

# **Guidelines for dealing with inappropriate behaviour in meetings.**



**UK Region approved literature**

## **GUIDELINES FOR DEALING WITH INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR IN NA MEETINGS**

### **GENERAL**

All members are responsible for the well being of NA. Individual recovery depends on regular safe meetings and other recovering addicts to provide support. A strong group may not need these guidelines as much as a young or struggling group; group conscience and the visible support of group members provide the necessary back-up for a group secretary to deal with a difficult issue. However, occasionally, due to inexperience in the group, a secretary may be in position where s/he has to deal with a difficult issue alone. In this situation these guidelines may be the only means of support.

There are certain fundamental principles that need to prevail in a group for it to function well in fulfilling its primary purpose. These are:

- i. the group's adherence to clean-time guidelines and regular business meetings and group inventories (suggestions about how to hold a group inventory can be found in the '*Guide to local services*'.) to create and sustain a strong group;
- ii. the importance of an atmosphere of recovery in NA meetings;
- iii. the personal responsibility of all the members to maintain that atmosphere;
- iv. the need to refer to a group conscience for both identification of inappropriate behaviour and for decisions about how to deal with it;
- v. principles before personalities in both the discovery of the group conscience and in dealing with disruptive individuals.

In terms of action it is important to tackle inappropriate behaviour with love and inclusion, and the job should be done by experienced members of the group backed by a strong committee, or negotiated between committee members as to how might be the best way to proceed as a group. One option might be to invoke a group conscience and have a means by which a member might bring concerns to the group anonymously, perhaps by letter. The guidelines that follow are driven by these principles.

### **PRINCIPLES**

#### **i. the group's adherence to clean-time guidelines**

It is the responsibility of each group to provide the best forum for recovery from addiction. A regular group inventory of how it fulfils its primary purpose reinforces and demonstrates the commitment of the committee members, and keeps the group focused.

'NA as such ought never be organised' (*Trad. 9*) ...this means we don't have rules enforced on us from above, but it doesn't mean we shouldn't organise ourselves, this is the job of the committee.

According to tradition nine, the meeting committee is directly responsible to those they serve, that is, the individuals in the meeting. Taking on a committee position is, therefore, a serious commitment and it is strongly recommended that groups adhere to the clean-time guidelines when electing committee members and follow the suggestions in the pamphlet IP2: 'The Group'.

The following clean-time recommendations are made for the various group committee positions:

Group service representative:	1 year
Alternate group service representative:	6 months
Secretary:	1 year
Treasurer:	1 year

This ensures a strong committee that is likely to be experienced enough to deal with problems with a firm and loving approach.

## **ii. atmosphere of recovery**

'Groups carry the message of NA: hope and freedom from active addiction' (*It Works: How & Why, Trad. 5, p.159*). 'All Narcotics Anonymous groups are bound by the principles of the twelve steps and twelve traditions of NA. Each group has but one primary purpose - to carry the message to the addict who still suffers.' (*The Group, IP2, p.1*). An atmosphere for recovery is vital so the primary purpose can be fulfilled. If there is chaos, aggression, predatory behaviour etc. it is likely to prevent our carrying a message of recovery.

Recovery can be a delicate thing, it grows best in a stable and supportive environment. Each of us and each of our groups plays a part in maintaining stability. Tradition five stresses the 'we' of the group; the collective responsibility of the members to maintain an atmosphere of recovery. The group 'we' comprises all the individuals present at an NA meeting; everyone is responsible. Tradition five also tells us: 'group members help further our purpose when they take personal responsibility for keeping the meeting recovery oriented' (*It Works, Trad. 5, p.160-61*).

'Even more impressive than sheer numbers of recovering addicts is the unity of purpose and the atmosphere of recovery found in meetings - a spiritual power' (*It Works, Trad. 5, p.163*). The guidance of a loving higher power through a group conscience is the manifestation of recovery. This 'spiritual power' of the group is the first resource we have at our disposal for setting standards of behaviour; sometimes this alone is sufficient to pre-empt and prevent disruption; 'The evidence of that power is hard to deny' (*It Works, Trad. 5, p.163*), and hard for an individual to work against.

