

## **Presentation on A.A. Safety**

Area Committee of March 11, 2023

If I may, I'd like to turn now to a topic that is part of the common welfare of us all. More than that, it is about our safety and our future as a service organization.

At the next preconference meeting next month, we will all have an opportunity to discuss safety in our A.A. groups. We will, of course, discuss the topics on the General Service Conference agenda so that our delegate will be equipped with the expression of our area group conscience.

But, our delegate, Claude, has agreed that we will also hold workshops that will focus on safety and prevention of all forms of harassment in our groups.

You are probably familiar with our safety card — our famous yellow card. This is the statement that had been made available to groups as a service document for groups to read to advise members in attendance that the "group strives to create a safe environment where alcoholics can focus on their sobriety." It was revised and updated last April.

I encourage you to look it up if you are not familiar with it or if you don't remember what it says.

We want to take advantage of the presence of many GSRs at our next Assembly to revisit the issue of predatory behavior, bullying and unwanted advances.

We are asking the DCMs to make a special effort to ensure participation at the GSR level so that as many group representatives as possible can be made aware of harassment in all its forms and what can be done to stop it when it happens to us and our group.

The last time the Regional Committee dealt with this issue was in May 2021. So, we are going to go back to the exercise of asking ourselves questions about harassment — whether it is in-person bullying since we are back in attendance or cyberstalking that happens on social media.

In fact, it's important to go back to the fact that not everyone comes to AA only to find sobriety and recovery.

There are people who come to our rooms to try to take advantage of other members in all sorts of ways. Sometimes vulnerable people in their infancy can fall under the sway of people who claim to want to help them...

Many of us are familiar with phrases such as "the 13th step" or "the old sharks". We may be less familiar with the frequency with which harassment can occur and, more importantly, with the actions that can be taken when confronted with "cases," "incidents," "predatory behavior.

Not only do we need to speak out against them, but we need to let newcomers know that we do not tolerate them.

It is up to the conscience of our groups to ensure that we create a climate of trust where a person who is dealing with a stalker or a bully can call on the group for help. How many newcomers have not returned to A.A. after experiencing unacceptable situations?

The very definition of harassment can be broad. How to handle cases should be part of the group's guidelines or, at the very least, part of a consensus within the group's consciousness.

There is room for reflection and, in reality, room for intervention. In preparation for this April meeting, I encourage you to read the "Safety Map for A.A. Groups" and also the service document "Safety and A.A.: Our Common Welfare. You can find these at our literature desk or at [aa.org](http://aa.org).

The primary purpose of any group is to carry the A.A. message to the alcoholic who still suffers. Each group must provide a safe and healthy environment where everyone can feel secure to focus on recovery. Each group conscience must be prepared to act in the spirit of our A.A. principles.

I leave you with this and wish you well in your reflection and also to come back in April surrounded by your GSRs.

Kathleen R. Chairperson Area 87

Robert MC. Alternate Secretary

## 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 ex-patience.

\*Available upon request by contacting G.S.O.

\*\*Available on aa.org.

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

## A.A. FACT SHEET

### ***The Preamble of Alcoholics Anonymous***

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.

A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes.

Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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### ***What A.A. Does***

Nonalcoholic guests are welcome at “open” A.A. meetings. Attendance at “closed” meetings is limited to those who are alcoholic or think they may have a drinking problem.

At meetings A.A. members share their recovery experience with anyone seeking help with a drinking problem, and give person-to-person services or “sponsorship” to the alcoholics coming to A.A.

The A.A. program, as set forth in the Twelve Steps to recovery, offers the alcoholic an opportunity to develop a satisfying way of life free from alcohol.

### ***What A.A. Does NOT Do***

1. Make medical or psychiatric diagnoses or prognoses, or offer advice.
2. Provide detox or nursing services, hospitalization, drugs, housing, jobs, money or other welfare services.
3. Accept any money for its services or contributions from outside sources.
4. Provide letters of reference to parole boards, lawyers, court officials, social agencies, employers, etc.
5. Engage in or support education, research, or professional treatment.

*Our recovery is based on sharing our experience, strength and hope with each other, that we may solve our common problem; more importantly, our continued sobriety depends upon helping others to recover from alcoholism.*

## **SAFETY CARD FOR A.A. GROUPS**

*The General Service Office has made this optional card available as an A.A. service piece for in-person/online groups that wish to use it. Please feel free to utilize, choose a section(s) or adapt the text to your group's needs.*

**Tradition Five states:** Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Any person seeking help with a drinking problem is welcome at this group. No A.A. entity determines an individual's membership in Alcoholics Anonymous. It is this group's conscience that if any person endangers another individual or disrupts the group's efforts to carry A.A.'s message, the group may ask that person to leave the meeting.

This group strives to safeguard the anonymity of A.A. members and attendees; however, keep in mind that anonymity in A.A. is not a cloak for unsafe and illegal behavior. Addressing such behavior and/or contacting the proper authorities when appropriate, does not go against any A.A. Traditions and is meant to ensure the safety of all in attendance.

The short form of Tradition One states: "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." Recognizing the importance of group unity, our group strives to create a safe meeting environment in which alcoholics can focus on achieving sobriety.

