Intimacy, Entry #1 of 4

Caring and sharing the NA way is the ultimate weapon against our alienating, isolating, destructive disease (Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Relationships”).

Experiencing loneliness is an inevitable part of the human condition. For many addicts, this loneliness is amplified by how different we've felt from our peers. We've had trouble fitting in, or we're just plain weird. We needed too much attention and alienated others in our efforts to get it. Or we wanted none of that; instead, we stayed silent and hoped that others wouldn’t notice us.

Drugs helped us deal with those feelings and experiences. Initially, using made us feel more “normal,” more comfortable in our own skin. It allowed us to be more social, and, most importantly, created a buffer to keep us safe from intimacy and vulnerability.

Early in recovery, we learn that our disease is fueled not only by getting loaded—but by keeping us isolated from others and from ourselves. When we first get clean and we don’t have drugs as that extra layer of defense, we are raw as hell.

Narcotics Anonymous provides us with opportunities to heal that rawness—through intimate relationships with other addicts. Allowing ourselves to share fearlessly with another addict is truly the salve for our isolation. Even with years clean, a voice in our heads will tell us that we are better off dealing with (or not dealing with) our problems alone. However, we know that the act of revealing ourselves and being present for others is the most powerful antidote to our very human state of loneliness—and to our default addict state of believing we are just too weird.

Even though sharing may be uncomfortable, I will take a risk and allow myself to be seen by another addict. I will choose connection over isolation.
**Intimacy, Entry #2 of 4**

Intimacy is conscious contact with another human being. We connect. As we get close to others we see the divine in them, and we see it in ourselves as well (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Conscious Contact”).

Few of us come to NA with mountains of success practicing intimacy. Often we hear our fellow addicts grumble, “I hate people.” Before getting clean, family life was often dysfunctional, to say the least. The deeper we were in our addiction, the shallower our friendships and romantic relationships became. Our drug use, ego, and denial were a trio of airtight barriers that prevented us from connecting with those closest to us. We lacked trust in others and avoided being vulnerable at all costs. The idea of truly being seen by another person was unbearable, even absurd.

Upon getting clean, we may not initially be conscious of a desire for connection with our fellow addicts. We resist the idea of exposing our true selves, but intimacy isn’t just about sharing the details of our lives. It can be abandoning our old ideas about people and relationships, even letting go of our definition of what’s safe. It can be taking emotional risks when we don’t know the outcome. It can be saying what we want from a relationship—to the other person in it with us. It can be tolerating feedback from our loved ones and growing from it. It can be sitting in meetings with a group of recovering addicts, hearing each other’s gripes, pleas, desires, and strides. It can be witnessing what makes us human and worthy of love and connection, over and over again. Intimacy is the result of all this.

Intimacy is nothing less than letting go of everything that stops us from being ourselves in front of another person. What’s divine in us is what’s genuine.

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*Today, I will consciously seek opportunities where I can get closer to my true self with another human being I trust.*
Intimacy, Entry #3 of 4

Having honest, open dialogue with our sponsor brings us to a new level of trust. As we experience intimacy in that relationship, our ability to be intimate with our partners and with others increases as well (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Sex”).

It’s impossible to paint all recovering addicts with the same brush when it comes to our experiences with relationships. To state that we are all permanently damaged, have never had a healthy relationship, or experienced intimacy is an overstatement. What we can say is that most of us are shut down when we get to NA. We bear scars from unhealthy relationships. Many of us are certain that sustaining a romantic partnership—or being the parent our kids deserve (and vice-versa)—is an impossibility, considering the injury and chaos we’ve caused. We don’t want to get too close to anyone for fear of rejection. Trusting people? Being honest about our feelings? No way.

If intimacy is a spiritual principle we value and a quality we want to bring to our relationships, then we need to practice it. We must surrender to learning new skills and refining existing ones: being honest, sharing feelings, owning our part, listening to and integrating feedback into our behavior, and accepting where our partner is in their growth. Ideally, the relationships we forge in NA allow us to explore intimacy in a safer environment than what we’re used to—with other recovering addicts who are striving to do the same.

For many of us, it’s the relationship with a sponsor guiding us through the Steps that inspires us to know ourselves more intimately and to experience intimacy with others in new ways. However, this role isn’t limited to our sponsor. As we start to open up, we may find multiple members we can learn to trust.

We addicts may bear the scars from previous attempts at trusting others, but not all scars are permanent.

I will make today a day of healing from my past relationships. I will do this by being willing to share intimately with someone I can trust.
Intimacy, Entry #4 of 4

For those of us who used sex as a way to move through the world, it may take quite some time to figure out the difference between being sexual and being intimate (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Sex”).

“Wait, so...sex and intimacy are not the same thing?” This is news to many of us.

What isn’t news is the complex and often contradictory relationship at play when it comes to our sexual behavior, our addiction, and our capacity for intimacy. For many of us, sex has been a useful tool, a bargaining chip. We’ve used it as a shield to deflect intimacy, rather than to experience it.

Sex can be so intricately entwined with our use of substances that we may need to learn how to have sex without using. Will we be able to perform? Will we even enjoy it? How can we fulfill our sexual desires without taking advantage of others or putting ourselves at risk for the same?

Learning how to have sex clean is one thing. Being intimate with others in a non-sexual context is another. True intimacy requires mutual honesty and willingness from all involved parties. Quite literally, baring our souls instead of baring our bodies.

How in the hell do we approach this? It’s overwhelming, and who says we even want intimacy anyway? Is that a requirement for staying clean?

We approach this jumbled human mess with patience for ourselves, no matter how long we have clean. We approach it with some resolve to understand and communicate our desires and our truths. And, if possible, we approach it with the understanding that our relationship to sex and intimacy will continue to evolve as we stay clean—and get older...

Intimacy is complicated, and I can’t possibly figure it out today. Instead, I will focus on getting to know myself and being considerate of others. I’ll aim to practice spiritual principles in my sexual affairs, too.
Creativity, Entry #1 of 7

Creative action is not a mysterious procedure, although it is an inside job in rebuilding or reintegrating our disordered and fractured personalities (IP#5: Another Look, “4. Addiction is not a way of life”).

Active addiction is a mess—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual disorder in the flesh. There isn’t enough room on this page to list what we lose or risk losing while we’re using: our health and well-being, our loved ones, our freedom, our minds, and...our keys! We’ve all been there.

We also lose ourselves. Which selves?... Exactly. Which, indeed. In the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous, we often hear members say, “Out there, I was a chameleon.” While we were using, we changed our behavior, even our personalities, from situation to situation, to meet our self-centered ends, to survive. That’s some masterful creativity for sure.

As with all of our defects, if we flip the coin over, there’s an asset on the other side. We can be as curious and adaptable as we are manipulative and self-seeking. By the same token, just as we used our creativity to survive, we can rely on it now to rebuild our lives from the inside.

When we’re clean, our creative efforts aren’t squandered away on hiding who we are. We don’t have to waste energy developing new strategies to get what we want at the cost of our sanity and everything else we stand to lose. Instead, we take a creative approach to our program of recovery and change it up when we need a reboot.

In working Steps, we learn which parts of ourselves are authentic and which need cultivation. Through sharing and listening to other members, we can figure out what’s broken in us, which parts can realistically be glued back together, and which can be tossed in the bin. As a result, we learn how to express who we are with integrity. We get to be our true selves in relationships with others—and in the ways we dig into work, our interests, and service. Some of us even find creative ways to keep track of those bloody keys.

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Today, I will look at what’s messy or broken inside me and use my imagination to identify what I could do to create some order and serenity up in here!
**Creativity, Entry #2 of 7**

Living fully is a creative expression of love for our Higher Power. To be fully alive, awake, and honest about who we are is a gift to us and from us (*Living Clean*, Chapter 3, “Creative Action of the Spirit”).

The longer we stay clean, the richer our lives become. We pursue our passions and take them where they lead us. For some of us, that means we go to school, launch careers, and start families. Others fall in love, serve our communities, and finally have time to plant a garden or take a road trip. The journey to unearth these passions—whatever they may be—is like an archeological dig. We excavate our personal creativity, an attribute long lost and forgotten, buried in the wreckage of our active addiction.

Our relationship with a Higher Power gives us the courage to discover and embrace our true selves and to give voice to our dreams. The journey through the Steps shapes our understanding of our Higher Power and of ourselves. We learn who we are and who we’re not and how to put one foot in front of the other to become who we want to be. We let go of old identities that no longer suit us. Our survival no longer depends on pushing people away. We’re free to be our authentic selves and ready to explore all of the quirky weirdness that entails. We often find kindred spirits in the rooms, other members who are just as excited as we are about classic cars, comic books, yarn crafts, independent films, obscure festivals, or virtually any other interest.

We are no longer merely surviving our circumstances. In fact, we are full of life and wide awake to experience all that the world has to offer. One of the greatest gifts in recovery is the ability to embrace ourselves for who we are and open our hearts to those around us.

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*I will explore opportunities to share myself in my NA community in creative ways and strengthen my relationship with my Higher Power in the process.*
Creativity, Entry #3 of 7

Sharing with others keeps us from feeling isolated and alone. This process is a creative action of the spirit (*Basic Text*, “Recovery and Relapse”).

Many of us, even with time clean, find ourselves with a problem or a situation we have no idea how to deal with. For example, grateful as we are that we’ve been released from prison, we are petrified by the prospect of rebuilding our lives outside of the structure we’d become used to. Or, having fallen out of love with our spouse—who shares the same homegroup, no less—we want to move on. But how? Or, our teenage son tells us he’s gay. We want to be supportive, but our faith community has very strong opinions. Or, our supervisor at work is in active addiction. We pick up her slack because we don’t want her to get fired. But the stress is killing us.

Shame, indecision, and fear prevent us from talking about our problem with anyone. Or our ego takes over: *I can figure this out on my own.* We’ve been down this road before and know where it leads: denial, dishonesty, resentments, isolation. But we can make a different choice now, just as we did about our addiction.

If we share what we’re going through—with a trusted NA member, our sponsor, or on a group level—we are acting differently, even creatively. We can rely on someone else’s creativity to take us down a road that we had never considered. We just have to open our minds to their experience and perspective.

Other times it’s the act of sharing that’s the solution. Creative action of the spirit requires us to have the courage to open our hearts to share what has seemed impossible for us to talk about. In these cases, we depend on another’s empathy to get us through a situation that has no resolution but to accept it.

*Today, I’ll ask myself: “What am I keeping to myself?” and “Who can I ask to share their creative problem-solving skills with me?” Then, I’ll seek out that person out and be open to what gets revealed in the process.*
Creativity, Entry #4 of 7

[When we are spiritually connected, creativity flows through us. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we paint or make music (though it can), but that we can see solutions to problems and find satisfaction in doing whatever we do as best we can (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Work”).

Many of us develop a deeper spiritual connection as we dig into our Step work, especially when we get to Step Eleven. We explore creative ways to meditate or connect to our Higher Power, and we discover multiple avenues for inspiration in our lives. Creative expression takes many forms.

One member shared, “Creativity is not just about art or music; it can be that spontaneous kind gesture we do for another human being.” We learn that it doesn’t cost a thing to carry our passion for living with us everywhere we go.

When we tap into a spiritual connection, it can be like hitting our stride in a marathon. Somehow the world seems quieter, and our purpose in it takes on new clarity. Our path through recovery comes into focus, and it leads us out into the lives filled with meaning. We find joy in being useful to others and enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done.

Our connection to our Higher Power helps us access our creativity and use it to amplify our service. We’re increasingly able to discern the quiet voice of our conscience, a voice many of us identify as a direct connection to our Higher Power. Letting our intuition guide our creative acts of kindness is an art in itself.

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Today, I will look for ways to harness my creativity in service to the Fellowship and the rest of humanity. I will cultivate my spiritual connection to allow creativity to flow through me.
Creativity, Entry #5 of 7

Creative action keeps us moving forward (Guiding Principles, “All Will be Well”).

One way for us to examine the power of creative action is to take a clear look at its spiritual polar opposite: destruction. In our active addiction, instead of building up our lives, we knocked them down. We demolished relationships, careers, and property. We self-destructed, harming our bodies, our minds, and our spirits. In many cases, our destructiveness resulted in losing our freedom.

As melodramatic as it may sound, we can rise from the rubble, fumes, and bloodshed of our self-destruction! We destroyed a lot, but we didn’t destroy everything. Because we’re alive and we’re clean, we have the opportunity to rebuild. Most simply, creative action is everything we do to reconstruct our lives and elevate our communities. It includes all the actions we take to build our self-esteem, strengthen our relationships, and bolster our integrity.

