Safety and A.A.: Our Common Welfare

Safety is an important issue within A.A. — one that all groups and members can address to develop workable solutions to help keep our meetings safe based on the fundamental principles of the Fellowship.

"Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great 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 afterward." — Tradition One (Long Form)

"Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." — Tradition One (Short Form)

"Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose — that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers." — Tradition Five (Long Form)

A.A. groups, whether they meet in person or on virtual platforms, are spiritual entities made up of alcoholics who gather for the sole purpose of staying sober and helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a microcosm of the larger society within which we live. Problems found in the world can also make their way into A.A. As we strive to share in a spirit of trust — both at meetings and individually with sponsors, friends and new acquaintances — it is reasonable for each member to expect a meaningful level of safety. By providing a safe environment *in which alcoholics can focus on gaining and maintaining sobriety,* the group can fulfill its primary purpose — to carry the A.A. message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Autonomy and Group Action

Because A.A., as such, ought never be organized, as indicated in Tradition Nine, it is individual members and groups who ensure that all members feel as safe as possible in A.A.

As embodied in the Fourth Tradition, the formation and operation of an A.A. group resides with the group conscience of its members. It is through an informed group conscience that A.A. groups find their solutions to group problems. Service entities such as areas, districts and inter-group/central offices are available to help provide *A.A. services and shared experience*. All groups and entities in A.A. are autonomous. There is no government within A.A. and no central authority to control or direct its members, but we do share the experience of groups and members in applying A.A. principles to issues that have arisen.

Recognizing that safety is an issue of importance to members, many groups have created "guideposts" to keep distractions and disruptions to a minimum within the context of the group.

A.A. Membership

A.A.'s Third Tradition states that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. This brings an openness that helps to define our membership as a diverse Fellowship of alcoholics, yet it also requires us to be mindful of our group and individual safety. Though disruptions are rare, such a disruptive person may be asked to leave an A.A. meeting space, if the disruptive behavior inhibits the group's ability to carry out its primary purpose.

No A.A. entity proposes to bar any individual from membership in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Dealing with Disruptions

While most groups operate with a healthy balance of spontaneity and structure, there are a number of situations that can threaten group unity and challenge the safety of the group and its members. Often this can center on disruptive individuals or those who are confrontational or aggressive. Such behavior can take over a meeting and frighten new and longtime members. Though typically as a last resort, groups and members always have the option to call the appropriate authorities if disruptive behavior continues or if anyone's safety is at risk.

Disruptive members may be asked to stop attending the meeting for a period of time. In-person and virtual groups that take this drastic action do so in order to preserve the common welfare of the group and to maintain A.A. unity.

Some groups have developed plans for addressing disruptive behavior and have established procedures through their group conscience to ensure that the group's welfare is protected. In many cases, disruptive behavior is preempted by having the chairperson state some reasonable expectations for the functioning of the group.

Some groups include in their opening announcements that illegal, disruptive behavior and hate speech are not tolerated. For clarity, some groups have listed examples of the group's definition of disruptive behavior.

Safety and A.A. in the Digital Age

The Internet and social media platforms have greatly impacted how A.A. members are able to interact with each other and with potential members. The principles that apply to in-person A.A. settings also apply to A.A. phone, online and social media settings. Some virtual A.A. groups that have experienced harassment from Internet "trolls" have adjusted the group's security settings, created safety procedures and/or sought professional technical support. Some local central/intergroup offices, districts, areas and forums have also developed tech support and safety service material to share with members.

Keeping in mind A.A. Traditions, the Fellowship finds that social media has become a significant resource to connect with fellow members and potential members in ways we never thought possible. It is also important to keep in mind that someone's first impression of Alcoholics Anonymous may occur on a virtual platform where A.A. members — and potential members — mix.

Group Safety and Unity

Situations that groups have addressed through their group conscience include sexual harassment or stalking; threats of violence; bullying; financial coercion; racial discrimination, sexual orientation or gender intolerance; and feeling pressured to adopt a particular point of view or belief relating to medical treatments and/or medications, politics, religion, or other issues.

Guidelines for handling difficult situations can be discussed at meetings and determined by the group conscience. A.A. members can speak to those who are acting inappropriately.

Targets of inappropriate behavior, harassment or sexual or financial predation can let the group know about such situations directly or, if not directly, then perhaps through a sponsor or trusted friend. This way the group is informed, and members can help address the situation and curtail further problems. In these group discussions, the focus is on creating an environment where all alcoholics can find and maintain sobriety.

