VIGILANCE, Entry #1 of 5

We must be willing to do whatever is necessary to recover (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today).

“I always remind myself: Yesterday’s recovery won’t keep me clean today,” a self-described chronic relapser shared as they celebrated a major milestone. “Vigilance—right here, right now—has been key for me,” they explained. “I learned the hard way that the real work of recovery is that I have to be willing to do whatever’s necessary. And I needed to take time to be still and figure out what that is at any given moment.”

As spiritual principles go, vigilance is kind of a rock star. It’s thick with meaning, pairing watchfulness with deliberate action. We start our practice of vigilance simply by paying attention. We level up from basic abstinence to a meaningful recovery when we choose to be active in our program, self-reflective, and flexible, fine-tuning our approach as our personal program evolves.

In the beginning, going to lots of meetings and not taking anything between them has the desired effect; a clear head and a bit of hope make for a great start. It’s enough to keep us coming back. Listening to other members’ stories makes us want more. A member shared, “If I want more out of my program, I’ve got to put more in.” Inspired, we get a sponsor, cultivate a relationship with a Higher Power, and make steady progress through the Steps. As a result, we get more and more comfortable in our own skin.

Vigilance helps us to settle into our new way of life, applying what we’ve learned about spiritual principles in our daily affairs. We make time to reflect and fine-tune our approach as we move through life clean. As we remain watchful, we may notice that our emotional life, our thinking, our physical selves, or spiritual condition will still get out of whack from time to time. That’s because we’re human and because things change. But life’s lessons have revealed a process for navigating through our difficulties, regaining focus, and reconnecting with ourselves, those who care about us, and a Higher Power.

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I am an addict every day, but today I choose to be a recovering addict. I’m willing to do what’s necessary to care for my spiritual condition and stay watchful over my program.
VIGILANCE, Entry #2

We can get stuck in patterns so quickly. Vigilance is necessary to keep old patterns from resurfacing (Living Clean, Chapter 2, “Connection to Ourselves”).

We used to be utterly stuck, didn’t we? Caught up in impulsive patterns that were impossible to interrupt with any long-term success. Recovery in NA has been our first real hope of breaking free from the mires of our disease, of walking the same toxic path over and again. We admit we’re powerless over our addictive patterns of behavior so we can create new, stable, and productive ones.

We do, however, need vigilance to stay on track. Creating new patterns certainly prevents our disease and old behaviors from wreaking disaster to the same degree But during times of intense struggle or humdrum complacency often our minds will seek out instant relief, putting us at risk for going back to our old ways, or, as one member put it, “quickly find new bad behaviors to give us that rush, even ones that seem helpful on the surface. One minute we’re taking on a service commitment, or maybe two, and the next we’re completely obsessed, ignoring our families and other responsibilities.”

The member also shared, “Practicing vigilance is serious business. It’s how we remind ourselves that there’s danger out there, in our midst, and up inside our heads.” How do we stay vigilant? As we’ve learned, sharing what’s going on with us is crucial: Be vulnerable, and then be open to taking suggestions. We can do a daily Tenth Step inventory and share it with our sponsor. We can diversify our program, if that’s what’s needed: Talk to more newcomers. Shed a wearying commitment and replace it with a new challenge. Or hit our lit: work the Traditions in Guiding Principles or reflect on these entries every day.

Like with much of recovery, we won’t be practicing vigilance alone. Often, it’s NA members we’re close to who notice—before we do—that we are veering off into the wilderness. It’s a fellow member’s keen, protective eye and each other’s wisdom that will help us keep what we have and give us some courage to walk down a different path, creating new patterns. Again.

Vigilance keeps me on guard, on track, and free. Mindful assessment and openness to suggestions will give me the choice to make changes before old patterns morph into new problems.
Many of us leave not when things are horrible, but when we have one more spiritual hump to get over. We lose our way right before the miracle—sometimes again and again (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

Most of us have heard the saying, “don’t leave before the miracle happens.” For newcomers, that can mean staying in a meeting even when the urge to leave feels like more than we can handle. After a little time clean, it might mean taking one more phone call from the sponsee who hears nothing we say, or choosing not to react when our boss or significant other pushes our last button—again (and again and again).

But how do we get there? How does the newcomer stay in the seat when everything in them screams: “Get up! Get out of here!” How does the sponsor dig deep and offer experience, strength, and hope to the troublesome sponsee, instead of just sighing deeply and dismissively asking, “have you prayed about it?” How do we shift our focus from the momentary frustration of an argument to the fulfillment we experience in our relationship or career?

