Empathy, Entry #1 of 6

As I sit here in my cell, I know there are people out there following in my footsteps, and it brings tears to my eyes, because I know the pain they are feeling (Behind the Walls, Is NA for you?).

Before we find NA and a path toward empathy and healing, a lot of us find jails first. Some of us follow predecessors into a life that we see no way out of. Others of us just see opportunities to take advantage, to make money, and to get one more that leads us down a similar path—and we take them because we’re addicts. We push away those who care about us. We end up desperately trying to gain control because we have completely lost it. We live in constant fear and shame and do whatever we can to suppress those feelings. We refuse help. We end up locked up. For many of us, this cycle repeats, over and over.

Along the way, we get exposed to NA and life behind bars gives us time to consider our choices: we can continue down the path of self-destruction and harming others, or we can follow one toward healing that is available to any addict through the Twelve Steps. We opt for the latter and begin to follow different predecessors. We are shown empathy by our fellow recovering addicts—through H&I, at NA meetings run by other inmates, or when just a couple of us get together and make a meeting. We work a program in whatever way we can. Our hearts open, particularly to those we’re locked up with who we see struggling with their disease. We think of those from our past who are still running. We pray that they find the hope and freedom that we’ve found.

Word travels fast inside, so it’s no secret that we’re in recovery and available to help. We do our best to draw people to us, instead of pushing them away. We try to be a good role model, and when the opportunity strikes, we reach out to the still-suffering addict. We seek healthy companionship and solidarity with one another. We empathize with the pain of each other’s pasts and with the struggles recovery entails.

I will take whatever actions I can to help others find and stay on the path that I have found. Two addicts make a meeting, and I will be one of them. I will let another addict know, “You never have to use again.”
Empathy, Entry #2 of 6

That wordless language of recognition, belief and faith, which we call empathy, created the atmosphere in which we could feel time, touch reality and recognize spiritual values long lost to many of us (Basic Text, Chapter 8: We Do Recover).

For some of us, our first perceptible encounter with a Power greater than ourselves comes in the form of other recovering addicts. We find it in that vibe we feel in the rooms of NA. Many of us pick up on it even before we’ve taken that leap and given abstinence a try. We sense this energy unlike anything we’ve experienced elsewhere. One addict described it this way: “I felt oddly connected to these complete strangers and they seemed to know me, to understand, and to genuinely want to help.”

Putting this intriguing something into words is difficult at best and runs the risk of becoming quickly outdated since the words to describe it change with the times. To our ear, our predecessors’ attempt to explain it may sound pretty trippy today. It’s hard to capture the essence of this almost indescribable thing in words. Had our French-speaking members written “We Do Recover,” they may have used the phrase “je ne sais quoi,” which translates literally to “I don’t know what” but signifies something more in its naming of the unnamable. As the Basic Text notes, “The problem with literature is language.”

To be sure, the atmosphere of recovery we find in NA is intangible. Maybe it’s too cosmic or mystical to pin down in a description that will stand the test of time and translations. Even so, groups and service bodies sometimes find it useful to talk about how we support or create an atmosphere of recovery. Most will identify empathy as a key ingredient.

Perhaps empathy stands out as central to our atmosphere because it’s a quality that’s been missing in our lives when we get to the rooms. Nevertheless, we recognize and respond to the empathy like it’s a long-lost friend. The world has little empathy for using addicts. NA is different and thank goodness it is.

I will listen with my heart today and empathize with the struggles and victories of fellow members.
Empathy, Entry #3 of 6

Empathy means we get each other; we see the hidden darkness and love and hurt, and we understand (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Fellowship”).

As newcomers, we often were suspicious when NA members told us “I get you” after we shared. When someone said, “I’ve been there,” we thought, *no way anyone has been through what I’ve been through.* Even scarier is when someone says, “I see you.” *If someone can see me, then they know how horrible I am.*

A lot of us reject empathy at first, because we misinterpret it as sympathy, like someone feeling sorry for us. What we begin to understand, as we keep coming back, is that our fellow NA members are feeling our pain with us. We get each other. Our situations and experiences may be different, even unique, but our suffering is not. All of us came to our first NA meeting having fought to keep our addiction going and having lost that fight.

Over time, the value of empathy is revealed. After we surrender to the fact that we belong in NA, it is others’ empathy that makes us feel safe enough to accept help. We learn we don’t have to hide—we can remove the mask we’ve been wearing, whether it’s one projecting intimidation, righteousness, innocence, or invisibility. We can allow ourselves to be seen below the surface and accept that others do understand us. And in turn, we start to identify and empathize with other addicts in the room.

Being understood can be scary in a different way, too, because we witness people who’ve been through similar situations as us who have taken positive action. They are clean and are taking responsibility for their lives, their relationships, and their choices. Allowing their empathy to affect us helps us to let go of the depth of our hurt and see a path forward. Eventually, we feel grateful that we get to do that. Accepting others’ empathy brings relief.

Although we get each other’s darkness and hurt, we also feel each other’s love and joy. We certainly do get each other, and it’s based not only on our wreckage but how we deal with it. Let’s acknowledge that, too.

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*I acknowledge that feeling seen and understood has helped me to heal. That’s why today I’m going to be open to other addicts identifying with me and relating to them. I know I’m not alone.*
Empathy, Entry #4 of 6

Empathy is the ability to connect with others at the level of the heart and the spirit (Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Friendship”).

