Service, Entry #1 of 8

Everything that occurs in the course of NA service must be motivated by the desire to more successfully carry the message of recovery to the addict who still suffers (Basic Text, Introduction).

Of all the spiritual principles in this book, service may the most directly related to action. Sure, service has a place in our hearts, minds, and souls, but we aren’t practicing this principle unless we are doing something.

Our primary purpose in Narcotics Anonymous is service. Essentially, that means carrying the message of recovery to the still-suffering addict, which can be any of us at any moment. Participating in service to other addicts, both on an individual level and to the Fellowship, helps to keep each other and NA alive and thriving.

We often say there are no “musts” in NA, but the Basic Text says otherwise in one of its earliest passages. Depending on who we are, where we are in our recovery, or even what we ate for breakfast that morning, we may find this direction—that all of NA service must be motivated by our primary purpose—either inspirational or distressing. Some of us may be more driven than ever to carry the message. Others may start to second-guess our motivations for service. We may get defensive at the absoluteness of the statement: “everything” we’re doing “must” be motivated by the purest, most fundamental “desire” to help another? Really? All the time?

Truthfully, the framework of NA, the Steps, Traditions, Principles, and Concepts are indeed oriented toward our singular purpose. Because of the simplicity of service as a principle and its reliance on action to practice it, showing up is all we have to do, really: go to a meeting and share what’s going on, answer the phone when our sponsee rings, pitch in for the 7th Tradition, fill the tea kettle. We come early and stay late.

Our purely motivated desire to carry the message won’t always be there, but we take the action anyway. That’s service in a nutshell.

Simply, I will carry the message to the still-suffering addict today with intention. I’ll contemplate my level of desire—and practice willingness along with service.
Service, Entry #2 of 8

Service changes our relationship to our own lives. We learn to put love and gratitude into action, and when we mobilize our good feelings they have a way of spreading through all our affairs (*Living Clean*, Chapter 7, “Being of Service”).

The Basic Text tells us that “we can only keep what we have by giving it away.” That’s as true for us as individuals as it is for NA as a whole. When we share our experience with new members, we’re reminded where we came from and exactly how far we’ve come. We don’t need loads of cleantime to start reaping the benefits of service. One member recalled, “My sponsor taught me to carry a pen to every meeting so that I could give my phone number to newcomers. I asked, 'but aren't I still a newcomer?' and was reminded that I had 30 more days than the person that just walked in the door.” Reflecting on service in early recovery, another member shared: "I was making more than just coffee, I was making friends and beginning to feel a part of my home group.” We gain a sense of belonging as we give of ourselves. It feels good and we want more. We put love and gratitude into action as we serve.

We focus on carrying the message and let the other details—in life, in meetings, in our heads—sort themselves out in their own time. A shared commitment to service helps us hear each other and to choose to believe that we’re all doing our best. We love and, therefore, serve NA even when we disagree about the best way to go about it. We contribute to the lively and loving atmosphere of recovery in our meetings and participate in the countless incognito efforts that make this thing work. We arrive at meetings early to welcome each new face or stay late to clean up and put away chairs. Each of these actions expresses our gratitude.

We bring this mindset with us into the world outside NA. We recognize our capacity to help others and know that it feels good to do good. We get some freedom from self-obsession and the opportunity to practice loving-kindness in our affairs. We gain a sense of fulfillment as we engage in acts of service inside and outside of Narcotics Anonymous.

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I will express love and gratitude by serving the greater good.
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Service, Entry #3 of 8

When we engage in selfless service, we find that all of the principles we have come to love and learn are called upon. It isn’t easy to get out of our own way, but that is precisely what frees us from our self-made prisons (*Living Clean*, Chapter 3, “Spirituality in Action”).

We hear a lot about the interpersonal difficulties that arose in that infamous NA business meeting. Perhaps too much is made of those times when there was too much talking (or shouting) and not enough listening, when fists flew, or chairs were flung. “Well, someone around here sure needs to practice some principles!” we think. But sometimes the most pronounced ego in the room isn’t an overtly sensitive newcomer’s or that revered oldtimer’s—some tender soul who surely needs to practice unity, patience, and understanding. Sometimes the ego that’s a ticking time bomb is ours. We are the ones other members put on their resentment lists, and whose sponsors advise, “Pray for them.”

