We need to develop empathy and concern for others, and to let go of self-obsession without losing sight of ourselves.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Friendship”

Negotiating a balance between caring for ourselves and for others takes much self-awareness. It requires ongoing focus, discernment, and thoughtful action. Finding that combination of loving generosity in helping others while maintaining appropriate boundaries—the healthy interplay between independence and interdependence—is a lifelong pursuit for a recovering addict.

Through the work we do on ourselves, our bent toward self-obsessiveness lessens as our empathy for others tends to deepen. What used to be a single-minded concern for “this addict” often becomes tempered with a genuine concern for other NA members. Many of us roll up our sleeves and get to work helping new members, because we want them to experience the relief and connection as we did. We have found a new way of life and want to share with them how we did it. Fair enough. But we may end up feeling like we need to save them and that we are the only ones who can do it. We take it personally when our suggestions are rebuffed. We mistakenly blame ourselves if they don’t stay clean.

This perspective is detrimental to our own recovery, reflecting a bit of that self-obsession we thought we had exchanged for kindness. We must show ourselves some care—and demonstrate some humility, even self-respect, often by taking a step back while still making ourselves available to help when asked. Knowing where support ends and enabling begins can be a baffling process that we revisit again and again throughout our recovery. Some of us develop excellent instincts in this regard and can support other addicts through the process of discovery for themselves.

I can care about others while still caring for myself. I can help others find what I’m finding in NA while maintaining my self-respect and being pragmatic about my powerlessness over other people.
Caring, Entry 2 of 2

Even with many years clean, separating and reconciling what’s in our heart and what’s in our head doesn’t come automatically. We need another set of eyes; we need a caring, attentive listener to help us sort things out.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Romantic Relationships”

Our relationships with other addicts in NA can teach us a lot about how to practice care in the way we relate to the people in our life, including our romantic relationships. Most of us have distorted ideas about love and care when we get here, due both to our self-centeredness and to the poor examples we've had. Whatever issues we might have with caring when we arrive, we improve our ability to give and receive care by practicing with other addicts.

Having a sponsor teaches us about letting others care for us. When we find a sponsor who’s right for us, we soon get the chance to experience the type of genuine care described in the quotation above. Sponsors are often able to balance compassion with honesty as they help us to reconcile what’s in our head with what’s in our heart. We get to know what it feels like not to be in control of how another person demonstrates their care for us, which can be surprisingly freeing. Letting others care for us in their own way is something we can continue to practice in all of our relationships, including the romantic ones.

Similarly, showing our concern for newcomers or sponsees can teach us how to practice care in other relationships. Deep down, we know that we truly want others to feel the hope and experience the freedom we’ve received in NA. Our care for newer members helps us listen deeply and then share our relevant experience. We learn to do our part and leave the results to a power greater than ourselves. We hone our talents for being a caring, attentive listener for others, rather than simply remaining quiet until the other person stops talking so we can proceed with forcing our opinion on the situation.

These lessons profoundly enhance our ability to show our care for others. We allow people to be there for us, and we offer them love in a caring manner.

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Giving and receiving care is a skill I can constantly improve upon. I will practice being a caring and attentive listener in my relationships.