Many of us have had the experience of hearing someone else tell our story. We love it when we recognize ourselves in the details of how another member went about the “getting and using and finding ways and means to get more.” Relating to the specifics is far from typical, however, so how is it that we identify with others’ experience when, really, it’s not our own?

Identification doesn’t require that we come from the same place. After all, hitting “rock bottom” often has little to do with our circumstances. Our willingness to give recovery a try can emerge in wildly different contexts. One member shared: “By outward appearances, I had it all. And yet, I felt isolated and alone, filled with fear, resentment, and regret.” While another recalled: “The source of my desperation wasn’t living on the streets. It came from that hollow ache of hopelessness, shame, and sadness deep inside me.” Many of us will relate to both stories—and so many more—because they express the emotional state that precedes the gift of desperation.

We share a few telling particulars in our stories because it keeps us in touch with where we came from and what awaits us should we return to using. We revisit that desperation and touch base with our First Step. And that’s where we connect, too. Empathy has the power to bind us together regardless of our stories. One member shared: “The disease will tell me, ‘you’re not like these people’ but my spirit can’t help but connect when I focus on the feelings.”

As we stay clean and experience the Twelve Steps, our ability to connect with heart and spirit expands. Beyond the using stories that qualify us as drug addicts, we share a common path, a spiritual program in which we learn to practice living principle-centered lives. Recovery gives us access to the range of emotions we’ll need to respond to life’s ups and downs. When NA groups make it safe for intimate sharing, we can summon the courage to share our feelings—good, bad, and ugly—and make room for empathy to emerge.

I will listen with my heart and my spirit today as I seek empathy and connection with others. I will disclose more about my emotional life so that others might connect with me.
Empathy, Entry #5 of 6

We find people who have been through what we’re going through, and got through it clean. We need other people to walk us through hard times, and we need to reach out and help others as we heal (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

For many of us, when we were new to NA, getting clean—and staying clean—was the hardest thing we’d ever been through. Our life seemed impossibly dark, and it took every bit of effort not to go back to our old lives. But we didn’t pick up, no matter what. We survived that time, in large part, because of our connection to other addicts. A member shared, “In my first meeting someone told me, ‘I understand you, and you don’t have to go through this alone.’ For years, people had said so many things to me, trying to help, but until NA, no one said they’d had the same experience—and that they’d survived it.”

However, staying clean doesn’t mean the difficult times are over. Inevitably, “no matter what” situations await all of us. Sometimes these challenges can add to our lives in significant ways: we get off the street and live on our own for the first time, or we buy property or start a family or a business. For many of us, we experience catastrophic events that easily eclipse the suffering of early recovery. We have to care for an aging parent, or we lose a child to the disease of addiction. There’s economic hardship, divorce or widowhood, infertility, cancer or chronic pain, the list is endless...

...And so is the depth of the empathy and experience of our NA Fellowship. None of us has to go through any hardship alone. We get through these times clean, just as we did when we were new: with willingness to accept help from those who understand us and who have endured similar situations.

The member continued: “Without each other, we are stumbling around in the dark. I let people in, not only because I needed help, but because allowing others who love us to support us in our time of need also shows compassion and generosity.” Speaking about the loss of his spouse to suicide, he added, “Ultimately, my own struggle became more bearable, because I helped someone going through the same thing. That mutual aid is empathy in action.”

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I am committed to being there for others who have been down similar roads. We can walk together and welcome others along the way.
Empathy, Entry #6 of 6

One of the benefits of reaching out is finding that our most painful experiences can help someone else (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

Being clean doesn’t give us immunity from life’s struggles. Fortunately for us, we don’t have to navigate life on our own. When we ask for support and allow people to be there for us, we access perhaps the Fellowship’s greatest resource: each other. If cleantime and other successes have caused us to lose touch with this asset, life’s difficulties can provide a gentle nudge in its direction. When we summon the courage to reach out for support, our NA communities respond with empathy. It helps to have someone to lean on, to sit with us as we sit with our feelings, to cheer us on as we put one foot in front of the other, and to empathize as we heal, regroup, and start again.

Our fellow members understand our urge to run away or to find some temporary relief in food, sex, or spending. We can identify with that impulse to shut down, or be massively controlling, or lean into other character defects to manage our troubles and feelings. We empathize because we’ve been there emotionally, or at least in the neighborhood. We can connect deeply and share the burden of each other’s sorrows and emotional pain. Even if we don’t have direct experience with a specific way in which life has shown up for a fellow member, we’re all capable of listening, bringing a hot dish, or taking the kids out for ice cream. Sometimes, it even helps to be reminded that there will be sunshine after the rain.

When we share with an addict in pain, we’re able to get outside ourselves. The empathy we experience creates identification, gratitude, and perspective. The therapeutic value of one addict helping another is beneficial to both the helper and the helped—we know this because we’ve been both. One member’s comment to another captures this dynamic: “Someone told me that my struggle would give me the strength I’d be needing down the line. That strength was for you and when my experience helped you, I got to heal on a whole new level. Your call for help was a real mitzvah.”

The well of empathy runs deep in NA, and I will keep returning to it. I will share my burdens with another addict today, knowing it will provide a source of healing for both of us.