Fellowship—when we are disciplined—our disease of addiction is rendered powerless.

Though we may strive to view discipline in a positive light, it’s not always easy. It takes practice. It is practice. Discipline is the drive to move forward regardless of our mood. We say yes to sponsorship. We attend our home group and fulfill our commitments, because we said we would. Discipline leads us back to the message again and again.

I’m willing to transform my commitment to action. Discipline takes practice, and practice starts now.
Discipline, Entry #3 of 3

What matters most are the actions we take. Consistent application of the tools of recovery changes us (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Awakenings”).

“My parents sent me to military school when I was a kid, in hopes of drilling some discipline into me,” a member shared. “They said it would build character. It built rebellion instead. It would be a long time before I’d see discipline and character in a positive light. But here I am, grateful that my rebellion landed me here. NA gave me what military school could not. You people showed me the value of a different kind of discipline, a spiritual discipline, and through it, I’ve become a person of good character. It’s all that matters.”

Many of us have negative associations with the word “discipline.” It conjures up memories of the principal’s office or worse. We understand discipline to mean punishment—and it does!—but there’s another definition that’s a better fit for our lives in recovery.

As a spiritual principle, discipline refers both to the good habits that support our recovery and the self-control that develops as that work pays off. When we’re disciplined about our spiritual maintenance, we’re less distracted by our base desires and more apt to listen to the quiet, steady assurances of our conscience or higher self. As we improve our conscious contact, we find it easier to curb our impulses and to strengthen our character. As one member wrote, “My daily practices give me command of my actions and emotions. I can practice restraint when it’s called for because I’m no longer governed by impulse.”

My character is defined by my choices; who I am is what I do. Are my current routines providing adequate spiritual maintenance? How might I strengthen my character by being more disciplined?
Flexibility, Entry #1 of 3

The open-mindedness we practice in our recovery gives us the ability to be flexible when things change in ways we hadn’t expected (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Getting Out of Our Own Way”).

Trees are commonly associated with qualities like strength and resilience, the types of qualities that can help us to endure the difficulties of getting and staying clean. Living life on life’s terms involves experiencing all sorts of weather patterns—plenty of sunshine and warmth, followed by patches of cold, rain, storms, and snow. Some of us work so hard to hold everything in our lives all together, only to find ourselves having a complete breakdown when someone takes our seat at the meeting. If we take a lesson from trees, we’ll see that the more rigid and inflexible we are, the more easily we can be shattered.

Palm trees might not strike us as especially strong. They are often associated with beaches and easy breezes—and do they even look all that sturdy [compared to, say, an oak]? However, those skinny-seeming palms still lay down firm root structures, and when a powerful storm comes, they are able to lean with the wind. The part of the tree that is visible above the surface is flexible and resilient, as it is secured by strong, deep roots below.

Our lives will become tumultuous from time to time. We have disagreements with coworkers or partners. People in public annoy us. We have to sit in a different seat at our home group. We can become rigid and defiant, refusing to bend. Or we can move toward open-mindedness, willing to give a little here and there as needed, so we don’t snap when the pressure is on. When our roots are firmly secured in recovery, we tend to find the flexibility we need.

-------------------------------

I cannot control the weather, but I can practice flexibility. I will plant myself firmly in the NA program, knowing that I can bounce back from any feelings that may come to pass.
Flexibility, Entry #2 of 3

The flexibility that relationships require comes more easily to us when we are practicing principles in our lives (Living Clean, Chapter 5, “The Courage to Trust”).

One of the many wonderful lessons we learn by working the NA program is that our relationships can be as healthy as the people in them. For many of us, this shows up first in our earliest NA relationships—with a home group and a sponsor. From our first meeting, we are often very pleasantly surprised by how open-minded and accepting the people in NA are, no matter how much of an edge we might have when we get here.

Our relationships with other members continually teach us how to live by spiritual principles. We don’t do it perfectly—but by being real with each other, we help each other grow. Working with a sponsor helps us learn to trust and to ask for what we need. Serving in a home group and at other levels of service teaches us lessons like how to compromise, speak up for ourselves, respect boundaries.

Experiencing the principles firsthand like this in our NA relationships is a perfect complement to our work in the Steps. Steps One through Four help us get to know ourselves—and our disease—a little better. Steps Five through Seven give us more practice with relating to our sponsor and a Higher Power. In Steps Eight through Twelve, we strive to repair relationships with others and develop a practice for maintaining those relationships.

Working the Steps and practicing principles helps us see that letting go of the illusion of control improves our lives tremendously. Many of us once lived by a policy of “my way or the highway.” By practicing the principles in our program, we gain the flexibility to be able to say, “Your way? Sure. Let’s try it out.”

-----------------------------------------------

Relating well with others involves some give and take. I will draw on my NA experience to practice flexibility in all of my relationships.
Just when we think we know all that recovery has to offer, more is revealed—if we are willing to accept the gift (Living Clean, Chapter Seven, “Awakenings”).

Recovery allows us to take life by the reins. With a clear head and a clean conscience, we’re able to deal with situations that would have mystified us in our previous lives. With time and effort spent on our recovery, we find the balance—often repeatedly—between confidence and humility, patience and action, faith and persistence. Flexibility sits at the intersection of all of these principles, allowing us to adapt and be resilient as recovery reveals its gifts.

When life takes an unexpected turn, sometimes there’s magic in what we discover; other times, disappointment. In either case, practicing flexibility helps us to go with the flow. We keep breathing, regardless of the circumstances. A difficult living situation, an unhappy marriage, or a dead-end job may call on us to make decisions and take action. Our problems don’t solve themselves just because we’re clean. The work we put into our recovery helps us to understand our part in every situation. With that, we figure out what we can accept, what we should change, and when it’s time to walk away. We take the reins of our lives, but we leave enough slack for the right pace and direction to reveal itself.

With faith and flexibility as our guideposts, new challenges seem more like serendipity and less like a curse. “As we say in my spiritual tradition: ‘We plan, God laughs,’” one member shared. “When something gets in the way of my plans, I take it as divine intervention prompting me to explore other options.” We often emerge from our most painful times with gifts we could not have imagined. Recovery helps us let go of some of our fixed ideas and look for the horse when all we see is manure.

I can learn new things and discover new gifts at any phase of life in recovery. I will loosen the reins today and be flexible enough to accept the gifts that come my way.
Freedom, Entry #1 of 5

The ability to grow spiritually enables us to find freedom, even within the walls of a cell. Our greatest freedom is not outside ourselves but within (Guiding Principles, Tradition Five, opening essay).

Many addicts first hear our message of hope while incarcerated, often thanks to the hard work of our H&I trusted servants. One member shared, “When I got out, I heard someone share about a ‘self-made prison,’ and I was mad at first. They didn’t know what it was like to be on the inside. But the more I came to meetings and heard addicts share about the disease, I realized that we had more in common than I thought. Just being out didn’t mean I was free... yet.”

Freedom comes in many forms. The ability to come and go freely as we wish, a right denied when or if we are incarcerated, is just one of those forms. We can experience mental, emotional, and spiritual freedom wherever we go—or wherever we stay. One member wrote, “I thought freedom meant doing whatever I wanted whenever I wanted, as long as I stayed clean. But I felt trapped by my impulses. I couldn’t say no to myself anymore, even when my behavior had consequences. When I told my sponsor I wanted to stop ____ but didn’t know how, they told me to sit with the impulse and see if I could learn something from it. I sat with it, and didn’t act on it, and I learned that I could survive the feeling. The feeling passed, and I felt light. I felt free.”

The most obvious freedom we gain in recovery is physical—we gain freedom from our compulsive use of drugs. That physical freedom, that changed behavior, has a corresponding inner component—the peace of mind that comes with no longer being trapped in obsession and self-centeredness. We are free to think of something other than where our next fix is coming from. We are free to feel something other than despair. We are free.

