

Safeguarding and Personal Conduct

5.0 Introduction

The aim of this guidance is to provide the background and a general framework for AA groups seeking to tackle safeguarding issues. Since our beginning we have always had an understanding that safeguarding is for everyone.

From *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*

Tradition One

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

The unity of Alcoholics Anonymous is the most cherished quality our society has. Our lives, the lives of all to come depend squarely upon it. We stay whole or A.A. dies. Without unity, the heart of A.A. would cease to beat, our world arteries would no longer carry the life-giving grace of God. His gift to us would be spent aimlessly. Back again in their cave, the alcoholic would reproach us and say, "What a great thing A.A. might have been!"

"Does this mean," some will anxiously ask, "that in A.A. the individual doesn't count for much? Is he to be dominated by his group and swallowed up in it?"

We may certainly answer this question with a loud "No!"

We believe that there isn't a fellowship on earth which lavishes more devoted care upon its individual members; surely there is none which more jealously guards the individual's right to think, talk, and act as he wishes. No AA can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled.

Our Twelve Steps to recovery are suggestions; the Twelve Traditions which guarantee A.A.'s unity contain not a single "Don't." They repeatedly say, "We ought...." but never "You must!"

5.1 History and Background

In order to help protect and safeguard our AA Fellowship, the General Service Board of AAGB has produced a safeguarding Policy for the AA Fellowship. This guidance, the 'Safeguarding Policy Document', can be accessed via the AAGB website, or by contacting the General Service Office to obtain a copy.

A continuing function of the General Service Board as custodian of the Traditions is to inform and guide the Fellowship as a whole. The General Service Board of AAGB is a charitable company and as such has a responsibility to the Charity Commission to report safeguarding incidents under active investigation by the legal authorities.

Every AA group makes an open invitation to its meetings to any member of the public having a desire to stop drinking. 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. Our First Tradition reminds us that all members and groups have a responsibility for the common welfare and safeguarding of the individual member.

We suggest that AA groups recognise and accept responsibility for dealing with unacceptable behaviour and thereby protect the Fellowship and the overall good name of AA.

Note - Many of us who join AA have a chequered past and this is only to be expected. With recovery we can be restored to society and lead a fruitful life. Society has become progressively more concerned with safeguarding the rights of the individual and these concerns have been reflected in recent changes to the law. The Protection against Harassment Act 1997 and the Human Rights Act 1998, together with the Care Act 2014, are specific examples. Most local authorities have now established Safeguarding Adults Boards and Safeguarding Children Boards.

Neither the GSB nor AA groups are regulated care providers, but Tradition One requires that we understand good safeguarding practice and the duty to care for others in the group.

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.

To be clear - No member of AA is above the Law for any offences committed prior to joining AA or any offences committed whilst attending AA. We as a Fellowship believe that "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions" (Tradition Twelve), but this does not mean that we allow the protection of anonymity to anyone to exploit or abuse our Fellowship, or any individual member of AA.

5.2 What Constitutes a Safeguarding Issue?

Abuse and Exploitation in all its forms, some examples of which are listed below, need not be tolerated at any level of the structure; our members have the right to feel secure in meetings and whilst going about AA service / business.

- Violence
- Threatening Behaviour
- Spiritual Abuse
- Racial / Sectarian abuse, extremism, or radicalisation
- Sexual Harassment, abuse, and exploitation
- Bullying or harassment
- Exploitation (criminal, commercial, financial or otherwise)
- Forced marriage
- Modern day slavery or human trafficking
- Health and safety issues
- Discrimination on any grounds of the Equality Act 2010
- Data breaches, including those under GDPR
- Offensive language or behaviour within meetings and online
- People may be abused or exploited, for example because of their religion, ethnic origin, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, age, stature, appearance etc. Abuse or exploitation may include cyber abuse, direct physical or emotional abuse, or negligent treatment

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

6.0 Addressing Safeguarding Issues

Tradition 12

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

Groups, through their conscience meetings, may establish contingency plans to deal with Safeguarding issues and be mindful of the Safeguarding Policy document produced by the General Service Board of AAGB. It may be that groups appoint a safeguarding representative at either group, intergroup or region level; an experienced, respected AA member may be best suited to this role. As an example, any safeguarding issues that come through our on-line services will be forwarded to our General Secretary, who may wish to discuss a particular issue with the Board's Executive Committee. This will be done in a manner that respects anonymity.