It’s important to note that some of us use our creativity to build only our outsides—getting our looks back, doing our time and being released, finishing the degree, or retiring in style—but deny our spiritual needs. That neglect can lead us down a path of destruction. We may not relapse, but we certainly have plenty built that we could destroy. The creative actions we take to stay engaged in our recovery, give of ourselves in service, and nurture a relationship with our Higher Power will sustain our spirits even as we thrive in other ways.

We will make mistakes and may experience massive failures beyond our control. We are bound to take actions that undermine our progress and hurt others. We aren’t perfect. But, again, we can rebuild. Our capacity to engage in creative action during times of adversity is key to our progress. Learning how to be grateful for life’s hard-hitting lessons is the ultimate protection against our destructiveness.

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I’m going to take this moment to examine my destructive tendencies. Today, I’ll find an opportunity to consciously and creatively prevent them from taking over.
Creativity, Entry #6 of 7

When we are engaged in creative action of the spirit, whether in our personal lives or in our service work, we may be surprised by the solutions that present themselves (Guiding Principles, “Introduction”).

Living clean and working the Steps gives us loads of practical experience with applying spiritual principles. Open-mindedness unlocks some doors for us in Step Two, and we learn the benefits of being flexible in our thinking. The trust required to turn our will and lives over in Step Three gives us new confidence in the quiet knowing we might call our faith or intuition. With these and other experiences to draw on, it gets easier to align our actions with spiritual principles. With enough practice, spiritual solutions become second nature. We find ourselves more flexible in our thinking and more ready than ever to engage in creative problem-solving.

We practice listening to our intuition and learn to sift out impulses that are rooted in the disease. We tune into what some call our higher selves, the better angels of our nature, or simply good judgment to find inspiration that’s more closely aligned with our spiritual center. One member shared, “With some time clean and some Steps under my belt, I realized that my head wasn’t always trying to kill me.” Sometimes we’re inspired to help an elder cross the street, to take a panel into a local juvenile detention center, or to go back to school—age be damned!

Creative action of the spirit can lead us in any number of directions. We continue to be amazed by our creative capacity to craft spiritual solutions to the challenge of living life on life’s terms. We stumble upon new career paths, find new ways to serve, and learn new lessons. When we are engaged in living in the world and participating with other humans, our focus shifts from our self-centeredness to a more global perspective. That shift might be just what we need to live in the solution as regular contributors to the greater good.

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I will approach life creatively today. I am open to inspiration and the guidance of a loving Higher Power and willing to contribute to our common good.
Creativity, Entry #7 of 7

Some of us discover that we have talents for contributing to the world in other ways, whether through our creativity, our empathy, or our addict ability to focus on one thing and do it ‘til it’s done (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “A Vision of Hope”).

In NA, we often recall how drugs ruined our lives and how our innate talents were ultimately no match for our disease. When we were using, however, many of us believed that the drugs we used were fundamentally responsible for the positive contributions we made to our lives. Drugs allowed us to be confident about expressing ourselves socially, artistically, and sexually. They helped us fall asleep at night and wake up in the morning so that we could be there for our kids after work and before school. Using gave us laser-sharp focus and heightened our productivity at work, which pleased our employers and soothed our insecurities. Still, we eventually came crashing down. As one member put it, “I thought I was high-functioning, but it turns out I was just high.”

When we first get clean, we are terrified that we won’t be able to perform at the level that we and others have become accustomed to. With no drugs, we believe that we are no longer creative beings or that we’re talentless hacks who never were. We doubt we’ll be able to function, let alone complete projects on a deadline. Will our families still love us, because, surely, we’ll be less easygoing and fun? And what about sex?

As we heal, we begin to understand that the deep well of our creativity, our empathy, and our focus comes from developing a more honest relationship with ourselves and a connection to a Higher Power. We learn to acknowledge and release—even a tiny bit—our need for perfection and validation. Our expectations of ourselves become more realistic, and that gives us more integrity in how we contribute to our lives. We refocus the wasted energy we spent comparing ourselves to others toward being of service to fellow addicts and to our loved ones. And we may even discover new talents and abilities we never knew we had.

I know I have something to offer the world. If I don’t know what it is, I’m willing to ask for help to find out. If I already know, let me seek guidance on how to deliver it with humility and generosity.
Resilience, Entry #1 of 3

It’s never too late to start over, reconnect with the fellowship, work steps, have a spiritual awakening, and find a new way to live. (Living Clean, preface).

For many of us in active addiction, starting over from scratch was practically a lifestyle choice. Things got tough, we owed back rent, our relationships or jobs got in the way of our drug use—and we were gone! We got a new place, a new job, someone new to put up with our crap. Some of us carried that behavior into Narcotics Anonymous. Instead of staying clean through snags in early recovery, we’d press the red button and clear the board. Day One again. We change road dogs, sponsors, and home groups. That’s how we know to be resilient.

When we get some time in NA, starting over might look very different. Many of us will hit major low points in our lives, but when we stay close to NA, we can immediately turn to Step One when our life becomes unmanageable—not Day One.

Others of us may accumulate years of cleantime and are so busy being functional that we don’t realize how isolated we are from NA. We haven’t relapsed, but our recovery has all but flatlined. “I woke up today and realized that it was my 25th cleantime anniversary, and I don’t even remember the last time I marked the occasion,” a member shared. “I came today because I didn’t even know I was miserable. I thought, ‘Maybe I should use so that I could come back to meetings.’ Though I’m embarrassed about how long it’s been, I’m grateful my next thought was, ‘Just go to a meeting and start over.’”

How do we come back when we haven’t really left? Instead of pulling the plug on our program, we can jumpstart it. We may feel some shame at taking NA for granted, but we are back—and can keep coming back.

It doesn’t matter when we start over or why; it only matters that we do.

How close am I to the Fellowship today? I will remember that I can push the recovery reset button anytime but don’t have to throw a grenade in order to start fresh.
Resilience, Entry #2 of 3

As we progress, we learn that we can always begin a new journey in recovery, and we can start over whenever we need to. We don’t need to blow up our lives to get a fresh start (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Spirituality in Action”).

Life on life’s terms comes with some inevitable setbacks. Recovery gives us choices about how we deal with those occasional stumbling blocks or misfortunes. Do we summon our inner drama queen, back ourselves into a corner, and turn a minor set back into a full-blown catastrophe? Sometimes, yes. And, sadly, relapse can be part of that story.

Fortunately for us, recovery makes us more resilient. We learn we can reset our attitude instead of resetting our cleantime. We’re reminded that change is the only constant. Life’s challenges don’t end when we get clean. Rather, we learn to respond to change and challenges in a different way, summarized by one member: “Get knocked down three times? Get up four.”

Early on, it may have taken a toxic relationship or some regrettable financial mismanagement for us to reach for the reset button. Our tolerance for emotional pain or spiritual disconnection lessens over time, however. Our setbacks are less dramatic because we’re quicker to get into the solution. We accept new realities more readily. Instead of resisting the storms of life, we learn to bend with the wind.

The Twelve Steps offer us a spiritual path through life. It holds the same rough terrain, but we become more sure-footed. We navigate the obstacles and have the courage to explore uncharted territory. With the support of our fellow members and our Higher Power, we may stumble, but it gets easier to get back up. With the hope that our best days are ahead and the courage to make that so, we dust ourselves off and continue on our journey.

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I will recognize the sources of my resilience today and be grateful for all that contributes to my ability to put one foot in front of the other.
Our hope is renewed throughout our recovery. Each time something new is revealed to us about our disease, the pain of that realization is accompanied by a surge of hope (*NA Step Working Guides*, Step 2, “Hope”).

Hope and resilience so often seem to be interconnected.

In active addiction, our resilience was largely based on our dishonesty. Many of us bounced back from difficulties thanks to our capacity for manipulation, shadiness, and flat-out denial. Hope kept us going, too—even if our only hope was to not get caught. When our kid, a coworker, or current friend-with-benefits confronted us with the truth, trying to make us see how we hurt or disappointed them, we could not and would not deal with that. Same with law enforcement: “I swear, officer, that’s not mine—these aren’t even my pants.” Anything that poked a hole in the story we told ourselves was to be soundly rejected. Or else, it was the beginning of the end...which clearly it was because here we are reading an entry from an NA book of spiritual principles.

Our resilience lands us—and then keeps us—in NA. When our powerlessness and unmanageability are revealed to us in Step One, we stay, despite the desire to escape. Through meetings, our first service commitment, relationships with other recovering addicts, and a Higher Power, we find hope that we can stay clean.

Instead of avoiding the truth, our solution is now to uncover it. The process of working the Twelve Steps thoroughly—whether it’s the very first time we are diving in or the hundredth—involves actively and methodically confronting our disease, our ego, our flaws, our fears, and our mistakes. As a result, we often experience considerable pain, regret, and shame. But hope is here, too, amongst those revelations—hope for serenity, for courage, and for wisdom. We may not experience a “surge” of hope, as in the quote above, but a spark will do just fine to keep us bouncing back and moving forward.

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When I acknowledge or reveal something about myself that causes me pain, I will make every effort to acknowledge the hope that follows as well. I can get through this. I know I can.
Vulnerability, Entry #1 of 3

By asking for help, we can change. Sharing is risky at times, but by becoming vulnerable we are able to grow (Basic Text, “Just for Today”).

As kids, many of us became completely self-reliant out of necessity, because the people and institutions that were meant to care for and help us consistently let us down. That skill got us through our using days—until it didn’t. For others, we definitely sought help when we were using. But it wasn’t to assist us in our growth. The help we wanted was for feeding our addiction and often put us in risky situations. We were vulnerable but not safe.

The act of coming to NA is an admission that we need help. But are we thinking of our personal and spiritual development as we drag our asses into our first meeting? For most of us, the answer would be a resounding no! We just want to stop using. A member shared, “Asking for help was not an option. That meant I was weak, a whiner, a loser. I could be retaliated against, humiliated, rejected, or abandoned, cuz that’s what happened when I showed vulnerability out there.”

Sharing in recovery does pose some risks. Rejection is possible and real. We expose ourselves to feeling shame and guilt. And who wants to experience any of that? Sometimes the risk is about accountability: Like, if we tell someone what we’re contemplating or feeling, then we might have to do something about it. However, withholding and going-it-alone make us less safe. We become more fearful, our isolation intensifies, and then acting out can seem like a good idea.

As we recover, the pain we experience from isolating or acting out eventually outweighs the pain of sharing what’s going on with us. Our experience of sharing with other members demonstrates that overall, we find acceptance, support, and love. We learn that it takes courage to be vulnerable. Our desire to grow as recovering addicts eclipses our fears of feeling exposed.

I will assess what I may be concealing and where I’m afraid of being vulnerable. I may not make the choice to ask for help today— but I know I’m safer if I do.
Vulnerability, Entry #2 of 3

Each time we make ourselves vulnerable and find someone there for us, we come to a new level of safety and trust (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Fellowship”).

Working Step Five with a sponsor can feel like baring our underbellies. We summon up enough honesty, humility, and courage to admit the exact nature of our wrongs. Despite our conviction that we’re doing the right thing, sharing our inventories can make us feel exposed. Being vulnerable can be an unnatural state for addicts; it tears down our hardened defenses. Sharing our inventory is an act of trust. For many of us, this may be the first time we reveal ourselves completely to another human being.

Whether we have years clean or days, we find value in sharing our struggles and our victories with fellow members. Being real and sometimes raw creates opportunities for others to connect with us. Sharing from the heart simply resonates. We’re often humbled by the kindness of our fellow members who support us when we are most vulnerable.

Each time we take a risk, open up, and are met with loving support from other members, we understand the strength in vulnerability on a deeper level. “I look at this kind of vulnerability as the emotional equivalent of a trust fall,” one member shared. Each act of vulnerability enhances our feelings of safety in our relationships.

The more we practice connecting with other members, the more at home we feel in NA.

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*I will challenge my old beliefs about trust. I will push myself out of my comfort zone to practice being vulnerable and allow other members the opportunity to be there for me.*
Honest self-assessment is essential to recovery, but it is only possible if we are vulnerable enough to let someone in (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Anonymity”).