And being a sponsor will undoubtedly require practicing willingness, empathy, and acceptance. We worry if we say “yes, I’ll sponsor you,” we’ll mess them up worse. We’re afraid of being too judgmental or not attentive enough. What if they lie to us? What if they won’t do what we suggest? What if they think we suck as a sponsor and break up with us? We want to deflect the request, but do that in an enlightened manner: “You’ll be better off with a sponsor who can get out of their own way.” Instead, we agree, because that’s how we were taught and that’s how we want to live now.

Frankly, no one among us is able to practice principles in all of our affairs every minute of every day, from now until we are buried with the infinity medallion. But giving of ourselves—our time, energy, passion, and skills—opens us up to endless opportunities to get out of our own way. Our character defect of selfishness takes a back seat to the spiritual principle of compassion for others. We practice courage and vulnerability by committing to something we’ve never done before. We practice surrender when we take someone through the Twelve Steps. Humility comes up too—and forgiveness—when someone we trust tells us the truth about how we behaved inappropriately in a business meeting.

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*Today, I will take stock of the spiritual principles I’m practicing in my service commitments. If service is not currently part of my program, I’ll practice accountability, participation, and discipline, and get on it!*
Service, Entry #4 of 8

Service begins when we put ourselves aside and welcome the newcomer. That simple action might be the most important thing we ever do (Guiding Principles, Tradition 2, “For Groups”).

Many of us recall being welcomed by total strangers as we stumbled into our first Narcotics Anonymous meeting. We felt oddly at home in the rooms of recovery and that fragile sense of belonging made all the difference. Every gesture mattered: a warm smile, a gentle hug, a meeting directory. When members looked in our eyes, asked our name, and treated us like a human being, we were stunned—in a good way.

Welcoming newcomers is one of the most significant things we do in NA. It’s important to be welcomed and it’s important to be welcoming. Those of us who have trouble getting out of our own way can extract a powerful lesson from graciously welcoming new members. We take a break from our busy brains and reinforce our belief in the NA program: “Against all odds, we are clean and it can work for you, too.” It’s a message that we all need to hear; it keeps us anchored in Narcotics Anonymous.

When we set aside our thoughts and feelings to welcome the newcomer, we reinforce our stake in our recovery. We defy the self-centered and self-seeking nature of the disease of addiction. We shelve our burdens and answer that call from a newcomer. It offers perspective and reminds us that “we keep what we have by giving it away.” Each act of service strengthens our foundation in recovery and deepens our investment in this new way of life.

I will extend a warm welcome to a new member and pay attention to how it benefits us both.
Service, Entry #5 of 8

We learn who we are precisely when we forget ourselves in service to others (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to a Higher Power”).

Before we got to NA, we were all about "the getting and using and finding ways and means to get more." On the rare occasion that a feeling surface, we’d snuff it out with more drugs. This habit of reaching outside of ourselves to fix what’s inside follows us into recovery. Our inventories reveal how fear-based defects come into play as we’ve tried to protect ourselves or avoid discomfort. Instead of trying to wrestle happiness from life, we learn to be patient and strong, to give time to time, and even to live with uncertainty. Although we’re sometimes tempted to control and manipulate, or to tune out with any number of distractions, service provides a healthier alternative.

Service allows us to get out of our heads and into action. Whether setting up chairs or speaking with a newcomer, being of service puts us in the moment. “It’s such a relief to be right here, right now,” as one member put it. Even when we’re going through our own storms, serving others keeps us in today.

Service can bring out the best in us. It helps us figure out who we are or who we want to be. We show up for each other and our commitments regardless of what’s going on in our lives and realize that we’ve become reliable and trustworthy. We practice compassion and become more compassionate. We listen without judgment and become less judgmental. As one member reflected, “I took this newcomer under my wing, hell-bent to save her life. I saved my own in the process by being the best version of myself.”

It happens all the time around here. We set aside our worries to serve others and we’re reminded of our strengths. Asking, “How can I help?” plops us into a petri dish for applying spiritual principles, growing good character, and exercising our best qualities.

I will allow acts of service to guide me away from self-centered thinking, revealing my best qualities. I will set aside my own wants and needs and build some muscle memory around practicing spiritual principles.
Service, Entry #6 of 8

Service gives us opportunities to grow in ways that touch all parts of our lives (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today—Living the Program).

The Basic Text describes who we used to be in active addiction as "devious, frightened loners." Many of us come to NA with very limited healthy and productive life experience. We may never have held a legal, on-the-books job and don’t have the skills to get one. Or we may have skills and experience, but our dodgy work history reflects our using more than our employability. Our relationships, if they even still exist, are a mess—with our loved ones, with ourselves, with a Higher Power. Our self-serving behavior and our aversion to being truly vulnerable and intimate with others have kept us isolated. And then there’s the spiritual deadness so many of us arrive with—and either the hardness or the utter fearfulness that comes with it.

