

April 2012

**62<sup>nd</sup> General Service Workshop**  
***Safety in A.A.: Our Common Welfare***

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“Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a greater whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterwards.” Tradition One (*Long Form*)

Wednesday morning Conference members divided into groups for workshop discussions based on the topic selected by the 2011 Conference “Safety in A.A.: Our Common Welfare.” The following are questions and a summary of the sharing during the workshop. This includes comments that reflect individual experience and viewpoints.

**1. How can we make our home group a welcoming and accessible place?**

Home groups are made welcoming by having greeters at the door when members enter and leave the meetings. Greeters welcome members by shaking their hands and introducing themselves. Greeters might help direct the handicapped to elevators or lift chairs when available. They may also help newcomers and others find the coffeepot, give newcomers a cup of coffee, help them find a seat, find literature or meeting schedules. Be careful about offering hugs. Greeters are very important. When welcoming the newcomer certain catch phrases may create openness such as “How are you doing?” This can create an opportunity to match that person with someone who can share experience, strength and hope with the newcomer. Welcome newcomers but don’t mother them. Explain the meeting format upfront. Discuss with newcomers the expected manners and decorum that is appropriate at meetings. Ease the newcomer into understanding about singleness of purpose, crosstalk, etc. Provide explanations (i.e., when basket is passed discuss spiritual principles of self-support). Treat the Home Group as if it were one’s living room.

It is really important to recognize first-time A.A. attendees. Be on the lookout for new people and introduce them to other members. We can remain approachable by not congregating in small groups and by avoiding cliques. Need to watch out for subtle formations of “in” or “out” crowds. Members respecting each other creates a good impression. Older members can approach new members to welcome them. They treat newcomers always with a kind act. Create a sense that the newcomer is important by introducing them to the chairperson. Invite newcomers and guests to your Home Group. It can be the responsibility of the “oldtimers” to interact and communicate about Traditions, etc. Ask at the opening of the meeting whether it is the first meeting for anyone – if so, make it a Step One meeting. When announcements are made, ask if there are visitors from out-of-town and welcome them. A Big Book signed by group members is sometimes used to welcome a newcomer. Conduct newcomers/beginners meetings and encourage newcomer participation in business meetings. Conduct periodic group inventories. “Fellowship” breaks during meeting help newcomers socialize. The chairperson can ask at the end of the meeting for temporary sponsors so

newcomers know who they are. Ask who in the home group might be willing to be a temporary sponsor and foster good sponsorship. Sometimes a visible group structure helps the newcomer adapt. Make A.A. meetings spirited and enthusiastic so they can feel the love of A.A. Members may not remember the speaker, they may not remember the sharing, but kindness will always be remembered. Stay for the meeting-after-the-meeting and encourage the newcomer to do the same. Make sure the doors of A.A. are always open. On leaving the meeting, invite the newcomer back and shake hands. The goal is to get them back to another meeting. Have "leave" greeters at end of the meeting to remind members to keep coming back.

As part of the meeting format, announce some guidelines for conduct during the meeting (i.e., texting, cell phones, crosstalk, etc.). Avoid chatting during introductions and readings. Listen to people as they share. Suggest that the men stick with the men and women with the women – especially for new women. Be sensitive to closing with a prayer that might appear to be religious to newcomers and visitors. Explain to newcomers why meetings often close with a prayer, responsibility pledge, a moment of silence or other. Try to make the meetings welcoming and safe for everyone. Consider ways to make A.A. more welcoming and accessible to Spanish-speaking women, such as having a Spanish-language women's meeting. Discuss safety, behavior, etc. regularly at group business meetings.

Come early to set up the meeting and leave late to help clean-up. This is a good time to meet and talk with members. Nametags are helpful. Keep books and literature visible. As an alternative, play audio tapes at book studies so that anyone who is illiterate is not forced to read. Provide contact lists with first name/last initial and phone numbers; suggest separate lists for men and women. Make sure meeting lists are available. Also have newcomer packets available. Ask if there are newcomers and give them newcomer's packets that may contain meeting schedules, pamphlets on home group, group contact list, etc. Have signs on the door and meeting lists that say where wheelchair accessible meetings are, and open or closed meetings and locations. Ensure that groups are properly listed in meeting directories.

Make home groups accessible by improving the physical access and accommodate those members who are handicapped (i.e., be sure to have wheelchair access, large print). Keep smoking areas away from the main entrance. Keep the rooms tidy and inviting. Food/refreshment is always good, but so is adequate lighting and safe surroundings. Ensure that there is adequate lightening in the meeting place, walkways are well-lit and that handicap accessibility (where applicable) is monitored and maintained. Escort members in and out of the building, and to the parking lot, if necessary.

