

## 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)*

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### **A.A. and Safety**

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 safe environment, alcoholics can focus on maintaining sobriety and the group can fulfill its primary purpose — to carry the A.A. message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

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. As expressed in Tradition Two and Tradition Nine, it is through an informed group conscience that individual members and A.A. groups find solutions to group matters as they relate to safety. Service entities such as areas, districts and intergroup/central offices are available to help provide A.A. services and shared experiences.

### **Group Safety and Unity**

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

Guidelines for handling difficult situations can be discussed at meetings and determined by the

group conscience. In these group discussions, the focus is on creating an environment where members can share safely and find and maintain sobriety. 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.

### **Dealing with Disruptions**

While most groups operate with a healthy balance of spontaneity and structure, others have experienced situations that can threaten group unity and challenge the safety of the group and its members. One such situation is a disruptive person whose behavior inhibits the group's ability to carry out its primary purpose. Members exhibiting such disruptive behavior may be asked by the group to stop attending that particular meeting for a period of time. In-person and virtual groups dealing with these kinds of disruptions make such a request to preserve the common welfare of the group and to maintain A.A. unity, recognizing that no A.A. group can bar any individual from equal membership in Alcoholics Anonymous.

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 disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. For clarity, some groups have listed examples of the group's definition of these behaviors. When necessary, groups and members always have the option to call the appropriate authorities if disruptive behavior escalates to violence or harassment, or if someone's safety is at risk.

### **A.A. and the Law**

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

Any activity within an A.A. group's meeting is subject to the same laws and local regulations that apply outside the group's meeting. Through the group conscience process, many groups have established guidelines regarding when it may be appropriate to call authorities to handle a given situation. Situations that groups have faced include, but are not limited to, violence, embezzlement, theft of property, drug sales at a meeting, and more. However, neither the list of possible situations nor the guidelines are meant to cover every scenario. 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. Members should contact the authorities if they feel that their safety is at risk.

## **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; for example, if an individual is threatening self-harm. Addressing an emergency is more important than continuing the meeting.

In recent years, a global health situation affected A.A. groups meeting in person. Although many groups have responded by meeting virtually, groups opting to meet in person found it helpful to obtain the most complete and reliable information possible from qualified medical personnel and/or public health and safety agencies. Some groups have used A.A.'s Twelve Traditions as the basis for creating unity within the group and developing group safety guidelines. Attendance at A.A. meetings should not require putting one's health at risk or being intimidated for adhering to local safety guidance. By respecting the local laws and safety guidelines, many groups stayed focused on our primary purpose and avoided drawing A.A. into public controversy.

## **Safety and A.A. in the Digital Age**

Virtual platforms and social media have become a significant resource for connecting current A.A. members and potential members in ways the Fellowship never thought possible. The A.A. Traditions that apply to in-person A.A. settings also apply to A.A. phone, online and social media settings. Many groups discuss the relationship between safety and anonymity and incorporate guidelines in their opening announcements. To help keep meetings free from cyberbullying or harassment, some virtual groups have created specific service positions. 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 intergroup/central offices, districts, areas, and forums have developed tech support and safety service material to share with members.

## **Participation and Inclusion**

A.A.'s Steps, Traditions and Concepts encourage participation, inclusion, and unity. These spiritual principles serve as the ideals A.A. groups and members strive for.

In the Step Five essay in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, A.A.'s co-founder Bill W. wrote, "...nearly all of us suffered the feeling that we didn't quite belong.... When we reached A.A., and for the first time in our lives stood among people who seemed to understand, the sense of belonging was tremendously exciting."

As part of a Grapevine article on Tradition Three Bill W. shared "Let us of A.A. therefore resolve that we shall always be inclusive, and never exclusive, offering all we have to all.... May all barriers be thus leveled; may our unity thus be preserved."

The Concept Four essay in *The A.A. Service Manual* states, "There is another good reason for 'participation,' and this one has to do with our spiritual needs. All of us deeply desire to belong. We want an A.A. relation of brotherly partnership. It is our shining ideal that the 'spiritual

corporation' of A.A. should never include any members who are regarded as 'second class.'"

These may be the ideals, but they are not always everyone's experience. Some A.A. members have shared they felt unwelcome in A.A. meetings based on their race, ethnicity, religious belief or non-belief, native language, age or varying abilities. Some members have shared that being questioned about their gender identity has made them feel unaccepted. Others have shared they have not been invited to fully participate in the group or fully participate in A.A.

Our Traditions suggest that no one should have to tolerate racial, sexual orientation, gender, age or other discrimination when they seek help from A.A.

*What is the connection to safety?* These experiences impact members feeling safe and wanting to stay in A.A. Here is some experience that A.A. groups have shared on how they practice these principles to support a safe meeting space:

Groups have used the inventory process to address barriers to full participation, asking questions such as:

- Are we striving to provide a safe and accessible meeting space?
- Could we be providing language interpretation, including ASL, to be more accessible to all alcoholics?
- Are we striving to attract a good cross section of alcoholics in our local community?
- Are all members given the opportunity to speak at meetings and to participate in other group activities?

Alcoholism is a disease that is no respecter of age, varying abilities, creed, race, gender, 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.

*"...we resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help. Love and tolerance of others is our code."* — *Alcoholics Anonymous, page 84*

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**Here are some helpful suggestions and reminders:**

- Talk about issues of safety before they arise, at the group, district, or area level.
- Use your group's [General Service Representative](#) (G.S.R.) and [A.A. Service Committees](#) to help provide broader shared experience.
- Include the topic of safety as part of your group inventory and consider developing group guidelines and procedures on safety.
- Keep the focus on our primary purpose and our common welfare, and place principles before personalities in all discussions about safety.

- Remember that sponsors can play an important role in providing leadership and setting an example.
- Let A.A. members know that if they are concerned about the words or actions of another member, they may find it helpful to speak to someone they trust, their A.A. group, or a professional.
- Remember that calling the proper authorities in relation to criminal behavior taking place at or around meetings does not go against any A.A. Traditions and that anonymity is not a cloak protecting such behavior.

## Helpful Resources

- [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.

[www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)