## **Additional Sharing:**

- Safety is a topic within A.A. that groups and members can address. Developing workable solutions to help keep meetings safe can be based on the principles of A.A. In discussions about safety, keep the focus on our primary purpose, our common welfare, and placing principles before personalities.
- Predatory behaviors and unwanted sexual advances are in conflict with carrying the A.A. message of recovery and with A.A. principles.
- A.A. does not provide medical advice or detox services; it has no opinion on outside issues, including medication. Medical advice should come from a qualified physician.
- The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking. Groups and members strive to create a safe environment for the alcoholic who still suffers.
- If safety concerns arise, individuals can speak with a sponsor, members of the group, a trusted friend and/or a professional to address the concern.
- Service entities, such as areas, districts and intergroup/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 our experience, strength and hope.

*For more information on this topic, see the service piece  
“Safety and A.A.: Our Common Welfare” (SMF-209) at [aa.org](http://aa.org).*

# Safety and A.A. flyer

*A.A. groups are made up of alcoholics who gather for the sole purpose of staying sober and helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.*

Safety is a topic within A.A. that groups and members may need to address to help ensure the ability to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. Our Twelve Traditions provide a set of principles to help guide us, and the additional shared experience pertaining specifically to safety provided in this service piece may be helpful if challenges arise at in-person or virtual settings.

**A.A.** membership does not include having to tolerate sexual harassment, threats of violence, financial coercion, or bullying. Nor is pressuring A.A. members into a particular point of view or belief relating to medications, religion and other outside issues acceptable.

No one should have to tolerate racial, sexual orientation, gender, age or other discrimination when they seek help from A.A.

### **Keep in mind:**

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.

- Unwanted sexual advances and predatory behaviors are in conflict with carrying the A.A. message of recovery.
- There may be other behaviors that go on outside of typical meeting times that may affect whether someone feels safe to return to the group.
- As reflected in A.A.'s Tradition Three (Long Form), "Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover." However, an A.A. group could ask someone to stop attending their meetings if the person is disruptive and prevents the group from carrying the message. *No A.A. entity proposes to bar any individual from membership in Alcoholics Anonymous.*
- Calling the proper authorities *does not* go against A.A. Traditions. Anonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal behavior. Any conduct within an A.A. meeting is subject to the same laws that apply outside the meeting.
- Involvement in any business ventures, 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, they should take place with the clear understanding that these activities are outside of A.A.

- The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking; therefore, groups strive to create a warm and welcoming environment to the alcoholic who has not yet stopped drinking.

### **Samples of statements on safety:**

Groups determine the formats of their meetings reflecting their needs, experience and group conscience. Below are a few examples of language used by some A.A. groups as part of their introductory announcements in their efforts to create a safe meeting place. Please feel free to select or adapt any text from this flyer that fits your group's needs.

- *Our group strives to create a safe meeting environment where alcoholics can focus on gaining and maintaining sobriety.*
- *As our Traditions remind us, despite personal differences, our common welfare is critical and comes first. Therefore, we ask that group members and others refrain from any behavior that might compromise another person's welfare, safety, or ability to participate in the group.*
- *This group welcomes all those seeking help with a drinking problem. A.A. is inclusive, never exclusive.*
- *Those who experience any harassment that makes it difficult to receive the A.A. message of recovery can feel free to let the group know about such situations and can, of course, take appropriate action.*
- *We respect and protect your anonymity; however, all in attendance should be aware that our principle of anonymity does not mean that an A.A. member cannot or should not contact the appropriate authorities if they are subjected to or learn about illegal behavior by another A.A. member.*
- *Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.*
- *So that our group can carry out our meeting, please keep in mind that disruptive behavior is not tolerated. This group defines disruptive behavior as [insert examples].*

## **Some suggestions:**

- In discussions about safety, keep the focus on our primary purpose, our common welfare, and placing principles before personalities.
- Communicate clearly what A.A. is and what it is not.
- To raise awareness about safety concerns, discuss the topic at group conscience meetings, service workshops, and, when appropriate, with a sponsor.
- Consider developing group guidelines and procedures on safety.
- Consider including safety as a topic for a group inventory.
- If concerns arise, speak with a sponsor, trusted friend and/or a professional to address the concern.
- Contact your District Committee Member (D.C.M.) or Area Delegate for local shared experience.

## **Emergencies:**

Accidents, medical emergencies, fires, etc., sometimes do occur during meetings. To prepare for these situations, groups can develop plans and procedures, often in consultation with their landlord or local authorities. Addressing an emergency situation is more important than continuing the meeting, and members should not hesitate to call emergency personnel in critical situations. It is suggested that groups and members with health and safety questions contact national, state/provincial and local health authorities for appropriate information.

## **Safety and A.A. in the digital age**

The Internet and social media platforms have greatly impacted how A.A. members interact with each other and with potential members. Relating to safety, the principles that apply to “in person” A.A. settings also apply to A.A. phone, online, and social media settings.

## **Related A.A. resources: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)**

- A.A.'s Twelve Traditions
- The service piece "Safety and A.A.: Our Common Welfare" (SMF-209)
- "Safety Card for A.A. Groups" (F-211)
- Service material "Information on A.A." (F-2)
- A.A. pamphlet "The A.A. Group... Where It All Begins" (P-16)
- A.A. pamphlet "Questions and Answers on Sponsorship" (P-15)
- A.A. pamphlet "Frequently Asked Questions About A.A." (P-2)
- "The A.A. Member — Medications and Other Drugs" (P-11)

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 intergroup/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 our experience, strength and hope.

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