We believe that individual welfare coupled with anonymity are central to the Fellowship's safeguarding responsibility. We suggest that any response be consistent and supportive. It is not our place to discuss, investigate or judge. We have one primary purpose, and we will always suggest recourse through trained professionals that sit within Local Authority Safeguarding boards.

In dealing with any unacceptable behaviour the response must also 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 may have to 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 in progress 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.)

6.1 Personal Action on Unacceptable Behaviour

- It is often sufficient for the recipient of behaviour they feel is inappropriate to raise the difficulty with the person creating the problem by pointing out that the conduct is offensive. Anyone has the right to challenge unacceptable behaviour from any other members of AA at any stage, and request that the behaviour stop.
- Support and help – it should be possible for the recipient to prepare for this conversation with the help of their sponsor or another member if they wish. If they 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 their sponsor or another member present e.g., the group's safeguarding rep, if it has one.

6.2 Group Action

- When a personal approach fails or the recipient feels that this method is inappropriate, the recipient may approach the group Chair, or another trusted servant, for help and guidance, feeling secure in the belief that any safeguarding issue will be considered as a serious matter.
- The alleged offender should be told of the complaint as soon as possible.

- If the situation is sufficiently serious or complex, it may be necessary to involve members from outside the group.
- 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.
- The reporting of safeguarding instances to local authorities may be required.

6.3 Group Meetings

- Members are encouraged to choose a home group in which true bonds of Fellowship will lessen the need to fear behaviour they might find offensive.
- It is suggested that Group Conscience meetings 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.
- Where safeguarding issues (as described in 5.1 and including verbal abuse, discriminatory jokes, disparaging remarks, etc.) occur in a group situation, members in recovery have a responsibility to ask for the offending behaviour to stop.
- We suggest that an explanation of the dangers of unacceptable behaviour in AA be given at the time, or at the end of the meeting.
- Offensive behaviour cannot 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.

6.4 Group / Intergroup / Region / Service Meetings

Our collective experience has highlighted instances where individual members and groups have actively tried to dictate the conscience of service meetings through abusive and threatening behaviour.

When these instances have occurred, experience shows that it is perfectly acceptable for the Chair to stop the meeting, remind all attending of our primary purpose and our need to allow God, as we understand him, to express himself through our group conscience.

If the above suggestion does not have the desired effect, there may be a need to involve the appropriate authorities to assist – e.g., Police.

6.5 Primary Purpose / Service in Prisons / Probation / Social Services / Hospitals etc.

Organisations expect any member of AA attending Prisons, Hospitals or any institution requiring security clearance, to abide by the rules of the organisation and follow their safeguarding guidelines. Should groups be asked to introduce a chit-type system for specific offenders, please make sure that both safeguarding, and anonymity are considered. Guidance on the chit system can be found in our Service Handbook section 9:3.2.

In addition to the above we suggest that each service within AA have its own safeguarding guidance within the terms of reference.

6.6 Safeguarding Children and Juveniles

There are times when children or juveniles will be in attendance at AA open meetings or AA conventions. It is the responsibility of the group members or Committee to agree a safeguarding policy, preferably before they are in attendance; we suggest that parental responsibility be taken into consideration.

Should there be a need for child-care at our conventions, committees may need to give consideration to this.

If there are safeguarding issues involving children, we suggest that the Group Secretary (or any group member) act in accordance with the GSB's current Safeguarding Policy Document and consider whether it is necessary to report their concerns to the local Safeguarding Children Board.

6.7 Twelfth Stepping and Sponsoring of Minors

Minors are defined as children and young people under the age of 18, although this legal definition may vary from country to country. If, however, the Fellowship uses it as a guideline, we can better ensure the safeguarding of these younger members.

We want to help minors who believe they may have a drink problem, but we must respect the law, and compromises will need to be made, both by AA members and the minors seeking our help.

When asked to help a minor we may need parental or guardian's consent. This must be explained from the outset. In law written consent is recommended.

Guidance ought to be sought from the group, intergroup or regional safeguarding representative.

The following guidance was offered following changes in the law affecting minors and vulnerable adults and supersedes that issued by the General Service Board in March 2007. It refers to all who come into AA including minors and vulnerable adults.