## **2. How can sponsorship aid in keeping our A.A. meetings safe?**

Sponsorship leads to healthy people and healthy people leads to healthy meetings and groups. There are different approaches to sponsorship (by example, guiding, directing, etc.), but no matter what the approach, having a sponsor makes a difference. Leading by example will increase the trust of newcomers. The sponsor's responsibility is to provide information and guidance. A sponsor can discuss customs and norms with sponsees. Sponsors can also help recognize or be aware of potential problems before

they get out of hand. Sponsors alert sponsees as to risks and safety hazards. They can also advise a sponsee when their behavior is unacceptable. When dealing with a misbehaving member, consult with their sponsor or other established long-time members who may not be aware of the sponsee's conduct. Look for warning signs when sponsees are in trouble. Let the men handle the misbehaving men (same for the women).

Be honest with sponsees and warn them about "thirteenth-steppers." Encourage sponsees to read A.A. literature such as "Questions and Answers on Sponsorship." Sponsors need to be aware of potential issues with male/female relationships. Sponsors can suggest that men work with men, and women work with women. "Sisterhood" among women helps protect newcomers. Help the new women live defensively – especially the vulnerable ones. Suggest no new relationships before finishing the Steps. Some members suggest no new relationships before getting through the Ninth Step. There are widely differing opinions on the "one year rule." One group has a poster of a coiled snake with the text, "13th Steppers are predators and not welcome here."

Be aware that stalking may exist (men stalking women and vice versa). Make the newcomer aware of which members may pose a safety threat, to help the newcomer set good boundaries (what is public vs. what is private/interpersonal communication). Describe what A.A. is and what it is not. When we keep our Primary Purpose in the forefront many of our imperfections are kept in check (e.g., attend meetings to address alcoholism, not to find sexual partners). Refrain from profanity and sexual innuendos. Who you date is your business – as long as it is done with integrity and you don't use A.A. manipulatively.

Some people come into A.A. not having any idea what behaviors are appropriate, and which are not. We can try to inoculate our meetings with a sense of safety and confidentiality. One can get sober in A.A., but imperfections of character are a part of the human condition, so take caution and protect yourself. Seek advice about legal protections, if necessary. We all recognize good/bad and/or appropriate/inappropriate but the challenge is teaching it – can't legislate good or appropriate sponsorship. Sponsorship is not the matching of those who wish to dominate with those who want to be dominated. Don't tell sponsees what to do—share your experience, strength and hope. Sponsorship offers a guide to Step work and friendship.

When good sponsorship is happening it sets a good example and guides etiquette of the newcomer. Sponsorship can go beyond the one-on-one with the group serving as a sponsor. Meetings run by a group that has a regular group conscience and which practices the Twelve Traditions are generally safe. Someone in the group can focus on the newcomer to address in a personal way how the newcomer can present him/herself so as not to attract unwanted attention (dress, deportment, etc). Educate members by pulling pamphlets to read about in the group. Explain our Primary Purpose. Groups and meetings need to teach about sponsorship as well as individual. Keep your group healthy. Make this a topic at business meetings.

**3. In keeping with Traditions, how would/does my group address matters that may arise, such as:**

**a.) Conduct that disrupts the meeting.**

Safety is the responsibility of the group, but a sponsor can teach their sponsees how to be respectful by being an example of proper conduct. It is helpful if groups have a plan for disruptive persons. Disruptive behavior is often pre-empted by having the chairperson read the meeting guidelines for behavior in the meeting. Have instructions prepared for meeting chairs with suggestions on dealing with disruptive behavior.

The group conscience should fully empower meeting chairs and make them aware of their responsibilities to maintain order and safety in meetings so that the group as a whole will benefit. Group conscience discussions should include emphasis on Tradition One and the importance of the unity of the group having precedent over the individual. Some groups include in their opening announcements that illegal and disruptive behavior is not tolerated; include statements at the start of meetings that announce that abusive behavior will not be tolerated. Group can set boundaries. Do what is necessary to keep meetings safe. Ban persons who repeatedly engage in disruptive conduct that prevents the meeting from fulfilling its primary purpose. Do what is best for the whole group. Address disruptions when they occur.

Rely on the meeting chair as first line of defense, with intervention for repeated offenders. The chair of a meeting can ask that there be no crosstalk during discussion, that cell phones be turned off and no texting during the meeting, and that if members must talk during the meeting to take it outside. Crosstalk can be handled by the person having the floor by stopping their activity and remaining quiet until cross-talkers stop talking. Sponsors can discourage sponsees from texting during meetings. Starting meetings late can also be disruptive, especially for newcomers or visitors. When the group goes off the meeting's topic, members can raise their hands and get the discussion back on track (same with outside issues).

Disruption from wet drunks is usually handled by escorting the person out of the room by two members followed by an explanation; avoid confronting the person in the meeting room; approach them outside so you can address the concern of the disruptive behavior. The person can then be allowed to return if they agree to stop being disruptive. What about a wet drunk – isn't that why we are here? If the disruptive drunk upsets people in the group, then the behavior needs to be addressed. Be careful about allowing the personality of the "offender" to interfere with your judgment about inappropriate behavior. Remind members who are asked to leave a meeting that they are not being "kicked out" of A.A., nor is their membership being taken away. They are only being "kicked out" of a meeting because they are disrupting the meeting and in support of Traditions One and Five (unity and the primary purpose of a group) they are not welcome when they exhibit threatening or disruptive actions. Long-term members may offer to meet one-on-one with the disruptive member. If one-on-one contact with a disruptor is not effective and the disruptions continue, the group may have to ban them from the meeting until their behavior changes.