Wherever I am, whatever is going on around me, I will seek inner freedom by letting thoughts and feelings come and go without disturbing my peace, without throwing me off balance.
Gradually, we come to experience freedom from some of our deepest wounds. As we begin to clear up some of the confusion and contradiction in our lives, we can move forward with less of the baggage we brought in with us (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Sex”).

Freedom for any recovering addict begins with not using. But as the fog lifts, our emotional turmoil becomes more apparent. To stay clean, we need a different approach to deal with our underlying issues. We understand that we can be free from active addiction—but can we be free from our deepest wounds?

We’d love that answer to be a resounding “absolutely!”—and for some, it will be. But for many of us who’ve suffered traumas and abuse, the more realistic answer is: We can heal. We can move forward. We can gain more freedom than we have today. Recovery from addiction is a process, and so is letting go of “baggage,” especially the burdens we never asked for and, no doubt, the ones we inflicted on others.

That process can be fierce, terrifying, sometimes beautiful, often unexpected. We gain freedom from working Steps and sharing about our past with each other. We get relief through meditation and prayer, perhaps through outside help, through the passage of time and patience with ourselves. We try not to avoid or disconnect from painful memories. Instead, we deal with our baggage as best we can and realize that some of what we’ve been carrying isn’t ours. We come to some acceptance and healing, finding forgiveness for ourselves for not letting go. And, equally as important, we help others to do the same.

While some wounds may never fully heal, they don’t overwhelm us today. They don’t run our lives—or our relationships with others, with our bodies, and with the world. We can learn how to relate to others and respond to their needs without sacrificing our own. We can be vulnerable, and explore physical and emotional intimacy. We can find freedom, lose it a little, and regain it by digging in again.

My pain doesn’t define me, and I can use it to help someone else to heal. I will find both refuge and freedom in the Steps and in my fellow addict.
Freedom, Entry #3 of 5

We are free to participate, create, care and share, surprise ourselves, take risks, be vulnerable, and stand on our own two feet (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Keys to Freedom”).

When we stop using, we eliminate the most obvious symptom of the disease and the source of many of our problems. Abstinence alone, however, is seldom enough to straighten out our thinking. Even after the drugs are gone, our outlook, priorities, and personalities remain distorted. If we want to be free from all aspects of the disease, it will take some work.

“My self-centeredness had me tied me up in knots,” one member recalled. “I was angry and judgmental, greedy for attention and material things, dishonest with others and myself. Just not using was just not enough. It took time and change for me to get free from my self-imposed prison.”

We get relief along the way and glimpse what it’s like to be unburdened from self-centered fear. Stepwork loosens the grip that worry and shame once had on us, freeing us to live in today. We find freedom in having friends we can count on and confide in, in belly laughs that aren’t chemically induced, in the depth of our empathy for others’ struggles. We stay aware of our spiritual condition, not settling for freedom’s cheap substitute: irresponsibility. Humility liberates us to be a little more forgiving of others and ourselves, recognizing that we’re all works-in-progress. We’re grateful for our new capacity to stay in the present and for the respite we get from the disease when we tend to our spiritual wellness. We face life’s many choices knowing that, no matter what, we’ll be okay.

Freedom is a state of mind, not a state of being. The NA program helps us discover and discard limiting beliefs and patterns that keep us stuck, regardless of our living conditions. “Each day offers a fresh start and another opportunity to cast off my mental, emotional, and spiritual shackles,” wrote one member from the confines of a prison. “If I want to fly, I have to let go of the baggage that’s weighing me down.” That’s apt advice for all of us.

----------------------------------

I will release something that’s kept me bound. I’ll let go of it daily if that’s what it takes to live free.
Freedom, Entry #4 of 5

Letting go of the idea that we have to understand why things happen or how it all works frees us to have a spiritual experience without wondering if we’re doing it right (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to a Higher Power”).

Addicts are perceptive people, or so we like to think. When we were using, we could go somewhere we’d never been and easily find either a way to get drugs or someone to use with. Our intuitions and insights often serve us well in recovery, especially as the Steps help us to improve our ability to discern between the voice of self-will and that of conscience. Learning the difference can be a challenge since the disease talks to us in our own voice. Freedom from our disease depends on it. With practice and the help of other recovering addicts, we improve our connection to our intuition and our conscience. We gain the freedom to make better choices, and our lives improve.

Trusting in the process—and in our own conscience—can be scary. How can putting down the drugs make the obsession go away? How can we be sure that our sponsor won’t share our inventory with everyone? What happens if we let go of that defect that has been protecting us? We just don’t like not knowing.

Step Two in our Basic Text tells us, “We can use this Power long before we understand it,” and one member shared, “I’ve been staying clean on a Higher Power that I don’t understand for over 25 years, and I’m starting to get okay with never knowing. It still works!”

No matter how perceptive we are, our perception is limited. There are wavelengths of light not visible to the human eye, pitches of sound not perceptible to the human ear. We cannot know the totality of things. When we get okay with not knowing, we can shift our focus to what we do feel, sense, and perceive in the present. We are free to be right here, right now.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

It’s okay if I don’t know. I will enjoy the freedom to just be.
Freedom, Entry #5 of 5

We are free to change our minds, to change our perspective, and to change our lives. Freedom means that we are no longer living by default (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Awakening to Our Spirituality”).

In active addiction we lived in default mode: neglecting responsibilities and disregarding the consequences of our action or inaction. We were utterly vulnerable to our defects, self-destructive, harmful to others. A member offered this metaphor: “I was on an amusement park ride that started off fun. But then I couldn’t get off of it, even though it made me sick.” Default living made us miserable, yet even the slightest suggestion that we could change would elicit a defensive, “That’s just how I am!” Trapped is how we were. And sometimes we still are today through our willful denial, our rigidity, by fearing and avoiding change.

Outside of ourselves, change is inevitable, and recovery helps us deal with this fact. Within ourselves, change is a net-positive, a dynamic force exercised through the freedom of choice we now have. “Freedom isn’t just a state of being,” the member continued. “We practice it by choosing to change. We’re no longer trapped on a nauseating ride. We leave the active addiction amusement park behind. Life in recovery is a whole different park!”

We achieve some freedom in NA when we realize our true selves. Maybe it’s less that we change and more that we become who we truly are. We become not so attached to our story; we can write a new one. We can reexamine aspects of ourselves that we never thought to question—our religion, political leanings, musical tastes, even the food we eat. We get to be curious. We’re free to not be so cool.

Being clean allows us to challenge our belief systems and behavior patterns. We can act less impulsively; a breath provides a moment to respond with love, not fear. At our best, we are flexible, evolving, able to be influenced by others. There’s freedom in open-mindedness. We learn how to say no and to say yes. Though there will be times when we default back to default mode, we don’t have to linger there. We’ve got a life to live.

I will live this day consciously and with purpose. In choosing to change, I’m choosing to be myself. I’m choosing freedom.
Hospitality, Entry #1 of 2

Feeling welcome, and welcoming others to our new way of life, helps us see the world as a less hostile place (Guiding Principles, Tradition Three, “Spiritual Principles”).

“I don’t remember many details about my first NA meetings, but I can tell you this: I left every one of them feeling a little better, a little more hopeful, and a little more convinced that you folks had found a way out, one that could work for me, too,” a member shared. “Meetings still have that effect on me.” And maybe that’s the point of hospitality as a spiritual principle and practice in NA. It’s not the individual things that we do or say that are most memorable, it’s all of those things taken together and the way we make each other feel. All of us can contribute to a group’s hospitality and all of us reap the benefits.