## **iii. personal responsibility of group members**

Our common welfare requires personal commitment and responsible action to ensure a meeting is safe for all members. In pulling together we learn that we really are part of 'something greater than ourselves' (*Basic Text, Trad. 7, p.68*). Members of the group can support their committee in maintaining an atmosphere of recovery by attending business meetings and group consciences and being positive about them and their functions, and by encouraging others to see involvement in the business of the group as a privilege and an essential part of maintaining the meeting rather than a boring chore.

## **iv. the need to refer to a group conscience for both identification of inappropriate behaviour and for decisions about how to deal with it**

We are concerned with protecting ourselves from ourselves. By nature we are strong-willed, self-centred people. We need to remember that group committee members have been placed in trust, that we are trusted servants and at no time does any of us govern. Leadership by example and by selfless service works; direction and manipulation fail. If a group becomes an extension of the personality of a leader or single member, it loses its effectiveness.

NA is a god given programme and we can maintain our group in dignity only with group conscience and god's love. the group takes its guidance from the collective conscience of its members. Before the group makes a decision, its members consult their Higher Power seeking spiritual guidance on the matter in hand. To this end a moment of silence is useful. There is a difference between group conscience and group opinion dictated by powerful personalities or popularity of individuals. 'Collective responsibility, not personal authority, is the guiding force behind NA services' (*It Works, Trad. 12, p.213*). We rely on 'a loving God as He expresses himself in our group conscience' (*Trad. 2*) rather than on personal opinion or ego. The spiritual conscience of a group will never contradict any of our traditions.

The decision as to whether behaviour is inappropriate or not should be made by group conscience and no other way. We all have different ideas about what constitutes 'recovery', and this is where a group conscience is crucial to gain a consensus on what constitutes acceptable behaviour in an NA meeting. In all situations the group conscience must prevail:

Deciding on taking a course of action may be difficult. Once we have a collective conscience that the behaviour of an individual or individuals is breaking the traditions of our fellowship or is otherwise inappropriate, a decision has to be made about how to deal with this. This decision needs to be arrived at via a group conscience.

The difficulty is to balance consideration for all with the efforts we wish to make not to exclude an addict who is in pain and acting out through abusive behaviour. That is why it is so important to place principles before personalities.

#### **v. principles before personalities in both discovery of a group conscience about inappropriate behaviour, and in dealing with disruptive individuals**

'There are many distracting influences that can divert us from our primary purpose' and 'each time our focus is diverted from our primary purpose, the addict seeking recovery loses out' (*It Works, Trad. 5, p.161*). This applies to both perpetrator and victim of abuse. Many members believe that an abusive, violent or sexually predatory individual within an NA meeting is a 'still suffering addict'; her or his behaviour unequivocally demonstrates this, and s/he therefore qualifies for acceptance in NA. During a group conscience the guiding principles of our fellowship should be borne in mind rather than the personality of the individual(s) under discussion. We do not seek to expel disruptive 'still suffering addicts' from our meetings, but to demonstrate recovery, offer love and acceptance, and create and maintain firm boundaries to protect the environment and vulnerable members.

#### **ACTION**

We learn that we can only be governed by a loving god as expressed in our group conscience. Getting our egos out of the way and practising the principle of selfless service maintains the atmosphere of recovery vital to our groups.

Behaviour which causes some people to feel unwelcome, scared, discriminated against, excluded, ashamed or harassed will prevent our carrying the message. Examples of such behaviour might be: using obscenities or profanities; shouting or screaming; aggressive or threatening language or attitudes; using discriminatory language or making generalisations about groups of people; euphoric recall; describing sexual or violent acts or encounters in detail; interrupting other people's sharing. The committee is directly responsible to the members of the group and the secretary may need to intervene gently and respectfully when someone's sharing or other behaviour has this effect, to inform them that this will not be tolerated and stress the

importance of members' need for a safe meeting place. Newcomers should never have to challenge such behaviours.