Like all animals, humans have instincts. We’re hardwired to hide our wounds and protect ourselves from exposure. Practicing vulnerability runs counter to “terminally hip and fatally cool” self-image. It takes a conscious decision to drop the defenses that once kept us safe. We choose to share our pain with others, taking risks in direct opposition to our ingrained behavior.

Our willingness to trust the process increases over time. We may confide some of our darkest secrets to new friends in recovery even before we write an inventory. We notice that practicing vulnerability brings us closer to others.

Although legend has it that a member once shared their inventory with a taxi driver, we’d be hard-pressed to find someone who offloaded their Fifth Step with someone besides their sponsor. By the time we get to Step Five, we’ve grown to rely on our sponsor for good guidance and have learned to trust that what we share will be held in confidence. Perhaps most importantly, our sponsors don’t judge us or condemn our behavior—we do enough of that ourselves. Rather, sponsors try to help us work through our shame and embarrassment and move into acceptance.

We reflect on how we’ve opened up over time and realize the benefits of practicing vulnerability. Experience emboldens us to meet our fears head-on. We’re free to be real and raw and vulnerable in meetings. We come to realize that the walls we built to keep us safe kept us imprisoned. We aspire to build our relationships on a foundation of trust, honesty, and openness.

When we share from our hearts, others meet us there. Our sponsees, friends, and partners open up to us, and the value of vulnerability is reinforced. Experience confirms that we can feel vulnerable without shutting down. As one addict put it, “Vulnerability is like a super-strength adhesive. It bonds us together like nothing else.”

I will have the courage to be vulnerable today. I will share my true thoughts and feelings, letting those who love me know all of me.
Forgiveness, Entry #1 of 6

Recognizing our own humanness gives us the capacity to forgive others and not be as judgmental as we have been in the past (NA Step Working Guides, Step 9, “Spiritual Principles”).

By working Steps Four through Eight, we confront the person who’s kept our lives in turmoil: “Oh no, it’s me!” In this rigorous process, we face our disease and our humanity. We unpack and pick apart lifelong grudges and current resentments against people who hurt, judged, and rejected us. Often, we’re shocked to learn we had a significant part to play. Engaging fully in the recovery process gives us a more realistic awareness of our flaws and limitations. We see a connection between our acting-out and our very human need for safety, love, and acceptance. We learn that a lack of empathy for our own missteps has driven our judgments of others. Our capacity to forgive is Inseparable from our capacity for empathy.

In the Ninth Step, we strive to make peace with our own humanness. We expose our imperfections to those we’ve hurt. In an attempt to right our past wrongs, we humbly apologize. We change our behavior so we won’t repeat past errors. We’re often—but certainly not always—forgiven for the harm we’ve caused. This process offers us a striking lesson in empathy.

Acknowledging and accepting our own imperfections is key to accepting imperfections in others. We practice forgiveness for ourselves for the times we’ve let self-centered fear guide our actions. Instead of judging others for similar impulses, we can choose to forgive them, actively seeking to accept them as they are.

Experiencing others’ judgment and rejection—both in everyday life and when our attempt at an amends is rebuffed—increases our capacity to feel empathy and to forgive others. Our own pain becomes a source of strength, and we can draw from the well of self-acceptance we’ve created through our experience with the Steps.

Today I will take a “balcony view” of my judgments of others. Instead of cataloging their flaws, I will acknowledge their humanness, because I’m also human and worthy of empathy.
Forgiveness, Entry #2 of 6

We forgive ourselves, we forgive others, and we find peace—regardless of what others may think or feel or tell us (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Amends and Reconciliation”).

Many of us want to skip ahead to Step Nine and apologize to those we’ve hurt in hopes of receiving their forgiveness. We desperately want to shed some of our guilt and shame. We may be convinced that getting others to forgive us would provide a shortcut to feeling better about ourselves. We’re reminded that the Steps are in order for a reason and that making amends has more to do with changing our behavior than offering apologies. Despite the urge to find a shortcut and get an early payoff, we surrender to the wisdom of experience. We work our way through the first eight Steps before attempting to right the wrongs of our past.

The gift of time prepares us for the amends process. “I’d be lying if I told you that I wasn’t looking to be forgiven,” a member recalled. Despite this longing, we focus on clearing out our wreckage and amending our behavior. Some people may never forgive us, but we can forgive ourselves nevertheless. The road to self-forgiveness starts with our commitment to working the Twelve Steps. In doing so, we establish a new way to live. We focus on the things we can change, namely ourselves.

Over time, new, healthy behavior brings a sense of peace to our spirit. Forgiveness is not a finite process—the more we give, the more we seem to get. “As I forgive, I grow in love and compassion and I move forward on my spiritual journey,” one member shared. Our actions solidify our commitment to Narcotics Anonymous and to ourselves. We become less concerned about who acknowledges our growth or how our amends are received. We revel in the peace we’ve found within and offer up a little more forgiveness to ourselves and the world.

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*Today, I will allow the Steps to shape my choices and behavior. I will enjoy the peace I find in this new way of life and reach for more as I practice forgiveness with myself and others.*
Forgiveness, Entry #3 of 6

Walking with the knowledge that someone has not forgiven us is hard, but through it we find levels of forgiveness and acceptance that we may not have known were possible (Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Amends and Reconciliation”).

Over time in NA, we learn that we are worthy of forgiveness. That discovery comes, in part, as a result of making our Step Nine amends. Part of our preparation for this process is to understand why we are doing it. To make meaningful and lasting change in our lives, we must make peace with the consequences of our actions and the harm we’ve caused.

While being forgiven by those we’ve hurt is a blessing, finding self-acceptance cannot be conditional on another’s actions. We must reconcile with ourselves to heal from our past. Forgiving ourselves is not contingent on receiving forgiveness from those we’ve harmed.

Reconciliation may not always be possible. Though we may believe we deserve to be heard and forgiven, some will understandably stonewall our efforts. What then? It’s pretty hard to gain the courage to undertake this process—but then we have to be humble enough to accept the reaction, even if it’s a flat-out rejection? For those of us whose self-esteem entirely hinges on being liked by others, that rejection may be excruciating. We ask ourselves, “Am I even still worthy of forgiveness? How do I walk through this?”

No one is obligated to forgive us. We are powerless over other people’s willingness or readiness. In a situation like this one, we have one option for healing move forward. That may take time because rejection is painful. As hard as it is to accept, we have to find a way to live with that pain and the consequences of our actions.

Not being forgiven is its own beast—and its own lesson in practicing spiritual principles. This experience might give us pause the next time we want to rebuff someone else’s amends. We may be quicker to forgive because we know what it’s like to experience that wall and how much effort it takes to live with that and let it go.

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Today, I will strive to accept my past and move on from it, though others may not. All I can do—today and every day—is to do better.
Forgiveness, Entry #4 of 6

Forgiving is its own reward. We start to find peace within ourselves. When we are free of guilt, shame, and resentment, our minds can be still (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Love”).

Self-righteous indignation used to be its own reward. We were uplifted by our intolerance of other points of view. Mad rage was addictive. No one was going to stop us from reaping its choice benefits: isolating from others, a free pass to gossip, fortifying our side against the person who wronged us—and, of course, a thousand more reasons to get high. A member shared, “Why would I want to forgive when that adrenaline rush of righteous anger felt so damn good?”

But what do we really gain by being “right”? It’s a distraction from the real problem. All the hard work we put into staying angry at others could be used to improve ourselves. And like drugs, that initial rush of self-righteous indignation wears off—exposing the shame and guilt lurking below the surface. “I needed more, just to stay well,” the member continued. “A thousand hits of justified anger just ain’t enough.” We end up alone obsessing about our guilt, shame, and resentments, stoking a fire of fixation no one is tending to but us.

Forgiveness is also hard work, but its rewards are far more satisfying and long-lasting. Through the process of recovery, we can let go of reacting to every injustice we experience (or think we do). That’s a bit of relief right there. We become more content with minding our own business and less inclined to keep tabs on the behavior of others. We actively try to love them instead—or at least try to understand them. And a lot can be said for off-loading the resentments we’ve lugged around forever. There’s so much freedom in that. There’s lightness and even some ease in walking through life.

For many of us, forgiving others does get easier over time, not least because we have experienced its rewards. “I know what it’s like to stay in a deep, dark hole of anger and self-righteousness,” the member went on. “Rather than digging myself deeper, I call for help, I dig myself out…and wonder, Why you even down there again?”

Who in my life have I forgiven, or at least started to—and what has that been like? How might my life be different if I continue down this path?
Forgiveness, Entry #5 of 6

Sometimes the path to forgiving ourselves begins with forgiving another for their lack of forgiveness (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Amends and Reconciliation”).

At first glance, this quote may sound like a riddle, but our experience validates its wisdom. Hoping to be forgiven is only human. Despite advice to the contrary, we sometimes harbor expectations about how amends *should* be received. We have ideas about how and when we’ll be forgiven. We anticipate the relief it will bring...only to be disappointed at times.

Given the harm we’ve caused, it’s understandable that some people may not be quick to forgive us. It hurts nonetheless. The conventional wisdom that “expectations are just premature resentments” makes even more sense to us now. Regardless of how our amends were received, we do our best to clean up our side of the street and let go of any ill will.

We take ownership of the damage we’ve caused and earnestly make an effort to compensate for our wrongs and change our behavior. We release those expectations we had about receiving forgiveness, let go of any hard feelings we set ourselves up for, and—with time—find forgiveness for ourselves and those who were unable to forgive us. Letting all of that go frees up a lot of headspace and energy.

We’re not as attached to how our formal amends was or was not received; we’ve done the work to make things right whether or not others recognize it. Our actions lead us to a deeper level of self-acceptance—who we were then and who we are now. We can focus our energy on becoming the best version of ourselves by continuing to work the Twelve Steps.

Today, I will empathize with those who have yet to forgive me. I will contemplate forgiveness in my Eleventh Step practice and seek to forgive on a little deeper level. I will forgive others for not forgiving me.
Forgiveness, Entry #6 of 6

Forgiveness is an action and a decision. We need a lot of forgiveness, and we also get to provide it. (*Living Clean*, Chapter 7, “Love”).

Working the Twelve Steps of NA teaches us to make decisions for ourselves and take deliberate actions in our lives. We no longer allow circumstances and our disease to dictate our every move. We choose to practice forgiveness and try not to worry too much about when and if our loved ones forgive us. (We’d been pretty rotten at times, after all.) We focus on matters that are in our control and do the work necessary to forgive ourselves and others.

NA service provides plenty of opportunities to apply this spiritual principle. We serve alongside fellow members—it’s almost inevitable that we’ll bump heads from time to time. For the most part, we manage to set aside our disagreements, uniting to support the addict who still suffers. But practicing unity does not neutralize the need for forgiveness. “Despite acting in unity, I was still holding a grudge,” a member shared. “It occurred to me that service might be more pleasant if I would forgive some of those I serve with.”

Many of us have taken a turn standing on the NA soapbox in defense of what we believed was best for the Fellowship. We can forgive others for being irritatingly passionate, because we’ve been that, too. Instead of keeping a record of each others’ worst moments, we can make a decision to focus on the good work they’re doing. We adjust our perspective to take the bigger picture into account.

None of us is *all* good or *all* bad. By practicing forgiveness, we allow ourselves and others to be human. Sure, we make mistakes, but our worst moments don’t need to define us. By practicing forgiveness, we can shift our focus and appreciate the strengths each of us brings to the table.

I choose to practice forgiveness today. I’ll revisit some old resentments, take positive action on any unresolved issues, and let go of any lingering bitterness. I will accept people as they are now.
Kindness, Entry #1 of 4

We approach people with love and kindness, carrying within ourselves a deep and abiding respect for the feelings of others (It Works, Step 9).

“I’ve never regretted being kind,” the speaker stated. The rest of us in the meeting thought about that for about two seconds and nodded in agreement. It’s hard to argue with that.

Probably for nearly all of us, treating others with kindness, love, and respect was more difficult in active addiction than it is now that we are clean and striving to be better people. Maybe we were burned by others who treated us kindly but wanted something in return. Very likely we had the same manipulative tendency. Playing either role in this dynamic only reinforced our mistrust of others. If we were up to no good, then so was everyone else.

Working Steps Four through Nine is a reality check on our past behavior. By the time we get to the amends process, we’re prepared to face the hurt we’ve caused other people mostly through our selfishness and carelessness. We witness the results of our manipulation, our disregard for the feelings of our loved ones, and the damaging ways we’ve treated ourselves.