Hospitality gives our various strengths a chance to shine. There are great huggers among us and others who remember the names of new members. Still, others offer a sincere welcome to all of us every week, such as “I’m so glad y’all made it another week ‘cause I need each and every one of you.” We might notice how the member charged with setting out literature always recruits someone to help them. Could they do this task alone? Sure. But our primary purpose says nothing about tidy stacks of pamphlets. We carry the message by being more inclusive. We help others feel a part of and affirm the same for ourselves. When we tell newcomers “welcome home,” we’re reminded that we’re home, too.

Hospitality is made up of these words and actions—and so many more. The atmosphere of recovery that emerges is greater than the sum of its parts. We embrace the worth and dignity of each of our fellow addicts and of ourselves. Through our hospitable actions, we contribute to a world in which we are all treated with equality and compassion.

---------------------------------

I will contribute to the collective efforts that make up NA hospitality and consider how my words and actions can bring some of the same warmth and comradery to my life outside of NA.
Hospitality, Entry #2 of 2

Simply making eye contact or offering a hug to a newcomer can make all the difference to them—and to us (Guiding Principles, Tradition Three, “Spiritual Principles”).

The feeling of hospitality and welcome most of us found in the first NA meeting we attended was not just unexpected, but probably unfamiliar, too. So many of us had become all too familiar with being unwelcome nuisances to family, friends, and people in general. “People I used with stopped wanting me around even when I was willing to share my drugs,” one member shared. “Talk about feeling like an outcast!”

That special welcome we felt as newcomers in NA inspires many of us to go out of our way to help other newcomers feel welcome. “When I was in early recovery, I asked my sponsor how to be a home group member,” one addict wrote. “My sponsor told me I could start by making sure that no one new to the meeting ever leaves without being welcomed.”

The act of welcoming others has a big impact on us, too. For people prone to self-centeredness, it’s a great relief to put our own wants, needs, and feelings on the back burner long enough to concern ourselves with how others feel. Our sense of attention and concern expands, allowing us to notice who is around and what they might be feeling. As many of us have heard, we build self-esteem by doing esteemable things. We don’t even need to do much to help anxious, scared, or alienated addicts begin to feel calm, safe, and welcome in NA—and doing so rewards us in ways we cannot measure.

My feeling of connection and belonging in NA increases by leaps and bounds when I welcome others. I will go out of my way to make someone feel welcome today.
Humor, Entry #1 of 2

The way we share...finding humor in some of the darkest, most frightening things that have happened to us—is not always available outside the rooms (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to the World Around Us”).

In NA, we often get to know each other from the inside out. “I knew the biggest hopes and fears of some of the members of my homegroup before I knew their last names or what kind of jobs they had,” one member shared. We may never know the inner life of non-addicts the way we know each other in NA—and it’s a big part of why we’re able to laugh with (sometimes at) each other in NA.

Humor often comes in the form of a surprising or unexpected gap between expectation and reality. In society, there are lots of expectations about how people ought to act around one another—expectations that we addicts disregard completely. Sometimes that’s the joke: “normal” people act one way; we addicts act very differently. We hear others share about bizarre ideas and actions, we identify and relate, and we’re relieved that we’re not alone.

Other times, the difference in the expectation and reality is what we expected when we were using—how we saw our lives versus how our lives were actually going. “I thought my life was like something out of a big-shot gangster movie, money and drugs and lots of drama. In reality, it was more like a depressing ad for keeping your kids off drugs.”

Humor helps us heal as we come to terms with the reality of our lives. We see the outrageous gap between our behaviors and what “polite” society expects. (Of course there are gaps—we’re square pegs in round holes!) Or we notice the laughable distance between our lives and our fantasies. We share our inner life in a way we can’t anywhere else, and our fellow members laugh at us (and with us). We stop taking ourselves so seriously, laugh at our flaws, and start to grow.

By sharing my insides with other addicts, I can learn to laugh at the insanity of addiction—and let go of it, little by little.
Humor, Entry #2 of 2

One of the gifts of recovery is regaining our sense of humor (Living Clean, Chapter Seven, “The Lifelong Practice of Surrender”).

When we were using, everything was life-or-death serious—that lifestyle of getting, using, and finding ways and means to get more! Some of us felt like we hadn’t laughed for years when we first got to NA. Others of us experienced plenty of laughter out there—directed right at us. “You’re so thin-skinned,” our mates would mock us. “Get a sense of humor.”

While actual events of our using history stay the same, our relationship to them evolves as we grow in recovery. We see fellow NA members finding humor in their pasts, and we begin to lighten up about the darkness in ours. Our stepwork reveals a long list of defects that still affect us today. And being able (finally) to laugh at ourselves as we act out on that shortcoming—yet again!—is a strategy that can help us to not beat ourselves up and to be okay with where we are right now. Humor becomes a way we identify, connect, and express empathy and forgiveness, for others as well as ourselves. Humor is a practice of surrender.

For many of us, humor can also be a hazard. It’s a strategy we may use to escape our feelings or avoid being real in our relationships. We sometimes use it to put people down, including ourselves. Self-deprecating humor has a place, but self-ridicule breeds self-doubt. Some of us used humor to survive out there, but in recovery we aren’t living in that life-or-death cycle. As we become more aware of these issues through working our program and receiving input from our sponsor and others we trust, our relationship to humor may shift. Ideally, the sense of humor we gain in recovery becomes less self-pitying, protective, or aggressive than the one we came in with. And we can finally breathe because we don’t take ourselves quite as seriously as we used to.

I will try to surrender to levity today. I can laugh at myself without derision, and do the same for my fellow addict, with love, sensitivity, and wit, if I have a bit of that.
Inclusiveness, Entry #1 of 4

Our diversity strengthens and affirms the reality of our simple message. Across all of our differences, the same simple program works (Guiding Principles, Tradition Five, “Word by Word”).

NA’s simple message is that any addict can stop using, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live. Any addict. We’ve witnessed the proof that our program works, for ourselves and addicts from all walks of life, those with obvious similarities and who are different from us. Tradition Five states that a group’s primary purpose is to carry NA’s message to the still-suffering addict, which on any given day could be a newcomer or a more experienced member.

While most of us will acknowledge the above as true, it’s not a given. Inclusiveness, like all the spiritual principles, requires work. It takes practice and a degree of self-awareness. “Our diversity is our strength” is just a slogan unless we take steps to actively include each other, welcome and remember each other, share and listen to each other. All of us walk into NA feeling different and separate, not a part of. Our job as members is to try to bridge that gap.

While it’s true that we all have the same disease, we aren’t the same people. When we look—and feel—different from everyone else in the room, that can challenge us. One longtime member described his experience like this: “I walked into a meeting and nobody looked like me. I asked, ‘Where are my people?’ and a member responded, ‘Oh, they’re on the way. You have to stay, so you’ll be here when they come.’ That made me feel included and that I had a purpose.”

It will do us well to remember that we are used to many factors defining us and our worth. Frankly, some of us have privileges that others don’t. While we like to say that “that stuff doesn’t matter here,” we need to keep actively demonstrating that to newcomers. We’re all accountable to the Fifth Tradition. We must never take it for granted. One member wrote: “We all feel different; that is the disease. We all belong together; that is recovery.”

How am I putting “our diversity is our strength” into action? Today, I’ll look for an opportunity to show another member that they belong.
Inclusiveness, Entry #2 of 4

We start to look more carefully at what makes a meeting feel safe and welcoming (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Disability”).

We know the struggles of addiction first hand, the danger and degradation. We remember what it was like to walk into our first meeting—to feel that initial spark of hope. We pray for the addict who still suffers, and we feel for them because we’ve been there. Our empathy helps us see our meetings, meeting places, and all of the social interactions surrounding them through others’ eyes.

We genuinely want every addict seeking recovery to feel safe and welcome when they walk through the doors. When we’re on our spiritual A-game, empathy guides our choices and ensures that we are inclusive. It’s easy to get lazy, however. We neglect the proper consideration of others’ needs. We may even justify our complacency and squash new ideas with the classic: “This is the way that we’ve always done it.”

