

Understanding Anonymity



“Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.”

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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www.aa.org

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What is the purpose of anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous? Why is it often referred to as the greatest single protection the Fellowship has to assure its continued existence and growth?

If we look at the history of A.A., from its beginning in 1935 until now, it is clear that anonymity serves two different yet equally vital functions:

- At the personal level, anonymity provides protection for all members from identification as alcoholics, a safeguard often of special importance to newcomers.
- At the public level of press, radio, TV, film/video other public forms of the Internet and social media platforms, anonymity stresses the equality in the Fellowship of all members by putting the brake on those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation to achieve recognition, power, or personal gain.

When using social media, A.A. members are responsible for their own anonymity and that of others. When we text or post something online, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

The word “anonymous” in our name is meant to provide as much privacy as an individual may desire regarding membership in A.A.

Anonymity on a person-to-person basis

From its earliest days, A.A. has promised personal anonymity to all who attend its meetings. Because its founders and first members were recovering alcoholics themselves, they knew from their own experience how ashamed most

alcoholics are about their drinking, how fearful they are of public exposure. The social stigma of alcoholism was great, and those early A.A. members recognized that a firm assurance of confidentiality was imperative if they were to succeed in attracting and helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

Over the years, anonymity has proved one of the greatest gifts that A.A. offers the suffering alcoholic. Without it, many would never attend their first meeting. Although the stigma has lessened to some degree, most newcomers still find admission of their alcoholism so painful that it is possible only in a protected environment. Anonymity is essential for this atmosphere of trust and openness.

As valuable as privacy is to new members, it is noteworthy that most of them are eager to share the good news of their A.A. affiliation with their families. Such a disclosure, however, is always their own choice: A.A. as a whole seeks to ensure that individual members stay as private and protected as they wish, or as open as they wish, about belonging to the Fellowship; but always with the understanding that anonymity at the level of the press, radio, TV, film/video and other public forms of the Internet and social media platforms is crucial to our continuing sobriety and growth — at both the personal and group levels.

Anonymity at the public level

After its first few years of success, the Fellowship attracted much favorable attention in the press. Articles praising A.A. appeared in magazines and newspapers across the country. With each new article, the ranks of A.A. grew. In those days, everyone still feared the consequences of public disclosure; and so the first press coverage guarded members' anonymity for safety's sake.

As public awareness concerning alcoholism increased, the stigma decreased, and soon some A.A. members began to publicly acknowledge their affiliation in the media. One of the first to do so was a famous ballplayer whose comeback was so spectacular that newspapers lavished attention on his successful struggle against alcohol. Believing that he could help A.A. by revealing his membership, he discussed it openly. Even

the founders of A.A. approved his actions simply because they had not yet experienced the costs of such publicity.

Then other members decided to break their anonymity in the media — some motivated by good will, others by personal gain. Some members devised schemes to tie in their A.A. affiliation with all sorts of business enterprises, insurance, sales, places known as “drying-out farms,” even a temperance magazine, to name a few.

It did not take long for those at A.A. headquarters to realize that overzealous and self-serving anonymity breakers could quickly jeopardize the Fellowship’s hard-won reputation. And they saw that if one person was made an exception, other exceptions would inevitably follow. To assure the unity, effectiveness, and welfare of A.A., anonymity had to be universal. It was the guardian of all that A.A. stood for.

More recently, the arrival of new forms of communication such as social media offers fresh vehicles to carry the A.A. message to the public. Modern communication flows in ways that are instantaneous, relatively open ended and evolving quickly. Reconsideration of how to protect anonymity is key for A.A. members and groups as we use any new channel of communication.

The spiritual significance of anonymity

In stressing the equality of all A.A. members — and unity in the common bond of their recovery from alcoholism — anonymity serves as the spiritual foundation of the Fellowship. Back in 1948, Bill W., our co-founder, wrote: “One may say that anonymity is the spiritual base, the sure key to all the rest of our Traditions. It has come to stand for prudence and, most importantly, for self-effacement. True consideration for the newcomer if he desires to be nameless; vital protection against misuse of the name Alcoholics Anonymous at the public level; and to each of us a constant reminder that principles come before personal interest — such is the wide scope of this all-embracing principle. In it we see the cornerstone of our security as a movement; at a deeper spiritual level it points us to still greater self-renunciation.”

