

## SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADING BEGINNERS' MEETINGS

- **What kinds of meetings work best?**
- **What is a good general outline for the leader?**
- **How Leaders can prepare themselves**
- **Suggested topics for meetings**
- **Suggestions on arrangements for beginners' meetings**

This information is for all AAs. Although it is written mainly to help the Group holding beginners' meetings, or the member leading them, any other AA will find it worthwhile reading.

By receiving and giving AA help, every one of us becomes a link in a chain around the world. All of us cling to the chain to save our lives, and yet each of us is part of it – depending on all the others to help keep the chain unbroken.

So these few pages explore ways to strengthen the links – ways through which we can stay sober by helping other alcoholics stay away from one drink, one day at a time. It is a collection, from AA Groups everywhere, of suggestions for helping AA newcomers gain sobriety and grow in the program.

### WHAT KINDS OF BEGINNERS' MEETINGS WORK BEST?

Many kinds have worked well. They range from small, unplanned, informal discussions, with newcomers doing most of the talking and a different leader each time, to large sessions, prearranged in a series, with one continuing leader giving prepared talks on specific AA subjects.

A combination of these two types seems to work best. Groups have found that newcomers' chances of recovery are higher if they can actively take part in AA discussions as soon as possible – and that they also need someone with AA experience to tell them the essential facts about alcoholism and our program of recovery.

Therefore, many beginners' meetings include both:

1. A brief talk by the leader, for not more than twenty or thirty minutes in an hour meeting, and
2. Discussion by all present.

## WHAT IS A GOOD GENERAL OUTLINE FOR THE LEADER?

Many experienced leaders of beginners' meetings say that their opening remarks generally cover these points:

1. Welcome to newcomers.  
(Newcomers are essential to AA's health and growth. In the first few weeks they will discover that their fresh experiences make them vital links in reaching other suffering alcoholics).
2. Assurance that newcomers' anonymity will be respected.
3. Explanation that everything the leader or any other member says is only the individual's opinion, that no one can speak on behalf of the entire worldwide Fellowship (or, indeed, of any group).
4. Brief statement of the Fellowship's size and scope.
5. Brief sharing of the leader's own experience, including in condensed form the usual elements of an AA talk:

identification as an alcoholic  
(not necessarily *events* while drinking, but *feelings*),

how the leader came to AA,

recovery in the program,

knowledge gained from AA.

6. Comments on any particular topic that, in the leader's opinion, newcomers need or want to know about  
(there are suggestions on the following pages).
7. Information about other local meetings.
8. Recommendation of the AA message in print – so that newcomers may take it with them after the meeting in the form of AA books, pamphlets, or the *Grapevine*.

## CAN A LEADER PREPARE FOR BEGINNERS' MEETINGS?

*Most say they can if they keep their minds open to suggestions from the experience of others. This guide both summarises such experience and points out Conference-approved literature in which generally accepted AA thinking on many important topics is given in greater detail. For instance, the booklet "Living Sober" – specifically designed for newcomers – provides possible answers to questions often asked at beginners' meetings.*

When a leader is "willing to go to any length" to help newcomers, preparation for a meeting can be an exciting and rewarding venture, not a chore.

As one leader wrote, "After all, I am responsible." Experience of nearly 70 years throughout the Fellowship does indeed suggest strongly that anyone who sets out to lead newcomers meeting should take this privilege as a serious responsibility – and work at it.

## SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR BEGINNERS' MEETINGS

### #1 How to stay away from one drink one day at a time

(In any series of beginners' meetings, there are usually new faces at each session. Therefore, leaders have found that this topic should always be included in every meeting.)

When we first came to AA, many of us did not realise that the *first* drink triggered the compulsion to drink more and more: that it deluded us into thinking we could drink another safely, then another and another.

The danger seems obvious now, but many of today's newcomers are just as baffled as we once were. So the leader usually explains the significance of the first drink – and how to avoid just that one, for at least one day or one hour.

Almost every AA has a favourite means of doing this, and other members attending a meeting can make suggestions for additions to the following:

1. The twenty-four hour (or one-minute, if necessary) plan.
2. The **HALT** reminder – never getting too **Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired**.
3. Sticking close to your sponsor – and discussing personal problems with him or her.
4. *Postponing* the drink.
5. Going to lots of AA meetings.
6. Keeping pockets stuffed with AA reading matter.
7. Prayer – in whatever form the new member prefers it.
8. Changing routines – especially at drinking hours – to break up the old habit patterns.
9. Spending time with other members individually – either in person or on the telephone (and especially during old drinking hours).
10. Spending time in meeting rooms or central offices where AA's gather outside of regular meeting hours.
11. Starting work on the *Twelve Steps*, to fight such threats to sobriety as resentments, self-pity, and the tendency to dwell on the past or the future.

