Attentiveness, Entry 1 of 2

*Each of us has something to offer. We don’t need specialized training to carry the message; all we need to do is pay attention.*

— *Guiding Principles, Tradition Eight, Opening Meditation*

We all have something to give in NA, and we don’t need to be professionals to do it. There’s no NA University where we take classes like Sharing 101, Advanced Sponsorship, or a graduate-level seminar in Hospitals and Institutions Strategy. We learn as we go. Some of us sponsor others following the way we’ve been sponsored. Or we improvise. We aren’t professional recovering addicts or sponsors or trusted servants. We pay attention to how others do it, and we consult our sponsor and our Higher Power, attentively listening for what rings true for us. It’s the therapeutic value of one addict helping another.

Paying attention to our surroundings should come easy for us. In our old lives, situational awareness was necessary for survival. We were always watching our backs, measuring up others, and doing what we had to do to get through every hairy situation we found ourselves in. Those same skills can help us read a room. We can see where our help is needed: Are there people sitting alone before the meeting? Greet them. Does the secretary need help passing out the readings? Done!

Perhaps most importantly, we pay attention to what is happening in real-time as we share with other addicts. We truly listen when others share. Rather than guessing what we think someone might need to hear, we simply listen. When we’re moved to do so, we share our relevant experience. When we are present and attentive to the process, we realize we don’t need to control things. Humility, prudence, and attentiveness—to our own assets and to the needs of those around us—help us make better decisions.

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*Since there’s no such thing as a professional recovering addict, I’ll do my best to carry the message the NA way. I’ll do so by being attentive to the needs of NA, especially the still-suffering addicts.*
Hearing addicts share their experience, seeing recovery in action, feeling the love in the room—all this is as much a part of the process as the work we do on the Steps.

—Guiding Principles, Tradition Eleven, Opening Essay

The “attraction, rather than promotion” that’s evident in the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous is often what keeps us coming back in early recovery. If we smelled promotion, it would be a major turnoff. Many of us may start out skeptical, but desperation forces us to pay close attention. At first, the Steps, as read in “How It Works” at many meetings, may not resonate—they’re not what we had in mind as our solution. But the stories we hear, the warmth we experience, takes hold.

Witnessing recovering addicts being their full selves is remarkable, absorbing, and keeps us coming back. Someone identifies themselves as brand new—“This is my first meeting ever”—and receives a genuine, hospitable welcome. A member celebrates two years clean, made so precious by the fact that it took way longer than that for them to reach this milestone. Another shares their story of losing connection to NA due to family responsibilities and then rekindling their bond to the Fellowship, thanks to members staying in touch. Others speak about their addictive relationship with food, sex or money, and about illness, loss, or lapses in judgment that have ugly consequences. And many others talk honestly about their struggles with stuff we can’t control: a psycho first date, a mean boss, traffic, and the weather.

We are paying attention to all these stories, their unique threads, and common messages—and their shared solutions often found in the Twelve Steps. When we work the Steps to the best of our ability, they help us undergo the profound change that allows us to stay clean and more free from the self-centered fear that can bog us down. But that’s never to discount the importance of all the hard-won experience and wisdom we pick up from other members. Recovery isn’t just what happens on our own with our stepwork. It’s what we hear, see, and feel from each other. It’s all of the elements of the program in concert.

Yes, I am committed to the solutions contained in the Steps. I’m also here to pay attention to my fellow addicts and enrich my recovery.