

IP No. 30

Mental Health in Recovery



“Although the specifics of mental health recovery in my life (medication, therapy, and other treatment options) may be outside issues, dealing with my mental health issues and recovery in this arena is as critical to my ability to stay clean and work a program of recovery in Narcotics Anonymous as being powerless, surrendering, and finding a power greater than me.”

In the Narcotics Anonymous program, every addict with a desire to stop using can be a member, and no member of NA need ever recover alone. Recovery is our common bond.

Even though some of us may feel hopeless because of the wreckage of our active addiction, we are not helpless. We are able to benefit from the experience and suggestions of other members who are recovering in NA.

Getting clean and working Steps in NA leads all of us to find ways to take better care of our minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits. Through the process of working the Steps with a sponsor and learning to take better care of ourselves, many of us find it necessary, at some point in our recovery process, to seek outside assistance for problems other than addiction.

This piece of literature reflects the shared experiences of NA members, including those who have found it necessary to seek outside help for mental health concerns and other members who are recovering alongside them. In this pamphlet, there are sections meant to help all NA members with challenges that arise—the decision to seek help, concerns about medications, and the stigma of mental health challenges, recovery, service, and supporting each other.

Seeking Professional Help

We do not diagnose anyone’s condition or track the progress of our patients—in fact, we have no patients, only members. Our groups do not provide professional therapeutic, medical, legal, or psychiatric services. We are simply a fellowship of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean.

It Works: How and Why, “Tradition Eight”

The Eighth Tradition in NA aptly illustrates that our focus is sharing a message of recovery from addiction. Addicts who have thoughts or concerns about their mental health may want to seek professional help. Some members have experienced that professional help aids them in facing a crisis outside of their recovery in NA; others may find that long-term therapy and medications are warranted. There are many additional options available to us; we research what we think may be best and discuss them with our sponsors and appropriate healthcare professionals. Our shared experience is captured well in Chapter Four of *Living Clean*: “When we use the tools available to us—calling our sponsor



and seeking the experience, strength, and hope of others, allowing our support group to support us, and turning to *In Times of Illness* and other NA literature—we are able to make decisions we can be comfortable with, and take action to do the next right thing.” We are free to pursue our recovery from addiction in NA.

We engage in our recovery through honest sharing with a sponsor. Many of us have found that shame and secrecy in any area of our lives opens a window for relapse. We need to be honest and truthful about our mental health—along with any medications that we take in our recovery. Working closely with our sponsor and other trusted NA members can help us to remain aware of our motives. Each of us is responsible for our own recovery and well-being.

Medication and Mental Health

It is possible to find freedom from active addiction in NA and to be taking medication prescribed by an informed healthcare professional for a mental illness.

In Times of Illness, “Mental Health Issues”

In NA, our primary purpose is to carry a message of recovery—this is true no matter what extenuating situations may present themselves. Attempting to address mental health challenges goes beyond the scope of carrying our message or helping other addicts to stay clean. In meetings, no one is a professional; we are all addicts seeking freedom from active addiction.

We may be advised at some point in our recovery to take medications to treat our mental health condition. Medications are to be taken as prescribed by an informed healthcare

professional; we do not self-medicate. Many of us have found it wise to inform our sponsors and a few friends in our support network that we are taking medication. This action helps us to be accountable and allows others we trust to be our “eyes and ears.”



With medication, it is important to be mindful and aware of changes that may occur. The longer we are clean, the more our physical and emotional selves change; sometimes, these changes may have an effect on our mental health condition. Honestly sharing any perceived changes with our sponsors, informed healthcare professionals, and supportive friends is a critical step in maintaining a program of recovery.

Many of us have heard, either individually or in meetings, that members taking medication are not clean. However, some mental health medications are prescribed to help manage symptoms that interfere with leading a healthy, productive, drug-free lifestyle. Members who take mental health medication as prescribed by a healthcare professional are considered clean.



Stigma and Shame

... our struggles with our mental illnesses and the way they impact our recovery are very much “inside issues.”

We need to make this distinction to ensure that we don’t fail to seek additional help either because of stigma in the rooms or confusion about the relationship between mental illness and recovery.

Living Clean, “Our Physical Selves”

As addicts, we may be prone to behaviors and actions that are not in line with spiritual principles. This could simply be described as our hearts and heads are not always aligned. Sometimes it takes years in recovery and working the Steps with a sponsor to improve our skills with spiritual principles such as compassion, acceptance, empathy, and kindness. We may jump to judgment and act in ways that discriminate against others who are not like us, finding reasons to separate ourselves from others. We can ask our sponsor or NA friends for their experience, strength, and hope. In NA, our primary purpose is carrying a message of hope, not one of judgment.

