

Twelve Step Sponsorship

How It Works

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Introduction

When I was new to Alcoholics Anonymous, people in the Fellowship suggested that I find a sponsor. But how was I to find one? And where? And, most important, who would it be? The AA Big Book didn't mention sponsorship, and there were no books written about it. I was scared to ask someone to sponsor me, so I put off getting one. I kept thinking I could do it myself. I couldn't. Now I see how much not having a sponsor delayed my progress in AA.

When I was new to AA and looking for a sponsor, I didn't even know the right questions to ask.

After a while, I did get a sponsor. Then one day, someone asked me to sponsor him. Suddenly, I had a big responsibility. I had dozens of questions that I wanted answered. And quickly. What was I supposed to do as a sponsor? How would I know when he was ready to take a Step? What if he drank? I had nothing to rely on but my own sponsor and what I had heard about sponsorship in AA meetings and from other sponsees.

Twelve Step Sponsorship: How It Works came out of those early sponsorship experiences and out of the fear and earnestness I saw in my own sponsees when they were asked to sponsor somebody for the first time. They had many questions, but AA's only publication on this topic was a thirty-page pamphlet called "Questions and Answers on Sponsorship." So when a friend of mine made the suggestion, I decided to write something that would guide Twelve Step members through the sponsorship process.

The result is a guide for both sponsors and sponsees, for both newcomers and old-timers. *Its purpose is to help sponsors be the most effective sponsors they can be, and to help sponsees get the most they can out of having a sponsor.* Because my experience and knowledge are mostly in AA, the ideas here will reflect mainly an AA perspective. Yet, this book will be useful to people in any Twelve Step Fellowship—e.g., Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Cocaine Anonymous (CA), Overeaters Anonymous (OA), or Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA)—who want to take advantage of the special resource of sponsorship.

This book discusses what a sponsor does, how to find a sponsor, and how to be a sponsor. It also explains how to help a sponsee work each of the Twelve Steps.

This book is a guide to the sponsorship process.

The suggestions in *Twelve Step Sponsorship* did not originate with me. Everything in the book comes from AA through its members, meetings, and publications, but it is filtered through my perception. The only real authorities in AA are the Big Book (entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*), *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, other Conference-approved literature, and decisions of the AA General Service Conference (as AA's elected voice). These sources are largely silent on sponsorship, so most of what is in this book comes from my own experience and from the experience of other AA members. As with AA, the only authorities in other Twelve Step Fellowships are their Conference-approved literature and their equivalent to the General Service Conference.

In the process of writing *Twelve Step Sponsorship*, I have discovered just how different opinions are within the Fellowships regarding sponsorship. Part of the reason is that there is no authoritative book on the subject that we can all use as a common reference point. Instead, we have relied on what our own sponsors have told us and on what we have heard in meetings. Sponsorship has been a word-of-mouth phenomenon. The result is that the contents of this book do not necessarily represent a consensus of opinion within AA on sponsorship. The book represents my considered opinion and the opinions of those with whom I have spoken while writing it. *Twelve Step Sponsorship* is not an AA, AI-Anon, NA, OA, or CA Conference-approved book. In the best Twelve Step tradition, use what you can and leave the rest.

In the best Twelve Step tradition, use what you can.

Many AA and other Twelve Step Fellowship members will not agree with the detailed suggestions and commentaries in this book, although I believe they will largely agree with its four major points. Those points are as follows:

1. The primary responsibility of sponsors is to help their sponsees work the Twelve Steps.
2. A sponsor and sponsee have an obligation to discuss their mutual expectations, objectives, and requirements, if any, regarding the sponsorship relationship *before* they enter into that relationship.
3. A sponsor shares his or her experience, strength, and hope with his or her sponsee rather than trying to run the sponsee's life.
4. A sponsor must never take advantage of a sponsee in any way.

Sponsorship is intensely, wonderfully personal. Each of us brings our own ideas, strengths, and weaknesses to it as both sponsors and sponsees. No one is an "ideal" sponsor and no one is a "perfect" sponsee. Thank God. But we can all learn to be better sponsors and better sponsees. Undoubtedly, there are certain native talents to the sponsorship art, but there are also some principles that can be brought to bear. Those with a load of "talent" still need to understand the guidelines. Those with less natural "talent" can improve their effectiveness by increasing their knowledge about sponsorship. No set of rigid rules could possibly do the phenomenon of sponsorship justice, but it is my hope that the observations in this book can begin to capture its spirit.

