As with so much else that happens in NA, the free exchange of experience and ideas in an atmosphere of support and mutual respect leads to growth and understanding. (Guiding Principles, Introduction, “Group Inventory and Service Workshops”).

“It’s like I had blinders on, dark sunglasses, and earplugs, too—oh, and tape over my mouth!” a member shared. “My view of life was so cloudy, dark, and narrow. And secretive. No information got in, and none came out.”

“Same with me,” another member responded, “except for the tape. I had no qualms about opening my mouth and telling you whose fault everything was—and what your problems were, too!”

Before getting clean, we believed that no one else could understand our unique struggles and situations. Our poor coping and communication skills often secured our role as being woefully misunderstood members of our community. We judged others—sometimes internally, sometimes verbally, but always harshly—and we perceived that we too were harshly judged.

Opening up our hearts to others members’ struggles—and being vulnerable about our own—helps us heal the wounds that we carried with us into the rooms of NA. When we become willing to have an honest dialogue about our ideas and hear other perspectives, we expand our self-awareness and can benefit more from the wisdom and experience of others. Allowing ourselves to be present creates an environment of mutual understanding and respect.

“Situations that once meant nothing to me, now have deeper meaning,” the first member said. “My understanding of something greater than myself continues to evolve. My outlook on life is way more expansive.”

“Yeah, NA has opened my mind in ways I never could have imagined,” said the other. “And sometimes I even keep my mouth shut.”

Feeling loved—and understood—changes us.

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Today I will shed the blinders, dark glasses, and earplugs. I’ll be open. I’ll listen. … As for the mouth tape, I’ll evaluate each individual situation as to whether or not I need to leave it right where it is.
Understanding, Entry #2 of 4

We begin to understand that other people have real feelings and that we are capable of hurting them if we are careless (*It Works*, Step Nine).

Active addiction caused us shame, and shame feels lousy. We learned to shut down our feelings, to turn our backs to our emotional wellbeing. Before drugs were a problem, they were our solution. Our preferred state—a drug-induced haze—made it easier to shut down those pesky feelings.

When we get to NA, we start to feel better...we start to feel *everything* better. Early recovery can seem like a feelings-rollercoaster that takes us from uncomfortable to exhilarating with every turn. Since numbing our feelings isn’t a viable option, we take a stab at understanding ourselves and the effects of the disease. Step One helps us to see how powerlessness and unmanageability shaped our every attempt to control our drug use. We begin to identify our feelings and verbalize our thoughts and emotions. When members nod and laugh in recognition as we share, we experience how good it feels to be understood.

We are inspired to be more understanding and empathetic. We practice being thoughtful and kind and others reciprocate. We gain an awareness of how our behavior affects others. We learn to practice discretion and keep our unsolicited opinions to ourselves, at times—this is new! Where once we were careless, practicing understanding calls on us to be considerate of others.

We gain valuable insight as we inventory our behavior. Most of us find that we’ve been on both sides of hurt feelings. This brings our understanding of ourselves and others to a whole new level.

We gain additional clarity in the amends process. We rally the courage and willingness to meet with the people we have harmed, to own our mistakes, and to change our behavior. We apply the principle of understanding by moving through our lives with more care and concern. Because we’re human, there will be missteps, but as members of NA, we have a process for staying clear and current.

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*I have a choice about my behavior today. I choose to be considerate of other people’s feelings and my own emotional wellbeing. I will allow understanding to influence my actions.*
Understanding, Entry #3 of 4

Sometimes we come face-to-face with life’s most difficult circumstances. Our relationships with our sponsor and sponsees can offer the support and understanding we need to keep moving forward (Sponsorship, Chapter 4, “The Sponsorship Relationship”).

Life’s realities, inevitabilities, and its bewildering tragedies often challenge our recovery. To survive such situations, we rely on our relationships with other recovering addicts. We are told: “We never have to use again. No matter what.” We see vast evidence of that truth in our experiences and through the stories of other members.

When we read a quotation like the one above and contemplate how it applies to us, it’s likely we’ll think about the people we’ve helped and who’ve helped us when we’ve had terrible things happen to us. (Yes, often they are sponsors and sponsees, but just as often they’ve been regular ol’ NA members.) Other addicts have understood and stood by us. Many have experienced similar circumstances or can introduce us to someone in NA who has.

But what about when we’ve created those situations, when we’ve committed serious crimes that result in serious consequences, when we’ve been the victimizer instead of the one who’s been hurt? Can we stay clean through that? Are we worthy of the support and understanding of our fellow NA members?

“No matter what.”

Though we don’t condone each other’s every action, practicing understanding is not conditional, and we are worthy of it—no matter what. Understanding means identifying with each other and helping each other through seemingly unliveable times, as well as understanding that despite our negative or harmful behaviors we are all still addicts in need of empathy. Understanding is a critical expression of our primary purpose of carrying the message to every addict—in meetings, at home, on the streets, and in jails and institutions. With that generosity of spirit—plus some forgiveness and tolerance—moving forward and healing is possible for all of us.

Just as I have been shown understanding from those in my circle during the worst of times, I will commit to showing up for others, no matter what their particular circumstances are.
Understanding, Entry #4 of 4

Our fellowship matures and develops as each of us brings our increasing understanding to the table; we grow from one another’s experience when we are willing to share and to listen with an open mind (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “A Spiritual, Not Religious Program”).

When we come into recovery, some of us dust off a faith tradition that we were raised with. Others develop their own framework for spiritual beliefs. Those of us with an anti-religious bias bristled at seeing “God” sprinkled throughout the Steps —what have we gotten ourselves into? We were relieved when we learned that we could pursue any kind of spirituality that suited us.

As we learn about the Traditions, the importance of making room for everyone becomes clear. We do our best to avoid lingo associated with any particular path when we share in meetings. We try to convey our experiences with spiritual growth in language that’s inclusive, understandable, and respectful to those with different beliefs. When we use NA language to express our deepening spirituality, we strengthen the link between our spiritual lives and what we’ve gained from living the Twelve Steps.

Over time, we all make peace with the fact that spirituality is central to the NA program. We each arrive at our own sense of spirituality that works. We listen to addicts share the integral part their spiritual awakenings have played in cementing their foundation of recovery. Our sponsors, friends, and predecessors offer their insights on our spiritual, not religious, program and we gain a deeper understanding of our own beliefs as we work Steps and apply Traditions. Intimate conversations help us to articulate what we believe and allow us to see how much our paths converge. NA language helps us to rise above the barriers that naming names and rituals might create. One member shared, “Our spiritual growth enables us to listen to others with an open mind. This leads to a greater understanding of ourselves, others, and the world around us.” We keep coming back and we see how this program works in each other’s lives. We have faith, above all, in the process of recovery we’ve found in NA.

I will listen with an open mind and an open heart when other members share their experiences with spirituality, coming from a place of understanding and curiosity.