One group is dealing with two individuals who are disruptive and violent. Initially things were not handled well – particularly because it was not discussed at the group's

business meeting and it fractured the group. It is a Tradition One issue, not a Tradition Three issue. It is up to the chairperson to handle these situations and with the support of the group conscience developed at regular business meetings. Some problems have no good solutions. Conduct can be hard to manage when there is a tendency to want to retain the member. The process should include discussing the behavior in the business meeting and talking to the person one-on-one. If the disruptive person has a sponsor, another member can go to that sponsor and talk about the sponsee's disruptive behavior so the sponsor can address the situation; and also can suggest getting outside professional help.

Acceptability of behaviors can vary with geography and urban/suburban/rural settings. Each of us is annoyed to different degrees by different forms of disruption. Some may feel that no one has the authority to stop specific behavior. Groups can either deal with disruptions, make it impossible to disrupt or allow it to continue.

We always have the option to call the police if disruptive behavior continues. Utilize available security personnel in institutions. The meeting rooms need to be safe and sometimes the police will need to be involved. Call the police if someone's behavior becomes unacceptable or threatening. It is okay to call the police for help. In an emergency, call 911. Have a plan to safeguard our meetings. Be aware that people in A.A. are in different stages of growth. Safety in meeting rooms should be taken seriously

#### **b.) Illegal activity**

Illegal and threatening behavior should involve the police. Many groups establish guidelines regarding when it is appropriate to call authorities. Handle the situation within the legal system. The nature of illegal acts can range from violence, embezzlement, theft of property to drug sales at a meeting. Some groups do not hesitate to report illegal activity to the proper authorities. Just because we are A.A. does not mean we have to tolerate illegal behavior. When we are in a meeting, we are still citizens and no one is above the law. Some situations may require a phone call to local authorities and/or a restraining order. Today there are constraints (liability issues) that need to be handled properly. Cooperate with the landlord regarding safeguarding their property.

We can all look out for one another and help to maintain a safe and positive meeting environment for all members and those yet to join us. What's good for the group comes first, but personal welfare follows close behind. Illegal activities that jeopardize the health and well being of others need to be reported. Everybody is welcome in A.A., but not illegal behavior. The process of sharing our experiences provides ideas on how to manage these situations that could arise. There is a good article in *Box 4-5-9 "We Are Not Above the Law."*

#### **c.) Inappropriate behavior towards vulnerable new members (e.g., 13<sup>th</sup> Stepping)**

Inappropriate behavior such as acting out or targeting vulnerable new members (e.g., "thirteenth stepping") occurs between someone new to a group and someone who has been around for a while. In general, older members keep an eye out for new and younger members. We need to be aware of two cautions: 1) predators are not always easy to spot and their targets are not always selected by appearance but by

vulnerability; and 2) newcomers are vulnerable. The implications of "thirteenth stepping" may be grave for the women. Encourage victims of predators or inappropriate behavior or harassment to let the group know, talk to their sponsor, and/or report it to the proper authorities. Groups or elder statesmen cannot address a situation if they are not aware. Assure the person involved with a negative situation that the issue is being looked at or going to be looked at. Respect them and listen to members who have been hurt. Encourage someone who has been a victim of a reported crime to seek outside help/counseling. Let these members know that we care, that we are concerned and treat them with love, understanding and respect.

Sponsorship plays a vital role. Encourage "thirteenth-steppers" to get a sponsor. Men can be sensitized to offensive behavior. Examine our motives when approaching other A.A. members. Be aware that not everyone welcomes a hug. Like any society, A.A. is not immune to human conduct. Sponsors can be helpful in pointing out warning signals or unhealthy situations to sponsees. Sponsors can teach about privacy, conviction and responsibility. We need to learn how to interact with newcomers who are young and those who are old/elderly who may have health issues/disabilities. Some Spanish-speaking members have concerns about the lack of regard for women within their groups, which drives the women out.

Ask, "Would I be willing to have this group meet in my home?" If the answer is "No," then work on addressing the issues of concern. Solutions need to originate at the group level and not at G.S.O. Include this topic in a group inventory and plan ahead as groups.

#### **d.) Emergencies (injury/accident/fire/etc.)**

Emergencies need to be handled by those trained for such situations. Make sure fire exits (e.g.) are clearly understood. Check on emergency procedures for the facility where the group meets. Have a plan in place on what to do in the event of an emergency. If it is a life-threatening emergency, call 911 or other emergency resources. Never hesitate to call emergency numbers to save a life. Once the call has been made to report an emergency, responders will be arriving – give them room to do their job. Expect that some members who are not directly involved may wish to leave and that addressing the emergency situation is more important than continuing with the meeting. Consider safety measures when evaluating meeting places. Discuss this at business meetings. Some revisions to existing literature to address emergencies/safety may be appropriate.