As with all teacher/student relationships, it is difficult to tell who learns more: the sponsor or the sponsee.

What Does a Sponsor Do?

In some ways, a sponsor is like a good friend, a wise teacher, a private tutor, a favorite uncle, a seasoned mentor, an experienced guide, and that older brother or sister we always wanted but never had. Sponsorship, which includes aspects of all these roles, is nevertheless unique. A sponsor is someone who has been where we want to go in our Twelve Step program and knows something about how we can get there. His or her primary responsibility is to help us work the Twelve Steps by applying their principles to our lives. Sponsorship is a basic part of belonging to a Twelve Step Fellowship and potentially one of its richest experiences. Sponsorship can be, like friendship, one of life's great blessings.

A sponsor's primary responsibility is to help a sponsee work the Twelve Steps.

But sponsorship can also be a scary experience, at least at first. We become vulnerable whether we want to or not. We take on responsibilities and develop expectations. We take risks. We reveal who we are and unload our secrets. We let another person into our lives in an honest and intimate way. We drop our facade. It can be frightening as well as exhilarating to trust another human being and to build a relationship with him or her.

This chapter describes some of the reasons for overcoming a natural reluctance we have to share our lives and our secrets with another human being. It explains what a sponsor does and, therefore, why it's important to have one. But first . . .

A Brief History of Sponsorship

The idea of sponsorship was born in Alcoholics Anonymous, the original Twelve Step Fellowship. *Living Sober*, an AA publication, describes how the term "sponsor" came about.

In the earliest days of A.A., the term "sponsor" was not in the A.A. jargon. Then a few hospitals in Akron, Ohio, and New York began to accept alcoholics (under that diagnosis) as patients—if a sober A.A. member would agree to "sponsor" the sick man or woman. The sponsor took the patient to the hospital, visited him or her regularly, was present when the patient was discharged, and took the patient home and then to an A.A. meeting. At the meeting, the sponsor introduced the newcomer to other happily nondrinking alcoholics. All through the early months of recovery, the sponsor stood by, ready to answer questions or to listen whenever needed. Sponsorship turned out to be such a good way to help people get established in A.A. that it has become a custom followed throughout the A.A. world, even when hospitalization is not necessary.¹

Sponsorship has since become one of the foundations of the recovery programs of all Twelve Step Fellowships and one of the greatest blessings of membership.

What a Sponsor Does

AA defines sponsorship in this way: "An alcoholic who has made some progress in the recovery program shares that experience on a continuous, individual basis with another alcoholic who is attempting to attain or maintain sobriety through A.A."² Every sponsor is different, just as each sponsee is different, but certain activities, responsibilities, and obligations are common in sponsor/sponsee relationships. The primary ways in which a sponsor shares his or her experience, strength, and hope to help a sponsee are as follows.

A sponsor helps us work the Twelve Steps by providing explanation, guidance, and encouragement.

Helping a sponsee work the Steps is a sponsor's most important function. The Twelve Steps are the foundation of AA and other Twelve Step recovery programs. The Steps require us to take action, but they were not meant to be worked alone. In fact, we cannot work them alone if we follow the way the AA Big Book suggests that we work them. The meaning of the Steps and how they are applied to life require explanation and interaction. A sponsor can help us translate the general principles of the Steps (a set of ideas) into the specific activities of our lives (our behavior).

A sponsor can provide some temporary discipline and motivation as well as the ongoing encouragement that we may need to work the Steps. There are times that call for "tough love" in sponsorship. Our sponsors can help us resist looking for an easier, softer way than working the Twelve Steps and applying their principles in our lives. They can confront us on our procrastination and on our unwillingness, when necessary, and help us stay focused on what's important—Fellowship principles and the work of the Steps.

A sponsor helps us get established quickly in our Fellowship by explaining basic concepts and terminology and by introducing us to other members.

A Twelve Step group's unfamiliar language, customs, and ideas can be confusing to newcomers ("turn it over," "ninety in ninety," "easy does it," and "keep it simple," for example). A sponsor can guide us through this confusion by explaining the Fellowship's customs, concepts, and terms. By teaching us the language of recovery, our sponsor can help us understand the program more quickly and help us feel part of it sooner.

A sponsor is a safe person whom we can learn to trust.