In meetings, we hear members share that their lives are “bigger,” “amazing,” and “beyond my wildest dreams.” Initially, we are skeptical at best, especially when they also tell us that’s not because of material gains but because of what they’ve gained by being of service to Narcotics Anonymous. A member shared, “Through service, my relationship to humanity was restored.” Seriously? All of humanity?

Most of us get involved in service because we’re told: “that’s how we stay clean.” We don’t fully grasp its holistic benefits until we experience them ourselves. Through our NA commitments, we learn basic accounting, public speaking, and good communication skills. We learn how to listen—in meetings, to a fellow member who needs to vent, to people who we don’t even like. We learn how to treat others with respect when we disagree. We learn to show up to do the job no matter what. And more.

These are qualities we take with us wherever we go, in all our affairs. NA doesn’t just help us stay clean; it transforms us into people who can make a positive impact inside and outside of the rooms.

What aspects of my life have been touched by NA service? Through service, what can I do today—at work, at home, or wherever I go—to make a positive impact?
Service, Entry #7 of 8

Service helps us feel like we belong. We have a place and a purpose. The experience can be humbling. Doing as the group asks, rather than as we choose, is a form of surrender (*Guiding Principles*, Tradition One, “For Groups).

Feelings of belonging don’t often come easy for us addicts, though some of us faked it well. We were social chameleons who so often felt like imposters, masking insecurity with perfectionism and hiding our control issues behind allegedly high standards and attention to detail. For others of us, that game seemed like way too much work. We were too cool for all that. We prized our loner status. Or maybe we were just too high to care. Whatever our situation was, most of us have been on a difficult path to a sense of community and solidarity.

In meetings, we hear right away that our desire to get clean, no matter how desperately or indifferently we feel that, is our ticket to membership. We are also told—and shown by example—how important service is in solidifying our relationship to the Fellowship and in helping us to stay clean.

“Until I eventually took my sponsor’s direction and took on a service commitment, I never felt like I was really a part-of in NA,” one member shared. “I never thought I wanted to be. All of a sudden, I had a voice. I started to use it, and people even listened.”

“I took on five commitments in the first 30 days,” a newer member shared. “I stayed clean, but I made everyone bananas with my brilliant ideas to make everything better. Soon I found out about ‘group conscience’—which wasn’t necessarily the same as *my* conscience. I always wanted to know why why why.”

And someone with a lot of time shared: “After 33 years, I still find it hard to ‘let go and let the group’...I want to explain all the history of how we do things in NA. I may be older, but that doesn’t always make me the wisest. Unfortunately!”

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*If I’m not an NA commitment whore I’m going to become one (within reason). If I’m a talker in business meetings, I’m going to make an effort to be a listener. If I’m a doer, I’m going to teach someone else how. If I’m a control freak, I’m going to try to “let go, and let the group”...just for today.*
Service, Entry #8 of 8

Just as making amends teaches us to be more forgiving, selfless service brings generosity, compassion, and awareness of purpose (*Guiding Principles*, Tradition 2, “Word by Word”).

Service gives us practice at interacting with others and becomes the basis of mutual support and connection. Whether we show up early to make coffee, take a panel into a mental health facility, or contribute our experience to a new literature project—each act of service offers lessons we can carry into our daily lives.

Some sponsors have a way of tricking us into service. We tag along to fill literature orders and the next thing we know, we’re committee members. We become more generous with our time and energy because we find some satisfaction in helping out. Plus, the company’s good and it doesn’t cost a thing. Our generosity extends to the rest of our relationships as well—going the extra mile to help friends, family, and even strangers, at times. We feel ourselves changing as we become more bighearted and less self-obsessed.

We show up early to open the meeting facility, knowing we may be the first person a newcomer encounters. One member shared, “I know that the seats I’m setting up in my homegroup are the same seats that were set up for me before I got here.” We remember how it felt when we set foot in our first meeting: anxious, guarded, and just a little hopeful. We see ourselves in these potential new members. Our hearts swell with compassion as we welcome them.

Service gives us a sense of purpose. Each time we say “yes” to a service opportunity, we connect with and contribute to something greater than ourselves. Acts of service to the Fellowship deepen our devotion to Narcotics Anonymous. We are thoughtful and caring individuals—qualities we discovered and honed in NA service. We have built a life worth staying clean for.

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*I will nurture my humanity by serving Narcotics Anonymous, my family, my friends, and my community.*