

5 Violence and Personal Conduct

5:1 Violence

Violence in any form is not acceptable at any level of the structure; our members have the right to feel secure and safe in meetings and whilst going about AA service/business.

“Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a greater whole. AA must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first, but individual welfare follows close afterwards.” (*Tradition One* long form)

“For our Group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as he may express himself in our Group Conscience.” (*Tradition Two* long form)

“Each Alcoholics Anonymous Group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary Purpose – that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers” (*Tradition Five* long form)

The aim of this Guidance is to provide a framework for AA groups seeking to tackle incidents of violence, covering all forms of harassment including sexual within meetings and online. People may be harassed in various ways, for example because of their ethnic origin, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, age, stature, appearance etc.

It is important to note that one need not be the direct object of such behaviour to feel harassed. A person witnessing such an event may deem it necessary to take appropriate action to stop such behaviour.

What can be done?

Some groups through their conscience meetings have found it helpful to agree contingency plans to deal with violence, including harassment.

In dealing with any incidents the response must be measured and reasonable, given all the circumstances. Members should not place themselves in danger physically, nor open themselves or the group to legal repercussions.

If an incident cannot be defused quickly and safely, members and groups should consider involving appropriate agencies – e.g. police.

In cases of persistent inappropriate/predatory sexual/threatening/violent behaviour that prevents the carrying of the AA message, groups may refer to the following by Bill W: “*This amount of charity does not mean that we cannot exclude those who disturb meetings or seriously interfere with the functioning of the group. Such people can be asked to quiet down or go elsewhere or to come back when they are better able to participate.*” (Letter from Bill W 1969.)

5:2 Personal conduct matters

The final report of the General Service Conference 1979 (Committee 1, Attraction by the Individual) contained the following statement:

“The importance of the individual member in drawing the suffering alcoholic to the way of recovery was stressed. By guarding his/her own behaviour, morals, dress, ethics, tolerance, sympathy, compassion and understanding of all human beings [a member] carries the message or leaves a slur on the name of AA.”

In recent decades, society has become progressively more concerned with the rights of the individual and these concerns have been reflected in recent changes in the law. The Protection against Harassment Act, 1997 and the Human Rights Act, 1998 are specific examples.

The potential damage to AA’s unity and reputation arising from any wrongful/criminal acts of individual members, and of course the associated publicity, is of natural concern to the Fellowship.

History and background

A continuing function of the General Service Board as custodian of the Traditions is to inform and guide the Fellowship as a whole.

Every AA group makes an open invitation to any member of the public having a desire to stop drinking to attend its meetings. In terms of AA Traditions, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that the carrying of the message to all prospective, new or established members is done honestly and decently. We also understand that our Twelve Traditions including that of group autonomy do not place groups or members above the law, and that when individuals act injuriously to others they are legally accountable. This will, of course, be generally understood in that our First Tradition reminds us that all members and groups have a responsibility in respect to the common welfare and protection of the individual member.

Every AA group needs to recognise and accept responsibility for dealing with bad behaviour and thereby protect the overall good name of AA as a respected Fellowship.

AA and society

While Alcoholics Anonymous seeks to maintain its singleness of purpose, and its simple principles, society is growing increasingly diverse and complex.

The healthy AA group is largely self-regulating, operating within the Twelve Traditions and the unity of all our AA principles that are founded in love, with our Steps, Traditions, Concepts and Legacies underpinning our recovery.

By regular examination of its group conscience, the healthy group enjoys good behaviour at both individual and group level.

About Behaviour

Bullying, harassment and offensive behaviour are negative and unacceptable forms of discrimination that are in conflict with the AA Traditions and our way of life in recovery. Any such behaviour needs to be taken seriously, and sober AA members must deal with it as it arises. Whether or not the behaviour is *intended* to be hurtful is irrelevant, the important point is that it is offensive. AA members, within their groups, need to recognise the power of their behaviour in their relationships with other members of the Fellowship and with potential newcomers. Members in recovery will understand that the behaviour we choose to adopt influences others. Recognising that we can control our behaviour, we have a responsibility to set a good example.

Members have a right to expect that they will be reasonably safe at a group meeting. It is the responsibility of the group holding the meeting, through its members and leaders, to ensure that no member or visitor is subjected to or experiences bullying, harassment or offensive behaviour of any kind.

What can be done about unacceptable behaviour?

1 Personal Action

- a. It is often sufficient for the recipient to raise the difficulty with the person creating the problem by pointing out that his/her conduct is offensive. Anyone has the right to challenge unacceptable behaviour of any other members of AA at any stage, and request that the behaviour stop.
- b. Support and help – it should be possible for the recipient to prepare for this conversation with the help of his/her sponsor or another member if she/he wishes. Should the recipient find it too difficult or embarrassing to raise the issue with the person creating the problem, it may be appropriate for the recipient to have the conversation with his/her sponsor or another member present.

2 Group Action

- a. When a personal approach fails or the recipient feels that this method is inappropriate, the recipient should approach the group chairperson, or other trusted servant for help and advice feeling secure in the belief that any complaint of bullying or harassment will be considered as a serious matter.
- b. The alleged offender should be told of the complaint as soon as possible.
- c. If the situation is sufficiently serious or complex, it may be necessary to involve members from outside the group.
- d. If the group conscience decides it necessary, unacceptable behaviour may result in temporary exclusion from the group. The ultimate decision on the return of the offender rests with the group conscience.

3 At Group Meetings

- a. Members should be encouraged to choose a Home Group in which true bonds of Fellowship will lessen the need to fear behaviour they might find offensive.

- b. Group conscience meetings should be held regularly (many groups hold them every 3 months at, say, the first meeting in March, June, September and December) plus additional conscience meetings as they become necessary.
- c. Where unacceptable behaviour (including verbal abuse, discriminatory jokes, disparaging remarks etc) occurs in a group situation, members in recovery have a responsibility to ask for the offending behaviour to stop.
- d. An explanation of the dangers of unacceptable behaviour in AA should be given at the time, or at the end of the meeting.
- e. Offensive behaviour should not be condoned. Failure to challenge and stop inappropriate behaviour implies that the offender has permission to repeat the offensive behaviour and encourages others to follow suit.

Suggestions at a personal level

- Treat other people with respect and dignity
- Recognise that newcomers to the Fellowship may be severely damaged 'victims'
- Don't travel alone with newcomers of the opposite sex
- As a newcomer, don't travel alone with an existing member of the opposite sex
- Don't Twelfth Step or home visit newcomers or potential newcomers alone
- When making home visits, leave details of where you are going with a trusted friend or relative. Make sure this person knows when to expect you to return
- Be aware of the dangers of opposite gender Sponsorship: man to man and woman to woman sponsorship is strongly recommended
- Never respond to offensive behaviour in a like manner
- Should someone speak to you about your unacceptable behaviour, listen to his or her criticism, think about what they have said and react appropriately. You may even at a later stage wish to thank them for pointing it out to you!

Suggestions at Group level

- Your group may wish to discuss and agree, at a group conscience meeting, upon a 'clear statement' to display, for example:

This Group does not tolerate:

- Bullying
 - Harassment
 - Discriminatory behaviour
- Personal Conduct Matters!**

**Bad Language
often offends...**

**But its absence
never does.**