Some questions and answers about anonymity

A.A. members as well as many people outside the program are sometimes puzzled about how to put the principle of anonymity into practice. Some of the most frequently asked questions about both personal anonymity and anonymity at the public level include:

Personal anonymity

Q. After I tell my loved ones about my A.A. membership, should I ask them not to disclose this information to anyone else?

A. This is entirely a personal matter, but it is usually best for all concerned to let the A.A. member decide who shall be told and when.

Q. If relatives, friends, and business associates comment on my improved appearance and functioning after I become sober, should I tell them I'm in A.A.?

A. Members of the immediate family and close friends are usually pleased to learn about an alcoholic's membership in A.A. As for business associates, it might be best simply to say that you've stopped drinking and postpone the decision about disclosing your membership until after you have been in the Fellowship for several months.

Q. What should I do if I meet old acquaintances at A.A. meetings?

A. You need not ask them to protect your anonymity; they are there for the same, or similar, reasons. They will generally respect your privacy and you, in turn, should respect theirs.

Q. What should I tell my loved ones about protecting the anonymity of the A.A. members they may meet?

A. Explain that anonymity is extremely important to A.A. members. Each A.A. member decides if and when to share aspects of his or her recov-

ery, and with whom. Accordingly, it is hoped that family members and other friends of A.A. members protect the anonymity of their loved ones who are in A.A., and that they protect the anonymity of other A.A. members whom they may meet. This includes not disclosing to others the fact that a person is an A.A. member.

In addition, let loved ones know that when an A.A. member dies, it is important not to identify an A.A. sponsor or A.A. friends, as such, in the obituary, in the media, or online.

Q. What if I see public figures at a meeting?

A. Like everyone else, public figures should have the protection of anonymity to the extent that they desire it.

Q. I've heard a number of people, inside and outside of A.A., say that well-known A.A. members should be encouraged to announce their membership to help promote the Fellowship. Why does A.A. continue to maintain the Tradition of anonymity for celebrities and other members?

A. Those Traditions developed out of the experience of the early members. At first, they too felt that well-known A.A. members could help the Fellowship by breaking their anonymity. But it soon became apparent that, if one anonymity breaker stepped forward, others would follow; and if members were to strive for public acclaim and power, the spiritual unity so essential to the work of helping fellow alcoholics would soon be lost.

Q. I know that I should not reveal the names of members that I hear in A.A. meetings, but what about other personal information?

A. It is understood by A.A. members that personal disclosures made in A.A. meetings are to be treated as confidential. For example, if friends outside the program are acquainted with some of your A.A. friends and know of their membership, you should be careful not to violate confidences picked up at meetings, however harmless they may appear at the time in any form or channel of communication.

Q. Is it okay to tell someone if I witness or experience inappropriate behavior that happens either during or outside meeting times? Can I

alert the proper authorities if there is criminal behavior?

A. Groups strive to provide as safe an environment as possible in which members can focus on sobriety, and, while anonymity is central to that purpose, it is not intended to be a cloak protecting inappropriate or criminal behavior. Saying something about inappropriate behavior or calling the proper authorities does not go against any A.A. Traditions and is meant to preserve the safety of all members.

Q. Should I tell people who seem to have a drinking problem about my A.A. affiliation?

A. This is a personal matter. However, the spirit of the program is one of sharing and a recent study of A.A. members shows that a high proportion of them joined the Fellowship through another member. Before reaching a decision about such matters, most members find it helpful to discuss them with sponsors or A.A. friends.

Q. Should I reveal my anonymity to my boss so that I can attend early A.A. meetings regularly?

A. Asking for special favors because of A.A. membership is not in the spirit of the anonymity Traditions.

Anonymity in the digital age

Q. I maintain a website and social media pages. At what level should I protect my anonymity on the Internet?

A. Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as websites featuring text, graphics, audio, and video can be considered the same as publishing or broadcasting. Unless password-protected, a website requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio, and film/video. Simply put, this means that A.A.s do not identify themselves as A.A. members using their full names and/or full-face photos.

It is suggested that when A.A.s gather as A.A.s or as an A.A. group on social media and other similar platforms that these pages are set to “private” rather than “public.”