The speaker went on: “Treating others with kindness is like an ‘ounce of prevention’ for our chronic condition of addiction. It lowers our risk of doing or saying something we’ll regret. And it has the added benefit that we won’t have to make as many amends.”

While we certainly don’t have to wait for any Step before we show and receive kindness, our relationship to this spiritual principle will deepen as we work on ourselves. We learn to be more thoughtful about what comes out of our mouths. We no longer use people to get what we want. Although we cannot completely prevent hurting or disappointing other people, or stop them from being angry with us, we don’t want to make the same mistakes.

Through our commitment to recovery, we develop a genuine respect for others and maybe a little belief in humankind as a whole. No regrets there either.

I have many choices today. One of them is to be kind. I’ll opt for that.
Kindness, Entry #2 of 4

The lessons we learn in NA about sharing and caring, asking for help, and offering what we have to give are powerful tools we can use outside the fellowship as well (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Disability”).

Before coming to NA, many of us were clueless about our own needs, much less the needs of others. We may have rejected the whole idea of needing help, needing other people, or having needy people in our lives. Identifying our needs—beyond the next fix—would require introspection. Looking within sounded frightening—“There be dragons,” as the ancients labeled unmapped territory. Others of us sensed a void inside, a deep well of vague longing. We clung to the few people left in our lives, hoping for love but settling for sex.

Recovery invites us to rejoin the human race. We learn to articulate what we think, how we feel, and what we need. Being part of an NA community that looks out for one another is a real asset to our lives. The give and take of kindness knits together our social networks, in and out of the rooms. We benefit from others’ kindness and revel in the good feelings we get from giving back. It reinforces our humanity and our humility as we recognize that we’re no better and no worse than our fellows. “Just another addict doing my best to stay clean and be better,” as one member put it.

A focus on practicing kindness contributes to the “better perspective on life” we strive for, just for today. Opportunities to help come into view more readily when we’re endeavoring to be kind. As one member wrote: “Giving up my seat to an elderly bus rider freed me, momentarily, from my prison of self-concern. When I want to feel good, kindness ain’t a bad hustle.” We become the good neighbor who shovels more than their fair share of snow, the parent who bakes enough cupcakes for the whole class, the houseguest that insists on washing dishes, or the coworker who restocks the community candy bowl.

If we can shake some old ideas about independence and self-reliance, we can practice kindness even as we ask for help. We know the good feeling of helping others; to need help and not ask for it seems selfish. We humble ourselves, ask for what we need, and open the door to let others be kind.

I will contribute some kindness to my community as I share a smile, give a sincere compliment, or ask for assistance today.
Kindness, Entry #3 of 4

We learn that people see goodness in us that perhaps we don’t see in ourselves. Our fellows reflect us back to ourselves and show us how we have changed (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to Others”).

In our first days clean, most of us feel utterly horrible about ourselves. We’re sick from withdrawals. We hate everybody we know and every stranger in the room. We’re ashamed, mostly because we got caught. We’re pissed off at jails, institutions, and, in some cases, not dying. Our outlook on the future is just as dark: we have to go to these stupid meetings for the rest of our lives and we can never use drugs again. And we have to give, give, give to the meeting, to each other, to our dad who messed us up in the first place because of his using, to the old lady who lives in the flat downstairs even though she’s mean to us. And we have to be nice all the time and talk about our problems and listen to other people’s problems and help other addicts who are more messed up than we are. Being even slightly positive about our future requires an impossible effort.

Eventually, our resistance cracks. We “do the deal”—meetings, sponsor, steps, service, newcomers (well, we don’t “do” them, we help them). We find an HP and start praying and meditating. We forgive Dad and make sure he has all his meds (and we don’t take any of them). We gratefully accept our elderly neighbor’s terrible holiday fruitcake and pick up her yappy little dog’s poo when she doesn’t. When she criticizes our new tattoo, we smile instead of plotting her death. Sometimes we do these things begrudgingly, but mostly it’s second nature now.

On occasion, people notice. After sharing a few IPs with a newcomer, an oldtimer, who remembers us when we came in, hugs us (longer than usual), looks deeply into our eyes, tears brimming. “What’s up?” we ask. It’s awkward.

“You,” the member tells us, “are so different. Sooooo different.”

We protest. “Aww, come on!” All we did was give someone an IP! But our resistance to this also cracks. We do the right thing, just say, “Thanks,” and hug them back.

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I’ll aim to be kind and generous today. If someone points it out, I’ll say “thanks.” I can acknowledge them and acknowledge that I’ve changed.
Kindness, Entry #4 of 4

We learn to treat others with kindness and respect and do what we can to support each other and our group (*It Works*, Tradition One).

Few of us come into Narcotics Anonymous with effective social skills; we often acquire them by trial and error...mostly error. When we unintentionally mistreat others, we feel terrible and become teachable. The good news is that some of our best lessons come from our mistakes. We call our sponsors, tell on ourselves, figure out our part, and determine better ways to handle similar situations in the future.

We are at our best when kindness inspires our words and actions. When kindness is a priority, we’re more likely to be supportive and that helps us grow as individuals and as NA groups. Naturally, it’s easier to be kind to those we love. But we don’t have to open our homes and share holiday dinners to honor our mutual stake in Narcotics Anonymous.

Being a homegroup member challenges us to practice kindness with folks who aren’t in our immediate circle. Our investment in the wellbeing of NA is more important than our personal feelings about any specific member. We put the welfare of the group first and treat all of our fellows with respect regardless of baggage or bitterness. Friendship is not a prerequisite for kindness. Rather, we are kind in order to foster unity within the group and to support personal recovery—our own and that of our fellow members.

The simplest gesture of kindness can make a world of difference when we are feeling stuck. “I was isolating and thinking about using. I got a text from a fellow home group member who asked if I was going to the meeting. It was just the push I needed,” a member shared.

Our actions have a profound effect on others as well as an impact on our self-image. By choosing kindness, we improve ourselves as we contribute to NA unity. Our actions make NA meetings safe and respectful places for personal growth. The way that we treat each other and our groups is a reflection of how we put “we” before “me.”

I will treat other members with respect and kindness today. I will act in ways that support recovery—yours, mine, and ours.
Perseverance, Entry #1 of 4

We may tire mentally in repeating our new ideas and tire physically in our new activities, yet we know that if we fail to repeat them we will surely take up our old practices (Basic Text, Chapter 7, “Recovery and Relapse”).

Many of us can say: “Relapse is a part of my story.”

From our own experience and from listening to each other share, we know that the possibility that we might not stay clean is very real. What causes an addict in recovery to choose to get high again? It can be anything, really, but an unaware “I got this” can be especially dangerous. We tire of hearing the message, sharing the message, and, frankly, each other. The sun goes down and comes back up on what seems like the same day. We become increasingly cranky and unfulfilled. Having become disillusioned with life clean but without recovery, maybe we even quit going to meetings. Eventually, we reach outside of ourselves to fix our insides and use again. When we come back to the rooms, we tell our story of complacency and sitting on that Step work.

While there are endless versions of the relapse story, we all have heard the ones that don’t have happy NA endings. Not everybody makes it back to NA and has the opportunity for another go at recovery. Knowing we could die out there—or not die but bring ruin to our livelihood and relationships—doesn’t keep us clean. So…what does?

We know the answer to the question. It’s pushing through with the basics of Steps, service, sponsor, and Higher Power. It’s breathing life into our recovery in whatever ways we can. Start a new meeting? Take on another sponsee? Read the daily “SPAD” entry? It’s doing what we all have done in the past, again, just for today. It’s carrying the message to a newcomer to remind ourselves of where we came from and what was so freely given to us. It’s not picking up, even when we want to. It’s staying, even when we don’t want to. Perseverance can be an antidote to complacency. We want to live, so we have to keep on living.

We don’t need a new relapse story, or one at all. It’s preventable, not inevitable.

Today I will honor the blessings I have already worked this hard for by repeating what I know works. I want to keep what I have.
Perseverance, Entry #2 of 4

The process of recovery isn’t easy. It takes great courage and perseverance to continue in recovery day after day (It Works, Step One).

The gift of desperation gets many of us through the door and propels us into the footwork of early recovery. If we’re very lucky, we might experience a bit of elation and optimism sometimes referred to as a “pink cloud” in the first weeks of recovery. Enjoy it while it lasts!

In time, the challenges of life in recovery present themselves. Some of us have faced a lifetime of difficulties so we’re no strangers to trouble. The difficulties we face in recovery have a different feel to them, however. As one member described it: “I could see a light at the end of the tunnel and I knew it wasn’t a train coming the other way.” Inspired by that light—our faith that our efforts will pay off—we persevere by putting one foot in front of the other.

A foundation in recovery helps us to endure life’s difficulties. Even with some time clean, our choices don’t always pan out. Working a program doesn’t make us immune from life’s struggles: financial problems, relationship trouble, health concerns, and housing instability plague clean addicts, too. We try to be honest and reflective, owning our part in the problems that come our way.

The disease may rear its ugly head during tough times. We might be drawn to act out in new ways, reaching outside of ourselves to soothe the angst within. Our character defects sometimes put on new disguises and find different hiding places. We hit new lows clean.

The good news is that our tolerance for spiritual or emotional pain lessens over time, so we’re quicker to get into the solution. We know that the Twelve Steps are a reliable source of relief. We return to the First Step again and again and surrender in different areas of our lives. It takes guts to face the various manifestations of our disease. We summon the necessary courage and persist.

I will be steadfast in my recovery and have the courage to look at where the disease is showing up today. Where do I need to apply Step One in my life now?
Perseverance, Entry #3 of 4

As new things are revealed, we feel renewed. We need to stay open-minded and willing to do that one extra thing... (Basic Text, Chapter 10, “More Will Be Revealed”).

Though not all of us arrive in NA with tons of willingness and enthusiasm to change everything about our lives, we tend to be open enough to try something different. We’re here, aren’t we? So we might as well take that “90 meetings in 90 days” suggestion. We get a home group and take on a commitment. We greet newcomers. With some effort and perseverance, we begin to work a program and to feel better, even renewed.

In time, many of us get to a point where those feelings of renewal get old. The well dries up. We aren’t having daily epiphanies of self-realization. Our life is more stable, sure, but is it still getting better? Do we have to keep doing the NA same old, same old: hearing the same shares, reading the same literature, drinking the same weak tea or bitter coffee?

“Don’t leave before the miracle,” we’ve heard our fellow members say time and again. While many of us don’t believe in miracles, per se, our experience has shown us that if we stay—stay in the room, stay open-minded, stay available to another addict, stay clean—our lives will continue to improve. And we will be better prepared for those times when life’s unpredictability presents us with challenges.

We never know where we’re going to hear just what we need to help us through our next phase of recovery. It’s often in the meeting that we really don’t want to go to, the speaker we’ve heard a thousand times, or the phone call we begrudgingly answer. We may not have even noticed that we were stuck until a message moves us into action. When we can push through our resistance, especially when it comes to helping others, we reap enormous benefits for our spiritual growth. The miracle of this program is continually revealed through our perseverance.

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Today I’m going to find that one extra thing to do and have faith that I’ll be re-energized in my recovery. Whether or not I feel that rush of renewal, I’ll do it again tomorrow. And the day after that.
Perseverance, Entry #4 of 4

Caring for our spiritual condition is like cleaning the house: If we want the benefit, the work must be ongoing (Living Clean, Chapter One).

We experience peace of mind and freedom when we consistently work on our spiritual fitness. We get in a groove of daily inventories, prayer and meditation, and helping other addicts. The results are obvious, and it feels great to be comfortable in our own skin, connected to a Higher Power and to others in recovery. It’s a beautiful thing—until we sabotage it!

Just as it’s easier to keep a home tidy after we’ve done a double-scrub, steady work on our recovery yields consistently good results. And yet, it’s so flipping easy to skip our daily inventory and, before we know it, several days or weeks or months have passed. It’s no surprise when we lose perspective and our lives become unmanageable again. We sit down, reluctantly, and recommit to our Tenth Step. A sense of relief returns. Maybe next time, we’ll only wait a few days before we sit down to write. Progress!

We may not be hardwired to persevere, but we get better at it with practice. We can start again at any time. We don’t need to devolve into a state of desperation before we reach for solutions; today, we can be inspired to do the work of ongoing recovery. We notice the sense of ease we enjoy when we stay immersed in the process. We keep our eyes on that prize and persevere.

