OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #1 of 8

Being open-minded allows us to hear something that might save our lives. It allows us to listen to opposing points of view, and come to conclusions of our own (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today).

There are a lot of opinions in NA about NA, and yet, there are few beliefs about recovery in Narcotics Anonymous that are universally held by all of us. Certainly, we are an abstinence-based program, and the NA basics are made clear in our literature: meetings, Steps, sponsorship, service, and a relationship with a Higher Power. Our primary purpose of carrying the message to other addicts is also plainly stated. In addition to our Steps, we have the Traditions and Concepts to assist us in meeting that purpose.

While NA's basics are explicit, how we apply them is not. As newcomers, we are told to listen as if our lives depended on it—because they do. It is through practicing open-mindedness that we can find our personal journey in recovery using the basics in the ways that work best for us. When we're new, we have no idea how to work a program of recovery—though sometimes we think we do and have no problem saying so. Mostly, we rely on sponsors and other more experienced members to show us how they do it. This is where some members’ very passionate and sometimes opposing views arise—for example, how many meetings we should be attending, how to work Step Ten, or how long to hang on to a service position. But there's no exact blueprint for staying clean. All we know is what has worked for us.

With more time clean it can become more difficult to stay open-minded, curious, and flexible. True, we find things that work for us and keep doing them. But we need to be mindful of becoming rigid in the face of our evolving lives. A new job or relationship or a sudden hardship might merit a different approach from what we’re used to. We may find ourselves, just as we did in early recovery, asserting what we think we know, instead of listening and being open to others’ perspectives and input. Wherever we are in our recovery, open-mindedness doesn’t mean that we have to change our views or our actions, but it means we are listening and exploring different options.

When I find myself not wanting to hear what others are saying, I need to ask myself why—and then I need to listen and draw my own conclusion.
OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #2 of 8

A new idea cannot be grafted onto a closed mind (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today).

“Approaching Step Two with an open mind was a real challenge for me,” a member shared. The concept that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity presents a real dilemma for some of us. “Thankfully, a thorough First Step convinced me that my way wasn’t working,” the member continued. “That set me up to surrender and I came to believe that maybe this NA thing would work for me.”

Each of us grapples with the meaning of “spiritual not religious” within the context of our own world view. The Basic Text promises that there aren’t any catches to the proposal that we find a Higher Power of our own understanding, and our experience bears that out. Some of us come with deeply held convictions steeped in a religious tradition. Others have secular beliefs that we may be equally committed to. No matter what our view or experience is prior to NA, we find that an open mind is an important asset, allowing us to consider ideas that are new to us.

In recovery, we find that being open to spiritual concepts enriches our own beliefs. We’re not being asked to swallow novel ideas whole, as we may have feared, or to replace a current belief system with some prepackaged dogma. Rather, open-mindedness allows us to learn from others’ experiences, taking what feels right for us, and leaving the rest. It’s a graft, not a transplant. Instead of closing our minds to new ideas, an open mind frees us to try them out. If the graft takes, it may enhance our previously-held beliefs. If not, it might still clarify our own ideas. In either case, growth results from keeping our minds open.

I will remember the benefits of a more flexible and open approach to new ideas, even those about the spiritual aspects of recovery.
OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #3 of 8

Open-mindedness leads us to the very insights that have eluded us during our lives (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today).

When many of us arrive in NA, we fancy ourselves as reasonably open-minded people. For one thing, many of us tried lots of different drugs! More seriously, we may have an anything goes or live and let live type of attitude and have been tolerant toward others who aren’t like us. But were our minds even a tiny bit open to others’ insights and opinions or to feedback about our behavior? Could we even listen? Were we able to admit that we might be wrong or didn’t know something? Did we believe that we needed to change—and even if so, did we believe we actually could? Probably not so much.

Our experience tells us that open-mindedness is at the very foundation of change for us. While some NA members may insist that we have to “change everything about ourselves,” practicing open-mindedness does not mean that everything we know—or think we know—is worthless. Instead, we gain some carefully wrought insight into what behaviors and perspectives we want to keep in our lives and what is no longer serving us today—and we learn to share these insights with others. Asking questions, listening to the answers, and then letting those answers resonate helps us to identify our old ideas and patterns, see our behavior more clearly, and act differently when it’s called for.

Open-mindedness is also one of the most indispensable tools for carrying the message to other addicts and for having productive discussions regarding NA service. We learn to listen more to our sponsees and service buddies, rather than planning out what we want to say. In the process, hopefully, we grow more comfortable with the concept of I don’t know. As one member put it, “We’re not here to be right, we’re here to be better.”