Experience has a way of nudging out such smugness. When a home group member comes to need a wheelchair, it highlights the necessity of an accessible meeting place. When a hard of hearing member explains the importance of visual cues in communication, we follow their lead. We change the room set up with attention to lighting, acoustics, and sightlines. When new members come from outside of the dominant culture, we go out of our way to welcome them. If diversity challenges us personally, perhaps we need to examine our reservations about the NA message. We recommit to the proposal that any addict can find recovery in NA. Empathy, generosity, and inclusiveness guides us toward a new perspective on helping addicts find a safe and welcoming place to surrender.

As the First Tradition suggests, we put our common welfare first. We plan for needs that haven’t yet surfaced. We remove barriers to participation—physical, perceptual, or cultural—and do what’s in our power to make NA truly available to us all.

I will look at my home group with fresh eyes and imagine how someone different from me might experience it. What can I do to make first-time attendees feel safer and more welcome?
Inclusiveness, Entry #3 of 4

When we value one another’s experience and work to make service fun, interesting, and inclusive, we find that there really is a place at the table for all of us (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Principles, Practice, and Perspective”).

A lot of us come into the rooms lacking social skills and are too intimidated to join in a group activity. Commitments are filled so we don’t see a role for us. Or many are open and still we don’t fit, or so we think. A member we don’t know at all is sure we can handle the job of greeting people when they arrive at the meeting and helping to find seats for latecomers. But why would we want to get involved? Then people might expect us to show up and stay...Oh, that’s how it works. That’s how they get you.

And it does work. When many of us start on a path of service in NA, we’re recruited by a member who’s skilled at being inclusive. Maybe we’re attracted by their enthusiasm for service, even a little intrigued by what makes NA tick outside of the meeting. Some of the members doing service seem to be really enjoying themselves. Maybe it’s not as tedious or serious as it sounds. They ask us to help with a particular task, note our skill in this arena, and suggest we join a committee. In that committee, they’re inclusive, asking us, for instance, if we think conducting business this way or that will help to carry the message well. We participate as best we can, and soon the service “they” becomes “we.” A place at the table has been set, and we’re sitting at it.

We need each other’s experience with the Steps to recover, and we need each other’s diversity of ideas, perspectives, skills, and experience for our groups and activities to function and function well. When we have greater representation of voices, we learn more. We find value in enhancing our understanding and empathy for people new to our group or service body. We end up doing things we’ve never done before. In service, we join forces to create something for others, sharing our journey, sharing space, and sharing tasks.

Including others helps us to belong even more.

---

How am I being inclusive of others’ perspectives in my service work? What can I do today to set a place at the table for another member?
Inclusiveness, Entry #4 of 4

All addicted persons are welcome and equal in obtaining the relief that they are seeking from their addiction; every addict can recover in this program on an equal basis (Basic Text, Chapter 6, Tradition Three).

Many of us who have been around NA for a little while have no doubt that the NA program is for any addict. Our literature and our Traditions are clear that any addict with a desire to stop using should be able to find a place in our fellowship. Making that ideal into a reality requires more than telling newcomers to “focus on the similarities, rather than the differences”—it requires us to actively make space in our meetings for any addict, “regardless of…”

“I was the only person who looked like me in the rooms where I got clean. People told me to focus on the similarities, and all I could think was, ‘that’s pretty easy for all of you—everyone looks like you!’ Then I heard someone say, ‘one day you’ll hear someone who is nothing like you share your story,’ and it clicked. I needed to hear that it’s okay that we’re not all the same—our stories are similar even when we’re not. I don’t have to ignore real parts of who I am to belong here.”

Making space for any addict requires taking an honest look at ourselves and our communities. Society outside of our meetings has all sorts of social strata. Differences of language, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, financial status can present challenges—and some might prefer that distinctions like these melted away at the door to our meeting. But they’re often all wrapped up in who we are as people, and our distinctions are assets to NA, not problems to be solved. We can tell newcomers that our differences don’t matter, but if our meetings are largely made up of people from similar backgrounds, it can look like NA is no more inclusive than the rest of society. When we share openly about our differences and encourage others to do so, too, our distinctions enrich the NA fellowship. Being who we are helps newcomers identify and relate—and stay.

Focusing on the similarities does not mean I need to ignore the differences. I will share honestly about who I am, differences and all—and honor the experiences of addicts who are not like me.
Integrity, Entry #1 of 3

Integrity is the state of being fully integrated: Our actions, our thinking, our feelings, our ideals, and our values all match up (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Spirituality is Practical”).

Most of us think of having integrity as being honest and reliable, as keeping our word. While that’s certainly true, integrity has a deeper and more nuanced meaning we don’t always consider: being whole, being wholly ourselves, being our whole selves at any given moment, no matter whose presence we’re in.

As active addicts, we often demonstrated a lack of integrity. We weren’t dependable, trustworthy, or responsible, and we weren’t whole. We omitted parts of the truth and parts of ourselves. “I was like a three-legged table,” a member joked. “Yeah, I could stand, but don’t try leaning on me.”

We compartmentalized our existence: we behaved in certain ways with some but not with others, and we led double—sometimes multiple—lives. These ways of being can follow us into recovery. How we act and appear on the outside doesn’t always match who we really are—or strive to be—on the inside.

A member put it like this: “Today, I know I’m out of alignment with my values when my emotions reflect my defects—like fear and judgment—and I act on them. Instead, I try to show up as honestly and entirely ‘me’ as possible. That includes the ‘ideal me’ I want to be in relationships and interactions.”

It’s unlikely that our feelings will “match up” with our ideals and values all the time. For instance, we can still maintain integrity when we don’t like somebody and would prefer to punch their lights out—yet we treat them with kindness and respect. That friction is productive; it’s an action of love that doesn’t necessarily feel loving. Other times, our feelings are less reactive; they match our conscience rather than our defects. In those cases, it may be necessary and right to address someone’s behavior. Integrity guides our decisions and how we express ourselves in those moments. It allows us to risk others’ disappointment and anger. That’s being true to ourselves. That’s honesty and reliability. That’s love.

I’ll practice integrity by reliably being all that I am, ensuring that my actions reflect what’s inside me. I’ll keep on this path of distinguishing my conscience from my reactions—and, of course, I’ll show up when I say I will.
Integrity, Entry #2 of 3

Everyone makes mistakes; promptly admitting when we are wrong shows integrity and responsibility for our actions (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Work”).

Perception is a funny thing. Self-centeredness shapes the way we experience our lives, magnifying our own wants, and minimizing our responsibility and accountability. It can be like walking through a carnival funhouse filled with distorted mirrors or echo chambers—our senses deceive us. We have a hard time perceiving reality for what it is, especially when it comes to responsibility for our lives and our actions. Checking our perspective with other addicts helps.

Working the program—especially the daily inventory of Step Ten—helps us make our way through the funhouse of personal responsibility. As we come to terms with our powerlessness and unmanageability, we blame others less for the wreckage of our past. We begin taking personal responsibility. As we take inventory and ask for help letting go of our defects and shortcomings, we lose the need to make excuses for current actions and choices. We take responsibility for making past wrongs right, and we make a practice of checking our perceptions regularly. We shift our senses away from the carnival distortions and get a better perspective on ourselves and our lives. The Steps help us get better and better at being the type of people we can be proud of being.

When we make a wrong turn on our way through the funhouse and find a dead end, it doesn’t do us much good to pretend we’re not lost. We ask for direction, and we backtrack if we have to. We make mistakes because we are human; we correct them because we have integrity.

My disease distorts my view of myself and the world around me. I will use regular inventory to adjust my skewed perceptions so that I can find my way out of the madhouse of addiction.
Integrity, Entry #3 of 3

Integrity is the consistent application of spiritual principles, no matter what the circumstances (It Works, Tradition Two).