Each of us develops a routine that works for us, built from the suggestions shared in the experience of others. “When I see a member struggling, I always tell them that my best days start with a quick prayer before my feet hit the floor,” one member shared. Another shared about their eclectic approach to meditation: “A couple of deep breaths in the shower or a long walk after dinner does it for me.” The trick is sticking with it and, when that fails, getting back to it.

I will evaluate my spiritual condition today. Am I getting the results I want from my current routine or is it time for a spiritual double scrub?
Practicality, Entry #1 of 5

Sometimes it’s enough just to know that other NA members believe [in a Higher Power] and that their belief helps keep them clean (Just for Today, April 23).

The struggle to believe in a Higher Power—or something—is real for many of us. Sometimes it can trouble us greatly. At other times, the struggle to find our belief system is the most profound and rewarding part of our life in recovery. That’s not to say that all of us take issue with the concept of a Higher Power. Before addiction took over our lives, many of us were unquestionably people of faith. Recovery from addiction in NA has only deepened that faith.

Some of us have no spiritual belief or practice to speak of when we begin our recovery journey. But we adapt easily to the idea of a power greater than ourselves. We’re told that it can be anything as long as it’s loving. The group? Nature? An aspirational “higher self”? No problem! Praying to one or more of these powers makes practical sense considering what our life was like before. Others of us share about our experience staying clean without too much focus on the “god” part of the program—because we want to let others who are struggling know that atheism is an option.

Then there are those of us who struggle with it all. We don’t believe, but we don’t not believe. Infinite choices confound and frustrate us. We bristle at “loving,” obsess about contradictions in NA literature or feel pressure to invent something innovative. We’re challenged by one member’s belief that we are relapse-bound without capital-G God and another member’s flippant attitude about needing one at all. We feel we have to believe. What if we never get there?

“You’re actually doing better than you’re feeling,” a member whose recovery we respect offers. “There may not be a place to ‘get to.’ Why not do the next right thing and stay in the struggle” In practical terms, that means taking actions that align with our values or beliefs—even when we’re still figuring those out.

“In a pinch, you can borrow my Higher Power,” another member offers. “Maybe it’s enough that I believe in something that helps me stay clean.” Why not? We’ll try it—because we have choices in NA. Plus, we need a break from the struggle.

My belief, whatever it is, is practical for me today—so I’ll practice it. If I’m struggling today, I’ll embrace that. No pressure. Recovery is a process, and it’s working.
Practicality, Entry #2 of 5

Our part...is to do the very best we can each day, showing up for life and doing what's put in front of us...We promise to do the best we can—not to fake it, not to pretend to be superhuman, but simply to do the footwork of recovery (Just for Today, February 18).

“If it’s not practical, it’s not spiritual.” Many of us have heard this before, but what does this mean exactly?

For starters, we can focus on living just for today as a practical matter. Instead of dwelling on regrets about the past and fears of what's ahead, we focus on what's right in front of us. As one member put it, "I concentrate on this day, and it frees me up to participate in my own life and recovery." We may plot our days in a particular direction, but we trust a loving power greater than ourselves with the outcome. Another member shared this strategy: "I ask myself, 'Where are my feet?' And then proceed to move one of them in front of the other."

We do our best. (How's that for practical?!) We follow through on what we can handle in the here and now, and shake off the impulse to achieve perfection. We learn our limits and work within them. Satisfaction comes from putting forth our best effort, even when we fall short of our goals. “I did my best,’ quiets my inner critic,” in one member’s experience. Another added: “When I feel good about what I’m doing, it’s easier to dismiss other people’s opinions of me.”

Staying grounded with some practical, daily footwork improves our lives. “I learned everything I need to know about how to stay clean in my first 30 days around here. You people told me, ‘Go to lots of meetings and don’t take anything in between.’ It sounded simple enough. ‘If you don’t pick up, you can’t get high.’ I thought these people were geniuses. ‘Read the book. Get a sponsor. Work the Steps.’ I followed this advice in the beginning, and it kept me clean. I follow this advice now because it keeps me in the solution.”

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I will do my best today. I will do the footwork and accept that it’s enough and that I’m enough.
Practicality, Entry #3 or 5

We feel that our approach to the disease of addiction is completely realistic, for the therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel (Basic Text, Chapter 4, “How It Works”).

By the time we get to Narcotics Anonymous, many of us have a long list of what didn’t fix us: family, relationships, doctors, treatment programs, religious institutions. We begged God or Something-Out-There for relief. Because of our involvement in the justice system, some of us have had help imposed on us. All these individuals or entities may indeed have been helpful to our survival, even if only to introduce us to NA. Some may continue supporting us to this day. But we found them to be insufficient to help build the long-lasting changes to our lives that we needed. So what was missing?

One member shared their a-ha moment: “This concept of one addict helping another hit me on the head like a ton of bricks. I thought, ‘Now I get it!’” These were helpful, practical bricks, of course. Bricks that we can use to build our life back up. Recovering addicts who’ve survived what we’ve survived are unquestionably the best source of practical information about recovery. This idea not only makes sense to us, but it also brings us some relief.

In NA, we create an atmosphere of healing for each other—that’s what we mean by “therapeutic.” We help each other to heal through empathy and solidarity. The “we” of NA is a powerful and practical resource that we use to walk through life’s difficulties and hold each other up as we heal. Honest sharing helps to identify others who have survived infidelity, infertility, illness, and the myriad of other hardships. We hook each other up with members who’ve had to navigate similar things and we get to learn from their experience. Our personal tragedies can become a shared source of strength. What could be more practical?

While our disease would have us focus on what makes us different, we know that the ties that bind us together are way stronger than those differences. Those ties are strong, real, and practical. They are the bricks that build us up and keep us from falling. NA is a practical program delivered by addicts to other addicts, with other addicts, for other addicts. That’s how it works.

How am I creating a healing environment for my fellow addicts? What can I do today that’s practical to help another addict?
Practicality, Entry #4 of 5

It’s not what we think about our recovery that matters; it’s what we do (Living Clean, Chapter One).

When we first come into recovery, we may think that everyone in the room is lying. A member recalled thinking, “They can’t possibly be that happy…and really, no one can stay clean for 30 years, let alone 30 days in a row.” We may even tell ourselves that there is no way we can stop using and have a fulfilling life. Despite our internal monologue, we continue showing up to meetings and putting some clean time together. We take suggestions, pick up a commitment, get a sponsor, and begin working steps—all the while thinking, this won’t work for me. We do our best to ignore that devious little voice inside us. After all, what we have been doing up to this point hasn’t really been working either.

As we take these practical actions, the heaviness lifts from our hearts. We experience moments of joy and freedom—clean. We realize that we have been doing all of the things we’d told ourselves were not possible. Now we have six months clean and our lives are so much fuller than we thought they could be. When we share in meetings, we realize that we’ve become those people that we thought were lying to us.

One of the most practical things we do is to show up and tell the truth about our lives. When we no longer need to fabricate stories and justifications, it frees up a lot of mental energy. We share our victories, our process, and our mess as they are happening. While the disease still talks to us, nowadays our recovery also chimes in to remind us that we’re right where we’re supposed to be.

Doing the footwork frees us to live in the present. We have a solid foundation and a network of connections in our recovery community. Our world has become fuller and more fulfilling. We have found a family in Narcotics Anonymous. We want more of these gifts, so we continue to put one foot in front of the other, doing the things that brought us to this point.

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*I will take a practical approach to my recovery today. I’ll thank “the committee” in my head for sharing and take positive actions that enhance my recovery and my life.*
Practicality, Entry #5 of 5

Many of us believe that every day we abstain from using, or take suggestions from our sponsor, we are taking practical action on our decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of our Higher Power (NA Step Working Guides, Step 3, “Turning It Over”).

Sometimes we get anxious about how we’re faring in recovery. Are we doing enough to stay clean? Is our concept of a Higher Power crystal clear? Have we struck the right balance of NA versus life responsibilities? When was the last time we reached out to a newcomer—like really made an effort? “Stop trying to do it perfectly,” a member suggests. “Just stop and turn it over.”

Just turn it over. Just?! *Heavy sigh*

The concept of “turning it over” to our Higher Power can be a tough one for many of us. We can be confused about what the “it” is that we’re turning over, who/what we’re turning it over to, and what “turning it over” is in the first place. Luckily, we have plenty of opportunities to explore this concept in recovery—we can answer all the questions in the Step Working Guides, we can discuss it with our sponsor, we can ask other members whom we trust about their experience, we can devour all Third Step-related passages in NA literature.

But let’s all just take a moment and consider this: since we didn’t use today (very likely since we are reading these words right now), we are clearly taking a practical action of turning our will over. And listen, even if we did use today, right this very second we are in our Higher Power’s will as we take in this moment, alone or with a group. Right now, as we are reading these words or hearing them read aloud by another member, we are having a spiritual experience. We don’t have to force it, or define it, or wonder about it, or control it. We can just reflect on it.

So simple. So practical.

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Right here, right now, in this moment, I’m applying the spiritual principle of practicality. I don’t have to do anything else except acknowledge it. *Deep breath*
Respect, Entry #1

Practicing this principle doesn’t necessarily mean that others respect us; it means we offer others the respect we wish for ourselves, and that we respect ourselves enough to walk in dignity and quiet strength (Guiding Principles, Tradition 11).

The crux of Tradition Eleven—which is about public relations (PR) but can be applied to other aspects of recovery—reminds us that the message of NA is what’s most important, not the messenger. Respect and anonymity are the keys to deciphering the difference between what’s “attraction” and “promotion.” An opportunity to share NA’s message of hope outside of the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous is a privilege for any member and a responsibility not to be taken lightly. Whether it’s a PR activity like speaking to a group of medical professionals, being part of an H&I panel, or helping to explain NA to the family of a sponsee who’s just relapsed, we must avoid our impulse to make the message about us rather than NA. Rather than seeking respect for ourselves, we show our respect to the program—and to our listeners by sharing the NA basics or the impact of the program on our lives, while being real about what NA is and what it’s not.

The same can be said for what happens inside the rooms, whether we’re talking about NA with new members one-on-one, or speaking—at intimate meetings on our cleantime anniversary, at spirited unity day events, or representing our region at the World Service Conference. These are moments when our recovery is best served by the clarity of our message or integrity of our role, not by seeking attention or validation. There’s no need to make inflated claims about our lives in recovery. And look, if we’re sharing at a huge convention, we will get attention and very likely validation! That’s part of the deal. But showing genuine humility and gratitude shows respect for NA and preserves our self-respect, too.

Yes, that’s the crux of it right there: we show respect, rather than seek it. With that as our goal, we can walk with dignity. Keeping our self-promotion in check and leading with attraction enhances our self-respect, too.

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Whether it’s public relations, addict relations, or my relationship to myself, today I will strive to show respect rather than to seek it out.
Respect, Entry #2

As we clean up our wreckage and live differently, we can respect our actions and find respect for ourselves in the process (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to Ourselves”).

Many of the stories we tell about our active addiction depict us thriving on our lack of respectability. Who needs a real job, an education, a place to live, or even a bath? We scoffed at others’ boundaries, the rule of law, authority, and institutions. We turned our backs on many of the values we were taught by our families, cultures, and society. Hiding all our fears behind bravado, a lot of us paid a steep price. We jeopardized relationships and careers, if we had any. In many cases, we lost our freedom. Did we lose our self-respect, too? Or did we just have none to start with?

When we get clean, the rebel in us may be tempted to dismiss “meeting etiquette” as an attempt to make us conform. At some point, most of us notice that being a rebel in NA doesn’t have the payoff that it did on the streets. We don’t gain credibility by being disrespectful. “I thought I was a badass but came to find out that it was just a front to protect myself,” one member shared. Once we start to listen in meetings, get to work on Steps, and are of service, we find ourselves inspired to loosen our grip on our past lifestyles and the version of ourselves in the stories we tell.

On our best days, we want to move on from the past but not without understanding it and learning from it. We learn to take actions that build our lives and help other people. We set boundaries for ourselves and respect those held by others. Our dignity and self-respect are being restored, like our sanity. Perhaps for some of us, this is the first time we have experienced these feelings or state of being in our lives.

Not only do we change our actions but many of us find we have to alter the stories we tell about ourselves. We become less focused on being the product of our wreckage and more about being the product of our recovery. We learn that we are worthy of the lives we have now. We begin to live a life that reflects values that we can be proud of. That’s pretty respectable. And before recovery, who knew we’d ever want that?

