

101 Meeting Starters

A Guide to Better Twelve Step Discussions

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Why I Prepared This Guidebook

Discussion meetings are closely tied in with AA's basic purpose of sharing our experience, strength, and hope with each other so we can stay sober and help others achieve sobriety. Certain topics and discussions support this purpose, but others have little or no bearing on sobriety and may even discourage wary newcomers from ever returning to an AA meeting. My hope is that this book will help every AA meeting get started on the right foot, regardless of how skilled the moderator or how distracted the group. My background for writing this book includes steady attendance at AA meetings since 1950. With at least ten thousand meetings behind me, I've come to see that not all AA discussion meetings are equal in content or spirit. Some of them are frightfully boring, although the people attending can be lively and personable. Many meetings go off track quickly, perhaps because they were never firmly on track at the beginning. Moderators sometimes permit discussions to become irrelevant or allow pointless distractions.

One pitfall is to launch meetings around general subjects such as "relationships" or "feelings." These topics are too broad to give us the focus we need for a helpful meeting. I've never come away from such discussions with the belief that we were really dealing with our personal problems. To some people, for example, the word *relationships* has come to mean sexual affairs, while *feelings* could embrace the whole gamut of human emotions.

During one great meeting I recall, a young member admitted to the group that he had been caught shoplifting. We really worked on that topic, and the ensuing discussion allowed some of us to open up about our own past dishonesties. No one condemned the young man, but everybody agreed that shoplifting was wrong and that some amends were necessary. It was a much better meeting than if we had simply tried to discuss the need for honesty.

We also have good meetings when individual members express specific issues that are bothering them at the moment. I recall a woman who was furious because her husband had lost his job, requiring them to move to a town she detested. Resentments of this kind are grist for the AA discussion mill, and almost everybody at the table can bring up examples of similar problems in his or her own past. Discussions can also catch fire when members talk about problems at work or disagreements with co-workers. While some of these discussions may wander a bit, they are healthy because troubled alcoholics need a forum for talking about such matters in a safe environment.

There are times, of course, when certain members will drone on about matters that have little or nothing to do with staying sober. AA even attracts a few people who are badly disturbed or who obsess about certain topics. At such times, it's necessary to get back to the topic at hand, but this should be done with kindness and understanding. I've seen capable moderators break in on such monologues tactfully, changing the subject without hurting feelings.

But our best course is to start the meeting with a good topic or question that will trigger immediate responses in the people at the table. That's why I've written *101 Meeting Starters*. The purpose of this guidebook is to get discussion meetings started in the best way so we will come away fulfilled and happy that we've had another great sharing experience.

Using this guidebook should be simple. The moderator chooses an appropriate topic, or reads a selection of topics aloud to solicit a preference from the group. The moderator then reads the text aloud to start the discussion portion of the meeting. Space has been provided after each topic for taking notes, which can serve as an aid for future discussions.

These topics are not intended to replace good ideas from group members. But they can serve a useful purpose in helping members focus on the problems and concerns that we face in the ongoing quest for continued, happy sobriety.

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A Look at Willpower

Moderator: In AA, we don't believe that willpower can keep us sober. Most of us tried that route before we got here, and it didn't work for us. No matter how much we "willed" ourselves to get sober and stay that way, we always wound up drunk. This was a frustrating business, and some of us decided we were just too weak-willed to find sobriety.

But many alcoholics are very strong-willed, and this can even be part of the problem. The will is our power to make choices and carry through with them. In drinking, however, we've acquired a compulsion that makes the wrong choices. The more we fight this compulsion, the more it tightens its grip on us. (People with other compulsions understand this well, hence the saying that "you can't eat just one potato chip.")

The process that seems to work for us in AA is to choose a different path with the understanding that our Higher Power is working in and through us, as well as over and above us. Our own will then becomes only the power to choose, but it is not the power that does the actual work of keeping us sober.

For this to work, we have to believe in the process and accept it for ourselves. It is simple, but it works. Now I'd like to ask the group to recall efforts to stay sober on willpower alone. Most likely, these efforts worked for a time and then failed. I need a volunteer to start the discussion with an example from personal experience.