We recognize the ultimate authority in NA groups to be a loving Higher Power that’s expressed in our group conscience, according to Tradition Two. For better or worse, however, we entrust mere mortals—and addicts, no less—to carry out our decisions. To do right by this Tradition, it’s important to choose trusted servants who demonstrate “the full range of personal characteristics associated with a spiritual awakening,” according to the Fourth Concept essay. We select such leaders and we evolve into those kinds of people as we live clean and work the Steps.

As trusted servants, we do our best to practice integrity as we fulfill our commitments. Yes, that’s a big order, but the Steps prepare us well. Some might even say that integrity is the proof in the pudding, the evidence of how working the Twelve Steps transforms us. “By the time Step Twelve told me to ‘practice these principles in all my affairs,’” one member said with pride, “I was ready to do just that. I’ve come a long way, baby!” We become people with character and backbone, the kinds of people who do the right thing even when no one’s watching—the very definition of integrity.

Of course, the real effort of character building starts long before we get through all Twelve Steps. It’s perhaps most apparent when we’re in the thick of Steps Six and Seven, which give us a close look at some of our deeply ingrained bad habits. The price we’ve paid for living this way was starkly detailed in our inventory. We know what we don’t want. Now, we take the opportunity to identify and practice healthier, more spiritual ways to deal with situations as they arise in all our affairs.

And practice we do. Like so much in recovery, thinking and character follow the course set by our actions. We might think of right actions as the seed, which—in time—produces the fruit of good character. We do good works, practice virtuous behavior, and become people with integrity.

----------------------------------------

Regardless of the circumstances, who’s looking, or what’s convenient, I will adhere to my new code of conduct today.
Optimism, Entry #1 of 3

Being spiritually awake, we can see the miracles that surround us, even when life is difficult (Living Clean, Chapter Seven, “Awakenings”).

Optimism is one of those spiritual principles that, perhaps too simplistically, gets merged with a personality trait. It’s true that some of us easily see the positive side of things, because that’s who we are. But more of us are wired differently. For those of us who aren’t born optimists, we can use optimism as a strategy to shift our perspective. It takes effort—sometimes enormous effort—to open our eyes to see life’s bounty and beauty during dark times.

“To me,” a member wrote, “optimism means that even if I don’t see a light at the end of the tunnel, I can keep checking to see if one appears. And the ‘miracle’ is that it eventually does, even if it’s tiny.” Because we risk rejection and disappointment by doing so, it takes courage to keep peering into that darkness.

Optimism can sometimes be found when we take a moment to look outside of our own woes. “When I can’t discern the good in my own life,” wrote another, “I look at someone else’s. I see the road they’ve traveled and their transformation against all odds. Sometimes it takes one breath to shift my perspective, other times I need a crowbar.” When we look only at ourselves, we’re self-obsessed—obsessed with what was taken away from us or what we never had.

Some of us find our optimism strategy in the simple benefit of the gratitude list. Or it’s allowing others to care for us in our time of need, rather than driving them away with our indulgence in “I got this” or “poor, poor me.” Or it’s prayer, an expression of trust in our Higher Power. Optimism alone can’t save us from utter despair or self-destruction. We need perseverance, hope, and lots of gratitude. One addict put it like this: “The only way to have what I want is to want what I have.”

I’m relieved I don’t have to be an optimist to practice this principle. I will make every effort to see the miracles around me, or at least I can commit to finding strategies that help me to keep looking.
When we realize we’ve survived every emotion we ever had, we start to believe that we are going to be alright even when we don’t feel alright (Living Clean, Chapter Seven, “Living Our Principles”).

Feelings get a bad rap, so it’s no wonder that many of us tried to avoid them. At best, they seemed complicated and uncomfortable. At worst, they posed a threat to us since appearing vulnerable might be dangerous. By the time we find recovery, we may be accustomed to being shut down emotionally. Our hardened exteriors were an asset in active addiction, protecting us like armor. But, like so many of those old survival skills, we found that being emotionally unavailable hindered our recovery. We needed a different approach.

Having little to no experience with emotional wellbeing, many of us tried to select which feelings we would feel. Unsurprisingly, we welcomed feelings that brought us pleasure: love, connection, joy, satisfaction—bring it on! On the other end of the spectrum, we did our best to stuff or avoid anger, heartache, or dread. Sadly, we recognized that this familiar pattern of seeking pleasure and avoiding reality—retooled without the cushion of dope—was not an effective path to emotional health.

Try as we might to avoid it, we all face adversity eventually and the emotions that accompany it flood in. When we first experience despair without drugs, we may feel like we’re going to die. “Everything is horrible!!” we tell our sponsor dramatically. Though we’d been fishing for a co-signer, we settle for some empathy. We’re offered assurances that our troubles are neither inescapable nor permanent.

“I think of my feelings as works-in-progress,” our sponsor explains. “I won’t deny my emotional response these days because I know it’s just a first draft, not ready to be framed and hung on a wall. My feelings can evolve with some time and distance, just as I do. The hope I found in NA gave me the courage to test out this theory. My optimism is rooted in experience. I have faith that better times will come.”

I will approach my emotional life with optimism today. My feelings—good or bad—are only temporary and subject to revision.
Optimism, Entry #3 of 3

Just for today my thoughts will be on my recovery, living and enjoying life without the use of drugs (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today—Living the Program).

People often talk about pessimism and optimism in terms of seeing the glass as being “half-empty” or “half-full.” As addicts, many of us think about it more in terms like, “What’s in the glass, though? Is it any good? When can I get more?” or “Do you have more than I do? Let me have some of yours.” No matter how many glasses we have or how full they are, we addicts tend to always be concerned with where the next one is coming from and/or what the people around us have in theirs. We often forget that, before recovery, we either didn’t have a glass at all or couldn’t keep one, full or not.

The shift in our thinking called for in our Just for Today reading is revolutionary for us. Instead of focusing on what’s next or what’s going on around us, we are called to focus on ourselves, right here and right now. The principles of optimism and hope often seem to be forward-looking, directing our attention to what is yet to come. However, as anyone who has ever been assigned to do a gratitude list can tell you, focusing on what is going well for us in the present moment can dramatically change our outlook on our lives.

When we focus on our recovery, on living and enjoying life without the use of drugs, our fears and anxieties tend to melt away. We become less concerned with matters like when our glass is going to get refilled. If we look into the glasses of those around us, it’s to see whether we can share what we have with them. Focusing on our glass—our recovery—gives us optimism by reminding us that we will be okay, no matter what.

Being in recovery means I no longer have to wonder whether the glass is half empty or half full. Not only do I have what I need, I have enough to share. I no longer need to compare with others.
Patience, Entry #1 of 2

Healing takes time, but it does happen. We must be patient with ourselves (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Sex”).

Some of us came into NA hoping for a speedy recovery, like the way we’d bounced back after that accident and got over the flu right quick. We wanted to get addiction behind us, and then we could get on with life. A mixture of hope and denial convinced us that detoxing would fix us. Our experience told a different story. We’d been able to stop using on occasion, but we could never seem to stay stopped. At some point, we realized that we needed more than a spin-dry, and we rallied the patience to persevere on a just for today basis.

We face our lives and ourselves in everyday living, as the Basic Text suggests. We strive for progress while taking care not to expect perfection. Sticking with it calls on us to be patient with the process and ourselves. Recovery is ongoing for folks like us, not something we can look at in the rearview mirror. We consider ourselves recovering, not recovered, addicts.

Practicing patience requires us to be more gentle with ourselves. We attempt to nurture kind and encouraging thoughts, shutting down that harsh self-talk that says, “I should be better than this by now.” When we measure our progress against some unrealistic benchmark, or worse, compare our insides to others’ outsides, it’s no wonder that we come up short. We focus on finding satisfaction with the pace of our progress. Patience serves as a bridge to some much-needed hope, faith, and humility as we learn to trust the process.

