

Inclusiveness, Entry #1 of 4

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

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

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

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

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

How am I putting "our diversity is our strength" into action? Today, I'll look for an opportunity to show another member that they belong.

Inclusiveness, Entry #2 of 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inclusiveness, Entry #3 of 4

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

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

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

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

Including others helps us to belong even more.

*How am I being inclusive of others' perspectives in my service work?
What can I do today to set a place at the table for another member?*

Inclusiveness, Entry #4 of 4

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

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

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

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

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