- As members of self-regulating groups, AA members do not require DBS or Disclosure Scotland checks for 12th Stepping or Sponsoring. This has been confirmed by the Independent Safeguarding Authority and the Scottish Government, following discussions with the General Service Board's solicitors.
- Nonetheless, the spirit of the law should be borne in mind and AA members should acknowledge the duty of respect that is due to one another.
- Sponsors should have substantial sobriety and be aware of the duty of care towards others.
- Contact with new members (including minors and vulnerable adults) to be conducted by two members – preferably a man and a woman. (not a single gender pair?)
- Any meeting with a new member would be best held in a public place and where appropriate the date, time and place reported in advance to the Group Secretary.
- Smaller groups and those in rural areas may find it useful to contact other groups in the area to pool resources for 12th Stepping.
- If members are able and willing to do so they may inform the Group Secretary of any DBS or Police checks held.

Resources:

Additional information:

Please refer to 6.5 for guidance on visiting schools / prisons (including Young Offenders Institutes) / hospitals etc.

7.0 The New Member

Often when a new member joins AA a feeling of hope and the lifting of despair can lead to thinking that every AA member has their best interests at heart. We need to make the new member aware that AA is like any other part of society; many in AA will offer us great support, but some may not.

7.1 Sponsorship

Within AA good sponsorship can be a vital for both our recovery and service. We have a pamphlet – *“Sponsorship Your Questions Answered”* - which can be very helpful. We suggest that groups have this readily available on their literature table. A man for a man, and a woman for a woman has often been suggested as working best. Today, however, we recognise that sexual and / or romantic attraction, regardless of sexuality or gender identity, can be problematic and may create safeguarding issues.

Good sponsorship involves making the sponsee aware that sponsors are not trained counsellors. All we have is our own experience of recovery from alcoholism. We believe that most sponsors would want to make the sponsee aware of the importance of personal confidentiality and trust. Concerning Step Five, all or any part of this can be taken with whomever the sponsee feels most comfortable, and that need not be the sponsor.

As individuals we decide whether we are alcoholic, and again, we as alcoholics choose our own sponsors. Some groups offer temporary sponsorship to new members which can be helpful in the beginning.

7.2 AAGB Staff Members / Public/Volunteers

AAGB staff have the same rights and responsibilities as AA members with regard to safeguarding. No AA staff member need tolerate abuse or exploitation, in any form, and, likewise, none need be tolerated from AA staff members.

In regard to members of the public coming into contact with AA, be that at Public or Open AA meetings, or for any other reason, they are entitled to the same level of safeguarding as any member of AA.

8.0 About Behaviour

All forms of abuse and exploitation being acted out, including violence, sexual abuse, bullying, harassment and offensive behaviour, are negative and unacceptable. Such forms of discrimination are in conflict with the AA Traditions and our way of life in recovery. All 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 our behaviour 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 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 unacceptable behaviour of any kind.

8.1 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.”

Recommendations:

- Treat other people with respect and dignity.
- Recognise that newcomers to the Fellowship may be severely damaged survivors.
- 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 on your own.
- 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 your return.
- Be aware of the dangers of romantic and / or sexual attraction in sponsorship (See Section 7.1: Sponsorship).
- 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 respond appropriately. You may even at a later stage wish to thank them for pointing it out to you!

Conclusion

By Bill W.

“It is an historical fact that practically all groupings of men and women tend to become more dogmatic; their beliefs and practices harden and sometimes freeze. This is a natural and almost inevitable process. All people must, of course, rally to the call of their convictions, and we of AA are no exception.

Moreover, all people should have the right to voice their convictions. This is good principle and good dogma. But dogma also has its liabilities. Simply because we have convictions that work well for us, it becomes very easy to assume that we have all the truth. Whenever this brand of arrogance develops, we are certain to become aggressive; we demand agreement with us; we

play God. This isn't good dogma; it's very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing.

Newcomers are approaching AA at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering.

Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares."

Bill Wilson, Toronto International Convention, 1965.

Suggestions at Group Level

Your group conscience meeting may consider discussing and agreeing upon a clear statement for display, for example:

This Group does not tolerate:

- Bullying
- Harassment
- Discriminatory Behaviour
- Or any other form of abuse or exploitation.

Personal Conduct Matters!

**Bad Language often
offends... But its absence
never does**

Tradition Eleven

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.

This Group Adheres to GBS's AAGB Safeguarding
Guidance

No Member of our Fellowship should be a victim of
Abuse or Exploitation