

How Do You Sponsor Effectively in Alcoholics Anonymous?

Ask Wally P!

By Michael Levin

“We stood at the turning point.”

This crucial line from the “Big Book,” the central text of Alcoholics Anonymous, summarizes in just a few words the challenge that recovering alcoholics face. Will they get serious about their illness and do whatever it takes to overcome it? Or will they simply succumb to their addiction, otherwise known as “suicide on the installment plan”?

Today, according to Wally P, one of the foremost authors, archivists, and authorities on Alcoholics Anonymous, the AA Fellowship stands at the very same turning point. Zoom meetings have decimated face-to-face recovery, which is the best way for newcomers to meet people with time who can sponsor or mentor them, guiding them into successful recovery.

Even prior to the pandemic, AA faced an even greater crisis. AA meetings, which traditionally had focused on what’s necessary to succeed in AA (Sponsorship, the Steps, developing a relationship with the “One who has all power,”) had given way to open discussion meetings, where the topics had to do with “checking in,” “how my day is going,” and guidance and advice that often had nothing to do with the real message of Alcoholics Anonymous.

As a result, newcomers attending their first AA meetings found themselves bewildered, and rightly so: what does your fight with your significant other, or your pet’s illness, have to do with my recovery?

The answer, of course: nothing. And yet this was pretty much all newcomers could hope for when they attended AA meetings. Yes, they were in the presence of someone who was trying to stay sober, but there was no guidance for the newcomer as to what staying sober really entailed.

As a result, AA’s recovery rate, which was half to three-quarters of newcomers in its earlier days, when the focus of meetings was on how to recover, has plummeted, and may be as low as one to two percent. In other words, tragically, for every 100 newcomers who attend AA meetings today, only one or two will obtain meaningful, long-term sobriety.

Wally P has written numerous books about the early history of AA including ***Back to Basics***, a guide on how to take newcomers through all 12 Steps in a few hours, as AA did back in the 1940's. He published this book in 1997.

Since then, Wally has turned his attention to the question of sponsorship. Everybody in AA knows that getting, having, and using a sponsor is critical to recovery. But what exactly does sponsorship mean? How do you sponsor someone effectively? How does the sponsor take the newcomer through the Steps, when does that process begin, and how quickly does it unfold?

Today, most sober alcoholics, sad to say, were “raised” in the AA Fellowship by other alcoholics who, while well meaning, have no idea of what it takes to sponsor an individual and help that person become a truly sober member of AA and enjoy the benefits of recovery and sobriety.

As a result, there is almost an element of “the blind leading the blind” in AA, because even those who are willing to take the time to work with newcomers don't necessarily possess the “best practices” for helping them become sober on which Alcoholics Anonymous has traditionally and successfully relied.

Wally P has been conducting weekend Sponsorship seminars throughout the world since 2006. Because of Covid 19, he has been offering a two-day Zoom version of his seminar on sponsorship in order to overcome this crisis that has affected the AA Fellowship as a whole. The next seminar will take place on July 17-18, 2021. Individuals and groups can sign up to take this seminar at www.aabacktobasics.org by clicking on the registration button. This seminar is repeated every four to five weeks.

As the pandemic eases and more sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous return to face-to-face meetings, newcomers will have a better chance of encountering individuals who can sponsor them. The question is what sort of guidance they will receive from those sponsors.

For those concerned about the future of Alcoholics Anonymous, which today, truly stands at the turning point—attending this seminar could be one of the smartest things you can do to further, not just your own recovery, but the recoveries of those you will guide with the ongoing gift of effective sponsorship.

Michael Levin is a *New York Times* best-selling author who penned Hazelden Publishing's *Sober Dad: The Manual for Perfectly Imperfect Parenting* and *Step Up: Unpacking Steps One, Two, and Three with Someone Who's Been There*. He writes under a pseudonym to maintain his anonymity and speak frankly about his experiences in Twelve Step recovery. He has also published *Morning Coffee*.