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Today, I’ll step back for a moment and look at the life I’m building with some pride and self-respect. It’s working, and I’m worthy of it.
Respect, Entry #3

We start by not engaging in self-abuse and gradually learn to treat our body, mind, and spirit with honor and respect (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Wellness and Health”).

Many of us could accurately describe our active addiction as “suicide on the installment plan.” Thankfully, when we stop using drugs, we eliminate a main catalyst of our self-destructive behavior. Without the compulsion to get high, it’s easier to avoid the degradation and criminality that brought us to new lows again and again.

Abstinence is one clear marker of our restoration to sanity, and it’s certainly a good place to start. Being clean allows us to think more clearly, and that clarity enables us to consider who we’ve been and who we want to be. The Steps offer guidance as we examine our lives, our motivations, and our choices. We learn from the experience of other recovering addicts, and it gives us the courage we need to strip away the guilt, remorse, and shame.

Taking care of our whole selves—body, mind, and spirit—is part of the amends we make to ourselves. Addiction touches all areas of our lives, and so must our recovery. Many of us seek out professional help to find specific healing. One addict shared: “My first sponsor explained that doctors, dentists, and therapists can also be powers greater than myself.”

Still, many of us struggle with the urge to undermine our success or to sabotage healthy impulses. Progress is often two steps forward, one step back—but that’s progress, nonetheless. As with using, we often become aware of harmful habits before we’re willing or able to make a change for the better. As we gain self-respect, our tolerance for self-deception lessens. With the help of our Higher Power, we’re quicker to learn the lessons, to stop unhealthy habits, or to take up new practices that honor our body, mind, and spirit.

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I will honor my recovery process and treat myself with respect today. What can I start or stop doing to better care for myself?
Respect, Entry #4

When we regard one another with respect, we open the door to a different kind of communication (*Living Clean*, Chapter 7, “Principles, Practice, and Perspective”).

Outside of NA, in our specific cultures or neighborhoods, respect was often something we demanded of others or felt we were entitled to based on our status in the community or our egos. Our communication around respect had one purpose: getting our own way. What mattered was how superbly articulate we were about our beliefs, our willingness to go to battle for every one of our opinions, and the sheer loudness of our voice. And if we weren’t among those with status or volume, we usually gave in to their demands.

Inside NA, practicing respect as a spiritual principle has nothing to do with getting our own way or handing over our power to those who command it. Regarding others with respect includes paying attention to how we are communicating—with our voice, facial expressions, body language, or our silence—and then honestly examining how people hear and respond to us. “If I approach another member with my claws out,” one member shared, “I shouldn’t be surprised if they react by slashing back.”

Ideally, practicing respect results in more inclusivity of opinions and more equality in participation. Communicating our respect prioritizes listening over speaking, our common welfare over selfishness. We try to make space for others rather than cutting them out. In NA, respect breeds trust, safety, and well-being—not fear, fragility, and oversized egos.

This perspective takes plenty of work—and plenty of unlearning. For one thing, we must work against our own feelings of superiority, inferiority, or indifference. A member who’s been around for awhile described their experience: “Working the NA steps has made my own beliefs less fragile. I don’t have to defend them as fiercely as I did before. And I don’t have to express my opinion about everything.” Just because someone else’s or the group’s opinion is different from ours doesn’t mean they’re wrong. And if they are wrong, is this a battle that must be fought, or can we make peace and be part of a solution?

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*How am I communicating respect to my fellow NA members today? How am I being respectful to the meeting, to the group’s conscience, to the Traditions, to NA as a whole?*
Responsibility, Entry #1

We don’t always want to work our program, but we know the rewards we get when we take responsibility for our recovery—and the consequences when we do not (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Keys to Freedom”).

Early recovery—especially our first go at it—can seem almost magical. For many addicts, things get so much better so quickly when we first find NA. We put some days together clean. We start feeling physically better. It’s easier to pay the rent because we don’t have a habit, so we gain a little stability. Those NA folks are really encouraging and—what?—is that hope I feel?

Soon, the minor miracles of early recovery—like paying bills, eating actual meals, or having regular bowel movements—lose some of their charm. It dawns on us that just not using is not enough. Despite having a cool sponsor and some friends who are clean, NA activities and a roof over our heads, we still have that gnawing feeling that something is missing.

While surrounding ourselves with good people is important, recovery is not contagious—we won’t catch it simply by hanging around. This is an important realization, but it’s what we do with it that matters. Ignore it and know that using may start to appeal to us. Get busy and reap more of the rewards of recovery. Sooner or later—and at multiple points in our journey—each of us faces these alternatives: Stay clean but remain miserable and set ourselves up for possible relapse, or take responsibility for our recovery.

And so we engage in what’s before us: the work of recovery. It’s a twelve-step program, why not work all twelve? The rewards are many and the most valuable among them intangible. In recovery, we become self-aware and—unlike when we were in the grips of the disease—we have the freedom to choose what to do with what we learn about ourselves. The road to spiritual wealth opens up when we accept responsibility for our recovery and all it entails.

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I will check in with my feelings and confide in a friend today. I will apply the spiritual principle of responsibility by identifying what’s happening with me and being open to change.
Responsibility, Entry #2

Finding the line between personal responsibility and willful control is a challenge (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Letting Ourselves Go”).

After years of willfully trying to control our lives, our moods, and other people to get what we want, we arrive in the rooms of NA and are told we must surrender every day and “turn our will over” to a Higher Power. On top of that, an inventory shows us that being controlling is a character defect that has constantly placed our needs at the center of all of our relationships. We thought we needed that control. How else were we going to get things done—the correct way? (Ours.)

“So, what are we supposed to do then?” a newer member demanded to know. “Just casually sit back and not handle things because we can’t control the outcome or other people? I thought I’m supposed to be responsible now.”

There’s a fine line between being responsible and grabbing control. Few situations are black and white, all or nothing, so discerning the position of that line may be a lifelong endeavor. Few life lessons in recovery are learned in one go, but that doesn’t mean we don’t get better at living them. It takes much effort to gain the wisdom to know the difference between the things we can—and perhaps must—change and the things we must accept.

“So then, how?” the newcomer—and everyone else—wants to know.

The “how” of it is pretty standard NA stuff, isn’t it? We listen to others’ experience and talk about our struggles in this area. We seek suggestions and take them. Through Step work, we reveal our self-centered tendencies and find strategies to address them. We say “yes” when asked to help, but we don’t sacrifice our needs either. We own up to our mistakes and own our assets, too. Crucially, we start the lifelong process of assessing the difference between those two sparring voices in our heads. One is our disease that will tell us to avoid, deny, or control. And the other, which is connected to our Higher Power’s will, is rooted in our values and our conscience, and, yes, our responsibility to do the right thing.

What can I do today to explore this concept of personal responsibility versus willful control? What am I holding onto that I need to let go of, and what is something I’m avoiding that’s my job to get done?
Responsibility, Entry #3

We can no longer blame people, places, and things for our addiction. We must face our problems and our feelings (Basic Text, Chapter 3, “Why Are We Here?”).

When we were using, denial shielded us from recognizing the part we played in our own destruction. We blamed our circumstances or the people around us for our drug use. Every once in a while, some light would shine through the cracks in our denial. A quiet voice within us said, “If you keep doing what you’re doing, you’re going to keep getting what you’re getting.” By the time we stumble into the rooms of NA, self-deception was often second nature. We may have been so used to blaming others that it took work for us to spot this mindset and still more work for us to fully appreciate its implications.

Personal inventories help us to understand our distorted sense of reality. We decipher “our part”—no more, no less—and take responsibility for it. Yes, we may have been intentionally hurtful at times. Just as often, though, our intentions were good or at least very human. We attempted to wrestle some sense of security and significance from an uncertain world, we put ourselves in a position to be hurt, or we clung to others in hopes that they might save us from ourselves. Understanding the patterns in our thinking and behavior helps us recognize them when they crop up again as they often do.

Some of us are survivors of unspeakable trauma. We have real emotional wounds caused by wartime combat, physical or sexual assault, natural disasters, or extreme poverty. We are not at fault for these horrific experiences. We find ways to reckon with our trauma in our own time and often with help from resources outside of NA. Our responsibility begins when the Steps uncover a need for more work. Real healing takes courage and persistence.

Recovery gives us the opportunity to know ourselves, to answer to our own conscience, and to own our part instead of blaming forces outside ourselves. We take responsibility and reap the rewards that come from being accountable for our actions: we’re capable of feeling the whole range of human emotions and ready to face life on life’s terms.

I will not hide behind the disease of addiction, today, nor will I cast blame on others in my orbit. I will practice responsibility by accepting my part in the problem and my role in the solution.
Responsibility, Entry #4

We sometimes belittle the struggles we face as "gold-plated problems," but if we ignore them we may get a "gold-plated" relapse (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Finding Our Place in the World”).

In Narcotics Anonymous, our primary purpose is to carry the message to the still-suffering addict. Cleantime doesn’t make us immune to pain or problems, so any of us is eligible to be that addict on any given day.

But what if the message seems to apply less to us than it used to? We get some time under our belts and our lives are progressing well. We get the trappings that many of us earn from being a productive member of society. When our outsides look great and our cleantime anniversaries stack up, are our problems really that bad when we compare them to when we were using? Nah, we’re fine.

Quality problems. Luxury problems. Cadillac problems. Gold-plated problems. We’ve heard them all. But what we’ve also heard time and again is what happens when we don’t deal with our problems. While our struggles today may look different from the ones we had while using or in early recovery, our disease remains the same. Left unchecked, it may lead us to relapse or to the all-too-familiar abstinent, but miserable. Having time clean doesn’t give us an excuse to avoid our problems, deny they exist, or be too ashamed to do anything about them. Yes, the newcomer is the most important person in the meeting and there are others seemingly in worse shape than us who need our help. But belittling our own struggles helps no one in the end. Pain is pain, no matter who we are or where we are in our recovery. Just like at the beginning of our journey, we’re likely to avoid our pain and our problems, because we want to avoid taking responsibility. Change is hard.

Lucky for us, the solution is still the same NA solution. Ultimately, we have to apply what we’ve learned in the past: we are addicts trying to stay clean a day at a time and worthy of compassion and support from our fellow NA members. Like always, it is our own responsibility to own up to our struggles, to ask for and accept help, re-engage with recovery, and take action. Those solutions aren’t gold-plated; they’re solid gold.

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Today I won’t minimize my problems to avoid coming up with a solution. I won’t put myself in a different category from other members. We are all the same, and we all need help sometimes. The solution is the same no matter how long I’ve been around here.
Responsibility, Entry #5

Although we are not responsible for our disease, we are responsible for our recovery (Basic Text, Chapter 3, “Why Are We Here?”).

“Responsibility” was a dirty word in active addiction. We feared it. We avoided it. The people close to us—and perhaps those in law enforcement and the justice system—told us over and over: “Take some responsibility for your life.” We thought freedom meant freedom from responsibilities, but, ultimately, we found it to be quite the opposite. We were enslaved by our addiction. For many of us, this version of freedom landed us behind bars.

We are not “bad” people because we suffer from the disease of addiction and we’re not bad people trying to become “good” in NA. But while having the disease isn’t our fault, it’s still important to recognize that many of the consequences we face stem from our own decisions. We made choices. We took action. A member shared, “All my life I saw myself as a victim of my circumstances, and I made blaming others the centerpiece of my victimhood.” Through Step work, we discover that it’s important to take responsibility for our past, even though we are powerless to change it. To move forward, we cannot cling to guilt over our past actions, nor can we succumb to the shame from the social stigma of being an addict. We can’t let our disease continue to overwhelm and paralyze us. We must act differently.

NA offers us a chance to take responsibility for our present and future lives. We do this slowly at first—perhaps by performing the most basic of life tasks, being of service in meetings, getting a sponsor. We discover that people can influence our recovery, but we have to do the work ourselves if we are to reap its benefits. “No one goes to meetings for me, calls my sponsor, or works Steps for me,” the member continued. “No one else is to blame if I choose to neglect my recovery and am caused pain by my choices—or cause pain to others.”

For many of us, the work we do in NA reveals a new perspective on our disease. Many of us become grateful for our addiction, because our journey toward responsibility in recovery has made our lives so beautiful and fulfilling. And so free.

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I’m not responsible for the way I’m wired, but I am responsible for my life and my choices. Today, I will refrain from blaming others for the consequences of my actions. Today, for me, responsibility equals freedom.
Service, Entry #1 of 8

Everything that occurs in the course of NA service must be motivated by the desire to more successfully carry the message of recovery to the addict who still suffers (Basic Text, Introduction).