It’s easy to do the right thing when things are going well, when we’re getting what we want or think we deserve. Sometimes, though, the “rewards” might seem minimal, or feel like they’re taking forever to arrive.

Some members have described recovery as being “a marathon, not a sprint.” Marathoners call it “hitting the wall”—that point in the race when it feels impossible to keep going, and there’s no end in sight. It happens in recovery, too: We live by these principles for months, years, even decades, but some of our hopes and dreams still seem so out of reach. We can’t even see the finish line yet, and we are TIRED. We have to remember that there is no “finish” line in a just for today program. We’re not here for the reward at the end.

We keep the pace. Even if it’s slow and steady, we keep moving forward whether we feel like it or not. We might need to stop at an aid station—for runners, a cup of cold water or sports drink every couple of miles can make the world of difference. In recovery, it’s coffee or tea with another addict.

When I feel like quitting, I’ll take a moment to remember that recovery is a journey not a destination. I will be vigilant and keep moving forward.
VIGILANCE, Entry #4

We hang on fiercely, mistaking the attempt to control all the variables in our lives for vigilance in our recovery (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

As with character assets or defects, many spiritual principles have a flipside. Too much of a good thing can take us down an unintended path. Ideally, practicing vigilance is being reflective and real about our progress, monitoring our program’s balance with outside responsibilities, and keeping an eye out for possible danger zones. But if we turn the vigilance coin over, we may find ourselves being fearful of change once again, or desperately trying to puzzle out all possible scenarios of a situation before it even happens. “I look at vigilance like a fence to protect myself from danger,” a member quipped. “I know I’m getting out of hand, hypervigilant even, when I’m constantly repainting the fence, fortifying it with more and more materials so that I can’t see out and no one can see in, and then patrolling the perimeter 24/7. All I need, really, is the fence.”

Vigilance does not equal control. It’s an awareness we can practice daily, reminding us of the severity of this disease and of the horrors of our last days of using. And, of course, this awareness extends beyond the past to our present: No matter how much time we have clean, we best serve our recovery and our wellbeing if we remain open and flexible. We keep members close who will help keep us accountable by alerting us if our fence has come down too low or is built too high to let anyone in.

Even though we’re clean today, we’re still powerless over many things. We don’t do ourselves any favors by having unrealistic expectations or being overly watchful of how others are working their program. We’re not failing if we stray from practicing principles perfectly. We can’t build an impenetrable fortress against danger, challenges, or change. Our job is to stay clean today, take action on what’s in front of us, and stay out of the result.

I will make sure to temper my vigilance with surrender, willingness, and open-mindedness. I’ll take care of my “fence”— but I won’t obsess about it. Not today, anyway.
VIGILANCE, Entry #5

We need to keep an eye on our passion, lest it become self-righteousness; and we keep an eye on our disagreements, lest we begin to harbor ill will toward our fellows. Vigilance is an inside job (Guiding Principles, Tradition Two, “In Service”).

The practice of vigilance can be like holding vigil: keeping space and silence to honor something of value, such as the spiritual principles that bring us freedom and peace of mind. In our personal recovery, vigilance often means paying close attention to our feelings, thoughts, and actions so we can catch ourselves before slipping into old behaviors or patterns. Our Basic Text reminds us that “we are each other’s eyes and ears;” our sponsor and other NA members can hold vigil with us by reflecting our values to us when we forget them, or pointing out our actions when we fail to see them. We need one another’s vigilance.

Our vigilance has a place in NA service, too. We strive always to adhere to the guidance of our Traditions, working to maintain unity, anonymity, focus on our primary purpose, and so forth. Many of us have gone through a phase—or phases—in our service to NA when we felt as though the Traditions needed enforcers, and we were just the right candidates. One member shared, “I had been calling the local helpline and pretending to be a using addict to see if I could catch the volunteers making a mistake. Then my sponsor asked me which list of spiritual principles I found ‘deception’ in. I felt pretty embarrassed.”

Our Traditions guide us to do our best for NA, and we each have a responsibility to remain vigilant and speak our conscience. Sometimes, those who disagree may treat us like vigilantes—people who take matters into their own hands. Other times, we might feel like vigilantes—like NA won’t survive if we don’t save it. Tradition Two reminds us to trust the expression of a Higher Power in our group conscience. NA is a we thing, not a me thing—rather than enforcing our Traditions or trying to catch our fellow members slipping, we speak our conscience clearly and directly, and leave the results up to a power greater than ourselves.

I can be vigilant without becoming a vigilante; my perspectives and interpretations are one of many. I will give my fellow members something we all deserve: room to make mistakes—and room to learn from them and grow.