### #2 Alcoholism, the Disease

A **very important secret** of successful *Twelfth Step* work is revealed in Chapter 7: "Working with Others" in the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" (The 'Big Book'). It is developed more on pp 13 and 67-68 of the book "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age".

Alcoholics usually have to face the medical facts of the disease, as well as the present unmanageability of their own lives, before they can accept help. This seems to be true even for newcomers who are forced by pressure from others to come to AA for the first time.

The medical viewpoint on alcoholism that helped to bring about the birth of AA is outlined in "*The Doctor's Opinion*", located in the front section of the book "Alcoholics Anonymous". It is explained in further detail in the first three chapters of the Big Book, and in the AA pamphlets "*Three Talks to Medical Societies by Bill W*", and "*AA as a Resource for the Medical Profession*".

Many good descriptions of the disease are used by AA members, such as: 'threefold illness', 'progressive disease', 'compulsion plus obsession', etc (see pp 4-7 in the pamphlet "*44 Questions*").

Many newcomers have also been helped by discussion of various definitions of alcoholism, of the symptoms of the disease, of the uselessness of misdirected willpower in combating alcoholism, of the futility in insisting on an intellectual understanding of the condition *before* becoming willing to *practise* the AA program.

Since AA does not pretend to be a medical program, scientific information on the illness – for those who want it – must come from other sources. Three good ones are listed on p 43 of the pamphlet "*The AA Group*".

### **#3            How It Works: The *Twelve Steps* Suggested as a Program of Recovery**

Many of us wonder when we first approach AA just *how it works*.

**That's the title of Chapter V in the book "Alcoholics Anonymous", of course. It is the heart of the AA message.**

Because the newcomer may have been told that "'here are no musts in AA', it seems wise to explain that these *suggested* Steps are a summary of actual past experience in recovery.

The men and women responsible for the Steps realised that they could never reach in person, many alcoholics who wanted their help. So they knew they had to be especially careful to use the words that would describe most honestly and completely the road they had taken.

Leaders of beginners' meetings generally agree that newcomers are rarely helped by ponderous sermonising about the *Twelve Steps*, or by complicated interpretations. The Steps speak plainly for themselves, and all newcomers are, of course, free to interpret and use them as they individually choose.

It is the leader's job to be sure that their exact wording is made available to the newcomer. While newcomers may not be in the mood for serious reading, the sooner they read the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" the better. Some groups give it away, others sell it, many keep a 'lending library' of AA books; some award the Big Book or "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" as a 'door prize'.

### **#4            The *Twelve Traditions*: What we Learn from AA Mistakes**

The Traditions explain much of the seemingly contradictory behaviour that confuses newcomers when they first encounter a fellowship that functions with so little obvious organisation: 'anonymity' – and yet the occasional use of full names at meetings; 'no dues or fees' – and then the basket is passed.

A discussion of the origin of the Traditions, in relation to our earlier mistakes, can answer many questions and allay many anxieties for newcomers.

By relating their own experiences in using the Traditions, leaders can help newcomers understand the importance of principles before personalities, of anonymity at the public, print or broadcast level, of the group conscience, self-support, and AA's non-affiliation with other organisations.

Know what AA does *not* do is as important for many of us as knowing what it *does* do, so that we will not expect more than AA can deliver. A list of services AA does not provide is given in the pamphlet "*AA in Your Community*".

If leaders want to feel secure in their own understanding of the Traditions, it recommends that they study carefully the books "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" and "AA Comes of Age", plus the pamphlet "*The Twelve Traditions Illustrated*".

## **#5 AA in Print – Service to Others**

**Most AA's agree that newcomers are entitled to know about *all* the AA help available to them.**

Support materials include books, pamphlets and wallet cards, (also slides, video and audio tapes, and banners). AA Conference approved literature is distributed by the National Office of AA Australia, either locally published or imported from AA World Services Inc, and obtainable directly or through local Central Service or Intergroup Offices. A large range of various kinds of AA help is offered. It carefully reflects the broadest possible consensus of the entire movement, worldwide – not just some individual's personal interpretation or some unique local view.