As NA members we are encouraged to welcome all who seek recovery from addiction. Disruptive individuals should be encouraged to participate in the group on a healthy basis and this may be achieved through a discreet approach and explanation by experienced members of the group. Should this fail, these guidelines provide an outline of a series of actions.

When a group has been persistently bothered by a regular member:

- offender may be challenged by reading out at the beginning of the meeting a particular tradition that has previously been broken
- secretary could inform the offender that while they are welcome their inappropriate behaviour is not

Verbal abusiveness:

- on a first occasion two committee members can give a private explanation to the offender after the meeting that such behaviour is not countenanced in the group, and request that it not occur in future
- subsequently the secretary might intervene to ask the offender to stop sharing.

Disruptive behaviour:

- secretary can stop the meeting and members vacate the room (while someone is behaving abusively recovery is not taking place which means the situation has ceased to be an NA meeting so there is no sense in continuing)
- the group can suspend meetings until the problem is resolved
- police can be called if the law is broken, and ultimately the group can seek an injunction against the offender. The group has the same resources as individuals who are terrorised by violence and need not feel that it is against the principles of NA to invoke civil forces to protect individuals or the group as a whole if a member is prone to violence or threats of violence

### **Sexually Predatory Behaviour**

This kind of behaviour manifests in many forms; from preying on newcomers, to using the fellowship as a dating agency. It is also difficult to discern since actual sexual activity and the planning of that inevitably takes place outside NA meetings. It remains, however, the responsibility of the group to do its best to ensure that no-one who comes looking for recovery is distracted or prevented from that by anyone whom they meet in an NA meeting. When members of the group know that another member is using the fellowship for abusive sexual behaviour, the power of peer pressure might be invoked and the group members might confront the behaviour of the offender. Often, the predator will be unable to see her/himself as such, the power of denial being as it is, and s/he may need guidance from those who have a fuller understanding of the nature of addiction.

The group can take precautions against a member abusing the fellowship for sex by ensuring that when a newcomer arrives in the meeting s/he is always taken under the wing of at least two experienced members of the group who have clear and strong sexual boundaries. Vulnerable newcomers are prey to abusive members and cannot be expected to have the knowledge or strength to protect themselves. The group needs to protect its members from anyone who might interfere with their chance of recovery.

Sponsorship is a powerful way of providing the newcomer with the information and support s/he needs to avoid becoming prey to sexual distraction. Suggesting that a newcomer get a sponsor

for whom s/he is likely to have no sexual attraction is vital to her/his protection. The chances of sexual misunderstanding are lessened if the experienced members are sensitive to the sexual orientation of the newcomer and offer advice about sponsorship accordingly.

Often newcomers are taken to other meetings by established members, and our experience tells us that this can provide a forum for a sexually predatory individual to advance on the newcomer. It is, therefore, suggested that taking newcomers to meetings is always done by at least two experienced group members who have clear sexual boundaries, preferably members of a different sexual orientation from the newcomer.

## **CONCLUSION**

Offensive behaviour may be persistent and require repeated efforts on the part of the group. By agreeing on a strategy and repeating it the desired outcome may be realised. However, we need always to remember where we come from and who we are. Few people come into the fellowship 'brimming with love, honesty, open-mindedness and willingness' (*Basic Text, Step 1, p.20*), and wherever possible we need to practice tolerance and patience. It is important when dealing with abusive behaviour to refuse to engage at the level of abuse, but to hold the highest thought about the 'abuser' in consciousness throughout any interaction. We are not qualified to make judgements about whether or not someone wants or deserves recovery. Our responsibility is to carry the message and to effect group conscience decisions about what is acceptable behaviour for an NA meeting. A loving god has ultimate authority and a loving god does not condemn.