

# A.A.® Guidelines

## Safety & A.A. Groups

from GSO, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various service areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

### INTRODUCTION

Bill W., who always emphasized the loving, helpful, and tolerant attitude A.A. members should show each other, wrote in a letter in 1969: "This amount of charity does not mean that we cannot exclude those who disturb meetings or seriously interfere with the functioning of the group. Such people can be asked to quiet down or go elsewhere, or, to come back when they are better able to participate."

Indeed, Bill W. was no stranger to tumult, controversy, or disturbances at A.A. meetings. He also had faith that growth and good could come out of trouble. In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, he writes, "Within A.A., I suppose, we shall always quarrel a good bit. Mostly, I think, about how to do the greatest good for the greatest number of drunks (...) Surmounting such problems, in A.A.'s rather rugged school of life, is a healthy exercise." (p. 233).

## 1. THE A.A. GROUP

### GROUP AUTONOMY

There is no government in A.A. and no central authority to control or direct members. As embodied in the Fourth Tradition, the formation and operation of an A.A. group resides with the group conscience of its members. 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.

A.A.'s Twelve Traditions developed as a statement of the principles that A.A. members formulated out of their experience of trying to remain true to spiritual principles in their groups.

While the Twelve Traditions may primarily be understood as guidance for A.A. groups, these principles can also guide how group members behave outside their groups, whether communicating with professionals, the media, or potential A.A. members. They may also apply in all kinds of settings: the workplace, the family, in person or on social media.

Keep in mind there may be experiences/harassments that originate from group interactions that occur outside the typical meeting times or place. This can include private social media channels where A.A.s gather. It is important to remember that having a negative experience may affect whether someone feels safe returning to A.A. Investments, loans, employment and/or any services offered in exchange for any fees are outside of the purpose of an A.A. group. If these activities do occur, all parties involved should clearly understand that these activities are not connected to A.A.

### GROUP SAFETY AND UNITY

As noted in many of our Conference-approved pamphlets, each A.A. group endeavors to provide a safe meeting place for all attendees and to encourage a secure and nurturing environment. In A.A., the shared experience, strength and hope of sober alcoholics is the lifeline to sobriety; our common suffering and our common solution transcends most difficulties, helping us to create the conditions in which to carry A.A.'s message of hope and recovery to the still-suffering alcoholic.

Safety-related concerns that groups (whether in person or online) have addressed through their group conscience have included:

- Threats of violence, bullying, or stalking
- Sexual harassment, predatory behavior
- Financial coercion
- Discrimination based on race, native language, culture, age, or sexual orientation
- Gender intolerance
- Pressure to adopt a particular view or belief relating to medical treatments and/or medications
- Pressure to adhere to a particular ideology, religious belief, custom or practice

Our Traditions suggest that anyone seeking help from A.A. should be welcomed and supported in their recovery. 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.

Being made to feel unwelcome or excluded from an A.A. group or from A.A. membership is not an "outside issue," nor is sharing about this experience. In fact, understanding this experience helps each group to check its progress on practicing the welcoming spirit of Tradition Three: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking."

Here are some ways groups have found to be helpful in weathering safety issues:

- Talking about issues of safety before they arise, at the group, district, or area level
- Including the topic of safety as part of your group inventory and considering development of group guidelines and procedures on safety
- Using the group's General Service Representative (GSR) and A.A. Service Committees to help present broad, shared experience

- Focusing on our primary purpose and our common welfare, and placing principles before personalities in all discussions about safety
- Reminding members that sponsors can play an important role in providing leadership and setting an example
- Letting A.A. members know that if they have safety concerns 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
- Reminding members 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

## 2. SHARED EXPERIENCE FROM GROUPS TO HELP GUIDE DISCUSSION ON:

### DISRUPTIONS

While most groups operate with a healthy balance of spontaneity and structure, situations can arise which 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. In keeping with Tradition Three, no A.A. entity proposes to bar any individual from membership in Alcoholics Anonymous. However, members exhibiting disruptive behavior may be asked by the group to stop attending that particular meeting for a period of time.

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. One way in which groups try to maintain a safe and welcoming atmosphere is to include a message 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.

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, including reaching out to law enforcement. Anonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal or inappropriate behavior. (See the Conference-approved pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity"(P-47)).

### EMERGENCIES

Emergency situations sometimes occur during meetings, and members should not hesitate to call emergency personnel in critical situations.

Addressing an emergency is more important than continuing the meeting. To accommodate such situations (injuries, accidents, fires, etc.), some groups have developed plans and procedures, often in consultation with property owners, local authorities and/or professionals.

In global health situations, groups may find it helpful to obtain the most complete and reliable information possible from qualified medical personnel and/or public health and safety agencies.