Pointing out what AA publications are, and what they contain, may be one of the finest services we can give to newcomers, because we are thereby encouraging them to dig out the answers for themselves.

Another gift of knowledge we can pass on to newcomers is information about our *Three Legacies of Service*, helping them to understand their own role as new links in our worldwide chain of love and service.

It is easy to explain just how AA is geared to serve alcoholics after reading about it in the pamphlet "*The AA Group*". In addition, information about the General Service Structure appears in brief form in the folder "*Inside AA*".

## **#6 Other Factors in AA Recovery**

In addition to the five suggestions above, many Groups report that their beginners' meetings include discussions of these topics:

- 1 The original AA experience, as described in the books "Alcoholics Anonymous" and "AA Comes of Age", and the capsule story of AA's growth on pp 12-13 of "*44 Questions*".
- 2 The desire to be sober for oneself.
- 3 Release from the compulsion and removal of the obsession.
- 4 Who can be a member of AA, and how to join. Many newcomers are greatly relieved at the absence of any official ritual, 'signing up', or other procedure for becoming an AA member (see p 27 of the pamphlet "*The AA Group*"). Anyone may attend *open* AA meetings. Membership in AA is open to anyone with a drinking problem. Dually addicted people are also eligible for AA membership, *if they have a drinking problem*.
- 5 Acceptance of facts about ourselves: self-honesty as the basis of the program.
- 6 The *Serenity Prayer*.
- 7 The *AA Slogans*.
- 8 Sponsorship: how to get a sponsor; how to change sponsors, if necessary. (See the pamphlet "*Questions and Answers on Sponsorship*").
- 9 The family (see Chapters 8 and 9, "To Wives" and "The Family Afterward", in "Alcoholics Anonymous") and ways in which non-alcoholic relatives can get guidance in understanding alcoholism and thus helping the alcoholic (the *Al-Anon Family Groups* and *Alateen*).

- 10 The AA language. Most leaders of beginners' meetings agree that it is very important to explain any specialised AA jargon to newcomers. Indeed, it is essential to make all discussions at these meetings as simple and understandable as we can. Many newcomers arrive with no prior knowledge of AA and (as most of us recall from our own histories), few newcomers are mentally in the best shape for rapidly absorbing complex information or ideas.
- 11 Spiritual awakening. Ever since Ebby T first successfully twelfth-stepped Bill W (see "*Bill's Story*" in "Alcoholics Anonymous"). AA's have been encouraged to arrive at their own conception of AA recovery tools. For a discussion of the role of a spiritual awakening in recovery, see in "Alcoholics Anonymous" the chapters "We Agnostics", "Working with Others", "A Vision for You", and "Spiritual Experience"; "*Step Twelve*" in "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions", pp 67-68 in "AA Comes of Age", plus the pamphlets "*44 Questions*" and "*Questions and Answers on Sponsorship*".
- 12 Are sedatives dangerous for alcoholics? (Refer to "*The AA Member – Medications and other Drugs*").

## SUGGESTIONS ON ARRANGEMENTS FOR BEGINNERS' MEETINGS

**Rotation of jobs in the group is considered highly valuable in AA (see "*The AA Group*" pp 16-17). After one member has led a series of beginners' meetings (anywhere from four to twelve – but six seems to be the favourite number), another leader rotates into the job for the next series. Many groups like to alternate between men and women as leaders, with a man leading one series, a woman the next.**

Other groups prefer that each beginners' meeting be led by a different member.

In those areas where AA's are most enthusiastic about the results of beginners' meetings, there seems to be general agreement on these ideas:

- 1 The meeting should be separate and apart from the regular open or closed meeting. In some localities, it is scheduled for one hour preceding a regular meeting. In others, the beginners' meeting is held at the regular meeting hour, either in a different room (where space permits) or on a different evening.
- 2 An intimate, informal atmosphere seems friendliest and encourages participation by the newcomer. With that aim in mind, the favourite arrangement has members seated around a large table.
- 3 Neither the leader nor any of the 'older in sobriety' members present should dominate the meeting. It is up to the leader to see that this does not turn into an ordinary discussion, with the more experienced talkers crowding the newcomer out.
- 4 The newcomer should feel welcome to participate, but never made to feel 'on the spot' or on the defensive by being asked questions.
- 5 An AA member should feel to attend the meetings and meet and help newcomers there.
- 6 Presenting the newcomer with a packet of basic recovery pamphlets and a current meeting list has been found helpful in some areas.