Respect, Entry #1 of 4

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 of 4

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 of 4

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 of 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?

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?