Autonomy, Entry 1 of 5

**Autonomy offers us the freedom to try new things, and we demonstrate courage when we make new efforts to better carry our message.**

—Guiding Principles, Tradition Four, “For Groups”

When Tradition Four says that “Each group should be autonomous,” it opens the gate for creative expressions of our primary purpose. What comes next—“except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole”—defines the path beyond that gate. The other eleven Traditions and our spiritual principles guide us along that path. They offer direction to ensure the best possible conditions for our journey and mark potential trouble to keep us from wandering off a cliff.

“We don’t just do as we please. We do what’s right,” as one member put it. “At our business meetings, my home group considers two questions: ‘How do our actions carry the message?’ and ‘What else can we do to improve the atmosphere of recovery?’” Keeping our primary purpose foremost in mind has a clarifying effect. It ensures that each innovation is motivated by our desire to carry the message more effectively.

Changes in society, in the neighborhood, or in the law can impact our meetings and often call for us to innovate. We do our best to let go of that “this is the way we’ve always done it” mindset, which can undermine the courage we need to exercise group autonomy. It may be helpful to distinguish between the capital “T” Traditions that guide all of our efforts in NA and the small “t” traditions—local customs or norms—that sometimes feel as important. Long-time members remind us to strive for unity, not uniformity, and tell stories of the early days when meetings in their NA community were uniform in everything from length to format. “The first proposals to change anything were met with skepticism or worse. Since then, we’ve learned that we won’t break this thing by thinking a bit outside of the box. We can practice our autonomy and pay attention to the ties that bind. When we do that we find that—as assured—all will be well.”

I will appreciate both the freedom that group autonomy offers and the continuity that our guiding principles provide.
Autonomy, Entry 2 of 5

Autonomy allows us to express who we are with integrity and to carry a message: the truth of our own experience, in our own way.
—Guiding Principles, Tradition Four, Opening Meditation

The autonomy spoken of in Tradition Four has a strong appeal to many of us in NA. We are people who tend to put a pretty high value on self-determination. In active addiction, insistence on doing things our way often led to bad results, usually because “our way” had a lot to do with self-centeredness, rather than integrity. In recovery, autonomy becomes an asset rather than a liability—as our Basic Text puts it, “Our real value is in being ourselves.”

It’s the second half of Tradition Four that keeps us on track: “except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole.” For NA groups, this means we think about our role as part of the Fellowship, not just what our own group wants. As individual recovering addicts, we balance our right to do as we please with our responsibilities to those around us: family, friends, the Fellowship, society. One way we begin to learn that balance is in how we share in meetings.

“As a newcomer, my sharing was super aggressive and put some people on edge,” a member wrote. “My justification was, ‘hey, this is who I am!’ After a while, I tried to mimic the way others shared, but it wasn’t my own voice, and it always came out wrong. Eventually, I got comfortable being me while also thinking about the feelings of those around me... I finally started to connect.”

If any group of people can sniff out a fake, it’s addicts. Authenticity is a message that lasts, whether it comes in the form of a riveting performance or an understated, soft-spoken share. Whether we’re trying to reach a still-suffering addict or save our own life, we try to strike the right balance between autonomy and responsibility, freedom and self-control, self-determination and connection.

Being autonomous doesn’t mean disregarding those around me. I will practice balancing personal freedom with social responsibility.
None of us chose to have the disease of addiction. We also didn’t choose our upbringing or the demographic groups we belong to, our identity or culture, or to have our particular set of character defects (and assets). But these aspects of ourselves don’t tell our whole story, not nearly. This truth also doesn’t negate responsibility for our personal autonomy, our free will to make decisions that may in many ways be informed by the above characteristics. Personal autonomy is having the capacity and willingness to act on our own behalf. As recovering addicts, our goal for personal autonomy is to have the capacity and willingness to do so while living by spiritual principles—as opposed to the self-centeredness that drove a lot of our decision-making in active addiction.

Through the Twelve Steps of NA, we investigate the hand we were dealt and what we did with those cards. This work opens many doors for us to make choices—with self-awareness—that align with our true values and a higher purpose. “In Step Four, I had an epiphany many of us have, realizing that holding on to my resentments was a choice that was holding me back,” a member wrote. “And my experience with Seven shows me that when I’m about to act out on a shortcoming, I have a choice. For me, autonomy is that moment of grace where I pray, ‘Help me choose differently, because I want to live differently.’”

