Selflessness, Entry 1 of 3

Make us servants of Your will and grant us a bond of selflessness, that this may truly be Your work, not ours—in order that no addict, anywhere, need die from the horrors of addiction.

—Basic Text, “Introduction”

The work we do in NA is all about carrying our message of hope to addicts seeking recovery. No matter what our beliefs about a Higher Power are, most of us can agree that anything capable of keeping addicts all over the world clean, just for today, is a power greater than any of us as individuals. “I couldn’t keep myself clean,” one member shared. “So there’s no way I have the power to keep anyone else clean either!”

The same holds true with our service efforts: Our job is not to keep anyone clean or make anyone recover. We carry the message. Our Service Prayer was adapted from the literature prayer in the Basic Text, acknowledging the crucial role selflessness plays in our services. Many of us understand a Higher Power to simply be whatever force keeps us clean, and when we serve selflessly, we can be a part of that force for the addicts who benefit from our work.

Selflessness isn’t always easy. Self-centeredness will try to make our work about us, rather than those we serve. Maybe we think a certain service position will make us popular or powerful. Maybe we think sponsoring a lot of addicts, or the “cool” addicts, will lend us some prestige in our anonymous fellowship. Maybe we think having the biggest home group or the best conventions means we are recovery rock stars. Some members say that ego can stand for “edging God out,” and there’s some truth in that: When we allow ourselves to move to the center, we have to push something else out of the center.

The Service Prayer reminds us to keep the needs of the still-suffering addict at the heart of our service efforts. We do our part and then try to stay out of the way. We won’t get it perfect, but practice helps!

I will practice selflessness by striving to keep the message—and a power greater than myself—at the center of my service efforts.
Practicing selflessness gives us relief from self-obsession.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Fellowship”

Our Basic Text states “Self-obsession is the core of our disease.” When we look for evidence of this in our lives, most of us find plenty to go around. We see ample proof of self-centeredness and self-obsession in many of the thoughts, feelings, and actions that led us to the door of our first meeting. Coming to terms with the way our disease manifested itself in active addiction is a crucial component of the recovery process. We see much more as we stay clean and work a program: like how self-centered fear spirals into self-obsession and continues to manifest in recovery. And, thankfully, how selflessness can offer us some relief.

“Once I was able to stop using,” one member wrote, “the greatest freedom I’ve received in NA has been freedom from intoxication with my own thoughts and thinking, freedom from the self-centered me. I’ve been freed to care about others.” Simple abstinence does not eliminate self-obsession; we get a better perspective on our lives when we get out of ourselves. One member was known to tell newcomers, “If you feel lousy today, call another addict and ask how they’re doing.”

When we focus all our attention on ourselves, we end up feeling bad. By shifting our focus to others, we usually feel much better about everything. Especially when we are helping a newcomer, we find plenty of reason to be grateful for what we have. Instead of worrying (or obsessing) about our own desires, we try to practice care and concern for those around us. Selflessness doesn’t even have to mean we disappear from the picture altogether—we simply turn our thoughts to others for a bit, and we experience some relief from self-obsession.

When self-obsession strikes, I will help another addict. It’s that simple.
Selflessness, Entry 3 of 3

The principles we learn in the steps help us let go of our selfishness and lovingly serve the needs of others.

—It Works, Tradition One

In hindsight, many of us find that self-centeredness shaped our thinking and behavior. We realize how much energy we spent protecting our fragile egos, imagining what others thought about us, or carefully curating our image on social media. Privately, we were often negative, selfish, and entitled, as we neglected the work of doing our best with what we have. The Steps have a way of setting us on a more productive course in life. We see who we’ve been, come to understand who we are, and clear out what interferes with taking a more positive, selfless, and grateful approach to life.

Whether we’re new or have been around a while, some of us take up seemingly selfless activities like ducks to water. But, like anything that feels good, we can take selflessness to unhealthy extremes. We do love too much of a good thing, after all, and—bonus!—we can avoid examining ourselves by becoming immersed in helping others. Many of us learn the hard way that unrestrained generosity can harm both the giver and the recipient. As the old saying goes, you can’t draw water from an empty well. The Steps help us build a more realistic self-concept and a life that we don’t want to run from.

“To practice selflessness requires that I first have a sense of self,” in the words of one member. “I tell my sponsees, ‘You first, right after me!’ We take responsibility for our own well-being and strive for harmony as we contribute to our common welfare. The principles of the Steps help us to establish healthy boundaries and strive for balance. For many of us, the idea of loving and serving others selflessly adds a new dimension to our spiritual self-care routine. We find ways to recharge and gather fresh inspiration so we can selflessly contribute to NA unity.

Self-care requires more than bubble baths and dark chocolate. I will turn to the Steps to care for my spiritual condition, preparing me to selflessly love and serve and contribute to NA unity.