Open-mindedness prevents us from running away from problems, ourselves, and each other. Many of us believe that striving to be open-minded keeps us closer to our Higher Power or to the higher self we want to be.

I aim to keep my mind and my heart open. I will listen more and speak less. And I will allow my insights and opinions to evolve as my recovery does.
OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #4 of 8

New information can be hard for us to accept when it doesn’t come to us in the way we think it should. (*Living Clean*, Chapter 1, “Keys to Freedom”).

Our ideas about the help we need, how it’s packaged, and who delivers it can be decidedly unhelpful. Our work in Step Three can provide some useful strategies. We’re often advised to “do the footwork and leave the results to your Higher Power,” and to “pay attention to what doors are opening and which remain shut.” When we find ourselves too attached to an outcome or banging our heads against the same locked door, open-mindedness may be in order.

In the classic allegory told in NA meetings over the years, a flood drives a man onto the roof of his home where he prays for help. He refuses to get in the rescue boat or the helicopter that come to his aid, telling them “My God’s got me!” The water continues to rise and the man perishes. In the afterlife, he rails at his maker for allowing him to die, to which his God replies, “I sent a boat and a helicopter!”

There’s a reason this story is a classic: It reveals some of the problems with closed-mindedness. One member described their broken process this way: “I put my needs out to the universe and ask for help, then I evaluate, judge, and reject the help that’s offered. Turns out I’m often just looking for someone to cosign my BS.” Open-mindedness will come in handy here, too.

Attending out-of-town meetings illustrates the benefit of open-mindedness. “I was just 25 kilometers down the road, but everything I heard seemed so profound,” one addict shared. “I realized that not knowing these members made me a better listener.” Without the mental static about the messenger—their clean time, reputation, or other baggage—it’s easier to hear the message. Listening in the same way takes a little more effort close to home. Applying the principle of anonymity helps us set aside information that interferes with how we hear others. Instead of listening to validate our own perspectives, we can practice humility and open our minds to consider others’ experience, strength, and hope.

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I will entertain the possibility that I don’t always know what’s best, making space to consider the ideas of others, no matter whose they are.
Open-mindedness gives us the ability to see more and more clearly within ourselves as we go through the never-ending process of surrendering, taking inventory, and inviting change (Living Clean, Chapter 1: Living Clean).

“A closed mind is a killer!” A member riffed on the idea that a parachute, like a mind, can’t function well, if closed: “When we dive into recovery, we tug at that ripcord in an impulse to surrender, with some measure of courage and faith.”

Being close-minded makes us jaded, sealing off our secrets and locking in bad habits. It excludes others; their perspectives, their insights, and their compassion. When we resist being open-minded, the light can’t get in, so our humanity is stunted. We can’t see ourselves honestly. New ideas cannot penetrate our fortress of anger or avoidance, and we end up stuck in isolation.

Getting and staying clean in NA dares us to open up the parts of ourselves that we would rather keep hidden. As we prepare to engage each of the Twelve Steps, we have to keep our closed-mindedness in check. Through this process of self-examination that is afforded to all of us, we pry open our minds to a new way of life. We inventory our pasts, so we can stop running from them and let go. We assess our shortcomings and assets to see ourselves clearly and to seek balance. We make amends to help us avoid the same mistakes in relationships. In addition to our minds, we open our eyes, our hearts, and our arms, helping others to seek change as we have.

This process, however, does not end—unless we stop attending to it. We don’t arrive at openness and wellness and just stay there. To keep evolving, we keep relying on open-mindedness. The member continued, “Our feet may touch the ground for a moment, but life will have us up in that plane again. We have to jump and pull that cord again.” Maintaining open-mindedness, even with years clean, prevents us from becoming too rigid, from building walls that we can’t see over, helping us to navigate new areas of conflict that arise.

Where in my recovery can I be more open-minded? Who or what am I resisting today? What part does this spiritual principle play in the Step I’m working on? If I’ve halted actively working on myself, what needs to happen so I can pull that cord and expand?
OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #6 of 8

The principle of open-mindedness helps us to remain teachable, and to look for teachers all around us (Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Being a Parent”).

When we read “Just for Today”—as we do at many meetings—we’re reminded to cultivate a better perspective on life. Open-mindedness is one of the keys to attaining this improved outlook. Without an open mind, we limit ourselves to what we already know. As one member pointed out, “If I knew how to fix myself, why would I come to NA?” Knowing we don’t have all the answers can be a real asset. Such humility helps us to stay teachable.