We’ll need all of these spiritual principles and more as we navigate the minefields of our past with the Twelve Steps and a sponsor’s guidance. Trauma and abuse cast a long shadow on many of our lives; we learn to be patient with ourselves as an expression of love. We come to understand our past without allowing it to define us. All of this takes time, time that’s available to us because we’re learning to practice patience.

I invite patience to help me find satisfaction with my progress and access the resources I need for continued recovery and healing.
Patience, Entry #2 of 2

Having patience for discussion, or waiting until the next meeting before moving forward with a decision, saves the energy and goodwill lost when hasty actions have consequences (Guiding Principles, Tradition Two, “For Groups”).

The work we do in NA service is important. When we serve well, more addicts will have the chance to hear our message and find recovery. We make a huge difference in the lives of addicts. Our sense of urgency for helping addicts can go a long way in helping us to stay motivated to serve well. We strive to be efficient, thorough, and creative in our efforts. Lives are on the line, after all.

In our efforts to be expedient, we run the risk of making mistakes. Adhering to our Traditions, local laws, and good old-fashioned common sense may require careful planning, consideration, and, sometimes, lengthy discussion. Seemingly endless debates can put our “principles before personalities” muscles to the test. The more complicated things get, the more difficult it is to communicate well.

We want answers and solutions as soon as possible. If an idea requires more time and thought than we want to give, we either dismiss it out of hand or throw caution to the wind and just do it. In both cases, we are doing ourselves—and NA—a disservice. Scrapping a good idea, we don’t want to think through can mean missing out on a chance to reach more addicts. Putting a half-baked idea into action can lead to unexpected complications or consequences.

Patience is more than simply waiting things out; it’s making the commitment to be present through the process. When we devote time and mental energy to challenging discussions—even when they’re mind-numbingly tedious—we honor ourselves, our fellow trusted servants, and the addicts yet to hear our message.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Patience is more than just waiting for something to be done. In my service, I will commit to being present for the process.
Prudence, Entry #1 of 1

[W]e learn to take on obligations thoughtfully to ensure that we can follow through on what we’ve promised (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Money”).

Looking back at our active addiction, most of us can see a clear theme: “moderation” was not a strength for us. If something is enjoyable, worthwhile, valuable in any way—why not get as much as we possibly can of that thing? The fact that we never seem to be satisfied was a crippling weakness for most of us. We drew lines in the sand for ourselves over and over, and then we stumbled across them by doing things we said we would never do. In recovery, some of us find that our lack of satisfaction can be almost like a hidden superpower: We raise the bar higher and higher for ourselves, leaping over past achievements by doing things we thought we could never do. Being difficult to satisfy can prompt some of us to achieve a lot in recovery.

However, we are still addicts, and we run the risk of spreading ourselves too thin. We may be inclined to think of prudence as being careful with our money, which is a difficult lesson most of us must learn at some point in our recovery. However, prudence can apply to any resource we have, including our time and attention. One member found himself struggling to fulfill his NA commitments because “people told me I could never say ‘no’ to NA requests.” He recalls his sponsor telling him, “If you’re feeling over-committed, practice prudence by learning to say ‘no’ to NA requests that get in the way of fulfilling other commitments you’ve already made.”

Our disease tells us, “if one is good, more is better.” Prudence helps us to say “no” or “not yet” when that positive, fulfilling thing we want to do or be doesn’t fit on our full plate. If we finish what we have, we can go back for seconds!

--------------------------------

I cannot be everywhere or do everything. I will practice prudence in my commitments by acknowledging my limitations.
Self-Acceptance, Entry #1 of 3

We learn to live with our frailties and imperfections (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “A Vision of Hope”).

Many of us have ideas in our heads of what we think we should be. These ideas may come from our families, friends, society, our religious backgrounds, and countless other influences. It’s a little uncomfortable when our images of who we think we are and who we think we should be don’t match. Getting to a place of self-acceptance when these pictures don’t align can be challenging.

The Serenity Prayer is a big help here. There are some things about ourselves we may never be able to change. If we’re a lot shorter or taller than most of the people we know, wishing or praying to be an average height isn’t likely to do much. By talking through our discomfort with our sponsor or others we trust, we can begin to make peace with our height.

Then, of course, there are the qualities we are okay with, but others around us aren’t! “I had a sense of humor that usually involved making someone the butt of the joke,” one member wrote. “I kept hurting people, but I thought that if they would just get thicker skin, things would be fine. My sponsor suggested that I find ways to joke without hurting people. I was mad at first, but I worked on my sense of humor, and people don’t look at me like I’m such an ass all the time now.”

Part of accepting our frailties and imperfections comes in finding the wisdom to know the difference between what we must accept and what we can change. “That’s just who I am” is an excuse we no longer need for harmful behavior. Talking with other addicts and connecting with our higher power can help us continue to grow into the people we need to be.

Some parts of who I am are here to stay, while other aspects may need a little work. I will use the Serenity Prayer to aid in my self-acceptance.
We no longer have to look for the approval of others because we are satisfied with being ourselves (IP#19 Self-Acceptance, “The Twelve Steps are the Solution”).

For many of us, needing others’ approval—or seeking validation—is perched near the top of our character defects lists. We have lived in constant fear of making the wrong choices and others knowing our faults, weaknesses, and mistakes. We did everything we could to avoid being judged and actively, sometimes obsessively, sought others to tell us we were worthy, loveable, desirable, or cool. After a lifetime of self-deprecation, self-pity, and self-harm, how do we gain self-acceptance?

Self-awareness is key to self-acceptance. Working our Steps sparks that awareness. By sharing our inventories, assessing our defects, and struggling not to act on them, we gain a new perspective: We have been our own most vigorous judges and harshest punishers, not others. We harmed ourselves with the delusion that others’ approval would make us satisfied with being ourselves. The emptiness we feel cannot be filled by validation from others. We have to find it within ourselves.

Understanding what doesn’t work is a good place to start. And soon we see that self-acceptance is an inside job that doesn’t happen with a flip of a switch. We work hard to accept ourselves as we are now, so we can make the changes we want to see. We can lovingly reintegrate parts of ourselves we used to disown, because they were of no use to us in active addiction. Recovery helps us revamp mistakes into learning experiences rather than excuses to rag on ourselves and quit trying. As we continue to take personal inventory, we discover how we want to live our lives, who we want to spend it with, and what makes our hearts sing.

Self-acceptance allows us to value someone’s insight without living for their approval or, for that matter, accepting their condemnation.

I know my strengths and my liabilities today, and I’m trying to accept both. Others have a role in my life, but it’s not to determine my worth.
Self-Acceptance, Entry #3 of 3

A spiritual understanding of self-acceptance is knowing that it is all right to find ourselves in pain, to have made mistakes, and to know that we are not perfect (IP#19 Self-Acceptance, “The Twelve Steps are the Solution”).

“Change is a process, not an event,” NA members often say—because we find it to be true! The same can be said about how we begin to experience self-acceptance in our first days, weeks, or months clean. That intuitive sense that we are, in fact, okay can feel like coming in from the cold. We enjoy a bit of self-acceptance even before we’ve worked all Twelve Steps. As we work the NA program, those feelings deepen, settle, and evolve just as we do.

It’s a mistake to assume that self-acceptance awaits us once we change some external conditions. We may hope—without evidence—that a new year, a new flame, a new town, or a new diet will bring us contentment. When we reach outside of ourselves to fix what’s within, our plan is to emerge as better people, more worthy of acceptance. To our disappointment and pain, we also have found accuracy in this familiar saying: “Wherever you go, there you are.” Sure enough.