Of all the spiritual principles in this book, service may the most directly related to action. Sure, service has a place in our hearts, minds, and souls, but we aren’t practicing this principle unless we are doing something.

Our primary purpose in Narcotics Anonymous is service. Essentially, that means carrying the message of recovery to the still-suffering addict, which can be any of us at any moment. Participating in service to other addicts, both on an individual level and to the Fellowship, helps to keep each other and NA alive and thriving.

We often say there are no “musts” in NA, but the Basic Text says otherwise in one of its earliest passages. Depending on who we are, where we are in our recovery, or even what we ate for breakfast that morning, we may find this direction—that all of NA service must be motivated by our primary purpose—either inspirational or distressing. Some of us may be more driven than ever to carry the message. Others may start to second-guess our motivations for service. We may get defensive at the absoluteness of the statement: “everything” we’re doing “must” be motivated by the purest, most fundamental “desire” to help another? Really? All the time?

Truthfully, the framework of NA, the Steps, Traditions, Principles, and Concepts are indeed oriented toward our singular purpose. Because of the simplicity of service as a principle and its reliance on action to practice it, showing up is all we have to do, really: go to a meeting and share what’s going on, answer the phone when our sponsee rings, pitch in for the 7th Tradition, fill the tea kettle. We come early and stay late.

Our purely motivated desire to carry the message won’t always be there, but we take the action anyway. That’s service in a nutshell.

Simply, I will carry the message to the still-suffering addict today with intention. I’ll contemplate my level of desire—and practice willingness along with service.
Service, Entry #2 of 8

Service changes our relationship to our own lives. We learn to put love and gratitude into action, and when we mobilize our good feelings they have a way of spreading through all our affairs (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Being of Service”).

The Basic Text tells us that “we can only keep what we have by giving it away.” That’s as true for us as individuals as it is for NA as a whole. When we share our experience with new members, we’re reminded where we came from and exactly how far we’ve come. We don’t need loads of cleantime to start reaping the benefits of service. One member recalled, "My sponsor taught me to carry a pen to every meeting so that I could give my phone number to newcomers. I asked, 'but aren't I still a newcomer?' and was reminded that I had 30 more days than the person that just walked in the door." Reflecting on service in early recovery, another member shared: "I was making more than just coffee, I was making friends and beginning to feel a part of my home group.” We gain a sense of belonging as we give of ourselves. It feels good and we want more. We put love and gratitude into action as we serve.

We focus on carrying the message and let the other details—in life, in meetings, in our heads—sort themselves out in their own time. A shared commitment to service helps us hear each other and to choose to believe that we’re all doing our best. We love and, therefore, serve NA even when we disagree about the best way to go about it. We contribute to the lively and loving atmosphere of recovery in our meetings and participate in the countless incognito efforts that make this thing work. We arrive at meetings early to welcome each new face or stay late to clean up and put away chairs. Each of these actions expresses our gratitude.

We bring this mindset with us into the world outside NA. We recognize our capacity to help others and know that it feels good to do good. We get some freedom from self-obsession and the opportunity to practice loving-kindness in our affairs. We gain a sense of fulfillment as we engage in acts of service inside and outside of Narcotics Anonymous.

I will express love and gratitude by serving the greater good.
When we engage in selfless service, we find that all of the principles we have come to love and learn are called upon. It isn’t easy to get out of our own way, but that is precisely what frees us from our self-made prisons (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Spirituality in Action”).

We hear a lot about the interpersonal difficulties that arose in that infamous NA business meeting. Perhaps too much is made of those times when there was too much talking (or shouting) and not enough listening, when fists flew, or chairs were flung. “Well, someone around here sure needs to practice some principles!” we think. But sometimes the most pronounced ego in the room isn’t an overtly sensitive newcomer’s or that revered oldtimer’s—some tender soul who surely needs to practice unity, patience, and understanding. Sometimes the ego that’s a ticking time bomb is ours. We are the ones other members put on their resentment lists, and whose sponsors advise, “Pray for them.”

And being a sponsor will undoubtedly require practicing willingness, empathy, and acceptance. We worry if we say “yes, I’ll sponsor you,” we’ll mess them up worse. We’re afraid of being too judgmental or not attentive enough. What if they lie to us? What if they won’t do what we suggest? What if they think we suck as a sponsor and break up with us? We want to deflect the request, but do that in an enlightened manner: “You’ll be better off with a sponsor who can get out of their own way.” Instead, we agree, because that’s how we were taught and that’s how we want to live now.

Frankly, no one among us is able to practice principles in all of our affairs every minute of every day, from now until we are buried with the infinity medallion. But giving of ourselves—our time, energy, passion, and skills—opens us up to endless opportunities to get out of our own way. Our character defect of selfishness takes a back seat to the spiritual principle of compassion for others. We practice courage and vulnerability by committing to something we’ve never done before. We practice surrender when we take someone through the Twelve Steps. Humility comes up too—and forgiveness—when someone we trust tells us the truth about how we behaved inappropriately in a business meeting.

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Today, I will take stock of the spiritual principles I’m practicing in my service commitments. If service is not currently part of my program, I’ll practice accountability, participation, and discipline, and get on it!
Service, Entry #4 of 8

Service begins when we put ourselves aside and welcome the newcomer. That simple action might be the most important thing we ever do (Guiding Principles, Tradition 2, “For Groups”).

Many of us recall being welcomed by total strangers as we stumbled into our first Narcotics Anonymous meeting. We felt oddly at home in the rooms of recovery and that fragile sense of belonging made all the difference. Every gesture mattered: a warm smile, a gentle hug, a meeting directory. When members looked in our eyes, asked our name, and treated us like a human being, we were stunned—in a good way.

Welcoming newcomers is one of the most significant things we do in NA. It’s important to be welcomed and it’s important to be welcoming. Those of us who have trouble getting out of our own way can extract a powerful lesson from graciously welcoming new members. We take a break from our busy brains and reinforce our belief in the NA program: “Against all odds, we are clean and it can work for you, too.” It’s a message that we all need to hear; it keeps us anchored in Narcotics Anonymous.

When we set aside our thoughts and feelings to welcome the newcomer, we reinforce our stake in our recovery. We defy the self-centered and self-seeking nature of the disease of addiction. We shelve our burdens and answer that call from a newcomer. It offers perspective and reminds us that “we keep what we have by giving it away.” Each act of service strengthens our foundation in recovery and deepens our investment in this new way of life.

I will extend a warm welcome to a new member and pay attention to how it benefits us both.
Service, Entry #5 of 8

We learn who we are precisely when we forget ourselves in service to others (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to a Higher Power”).

Before we got to NA, we were all about "the getting and using and finding ways and means to get more." On the rare occasion that a feeling surface, we’d snuff it out with more drugs. This habit of reaching outside of ourselves to fix what’s inside follows us into recovery. Our inventories reveal how fear-based defects come into play as we’ve tried to protect ourselves or avoid discomfort. Instead of trying to wrestle happiness from life, we learn to be patient and strong, to give time to time, and even to live with uncertainty. Although we’re sometimes tempted to control and manipulate, or to tune out with any number of distractions, service provides a healthier alternative.

Service allows us to get out of our heads and into action. Whether setting up chairs or speaking with a newcomer, being of service puts us in the moment. “It’s such a relief to be right here, right now,” as one member put it. Even when we’re going through our own storms, serving others keeps us in today.

Service can bring out the best in us. It helps us figure out who we are or who we want to be. We show up for each other and our commitments regardless of what’s going on in our lives and realize that we’ve become reliable and trustworthy. We practice compassion and become more compassionate. We listen without judgment and become less judgmental. As one member reflected, “I took this newcomer under my wing, hell-bent to save her life. I saved my own in the process by being the best version of myself.”

It happens all the time around here. We set aside our worries to serve others and we’re reminded of our strengths. Asking, “How can I help?” plops us into a petri dish for applying spiritual principles, growing good character, and exercising our best qualities.

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I will allow acts of service to guide me away from self-centered thinking, revealing my best qualities. I will set aside my own wants and needs and build some muscle memory around practicing spiritual principles.
Service, Entry #6 of 8

Service gives us opportunities to grow in ways that touch all parts of our lives (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today—Living the Program).

The Basic Text describes who we used to be in active addiction as "devious, frightened loners." Many of us come to NA with very limited healthy and productive life experience. We may never have held a legal, on-the-books job and don't have the skills to get one. Or we may have skills and experience, but our dodgy work history reflects our using more than our employability. Our relationships, if they even still exist, are a mess—with our loved ones, with ourselves, with a Higher Power. Our self-serving behavior and our aversion to being truly vulnerable and intimate with others have kept us isolated. And then there's the spiritual deadness so many of us arrive with—and either the hardness or the utter fearfulness that comes with it.

In meetings, we hear members share that their lives are “bigger,” “amazing,” and “beyond my wildest dreams.” Initially, we are skeptical at best, especially when they also tell us that’s not because of material gains but because of what they’ve gained by being of service to Narcotics Anonymous. A member shared, “Through service, my relationship to humanity was restored.” Seriously? All of humanity?

Most of us get involved in service because we’re told: “that’s how we stay clean.” We don’t fully grasp its holistic benefits until we experience them ourselves. Through our NA commitments, we learn basic accounting, public speaking, and good communication skills. We learn how to listen—in meetings, to a fellow member who needs to vent, to people who we don’t even like. We learn how to treat others with respect when we disagree. We learn to show up to do the job no matter what. And more.

These are qualities we take with us wherever we go, in all our affairs. NA doesn't just help us stay clean; it transforms us into people who can make a positive impact inside and outside of the rooms.

What aspects of my life have been touched by NA service? Through service, what can I do today—at work, at home, or wherever I go—to make a positive impact?
Service helps us feel like we belong. We have a place and a purpose. The experience can be humbling. Doing as the group asks, rather than as we choose, is a form of surrender (Guiding Principles, Tradition One, “For Groups).

Feelings of belonging don’t often come easy for us addicts, though some of us faked it well. We were social chameleons who so often felt like imposters, masking insecurity with perfectionism and hiding our control issues behind allegedly high standards and attention to detail. For others of us, that game seemed like way too much work. We were too cool for all that. We prized our loner status. Or maybe we were just too high to care. Whatever our situation was, most of us have been on a difficult path to a sense of community and solidarity.

In meetings, we hear right away that our desire to get clean, no matter how desperately or indifferently we feel that, is our ticket to membership. We are also told—and shown by example—how important service is in solidifying our relationship to the Fellowship and in helping us to stay clean.

“Until I eventually took my sponsor’s direction and took on a service commitment, I never felt like I was really a part of in NA,” one member shared. “I never thought I wanted to be. All of a sudden, I had a voice. I started to use it, and people even listened.”

“I took on five commitments in the first 30 days,” a newer member shared. “I stayed clean, but I made everyone bananas with my brilliant ideas to make everything better. Soon I found out about ‘group conscience’—which wasn’t necessarily the same as my conscience. I always wanted to know why why why.”

And someone with a lot of time shared: “After 33 years, I still find it hard to ‘let go and let the group’...I want to explain all the history of how we do things in NA. I may be older, but that doesn’t always make me the wisest. Unfortunately!”

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If I’m not an NA commitment whore I’m going to become one (within reason). If I’m a talker in business meetings, I’m going to make an effort to be a listener. If I’m a doer, I’m going to teach someone else how. If I’m a control freak, I’m going to try to “let go, and let the group”...just for today.
Service, Entry #8 of 8

Just as making amends teaches us to be more forgiving, selfless service brings generosity, compassion, and awareness of purpose (Guiding Principles, Tradition 2, “Word by Word”).

Service gives us practice at interacting with others and becomes the basis of mutual support and connection. Whether we show up early to make coffee, take a panel into a mental health facility, or contribute our experience to a new literature project—each act of service offers lessons we can carry into our daily lives.

Some sponsors have a way of tricking us into service. We tag along to fill literature orders and the next thing we know, we’re committee members. We become more generous with our time and energy because we find some satisfaction in helping out. Plus, the company’s good and it doesn’t cost a thing. Our generosity extends to the rest of our relationships as well—going the extra mile to help friends, family, and even strangers, at times. We feel ourselves changing as we become more bighearted and less self-obsessed.

We show up early to open the meeting facility, knowing we may be the first person a newcomer encounters. One member shared, “I know that the seats I’m setting up in my homegroup are the same seats that were set up for me before I got here.” We remember how it felt when we set foot in our first meeting: anxious, guarded, and just a little hopeful. We see ourselves in these potential new members. Our hearts swell with compassion as we welcome them.