Most of us have a lot of fear, many questions, and more than a few secrets when we come into recovery. In order to get better, we need to share our fears and our secrets with someone else and find the answers to our questions. Our sponsor is the person in our Fellowship who feels the safest and is best suited to help us do that. Sponsorship creates a safe environment in which we can expose a little bit of who we are. Addiction is a disease of isolation and loneliness. Having one person whom we can trust and with whom we can share our feelings and fears helps reduce our loneliness and isolation. A sponsor provides a safe place for us to be honest about ourselves and to discover the rewards of being open with another person. As the AA Twelve and Twelve says, ". . . We don't have to be alone anymore."³

A sponsor can answer the many questions that we have as newcomers or develop as "mid-timers."

As newcomers to a Twelve Step program, we can ask our sponsor "dumb" questions, "ridiculous" questions, terrifying questions. Our sponsors can provide one-on-one answers to satisfy our curiosity, increase our understanding, and reduce our fears. They can do the same even after we've been in recovery a long time, because as we grow in recovery, our questions don't end. We have new experiences, face new challenges, and develop greater insights that lead us again to our sponsors for their experience, strength, and hope. Our sponsors are deep reservoirs of practiced Twelve Step knowledge.

A sponsor can help us in the process of self-examination that the Steps require.

Self-examination is a difficult process without the assistance and encouragement of another person. Self-examination is a crucial part of any Twelve Step program. The Fourth, Fifth, and Ninth Steps require it specifically (see the Steps beginning on page 229). Self-examination in the First Step requires us to look honestly at our powerlessness over our addictive substance or behavior and at the unmanageability of our lives. Later, we will have to examine our character defects and the harm they have caused. A sponsor can keep us honest in our program by pointing out when we are deluding ourselves about our addiction or our recovery. Being honest with our sponsor also increases our humility and helps us learn to live in reality rather than fantasy. A sponsor can help us through this painful, but necessary and rewarding, process of self-examination.

A sponsor encourages us to read the basis text of our Fellowship and other program literature and to engage in Fellowship activities and service work.

As important as meetings are, a Twelve Step program is more than just meetings. Working the program also means using the Twelve Steps, reading the Big Book or its equivalent, changing our attitudes and behavior, doing service work, and carrying the message of recovery to other alcoholics or addicts inside and outside the Fellowship. A sponsor can encourage us to do all these things and remind us to use the various tools of our recovery program.

A sponsor can monitor our progress, confront us when it is appropriate, and generally help us stay on the recovery path.

Our sponsor is in a unique position to keep track of our progress in recovery. He or she can often detect the warning signs of a slip even before we can. When we are on a “dry drunk” or are actively moving away from the program, a sponsor’s intervention can often bring us back.

Most of us need to be confronted now and then on the kind of negative behavior that brought us to recovery in the first place. How else are we going to change? But with our sponsor, the confrontation is not an attack. A sponsor confronts our behavior, not our being, and he or she does it with compassion. Sponsors can point out our inappropriate behavior and how it hurts us without making the confrontation a hostile act. They can do it because of their love and acceptance of us, and because of our willingness to trust them.

Sponsors can confront us on inappropriate behavior as no one else can.

A sponsor reminds us to apply Twelve Step principles in our lives.

The Twelve Steps offer a “design for living” that means much more than not having a drink or not using (although *not having a drink or not using* is the basis of everything else that our Twelve Step program gives us). Our new way of life in recovery requires us to change some of our old attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behavior by applying these Steps and program principles to our lives. Because we are trying to learn to use new tools for living, we need someone to remind us to use those tools and to help us figure out *how* to use them. A sponsor can do that because he or she knows both us and the tools well.

A sponsor models the Twelve Step program of recovery.

There is a Twelve Step saying that “we have to walk the talk” to stay sober. It is not enough to theorize about recovery; we have to live it. Understanding what a Step means is only half of it. The other half is applying it. A good sponsor sets an example for us by showing us how to use Twelve Step principles to build a rewarding, sober life. By modeling the principles of the program, a sponsor becomes a powerful teacher. With such a sponsor, we can learn by doing as well as by example.

Our sponsor is available in times of crisis.

Especially as newcomers to recovery, we face fears, crises, and new circumstances that challenge us. We may suddenly want to drink or use. Or we want to know how to handle an unexpected situation. We may just need to talk. With a sponsor, we have someone we can turn to. We have someone who knows and cares about us who is available in times of crisis. (Even without a sponsor or when our sponsor cannot be reached, we can always turn to someone else in the program.)