NA’s literature, meetings, and online spaces help us find a better perspective on ourselves and our lives. Instead of focusing solely on our esteemable qualities, we learn to embrace all facets of ourselves—our assets and our liabilities. We take responsibility for our recovery and, in working the Twelve Steps, come to accept the world around and within us. We divulge our secrets and find that we’re not alone. “Even amid my struggles and sometimes bad behavior,” one member wrote, “I’m a light with this perfectly imperfect me. I know my wounds and my weapons. I’m a work in progress, and I am okay.” We embrace our values, our process, and our growth.

I’ll try to accept all of me today. I’m neither my strengths nor weaknesses—I am both: broken in places but just enough to let the light shine in.
Self-support, Entry #1 of 3

When we see that we can meet our own needs, we start to feel like we have a future (Guiding Principles, Tradition Seven, Opening Meditation).

Active addiction was a dead-end circuit of dependence: our reliance on dope, on the lifestyle, on that person to front us some cash one last time so we could get on our feet. We took without giving. We talked without listening. We made a lot of promises but came through on very few, if any, of them. We couldn’t see a way out or a future for ourselves—until we got clean and began our journey toward self-support in recovery.

When we consider self-support as a spiritual principle of Tradition Seven, we think mostly of giving money—or contributing our time—to make sure a group can survive. But an NA group exists because it’s made up of members who are practicing self-support in their own lives. In recovery, we learn to invest in ourselves and take care of our own needs. Instead of utter dependence on others, we look inside to find a well of strength and resources. We take personal responsibility in situations where before it seemed that we were incapable of doing so. In fact, making our contributions to NA demonstrates our capacity and willingness to engage in self-support. We are investing in ourselves through our recovery community, participating in keeping the doors open for those who come after. This support of others keeps us aloft, keeps us going.

Self-support isn’t something we practice alone. When we talk about taking care of our own needs, that doesn’t mean we’re self-sufficient. It means that we’re engaging the support we need. We can turn to our friends, a sponsor, our Higher Power—all of which are elements of self-support. We are an integral part of that system, too. Because we’re meeting our own needs, others can finally rely on us.

----------------------------------------

I will practice self-support today by giving and receiving. If I stay on this path, I’ll sustain the hope for a future I thought I’d never have.
When we are willing to stand for our own dreams and beliefs, we are practicing a deeper kind of self-support (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Finding Our Place in the World”).

Addicts are often viewed or portrayed as loners and rebels, which is an image many of us were (or still are) quite comfortable with. Even so, many of us have a difficult time genuinely standing up for what we believe or following our aspirations, no matter how ambitious.

“My whole family used, and I let that stop me from getting clean more than once,” a member wrote. “I didn’t want them to think I was abandoning them or that I thought I was better than them. But I couldn’t live that way anymore.”

Changing our lives is scary enough already, even without the additional burden of having loved ones who don’t share our interests or goals. Not everyone we used with wants recovery, but many people still respect our needs and boundaries when we get clean. We may grow apart from some people, but those who care about us want us to follow our own path.

We may feel a similar sense of hesitation about pursuing interests in recovery. We don’t want to abandon our friends. “When I had a couple years clean,” one member shared, “I was the youngest person in my NA crew. I wanted to take college classes, but I thought I’d be ditching my people. My sponsor told me it was okay—he got the prison experience for me, now I could go get the college experience for him.”

We don’t have all of the time, energy, or money to do anything and everything we want. We can’t be in two (or more!) places at once. Practicing self-support means taking responsibility for the choice of how we use our limited resources.

People who truly love me want me to follow my dreams. I will honor my loving relationships by choosing to stand tall in my own choices.
Belief in self-support is a massive leap of faith. We commit to the idea that we will be enough (Guiding Principles, Tradition Seven, Opening Meditation).

For many of us, a belief in our own inadequacy was a constant undercurrent in our lives before NA. We did our best to keep it hidden by putting on a brave front. Behind our masks, thoughts that we were not enough still plagued us. This idea that we lacked sufficient ability, power, or means follows a lot of us into recovery. Although we’d stopped using, we still felt incapable of dealing with life.

We can start to rebuild our self-image by embracing a practical application of humility; we commit to seeing ourselves as part of humanity, no better or worse than the rest of it. With time and effort put into Stepwork, we get a more accurate picture of who we are. We warm up to the idea that we will have and will do enough, and even that we are enough.

When self-support seems like too big of a stretch, we entrust our support system to help us make that leap. We pay attention to the experience of our fellows and emulate their commitment to self-determination. We lean into acceptance and faith as we figure out what the next right thing might look like. Our collective experience tells us that action is the key to moving an idea from our heads to our hearts. So, what actions align with self-support?

When we are present, plugged in, and ready, we can step through doors as they open, find the right words to match the situation, and otherwise take leaps of faith that we weren’t sure we had in us. One member’s experience speaks to such a moment: “My mom was paying my rent for my first year clean, but she would also always come around and tell me I wasn’t keeping the place clean enough, or that I needed to do something different with my hair. The idea of saying ‘no’ to her support was scary; the freedom that came with it was a big step toward believing in myself... maybe for the first time in my life.”

How can I stretch towards self-support today? What conversations might inspire me to take that leap of faith or prepare me for opportunities on my horizon?
Tolerance, Entry #1 of 3

We have found tolerance to be a principle that strengthens not only our own recovery but also our relationships with individuals who are a source of irritation to us (Just for Today, June 24, “Tolerance”).

So many of us have had the experience of calling our sponsor to complain about that terrible person at work, or that loathsome family member, or that absolutely insufferable fool at the area service committee meeting. If not for them, how peaceful and pleasant our lives would be! Our patient and loving sponsor gently asks, “Have you prayed for them?” So cliché!

Of course, sponsors tend to speak from experience—they know that when we pray for the people who bother us, we are often the ones who change. Sure, sometimes people around us do become more tolerable; people grow and change all the time—even insufferable fools. But when we pray for the people who bother us, we increase our own tolerance and compassion.

While everyone in the world has room for growth, tolerance is a much surer way for us to experience peace and harmony than simply waiting for those around us to get better. Some people will take a long time to change; others may never improve at all. If those around us aren’t going to become more tolerable, our best solution may simply be to become more tolerant. This doesn’t mean accepting unacceptable behavior; we still set healthy boundaries as appropriate. Our sponsor can help us sort out the tolerable from the unacceptable. We remind ourselves that we don’t need to be friends with everyone—we just need to be able to play nice with others when we’re at work, at family gatherings, and at service committee meetings.

-----------------------------------

I can’t make the people around me grow on my schedule. To get along with difficult people, I will pray for tolerance.
Tolerance, Entry #2 of 3

As we learn to gently accept ourselves, we can start to view others with the same accepting and tolerant heart (Just for Today, July 29, “Expectations”).

Working an NA program uncovers a considerable need for self-acceptance, and slowly we proceed on that journey. Our work also reveals that the people who get under our skin the most are among our greatest teachers. Just like us, they deserve our acceptance and empathy. There’s a reciprocal relationship between self-acceptance and tolerating others who bug us. We learn this from the harsh truth that we often share some very similar traits with those very same people. As one member put it, “Since I have to tolerate myself, maybe I should tolerate you.”

But then how is tolerance a spiritual principle? Shouldn’t we just be unconditionally loving and accepting of everyone? “Earlier in my recovery,” a member remarked, “I rejected tolerance as a spiritual principle, because when I practiced it toward the person who was driving me nuts, there was nothing spiritual going on in my head. I wanted to go right to acceptance...or scratch their eyes out. But now I see it as an act of love.”

“Tolerance, in my mind,” another member responded, “is like a gateway spiritual principle. It’s a layover on a multi-stop flight on the way to your final destination: acceptance.”

“Or it’s an appetizer principle,” a third member joked. “You have it first, to tide you over before the empathy entree. And maybe unconditional love is dessert.”

No matter how we slice it, tolerance helps us combat unrealistic expectations we place on others’ behavior and our own spiritual condition. Whether we practice it with an open heart or through gritted teeth, it helps prevent us from acting out in fear or anger or expressing our impatience with others who may not be as far along in their journey as we believe we are.