We are as we do, not as we feel or think we are. We aren’t all our outsides or insides. We can be kind without feeling kind. We can feel kind and not act on it. Our choices reflect our priorities—how we treat the people in our lives (from our sponsor to someone we want to date to a server in a café), how we spend our time and money, how we act when no one’s looking. We’re no longer living by default, or vicariously through others—we’ve carved out who we are authentically and can make choices that reflect that version of us. We are autonomous, responsible for our own feelings, words, and actions. And just as no one can ‘make’ us do anything, we can’t make choices for others either.

My autonomy, my willingness. My choice. Now, what do I prioritize today that reflects how I want to live?
Autonomy, Entry 4 of 5

Allowing our partners and ourselves to experience personal autonomy means we can grow and change at our own pace . . .

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Romantic Relationships”

Being a member of NA gives us plenty of chances to learn about relationships. For most of us, that starts with a sponsor and a home group, both of which offer lessons about autonomy. Every sponsor in NA, after all, eventually gets the opportunity to tell a sponsee: “Well, you’re going to do what you’re going to do, so...” Whether that comes from a place of loving acceptance or frustrated sarcasm—or a mix of both—our sponsors affirm that we are responsible for our own recovery. (And our consequences.) When we’re ready, we’ll change. And, as we often say, that might mean when we’ve had enough pain, we’ll change.

The same is true in our groups. We offer one another experience, strength, and hope; the choice of whether to accept what is offered belongs to each of us as individuals. “Honestly, I was getting really tired of a home group member who kept sharing about the same thing all the time,” a member shared. “I got tired of being annoyed so I just let it go and gave them space. Months later, they had a breakthrough and began to change. Today, we’re very close. I was so glad I didn’t have to wait for their breakthrough in order to feel better myself!”

The ability to keep our own pace and allow others to keep theirs is valuable in all of our relationships, including romantic ones. Whether our spouses or significant others are in recovery or not, a sign of an honest relationship is not being in 100% agreement on everything. It makes sense to experience discomfort in our relationships when we have differences of opinions, differing values, or different levels of willingness to practice principles. Practicing autonomy means knowing what we need to hold onto and what we need to let go of. If the answer to that isn’t obvious, we can look to our group and our sponsor for guidance.

I will practice autonomy by taking responsibility for my own life and recovery and allowing others the space to do the same.
Autonomy, Entry 5 of 5

Autonomy encourages groups to become strong and lively but also reminds them that they are a vital part of a greater whole: the Fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous.

—It Works, Tradition Four

We addicts can be pretty creative in how we deliver our simple message of recovery. We’re free to develop all kinds of meetings that focus on particular areas of recovery or literature, at any time of day. Autonomy gives us leeway to establish a meeting that addresses an unmet local need, has a unique format, or targets a particular group of addicts who may feel safer accessing and delivering our primary purpose together. The possibilities are endless as our Fellowship continues to evolve, strengthen, and reach an even wider geographic scope. How inspiring!

But let’s not forget the latter half of Tradition Four: “except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole.” This warns of the pitfalls of using autonomy to divide us. Expressing complaints about important issues, such as finances, area guidelines, and Traditions “violations,” and then declining to be part of the solution is unproductive and creates disunity. Autonomy is not a mic drop. Instead, we can choose to examine our urge to raise an issue, asking ourselves if we want a solution or do we just want to make a statement.

Open-minded communication allows us to make reality-based decisions, unencumbered by personal opinions. Some members think that service bodies have undue power over groups, and others may believe that all NA decisions must be made with group buy-in. We hear a lot about what they are doing. But WE are they. With autonomy comes responsibility: as seen on NA buttons and t-shirts: “Be the we!” In reality, we are accountable to each other, to NA as a whole, and to communicating our disagreements, as well as our message, with as much respect as we can muster.

 Freedom should be balanced with accountability and responsibility. I will respect our interconnectedness and play a role in creating a Fellowship that is united, loving and diverse.