In addition to looking within, we can find lessons and teachers in our experience and all around. Desperation, no matter the degree, can be a teacher. It has a way of opening our minds to the possibilities recovery has in store. When we’re open to finding teachers, we’re quicker to detect life’s guardrails and correct course to avoid some of the harshest lessons. When things don’t go our way, open-mindedness helps us find opportunities to stretch ourselves. New ideas seem less like a personal attack and more like a chance to increase our understanding. Instead of avoiding criticism, we seek to learn from it without getting defensive.

Once we stop using and lose the desire to use, the job of finding a new way to live is a lifelong project we chip away at each day. It takes on new meaning as we mature in recovery. “The new way to live I found when I was 20 and new to NA would kill me today,” one member shared. If we want to continue to learn and grow, it helps to remain open and teachable. Life never stops offering new lessons. Instead of resenting life’s twists and turns, we try to focus on what we can discover about ourselves as we navigate them.

I will stretch myself to consider perspectives that may be different from my own today. I will look at my challenges as opportunities for growth.
OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #7 of 8

Staying open-minded and teachable about our basic principles allows our understanding to deepen and mature (*Guiding Principles*, Introduction, “In This Book”).

Many of us go through a phase in early recovery in which we experience what some call “Peter Pan syndrome.” Like the fictional character who refuses to grow up, some of us set out to have the happy childhood that addiction stole from us. Making up for lost time may be a natural response to the new freedom we enjoy. The laughter and fun we share with other members is a big part of what keeps us coming back at any stage of recovery. But like so many things, we can take Peter’s approach too far, refusing to act responsibly or to mature in our recovery.

As we accumulate both age and clean time, it can be a shock to realize that new members have us in mind when they refer to “our predecessors.” A member shared, “I stick by my definition of ‘oldtimer’ as anyone clean at least five years longer than me. At some point, I noticed that I fit that description for others and that they looked to me for mentorship. I felt the need to know more and do better so I started a Traditions study to help me live up to the predecessor label.”

Also like Peter Pan, some of us might resist the idea of maturing or we may reject the idea of pursuing a deeper understanding of our principles because we think it sounds, well, dull. Either stance might be an excuse for a closed mindset. Likewise, “This is the way we’ve always done it,” doesn’t exactly invite discussion or allow for the exploration of varying perspectives.

Remaining teachable and open-minded, on the other hand, allows us to consider different perspectives through reading, discussion, and contemplation. With our minds open to learning more about our guiding principles, we often find new applications in our lives in and out of NA, as well as for our groups and in service. A member shared, “Before I really understood them, I viewed the Traditions as a rigid set of rules. I didn’t grasp that by protecting us from our worst impulses, they create the conditions for creativity and freedom in service to NA.”

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*Do I have some ideas about the Traditions that get in the way of pursuing a deeper understanding? How can I practice open-mindedness and be more teachable while also embracing the responsibility of mentoring others?*
OPEN-MINDEDNESS, Entry #8 of 8

Tradition Three asks us to practice open-mindedness toward ourselves, toward others, and toward the possibility of change (Guiding Principles, Tradition Three, “For Members”).

Tradition Three, which states that the desire to stop using is the only requirement for Narcotics Anonymous membership, is direct, inclusive, and thorough. We can even say that it’s radical in what it invites us to do: leave our judgments about who qualifies for NA membership at the door. As individual addicts, we decide if we qualify, and we leave that decision to others to make for themselves.

As with all spiritual principles applied to any single Step or Tradition, open-mindedness is not an “I got this” position we take. It’s an ongoing process that demands work. The excerpts from our literature that are read aloud in meetings continually confront our views of who is an addict or what recovery is. We need to keep reading them, hearing them, and acting on them. They support NA’s values of inclusiveness and acceptance of all addicts no matter where we come from or look like, what substances, delivery method, or quantities we used, what’s on our resumes (criminal or otherwise), whom we are attracted to, what our spiritual pursuits have been in the past (if any), and so on. We are all welcome here in theory—and, ideally, we’re welcomed by each other in practice.

At the practical core of this Tradition is not only open-mindedness but also compassion for ourselves and for others. We begin to reject our preconceived notions of belonging, relieved that even a slight desire is enough. We become willing to be part of a group that will have us as a member. For many of us, that’s tough going, as in the past we’ve resisted becoming a member of anything. Our dual low self-respect and lack of humility told us that a group that welcomes us and is so open to anybody probably is for losers anyway, so why bother?

We bother because we’re desperate and we want our lives to improve. As we grow, open-mindedness further expands our investment in others’ health and well-being. It’s the gateway to empathy and unconditional love. Our open-mindedness helps keep others in the room who doubt that they qualify as addicts, who fear being part of a group, or who think that they can’t stay clean.

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I will put my membership to good use by actively practicing open-mindedness. 
I’ll do what I can to make space for others to grow.