It feels good to know that we can always call our sponsor.

A sponsor provides practice in building relationships.

Our relationship with our sponsor can serve as a model for other relationships. We can practice expressing our feelings, revealing our fears, and discussing our expectations with another person. We can also practice admitting when we are wrong, making amends, and being honest. We can learn to trust and to ask for help and to think about someone other than ourselves. What we learn with our sponsor, we can then apply to other people in our lives.

In essence, with our sponsors and others in the program we can learn to experience and express love and to feel loved in return. Finally, we will come to love ourselves.

A sponsor can help us achieve a richer, deeper, more enjoyable recovery than we are likely to find on our own.

What a Sponsor Does Not Do

What a sponsor *does not do* is as important as what he or she *does do*. The following list describes some things a sponsor either cannot or should not do.

A sponsor cannot keep us in recovery.

Whether or not to drink or use or to engage in compulsive behavior is a decision we alone can make. No one else can make it for us. No one else can keep us sober. Not a family member, not a friend, not a boss, *and not a sponsor*. It is said in AA that sponsors “don’t take the credit when their sponsees stay sober and they don’t take the blame when they drink.” The decision to stay in recovery is ours alone. We make it one day at a time with the help of the program and our Higher Power. Our Twelve Step Fellowship gives us the power of choice.

A sponsor is not our therapist.

Sponsors are not psychiatrists, psychologists, or therapists (unless they happen to be psychiatrists, psychologists, or therapists, but even then, they don't act in that capacity with their sponsees). It isn't a sponsor's function to provide therapy to a sponsee. There is no "treatment plan" other than working the Twelve Steps. All sponsors can do is share their experience, strength, and hope concerning their own recovery. They are not our therapists, and we are not their patients.

The Twelve Steps are about spiritual growth, not therapy.

A sponsor should not attempt to control our lives or encourage an unhealthy dependence.

No Twelve Step Fellowship ever tells a member what he or she has to do. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking, using, or engaging in compulsive behavior. Even AA's original Twelve Steps are merely "suggested." Whether or not to work the Steps is left entirely up to us. In the same way, it is not up to our sponsor to control our lives. Advice is a tricky thing because we never really have enough data about someone else to make a decision for him or her. Nor is it our responsibility to do so even if we could. Twelve Step programs emphasize sharing experience, strength, and hope with one another—not offering advice.

In a sponsee's early days of recovery, a sponsor may wish to make strong suggestions to his or her sponsee about what to do and what not to do. For example: don't drink or use, go to meetings, read the Big Book or equivalent, call your sponsor, and so on. But these suggestions are still suggestions. We are better off when our sponsor leaves the actual decision to us while describing the program principles and experience that are relevant to that decision. As sponsees, each of us should retain the responsibility for making the basic decisions about our lives, including the decision to stay in recovery.

A sponsor should not permit, much less encourage, a sponsee's unhealthy dependence. A sponsee's only dependence should be on the Fellowship and, ultimately, on a Higher Power. A healthy *interdependence*, however, always exists between a sponsor and his or her sponsee.

Our only real dependence should be on our Fellowship and a Higher Power.

A sponsor should not take advantage of us or exploit us in any way.

The most fundamental responsibility a sponsor has toward a sponsee is *never to exploit* him or her in any way. In practical terms, it means that sponsors should not try to use their sponsees as a way to borrow money, make money, have sex, advance their careers, or do anything else that harms their sponsees or puts them at risk. A sponsor has a sacred trust toward his or her sponsee.

The relationship between a sponsor and a sponsee is inherently unequal because the sponsee is seeking guidance and has placed himself or herself in a vulnerable position. Even when there is no difference in the length of sobriety, a sponsor has a psychological advantage. In technical terms, a power differential exists that leaves sponsees vulnerable to manipulation. Morally and ethically, a sponsor may not take advantage of that vulnerability in any way whatsoever.

There are stories of sponsors who have attempted to abuse their sponsees for their personal gain. If a sponsor ever tries to abuse the sponsorship relationship by trying to do any of these things or anything like them, the sponsee should find another sponsor immediately.

A sponsor should never take advantage of us in any way. If he or she tries, find another sponsor immediately.