Service gives us a sense of purpose. Each time we say “yes” to a service opportunity, we connect with and contribute to something greater than ourselves. Acts of service to the Fellowship deepen our devotion to Narcotics Anonymous. We are thoughtful and caring individuals—qualities we discovered and honed in NA service. We have built a life worth staying clean for.

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I will nurture my humanity by serving Narcotics Anonymous, my family, my friends, and my community.
**Simplicity, Entry #1**

The simple, priceless gift we give each other is the recognition of our humanity (*Guiding Principles*, Tradition Eight).

When we’re new in the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous, it seems that everyone is speaking a language we don’t quite understand. All seem to know the order of things, the readings, the prayer at the end. Newly clean (or trying to be), we’re already immensely uncomfortable when we’re encouraged by someone to talk about what’s going on with us—*to a roomful of strangers?* We don’t know what to say, but we try anyway. People in the room vigorously nod at us, like they understand us. “Thanks for what you said,” someone tells us during the break. “You really helped me today. So glad you’re here.” *This is different.*

“I don’t even know what the hell I just said!” we reply. “I have no idea what I’m doing.” More vigorous nodding. *What is wrong with these people?*

NA’s practice of remaining “forever nonprofessional,” as per our Eighth Tradition, suggests that we are perfectly capable of delivering a message of recovery—even before we’re aware that’s what we’re doing. We don’t need professional training or coaching to share in a meeting. We don’t have to know all the NA jargon or have memorized passages in our literature. We don’t need to wait until we’ve completed a full round of Steps to give what has been so freely given to us, as a sponsor or as just one addict helping another. We are already experts. All of us, from the oldest oldtimer to the newest newcomer.

There is beauty and simplicity in the therapeutic value of one addict helping another. A desire to stop using gets us in the door, and our humanity gives us the capacity to listen and empathize, to share what’s in our hearts and on our minds, to be generous, and, crucially, to accept the generosity of others. Each of us finds our expertise as recovering addicts when we accept our condition as addicts and start to tap into our assets.

This principle of simplicity is aligned with NA’s commitment to anonymity: no matter who we are, we are deserving of each other’s recognition that we are human and worthy of love and acknowledgment. As NA members, we give each other the simple gift of being a part of something greater than each of us. Priceless. Simple. Free.

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*Today I’m going to do my best to acknowledge my fellow members’ humanity and share my own. That’s all I have to know how to do.*
Simplicity, Entry #2

When we allow spirituality to be simple, we allow it to be universal *(Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Spirituality Is Practical”).*

Addicts have a knack for complicating things. Finding a spirituality that works for us is no exception. Spirituality is central to Narcotics Anonymous, and what that looks like is up to each of us. We engage in a personal journey of discovery. The Steps help us to define and develop spiritual connections, and we free ourselves to live according to our convictions.

Many of us were relieved that “figuring out the whole God thing could be a lifelong project,” as one addict put it. “I was able to hear the message and receive the gift of recovery without subscribing to any specific set of beliefs. What a relief!”

Some of us have to try out many belief systems, conventional and otherwise. We may find a good fit, or maybe we eliminate a few potential paths. A buffet approach—a little of this and a little of that—suits many of this.

“I realized that my effort to define a Higher Power was boxing it in, limiting how my Higher Power-operated,” one member shared. “When I stopped imposing limitations, I started to see my HP everywhere. It is everyone and everything—it just is.”

The bond we share with other recovering addicts is both simple and sacred. The Steps help us understand ourselves, and that makes it easier to connect with others. “Caring about my fellow members helps me,” one member shared, “I notice when the light comes back into a newcomer’s eyes, and it is one of the most beautiful gifts of recovery for me.” Many of us approach spirituality as a practical matter. We know that when we show up at a meeting, we feel less alone. When we are of service, we think less of ourselves. When we share a hug with another member, we feel loved. These simple, spiritual actions are at the heart of our program of recovery.

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*I will connect with other members today and appreciate the simple spirituality in those connections.*
Simplicity, Entry #3

Clarity and simplicity are keys to our message...Narcotics Anonymous, all by itself, is enough. We promise freedom from active addiction (Guiding Principles, Tradition Ten).

Tradition Ten is pretty simple: addicts have opinions, but NA does not. Topics like politics and religion create unnecessary controversy and conflict. While civic involvement and participation in our faith communities may certainly help us as individuals to get and stay clean, NA is mute on these topics. To maintain an atmosphere of recovery for everyone, we do our best to leave potential distractions at the door.

Relatedly, here’s a good one that we’ve heard often: “Narcotics Anonymous is a simple program for complicated people.” And then there’s this gem: “Opinions are like a-holes. Everybody’s got one.” While that statement may ring true, it’s not an NA “opinion,” so let’s move straightaway to the NA message...

Our NA message is clear and simple. Any of us can stop using and stay stopped. Our obsession to use can dissipate. And we find a new way to live our lives. Freedom from active addiction is our only promise.

The program of NA has enough to keep us busy—no need to overcomplicate it. We’ve got Steps, Traditions, and Concepts—twelve of each. We have spiritual principles. We have service, literature, and our Higher Power. We have a vision of making NA accessible to addicts around the world. And we have each other. We need each other to stay clean and to find freedom from active addiction and the complicated mess that goes along with it. Keep it simple.

One disease, one program, one promise.

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NA is enough to keep me clean and free. I’m grateful for all my human complexities, for the outside support I may have, and for the activities and worlds I engage with. But I need to keep my recovery simple. I can commit to that for my own healing—as well as for everyone else who’s seeking freedom in the room with me today.
Understanding, Entry #1 of 4

As with so much else that happens in NA, the free exchange of experience and ideas in an atmosphere of support and mutual respect leads to growth and understanding. (Guiding Principles, Introduction, “Group Inventory and Service Workshops”).

“It’s like I had blinders on, dark sunglasses, and earplugs, too—oh, and tape over my mouth!” a member shared. “My view of life was so cloudy, dark, and narrow. And secretive. No information got in, and none came out.”

“Same with me,” another member responded, “except for the tape. I had no qualms about opening my mouth and telling you whose fault everything was—and what your problems were, too!”

Before getting clean, we believed that no one else could understand our unique struggles and situations. Our poor coping and communication skills often secured our role as being woefully misunderstood members of our community. We judged others—sometimes internally, sometimes verbally, but always harshly—and we perceived that we too were harshly judged.

Opening up our hearts to others members’ struggles—and being vulnerable about our own—helps us heal the wounds that we carried with us into the rooms of NA. When we become willing to have an honest dialogue about our ideas and hear other perspectives, we expand our self-awareness and can benefit more from the wisdom and experience of others. Allowing ourselves to be present creates an environment of mutual understanding and respect.

“Situations that once meant nothing to me, now have deeper meaning,” the first member said. “My understanding of something greater than myself continues to evolve. My outlook on life is way more expansive.”

“Yeah, NA has opened my mind in ways I never could have imagined,” said the other. “And sometimes I even keep my mouth shut.”

Feeling loved—and understood—changes us.

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*Today I will shed the blinders, dark glasses, and earplugs. I’ll be open. I’ll listen. … As for the mouth tape, I’ll evaluate each individual situation as to whether or not I need to leave it right where it is.*
Understanding, Entry #2 of 4

We begin to understand that other people have real feelings and that we are capable of hurting them if we are careless (*It Works*, Step Nine).

Active addiction caused us shame, and shame feels lousy. We learned to shut down our feelings, to turn our backs to our emotional wellbeing. Before drugs were a problem, they were our solution. Our preferred state—a drug-induced haze—made it easier to shut down those pesky feelings.

When we get to NA, we start to feel better...we start to feel *everything* better. Early recovery can seem like a feelings-rollercoaster that takes us from uncomfortable to exhilarating with every turn. Since numbing our feelings isn’t a viable option, we take a stab at understanding ourselves and the effects of the disease. Step One helps us to see how powerlessness and unmanageability shaped our every attempt to control our drug use. We begin to identify our feelings and verbalize our thoughts and emotions. When members nod and laugh in recognition as we share, we experience how good it feels to be understood.

We are inspired to be more understanding and empathetic. We practice being thoughtful and kind and others reciprocate. We gain an awareness of how our behavior affects others. We learn to practice discretion and keep our unsolicited opinions to ourselves, at times—this is new! Where once we were careless, practicing understanding calls on us to be considerate of others.

We gain valuable insight as we inventory our behavior. Most of us find that we’ve been on both sides of hurt feelings. This brings our understanding of ourselves and others to a whole new level.

We gain additional clarity in the amends process. We rally the courage and willingness to meet with the people we have harmed, to own our mistakes, and to change our behavior. We apply the principle of understanding by moving through our lives with more care and concern. Because we’re human, there will be missteps, but as members of NA, we have a process for staying clear and current.

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*I have a choice about my behavior today. I choose to be considerate of other people’s feelings and my own emotional wellbeing. I will allow understanding to influence my actions.*
Understanding, Entry #3 of 4

Sometimes we come face-to-face with life’s most difficult circumstances. Our relationships with our sponsor and sponsees can offer the support and understanding we need to keep moving forward (Sponsorship, Chapter 4, “The Sponsorship Relationship”).

Life’s realities, inevitabilities, and its bewildering tragedies often challenge our recovery. To survive such situations, we rely on our relationships with other recovering addicts. We are told: “We never have to use again. No matter what.” We see vast evidence of that truth in our experiences and through the stories of other members.

When we read a quotation like the one above and contemplate how it applies to us, it’s likely we’ll think about the people we’ve helped and who’ve helped us when we’ve had terrible things happen to us. (Yes, often they are sponsors and sponsees, but just as often they’ve been regular ol’ NA members.) Other addicts have understood and stood by us. Many have experienced similar circumstances or can introduce us to someone in NA who has.

But what about when we’ve created those situations, when we’ve committed serious crimes that result in serious consequences, when we’ve been the victimizer instead of the one who’s been hurt? Can we stay clean through that? Are we worthy of the support and understanding of our fellow NA members?

“No matter what.”

Though we don’t condone each other’s every action, practicing understanding is not conditional, and we are worthy of it—no matter what. Understanding means identifying with each other and helping each other through seemingly unliveable times, as well as understanding that despite our negative or harmful behaviors we are all still addicts in need of empathy. Understanding is a critical expression of our primary purpose of carrying the message to every addict—in meetings, at home, on the streets, and in jails and institutions. With that generosity of spirit—plus some forgiveness and tolerance—moving forward and healing is possible for all of us.

Just as I have been shown understanding from those in my circle during the worst of times, I will commit to showing up for others, no matter what their particular circumstances are.
Understanding, Entry #4 of 4

Our fellowship matures and develops as each of us brings our increasing understanding to the table; we grow from one another’s experience when we are willing to share and to listen with an open mind (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “A Spiritual, Not Religious Program”).

When we come into recovery, some of us dust off a faith tradition that we were raised with. Others develop their own framework for spiritual beliefs. Those of us with an anti-religious bias bristled at seeing “God” sprinkled throughout the Steps —what have we gotten ourselves into? We were relieved when we learned that we could pursue any kind of spirituality that suited us.

As we learn about the Traditions, the importance of making room for everyone becomes clear. We do our best to avoid lingo associated with any particular path when we share in meetings. We try to convey our experiences with spiritual growth in language that’s inclusive, understandable, and respectful to those with different beliefs. When we use NA language to express our deepening spirituality, we strengthen the link between our spiritual lives and what we’ve gained from living the Twelve Steps.

Over time, we all make peace with the fact that spirituality is central to the NA program. We each arrive at our own sense of spirituality that works. We listen to addicts share the integral part their spiritual awakenings have played in cementing their foundation of recovery. Our sponsors, friends, and predecessors offer their insights on our spiritual, not religious, program and we gain a deeper understanding of our own beliefs as we work Steps and apply Traditions. Intimate conversations help us to articulate what we believe and allow us to see how much our paths converge. NA language helps us to rise above the barriers that naming names and rituals might create. One member shared, “Our spiritual growth enables us to listen to others with an open mind. This leads to a greater understanding of ourselves, others, and the world around us.” We keep coming back and we see how this program works in each other’s lives. We have faith, above all, in the process of recovery we’ve found in NA.

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I will listen with an open mind and an open heart when other members share their experiences with spirituality, coming from a place of understanding and curiosity.