Responsibility, Entry #1 of 5

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 of 5

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?
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 of 5

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.

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 of 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.

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.