-----------------------------------------------

Today when I practice tolerance, I’ll know that it relates directly to my level of self-acceptance. I’ll try to let people be where they are and focus on what I can change about myself to invite serenity in.
Another member found that amends meant not tolerating abuse anymore, and felt she finally had permission to step away from a destructive household (Living Clean, Chapter Five, “Family”).

Preparing to make meaningful amends includes plenty of heavy lifting in Steps One through Eight. These Steps give us a new perspective of our place in the world, a better understanding of ourselves, and a conscious contact with a Higher Power. We gain courage and self-respect along the way; these will be vital assets for us as we make our amends. A sponsor’s guidance and the experience of other members help to shape our approach. With their input, we decide what our direct amends will look like in each situation and how we can avoid “injuring them or others”—including ourselves. The same network of friends and mentors reminds us to put our name on that list.

Family dynamics and a lifetime of baggage can complicate some of our amends. Our support group reminds us that holding ourselves to account does not mean tolerating mistreatment. In some cases, we can protect ourselves from harm by setting limits; healthy boundaries make for healthy—or at least healthier—relationships. In other relationships, the toxicity continues to be intolerable, and the amends process reveals a need for greater distance. When it comes to those who disregard our needs and values, we reevaluate our use of time and energy. We can stop giving them headspace and forgive ourselves for tolerating what wasn’t okay.

Making our way through a list of amends brings clarity. Protecting ourselves by setting limits of what we will and won’t tolerate is often part of the amends we make to ourselves. We take responsibility for our own beliefs, feelings, and actions. Not every relationship can or should be rebuilt, but the one with ourselves is definitely worth the effort.

If it’s true that we teach people how to treat us, what lessons have I offered? Am I clear about what I will and won’t tolerate?
Unconditional Love, Entry #1 of 2

...many of us have looked up and seen unconditional love in the eyes of the person hearing our Fifth Step (It Works, Step Five).

From addict to addict, sponsor to sponsor, sponsee to sponsee, there’s nothing in NA that all of us experience the same way. There’s the popularized, or even idealized, notion of how things should go, and there’s how they actually happen. Many of us resist Step Four because of Step Five. Being that vulnerable with someone can be intimidating, especially when we hear those wonderful stories of members reading their inventories to their sponsors and immediately feeling relief and acceptance. Many of us do have sponsors whose eyes reflect unconditional love and who say all the right things. But what about tomorrow?

Like all the spiritual principles, unconditional love takes work. It’s not a snap-your-fingers moment, a switch we turn for at the perfect moment that stays bright without fail. As addicts who want to recover, NA provides a place for us. We deserve the love of the Fellowship, yet that requires the individual effort of members. Unconditional love is more than merely loving someone for who they are regardless of...

In the sponsor-sponsee relationship, loving is more than just accepting. A sponsor shared, “Unconditional love says that I will invest in your growth, no matter what. I intentionally decide to invest in someone regardless of who you are or what you’ve done. We all deserve that. I also have to be working on myself to loosen and remove the conditions on love that my life experiences have placed there.” We don’t do it perfectly, and how we express unconditional love isn’t uniform, from addict to addict, or from day to day.

Accepting the unconditional love that’s offered also takes work. For many of us, the Fifth Step is an opportunity to do just that. Perhaps even more so, it’s the day after, when we call our sponsor and they’re there for us, just like yesterday.

---------------------------------------------------------------

Love is a decision that needs to be made over and over again. I’m willing to take action about that decision today regarding a fellow member and unconditionally express love as best I can.
Unconditional Love, Entry #2 of 2

We greet each other with the recognition reserved for survivors of the same nearly fatal catastrophe. This shared experience, more than anything else, contributes to the atmosphere of unconditional love in our meetings (It Works, Step Twelve).

Most of us were pretty far from unconditional with our efforts to love when we first got here. One member shared, “When I first started using, drugs helped me connect with people. I would get high with anyone! I started cutting out people who got in the way of my disease, and soon I was all alone.”

The members who welcome us to NA know the look of loss and alienation on our faces; they endured the same feelings we did. We empathize. For many of us, that’s our first practice of unconditional love—We know each other’s pain, so we offer relief no matter what differences we might have, real or perceived. Different political stance? Different football team? Different definition of “football”? We look past these differences to see the addict, and we do our best to offer hope. The hope we offer is a form of love. In Narcotics Anonymous, we offer this love unconditionally to addicts seeking recovery.

Step Twelve in the Basic Text mentions that, “Many of us believe that a spiritual awakening is meaningless unless accompanied by an increase in peace of mind and a concern for others.” The empathy we feel for other addicts is the first taste of “a concern for others” many of us get. Working Steps expands the reach of our compassion, continually allowing us to clear out the conditions we put on our willingness to love as we’re ready to do so. We aspire to love unconditionally and, even when we fall short, the practice does us good.

----------

Though the journey toward unconditional love is never ending, compassion helps pave the way. I will embrace the journey enthusiastically today.
We, Entry #1 of 2

In NA, our identification as addicts is what we have in common (In Times of Illness, “Mental Health Issues”).

What bound our predecessors together in NA’s early days is what connects us today: it’s our identification as addicts through the common lens of the disease of addiction and our desire to get clean. That commonality alone means that we belong here and with each other—despite what or how much we used, the specifics of our stories and experiences, and what makes us different as people. One of NA’s gifts, we hear members say over and over again, is having relationships with people whom we very likely would never even have met, let alone connected with, outside the rooms.

NA’s success as a Fellowship since its inception has hinged on this fact: Our best hope for recovery from addiction is banding together to help each other out. Our common welfare—the health and well-being of our groups and NA as a whole—underpins our personal recovery. That includes every member of this Fellowship, past and present. Even our future members depend on the “we” of NA. Though we may approach them in a variety of ways, it’s no accident that eleven of the Twelve Steps start with the word “We.”

But “we” isn’t just a concept. Like all principles, its practical application is what makes it spiritual. When we identify, we connect. When we share our true selves, that connection deepens. When we help each other and accept help, we stay connected. Above all, practicing ‘we’ is fulfilling our primary purpose of carrying the message of recovery to the still-suffering addict.

I will be mindful of practicing “we” today by investing in our common welfare: I’ll keep what I have by giving it away to another addict.
We, Entry #2 of 2

Tradition One asks us to shift our perspective. For the first time, “we” comes before “me” (Guiding Principles, Tradition One, “For Members”).

Each and every addict who comes to NA and hears a message is able to do so only as the direct result of members serving NA. Plenty of NA literature discusses the paradox of keeping what we have by giving it away, and our Traditions outline a practical guide for doing so. As this Tradition One quotation indicates, it starts by thinking about the good of the group before thinking of ourselves.

As addicts, putting anything ahead of ourselves is a foreign concept. Some of the first things we do in NA are perfect practice for this. “In my first year, I never wanted to share,” one member wrote. “A home group member told me that I had to start opening my mouth or I would be stealing. I thought I had nothing to offer, but when I shared, I realized it wasn’t about me.” Being part of NA by sharing or taking service commitments helps us, but it’s not just for us—when we share in a meeting, when we show up early to set up chairs, we are actively participating in the common welfare of NA.

The same holds true as we gain cleantime. One member shared, “When I had a few years clean, I told my sponsor that all the meetings I had been going to were pretty bad lately. My sponsor suggested I start focusing on what I was bringing to the meeting instead of what I was getting out of it…and wouldn’t you know, suddenly I was going to a lot of good meetings!”

Contributing to our common welfare lets us “be the we.” We focus on giving instead of getting—at the group level and beyond—and we find that the way we experience recovery gets better and better.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Shifting the focus from “me” to “we” doesn’t mean disappearing from the picture. I will bring the best of me to NA so that WE will all do much better as a result.