Q. Should I be concerned about the anonymity of others who view my sites?

A. When we use digital media, we are respon-

sible for our own anonymity and that of others. When we text or post something online, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

For more information on anonymity online, see the A.A. Guideline on the Internet at www.aa.org, and the October 2010 issue of AA Grapevine on Preserving Anonymity in a Networked World.

Q. What if I appear as an A.A. member on TV, in a film/video, or a podcast, or allow my picture to be used in a newspaper, magazine, or online publication but do not give my full name? Is this considered an anonymity break?

A. Yes, if full-face photographs and other easily identifiable photos of A.A. members (who are *described* as A.A. members) are published or broadcast, even though their full names are not given, these are considered anonymity breaks.

Q. What about making or posting videos of talks and meetings? Are these considered to be anonymity breaks, since people are seen full-face and clearly identify themselves as A.A. members?

A. Realizing that anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, it is recommended that talks by A.A. members *as members* be given in person, rather than be recordings in view of the temptation of recordings to “place personalities before principles,” and thus encourage the development of a “star” system in A.A. (*as per 1980 General Service Conference resolution*).

Q. Are virtual A.A. meetings considered “public”?

A. These online gatherings are not streamed to the general public; however, information about the meeting is provided to A.A. members, potential members and the general public, similar to in-person meetings.

While some members feel comfortable using their full names and faces, other members feel it is more aligned with Tradition Eleven to use only their first name and last initial or turning their camera off. For safety purposes, some groups have provided helpful reminders in their group format that picture-taking or screen shots are not in keeping with anonymity principles.

Spot-check inventory

Some additional questions that can be helpful in evaluating whether our actions may or may not be in conflict with the principles of humility and sacrifice that underlie our anonymity traditions:

- Is my posting about the message or the messenger?
- Am I carrying the A.A. message in the hopes of helping someone else, or am I simply “shouting from the rooftops”?
- Am I taking my story and affiliating it with political causes?
- Am I being extra cautious about not identifying other A.A. members in photographs or statements?
- Am I avoiding the temptation to incite controversy through caustic argument or bullying others who may disagree with me?
- Am I providing helpful information about A.A. for those who may need our help?

Facts about anonymity in A.A.

It is the A.A. member’s responsibility, and not that of the media, to maintain our cherished Tradition of anonymity.

- A.A. members generally think it unwise to break the anonymity of the member even after his or her death, but in each situation, the final decision must rest with the family. A.A. members, though, are in agreement that the anonymity of still living A.A. members should be respected in obituaries or in any type of printed remembrance or death notice.
- A.A. members may disclose their identity and speak as recovered alcoholics, giving radio, TV and interviews, without violating the Traditions — so long as their A.A. membership is not revealed.

- A.A. members may speak as A.A. members only if their names or faces are not revealed. They speak not for A.A. but as individual members.

Experience suggests that A.A. members:

- Respect the right of other members to maintain their own anonymity at whatever levels they wish.
- Are vigilant not to break their anonymity when texting or posting online, and very careful not to inadvertently break the anonymity of others.
- When speaking as A.A. members at non-A.A. meetings, usually use first names only.
- Maintain personal anonymity in articles and autobiographies.
- Avoid the use of titles such as “A.A. counselor” when employed as professionals in the field of alcoholism (the title “alcoholism counselor” is preferred).
- Use last names within the Fellowship, especially for election of group officers and other service jobs.

For more information on anonymity, the following pamphlets and other materials may be helpful:

GSO’s A.A. website: www.aa.org

“The Twelve Traditions Illustrated”

“A.A. Tradition — How It Developed”

“Speaking at Meetings Outside of A.A.”

AA Grapevine, October 2010:

Preserving Anonymity in a Networked World

A.A. Guidelines on Public Information

A.A. Guideline on the Internet

Public Information Workbook, which contains information on how to handle TV, radio, and newspaper interviews

Write: General Service Office
 Box 459
 Grand Central Station
 New York, NY 10163
www.aa.org

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

THE TWELVE CONCEPTS FOR WORLD SERVICE

I. Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.

II. The General Service Conference of A.A. has become, for nearly every practical purpose, the active voice and the effective conscience of our whole Society in its world affairs.

III. To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A. — the Conference, the General Service Board and its service corporations, staffs, committees, and executives — with a traditional “Right of Decision.”

IV. At all responsible levels, we ought to maintain a traditional “Right of Participation,” allowing a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.