Unsafe or predatory behavior, such as unwanted sexual attention or targeting vulnerable members, can be especially troublesome. Also, keep in mind there may be experiences/harassments that originate from group interactions but that go on outside of typical meeting times; these experiences can affect whether someone feels safe to return to the group.
Investments, loans, employment and/or any services offered in exchange for any fees is outside of the purpose of an A.A. group. If these activities do occur, all parties involved should clearly understand that these activities take place outside of A.A.

In any situation, if a person's safety is in jeopardy or the situation breaches the law, the individuals involved can take appropriate action to ensure their safety. Calling the proper authorities does not go against any A.A. Traditions. *Anonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal or inappropriate behavior.*

A.A. and the Law

Common sense and experience suggest that A.A. membership does not grant immunity from local regulations and that being at an A.A. meeting does not put anyone beyond the jurisdiction of law enforcement officers. As individuals, A.A. members are also "citizens of the world," and as citizens we are not above the law.

Through the group conscience process, many groups have established guidelines regarding when it may be appropriate to call authorities and handle a given situation within the legal system. No A.A. group has to tolerate illegal behavior, and any activity within an A.A. meeting is

subject to the same laws that apply outside the meeting. The nature of illegal acts that groups have faced include violence, embezzlement, theft of property, drug sales at a meeting, and more. While A.A. members and groups can be caring and supportive to those affected, we are not professionals trained to handle such situations. Law enforcement or other professional help may be necessary.

Emergencies

Injuries, accidents, fires, etc., sometimes do occur during meetings. To accommodate such situations, groups have developed plans and procedures, often in consultation with landlords, local authorities and/or professionals. Members should not hesitate to call emergency personnel in critical situations. Addressing an emergency situation is more important than continuing the meeting.

Recently, a global health situation has affected groups' abilities to meet in person. Many groups have responded by meeting online, and if meeting in person, they follow local health guidelines and laws. It is suggested that groups and members with health and safety questions contact national, state/provincial and local health authorities for appropriate information.

From our shared experience, groups and members who have not adhered to local safety guidelines regarding the pandemic have at times not only affected how A.A. as a whole is viewed by the general public (at times through media news stories) but have potentially put people's physical and mental health in jeopardy. Attendance at A.A. meetings should not require putting one's health at risk or being intimidated for wearing a mask or other taking other precautions (not holding hands, social distancing, etc.).

Some groups have set up contact lists with group members and alerted local A.A. entities if they are no longer meeting in person. When a group transfers to meet on virtual platforms, that information can also be shared with local A.A. entities so that the A.A. message will remain available to those seeking help with a drinking problem.

In addition, local A.A. committees can inform local professionals about "open" virtual meetings, which can be a helpful A.A. resource for their alcoholic clients. Local Public Information committees can also be helpful in providing up-to-date information about A.A. to local media.

Keeping the Focus on Our Primary Purpose

It is hoped that our common suffering as alcoholics and our common solution in A.A. would transcend most issues and curtail negative behaviors.

Safety is important to the functioning of the group. By maintaining safety in meetings, the group as a whole will benefit, and members will be able to focus on recovery from alcoholism and a life of sobriety. Ultimately, the experience of how these situations are handled can be as varied as the members in our Fellowship. Good judgment and common sense, informed by the Twelve

Traditions, seem to provide the best guide.

Each group is as unique as a thumbprint, and approaches to carrying the message of sobriety vary not just from group to group. Acting autonomously, each group charts its own course. The better informed the members, the stronger and more cohesive the group — and the greater the assurance that when a newcomer reaches out for help, the hand of A.A. always will be there.

Diversity and Inclusion

Keeping in the spirit of Tradition Three, A.A. celebrates its members by raising awareness of inclusion and respecting members with varying abilities, sexual identities, races, ethnicities, gender identities, religions, languages, neighborhoods, socioeconomic backgrounds and ages. As a Fellowship, we strive to support the well-being of members as we evolve toward greater diversity, equity and inclusivity.

Race and privilege have been a topic of discussion as they relate to the spirit of Tradition Three, among members of local A.A. entities as well as members of A.A.'s corporate boards, including the General Service Board. And particularly in light of this moment in time, when societal divisions and inequities along racial lines have been laid bare — some members are discussing this complex issue in tandem with A.A. Traditions — and recognize the need to look at our own disparities. Some members, who are people of color, have shared concerns that their life experiences as it relates to being an alcoholic person of color in A.A., have been viewed as an “outside issue” and therefore have felt unsafe in what they can and cannot share about their own experience. Membership does not include having to tolerate racism in A.A. or removing this life experience from one’s story.