### PARTICIPATION

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...It is our shining ideal that the 'spiritual corporation' of A.A. should never include any members who are regarded as 'second class.'"

Some 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 sign language, 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?

Some groups have shared that making people feel welcome can feel uncomfortable at first. Here are some examples of ways in which the inventory process has helped shape the group's conscience:

- One group member shared that in her group, after a young person spoke about their difficulty with physical contact, the group conscience decision was to ask the group's greeters to ask before hugging people at the door.
- Some groups have found it helpful to broaden the group's definition of what kinds of sharing would be allowed, in order to ensure that all members would feel comfortable sharing their personal experience of "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now."
- Some members have shared that they were challenged about their gender identification in meetings, which made them feel unsafe. In response, some groups have shared that one way they endeavor to provide a welcoming and safe meeting space is to announce that members can voluntarily share their pronouns (e.g., she/her, he/him, they/them) with the group when they introduce themselves.

### ANONYMITY ONLINE

When attending online meetings, every A.A. member has the freedom to choose the level of anonymity they wish to keep. While some members feel comfortable using their full names and faces, other members feel it is more aligned with their understanding of Tradition Eleven to use only their first name and last initial and/or turning their camera off. As each group is autonomous, some groups may require cameras on for safety reasons. In this case, individuals who prefer to keep their camera off are encouraged to explore other A.A. groups.

For safety purposes, some online or hybrid groups have provided helpful reminders that taking pictures or screen shots, and/or posting on social media in a way that compromises A.A. members' privacy and consent, are not in keeping with the anonymity principles of Traditions Eleven and Twelve.

To help keep meetings free from harassment, some online groups have created safety-related service positions. Online A.A. groups that have experienced harassment have adjusted the group's security settings, created safety procedures and/or sought professional technical support. Some local districts, areas, and forums, as well as intergroup/central offices, have developed tech support and safety service material to share with members.

### 3. RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOUR GROUP

#### A.A. ENTITIES AND LOCAL REGULATIONS

Regarding local misunderstandings, the General Service Conference approved the following resolution: "This, the 22nd General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous feels that GSO should not be asked to intervene or otherwise involve itself in local disputes or misunderstandings."

Local service entities such as areas and districts, as well as intergroup and central offices are available to help provide A.A. service, support, and local shared experience.

A.A. members have also found that it is important to consider local laws as well as the rules and safety guidelines of any facility where a meeting is held. If there are questions or concerns regarding a facility's rules, it is best to foster a dialogue directly with the facility. An informed group conscience can help determine whether a meeting space is the right fit for the group.

Any activity within an A.A. group's meeting is subject to the same laws and local regulations that apply outside of the group's meeting. Through the group conscience process, some 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. Neither the list of possible situations nor these guidelines are meant to cover every scenario. Members should feel free to contact the local authorities if they feel that their safety is at risk.

#### Conference-approved Literature and A.A. Resources

- Contact your district committee member (DCM) or area delegate for local shared experience. <https://www.aa.org/participating-in-aa>
- Available on [aa.org](https://www.aa.org):
  - » A.A. pamphlet "Questions & Answers on Sponsorship" (P-15)
  - » A.A. pamphlet "The A.A. Group ... Where It All Begins" (P-16)
  - » A.A. Guidelines "Accessibility for All Alcoholics" (MG-16)
  - » Service Material "Safety Card for A.A. Groups" (F-211)
  - » Service Material "Safety and A.A. Flyer" (F-228)
  - » *Box 4-5-9*, Fall 2010 edition, articles on "Disruptive Members at A.A. Meetings" and "A.A. and the Law" (available on the newsletters page at [aa.org](https://www.aa.org))

- Available upon request by contacting GSO at [groupservices@aa.org](mailto:groupservices@aa.org):
  - » A report from the 62nd General Service Conference Workshop: "Safety in A.A.: Our Common Welfare" (2012)
  - » Final Report of the "Ad Hoc Committee on Group Safety of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, U.S. and Canada" (2014)
  - » 2019 Regional Forum Report "Who's Not in the Room — Fostering Participation in A.A."

#### Non-A.A. Entities

The A.A. General Service Office has become aware that some non-A.A. entities are using the trademarked name "Alcoholics Anonymous" or "A.A." on their websites, URLs or mobile apps. They are not affiliated with A.A. and provide services that are not within the scope of A.A.