V. Throughout our structure, a traditional “Right of Appeal” ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard and personal grievances receive careful consideration.

VI. The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should be exercised by the trustee members of the Conference acting as the General Service Board.

VII. The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage and conduct world service affairs. The Conference Charter is not a legal document; it relies upon tradition and the A.A. purse for final effectiveness.

VIII. The trustees are the principal planners and administrators of overall policy and finance. They have custodial oversight of the separately incorporated and constantly active services, exercising this through their ability to elect all the directors of these entities.

IX. Good service leadership at all levels is indispensable for our future functioning and safety. Primary world service leadership, once exercised by the founders, must necessarily be assumed by the trustees.

X. Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority well defined.

XI. The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and consultants. Composition, qualifications, induction procedures, and rights and duties will always be matters of serious concern.

XII. The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government, and that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action.

A.A. PUBLICATIONS Below is a partial listing of A.A. publications. Complete order forms are available from the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. Telephone: (212) 870-3400. Website: www.aa.org

BOOKS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS
DAILY REFLECTIONS
AS BILL SEES IT
OUR GREAT RESPONSIBILITY
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE
DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS
'PASS IT ON'

BOOKLETS

LIVING SOBER
CAME TO BELIEVE
A.A. IN PRISON: A MESSAGE OF HOPE
A.A. FOR THE OLDER ALCOHOLIC — NEVER TOO LATE

PAMPHLETS

Experience, Strength and Hope:

WOMEN IN A.A.
BLACK IN A.A.
A.A. FOR THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN
YOUNG PEOPLE IN A.A.
LGBTQ ALCOHOLICS IN A.A.
THE "GOD" WORD: AGNOSTIC AND ATHEIST MEMBERS IN A.A.
A.A. FOR ALCOHOLICS WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES —
AND THEIR SPONSORS
ACCESS TO A.A.: MEMBERS SHARE ON OVERCOMING BARRIERS
A.A. AND THE ARMED SERVICES
DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DIFFERENT?
MANY PATHS TO SPIRITUALITY
HISPANIC WOMEN IN A.A.
BEHIND THE WALLS: A MESSAGE OF HOPE
IT SURE BEATS SITTING IN A CELL
(An illustrated pamphlet for those in custody)

About A.A.:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT A.A.
IS A.A. FOR ME?
IS A.A. FOR YOU?
A NEWCOMER ASKS
IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN YOUR LIFE?
THIS IS A.A.
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SPONSORSHIP
THE A.A. GROUP
PROBLEMS OTHER THAN ALCOHOL
THE A.A. MEMBER—MEDICATIONS AND OTHER DRUGS
SELF-SUPPORT: WHERE MONEY AND SPIRITUALITY MIX
EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT US:
AN INTRODUCTION TO OUR TWELVE TRADITIONS
THE TWELVE STEPS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE CONCEPTS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE TRADITIONS ILLUSTRATED
HOW A.A. MEMBERS COOPERATE WITH PROFESSIONALS
A.A. IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES
A.A. IN TREATMENT SETTINGS
BRIDGING THE GAP
A.A. TRADITION—HOW IT DEVELOPED
LET'S BE FRIENDLY WITH OUR FRIENDS
UNDERSTANDING ANONYMITY

For Professionals:

A.A. IN YOUR COMMUNITY
A BRIEF GUIDE TO A.A.
IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A RESOURCE
FOR THE HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL
A MESSAGE TO CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
IS THERE A PROBLEM DRINKER IN THE WORKPLACE?
FAITH LEADERS ASK ABOUT A.A.
A.A. MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

VIDEOS (available on www.aa.org)

A.A. VIDEOS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
HOPE: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
A NEW FREEDOM

For Professionals:

A.A. VIDEO FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR LEGAL AND CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
A.A. VIDEO FOR EMPLOYMENT/HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

PERIODICALS

AA GRAPEVINE (monthly, www.aagrapevine.org)
LA VIÑA (bimonthly, in Spanish, www.aalavina.org)
ABOUT A.A. (digital-only, www.aa.org/about-aa)

A DECLARATION OF UNITY:

This we owe to A.A.'s future: to place our common welfare first; to keep our Fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come.

I AM RESPONSIBLE...

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that:

I am responsible.