Many groups have found that providing a safe space to share this experience to be no more in contradiction of Tradition Ten (an “outside issue”) than the topic of safety and A.A. itself.

Racism in A.A. is a safety issue.

Acknowledging that we all operate within some unearned privilege is key in understanding and acting upon where we can widen the circle of an accessible message and a feeling of inclusion. For example, if one can acknowledge that they have an unearned privilege over a non-native English speaker or a member who is d/Deaf, then one can better reflect on how to ensure that all have equal access to our life-saving message.

While many members — including members who are transgender — identify as either male or female, some members do not identify within these two categories. People whose gender is not female or male often identify as nonbinary, gender nonconforming, genderqueer or genderfluid, among others. Keeping in mind Tradition Ten, a person is the gender they say they are. A.A. neither dictates nor has an opinion on any person’s gender or gender pronouns.

A.A. membership is open to all genders and backgrounds. No matter one's gender identity, some members have shared that they find it helpful to have a safe space to voluntarily share their pronouns with other members of the group, in order to help the group get to know them better. Some members have shared that they voluntarily share their pronouns at in-person or online meetings so that *others* may feel more comfortable, if they care to do so. Some members have also shared that being questioned about their gender identification has made them feel unsafe.

Here are examples of just some of the pronouns of A.A. members in our Fellowship: they/them/theirs; she/her/hers; and he/him/his.

Most alcoholics feel quite comfortable in any A.A. group. Yet, many A.A. communities also have "special interest" meetings where it may be easier to be open about certain personal issues. Some A.A.s come together as specialized A.A. groups — for "young" people; women, men, and nonbinary; medical or legal professionals; LGBTQ+; BIPOC; and others. If the members are all alcoholics, and if they open the door to all alcoholics who seek help — regardless of profession, gender or other distinction — and meet all the other aspects defining an A.A. group, they may call themselves an A.A. group.

We in A.A. believe alcoholism is a disease that is no respecter of age, varying abilities, gender, creed, race, wealth, occupation or education. Our experience seems to show that anyone can be an alcoholic. And, beyond question, anyone who wants to stop drinking is welcome in A.A.

What Can Groups and Members Do?

Groups and members can discuss the topic of safety to raise awareness in the Fellowship, and they can seek through sponsorship, workshops and meetings to create as safe an environment as possible for the newcomer, other members and potential members. This can be the subject of sharing among groups at the district or area level.

Be mindful of who's *not* in the room, and then widen the conversation as to *why*. What actions can we take so that A.A. is here for all who seek help with a drinking problem and who want to receive A.A.'s program of recovery? How can we widen participation in all forms of service?

Here are some helpful suggestions and reminders:

- Talk about issues of safety before they arise. Communicate clearly what A.A. is and what it is not.
- Raise awareness: Every member attending an A.A. meeting can be mindful of safety.
- Remember that sponsorship plays an important role, and sponsors can be helpful in pointing out warning signs or unhealthy situations to sponsees and newcomers.
- Let A.A. members know that if they are concerned about the words or actions of a sponsor or other member, they may find it helpful to speak to someone they trust, their A.A. group, or a professional.

- Include safety as part of your group inventory and consider developing group guidelines and procedures on safety.
- In all discussions about safety, keep the focus on our primary purpose and our common welfare, and place principles before personalities.
- Connect with your group's General Service Representative (G.S.R.) and A.A. Service Committees to help provide broader shared experience.

Helpful Resources for A.A. Members and Groups

- *Box 4-5-9*, October 2010 edition, articles on "Disruptive Members at A.A. Meetings" and "A.A. and the Law" (available on the newsletters page at aa.org).
- A report from the 62nd General Service Conference Workshop: "*Safety in A.A.: Our Common Welfare*"*
- Final Report of the "*Ad Hoc Committee on Group Safety of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, U.S. and Canada*" (Feb. 2, 2014)*
- 2019 Regional Forum Reports "Who's Not in the Room — Fostering Participation in A.A.**"
- A.A. pamphlet "Questions & Answers on Sponsorship."**
- A.A. pamphlet "The A.A. Group … Where it All Begins"**
- A.A. pamphlet "The A.A. Member — Medications and Other Drugs"**
- A.A. pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity"**
- A.A. Guidelines "Accessibility for All Alcoholics"
- Service Material "Safety Card for A.A. Groups"**
- Service Material "Safety and A.A. Flyer"**
- Contact your district committee member (D.C.M.) or area delegate for local shared experience.

**Available upon request by contacting G.S.O.*
***Available on aa.org.*

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