A.A. has a long history of cooperating with other organizations that aim to help alcoholics. In fact, some alcoholics may first hear about A.A. in these types of facilities or by treatment professionals. However, A.A. is not affiliated with any treatment center, rehab, or hospital. We do not provide "treatment" or medical services. Moreover, A.A. is not affiliated with any other organization or other 12 Step Fellowship. Even A.A. meetings that take place at treatment centers and rehabs are not affiliated with those facilities. Our hope is that the meetings are not being conducted by the professionals who work there. A.A. cooperates by bringing meetings to these facilities, when asked.

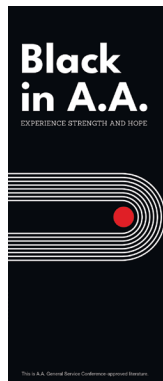
It doesn't cost anything to attend A.A. meetings. There are no contracts to sign. We won't ask for a credit card, electronic payment, insurance information or personal information.

Membership is voluntary. Though we may offer suggestions on attending meetings regularly, attendance is a personal decision. There are no membership lists or formal membership requirements. The only requirement is a desire to stop drinking. Individuals concerned with their drinking can just show up.

#### Members Share About Identification, Belonging and Participation in A.A.

*"...we believe that it is only by fully disclosing ourselves and our problems that they [the newcomer] will be persuaded to say, 'Yes, I am one of them too; I must have this thing.'"*  
(*The Big Book*, "There Is a Solution")

Included below is some shared experience from members with being welcomed and overcoming barriers. Understanding the diverse experiences A.A. members have had before and after arriving to A.A. is integral to the practice of A.A.'s Fifth Tradition: carrying the message of A.A. to the alcoholic who still suffers.



#### (P-51) Black in A.A.

<https://www.aa.org/black-aa-experience-strength-and-hope>

"I found a sponsor who sat me down with a Big Book, read it with me line by line, and led me

through the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. This woman could not be more different from me racially, culturally, and spiritually. My Higher Power used her to hand me the spiritual tools that have resulted in a life beyond my wildest dreams. She taught me to claim my seat in A.A. and hold on tight while walking through this life with dignity and grace no matter what I encounter.” — Evette, page 11.



**(P-11) Medications & Other Drugs**

<https://www.aa.org/aa-member-medications-and-other-drugs>

“After I’d been on this medication for four years, I talked to an oldtimer. I told him that I felt guilty and inadequate because I took medicine. He opened the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, to the Doctor’s Opinion and told me to read it. Even when the Big Book was written, the founders recognized that alcoholics with mental illness needed additional help.” — Bob, page 15.

**(P-21) Indigenous People in A.A.**

<https://www.aa.org/indigenous-people-aa>

“The beauty of Alcoholics Anonymous is that it works for everybody, no matter what your race, your sexual orientation, the size of your pocketbook, whether you’ve been in jail or live in a mansion. God’s grace is available to all of us.” — Angela, page 36.



**(P-83) Access To A.A.**



<https://www.aa.org/access-aa-members-share-overcoming-barriers>

“Often I realize that I am the only person in the meeting with accessibility issues, but because our Fellowship is constantly growing, I know there will be more of us...” — Deborah, page 21.

**(P-32) LGBTQ Alcoholics in A.A.**

<https://www.aa.org/lgbtq-alcoholics-aa>

“Service work in A.A. has become the cement that continues to bind me to people and to this program. A little while after I started transitioning, my friend and service sponsor got me a speaking gig on a LGBTQ panel at a local A.A. event in a neighboring area.” — Sammy, page 20.



**LET LITERATURE CARRY THE MESSAGE, TOO**

Today, as in the early days of Alcoholics Anonymous, the A.A. message of recovery from alcoholism is carried by one alcoholic talking to another. However, since the publication of the first edition of the Big Book in 1939, literature has played an important role in spreading the A.A. message and imparting information about the A.A. Twelve Step program of recovery.

A.A. co-founder Bill W., who often called the influence of A.A. literature “incalculable,” wrote in the May 1964 issue of the Grapevine, “Suppose, for instance, that during the last twenty-five years A.A. had never published any standard literature...no books, no pamphlets. We need little imagination to see that by now our message would be hopelessly garbled. Our relations with medicine and religion would have become a shambles. To alcoholics generally we would today be a joke, and the public would have thought of us a riddle. Without its literature, A.A. would certainly have bogged down in a welter of controversy and disunity.” (*The Language of the Heart*, p. 348).

Bill’s words ring just as true today. The newcomer walking into an A.A. group for the first time may be given a meeting list, basic recovery pamphlets and, depending on the individual group conscience, perhaps a copy of *Living Sober* or the Big Book.

For more information on suggestions for providing literature in your group, please see the Guidelines for Literature Committees. <https://www.aa.org/aa-guidelines-literature-committees>

A full list of all AAWS literature is available online through the Literature Catalogue. <https://www.aa.org/aa-literature-catalog>