Some of us who have mental health challenges may choose to be careful about the level of detail we go into when we share about our situation

in meetings. Rather than sharing in great detail in recovery meetings, we work with our sponsor and trusted NA members on the ways in which our situation affects our recovery. After all, the common denominator for all of us is recovery. One member shared:

“I struggled for years being more ashamed of my mental health condition than I ever was of being an addict. Today I realize that taking care of my mental well-being is a critical part of my overall recovery, and like everything else, the process of doing so is the solution to my struggles.”

Some members may be prone to isolating due to shame, and this is especially true for those of us who suffer from mental health challenges. Many of us are familiar with the saying, “An addict alone is in bad company.” Isolation tends to lead us to dark places, with only our own thoughts to guide us. Sometimes we are caught in a web of negative thinking. In the best circumstances, this type of thinking might inspire us to call our sponsor or a trusted friend or prompt us to go to a meeting. In less desirable circumstances, we might go so far as to entertain thoughts of hurting ourselves. Although it may feel impossible to move from the despair we feel, especially if thoughts of suicide arise, we must ask for help and take action. We need to bring ourselves out of the dark corner and back into living a program of recovery. We have to let go of shame and stigma. For some of us, working with mental health professionals may be necessary if we are going to be able to continue working our program of recovery in NA. As we practice patience and compassion with ourselves, we begin to see a glimmer of hope that helps to shift our thinking; we are embracing our recovery again.



Recovery Happens in NA

Everything we do, everything that matters to us as a Fellowship, comes back to our simple message of hope and freedom. . . . No one is too sick or too well, too rich or too poor, too far gone or too far away to qualify. It is available to us all.

Guiding Principles, "Tradition Five"

All addicts are welcome in NA meetings, and everyone is free to hear NA's lifesaving message. We gain a sense of belonging when we identify with others in meetings. Being clean, we strive to live in the solution and to practice spiritual principles in all our affairs. This is not accomplished by desire alone; we work with a sponsor, work the Steps, and share our recovery with others. Regardless of our mental health challenges, we are encouraged to practice the principles of recovery in ways that honor our own personal beliefs. The Eleventh Step in *It Works: How and Why* reminds us of "our absolute and unconditional freedom to believe in any Higher Power we choose." Recovery works for every addict who wants to stop using and is willing to make the effort.

Those of us who suffer from mental health challenges may want to deny our condition and may run the risk of self-deception about our condition. Denial will not serve us. We owe it to ourselves to face our fears with courage and perseverance. One addict with mental health challenges summed up their situation by saying, "If I don't work on both—recovery and mental health—I won't be successful with either." Our work on self-acceptance is crucial not just for our recovery, but also for our mental health. We learn to face life on its own terms.

Service is . . . our unique gift—something that no one can take away from us. We give, and we get. Through service, many of us start on the sometimes long road back to becoming productive members of society.

Just for Today, May 1

Service is a collective action working with others, whether in a group or service committee. We need to reflect honestly on whether we are a good fit for any service position we are considering. This may go beyond whether we simply meet the qualifications for our service positions; we are ready to objectively assess our abilities and limitations with our sponsor or with another

recovering member. This is true for all of us, but might be especially important if our mental health challenges may interfere with our ability to serve well in a particular position. Sometimes, we may find that group-level service is the best fit; other times, we may have confidence due to our life experience that a position on a service committee will work well for us. Through self-awareness and working the Steps with a sponsor and a Higher Power, we can find a place in service to give back regardless of our situation with mental health and medication.

Supporting Each Other

We make the choice to be a positive force in the lives of the people around us. The process of working the steps has given us the ability to love and accept who we are, and become able to truly love others.

*In Times of Illness,
“Supporting Members with Illness”*



One of the ways we support others in NA is through sponsorship. Sponsoring others is a demonstration of gratitude. Whenever we are asked to sponsor a member, we are mindful of the privilege of sponsorship. In sponsoring those whose challenges may differ from ours, we practice unconditional love to support members' recovery and bridge the gap between isolation and unity, which is all-encompassing. We embrace any member who wants to recover.

We all benefit from empathy, compassionate listening, and support in the Fellowship. Through love, we learn to accept ourselves for who we are. Those of us with mental health challenges appreciate support from other addicts as much as any other member. Supporting each other is unity in action. In NA, we strive to make sure that all have an equal opportunity to recover. Individually and collectively, we can be a beacon of hope and help others find freedom from addiction.

“When Good will supports and motivates both the individual and the Fellowship, we are fully whole and wholly free.” (The Basic Text, Narcotics Anonymous, “Our Symbol”) Not all addicts are cut from the same cloth, but our symbol tells us that we have room “for all manifestations of the recovering person.”

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