

Reprint of G.S.O. Response To One Kaua'i A.A. Group

Thank you for writing to the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous. Your letter reached my desk as I have the pleasure of corresponding with A.A. members in your region. By way of introduction, my name is Steve, and I am an alcoholic. I'm glad to have this opportunity to be in touch.

I hope you won't mind a rather lengthy response to your question. Regarding your question about a disruptive A.A. member, our First Tradition states, "our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." Additionally, it is important to note, we recommend when a group is confronting criminal conduct that professional legal authorities be consulted.

G.S.O. has no specific guidelines regarding disruptive individuals. Our experience regarding regular A.A. groups is that, from time to time, these groups have had difficulty with someone. Throughout the years, many groups have confronted members who have been troublesome and were causing disunity among the group members.

As we are all aware, our Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous is one filled with love and care. Someone is a member of A.A. as long as they say they are a member of A.A.; however, in order to keep the Fellowship cohesive and functioning, it needs Traditions which are its guidelines. These Traditions provide for the unity of the group, and therefore, ultimately protect each individual member's sobriety. So, while no one who says they are a member of A.A. can be kicked out of A.A., someone can be asked to leave a meeting for the sake of the common welfare of the group.

It has happened, unfortunately, that a troublesome individual's behavior is so disruptive that it is making it difficult or impossible for the group to fulfill its primary purpose of carrying the A.A. message. In this instance, a person might be asked to stop attending the meeting for a specific period of time. This sort of action is taken as a last resort after an individual has been asked to change his or her behavior. Groups which take this drastic action do it in order to preserve the common welfare of the group and maintain A.A. unity. It is always hoped, in these situations, that the individual member will see the difficulty as an opportunity for personal growth and will attend other meetings in the area in order to maintain his or her sobriety.

As we know, the ultimate authority in A.A. is a loving God as he expresses himself through the group conscience. Each group has different experiences, and we hope you will continue to discuss the matter, and that it will be resolved in the spirit of love and service.

The following is an example of how one local group chooses to handle the issue of disruptive members:

First, the group sets up a group conscience/business meeting and agrees to the following format:

- Each member can speak only twice on each topic.
- Each member can share for only two minutes at a time.

This format is agreed prior to all discussion.

The group defines a disruptive/threatening member as anybody who interrupts the good orderly direction of the A.A. meeting so that the message of Alcoholics Anonymous cannot be carried. It also applies to the intimidating or frightening of newcomers so that they cannot hear the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Under these circumstances, the disruptive A.A. member is asked to attend the group conscience/business meeting. Whether or not they attend, the group discusses the problem. If present, the procedure is explained to the disruptive member. The disruptive member is then asked to step outside and the group votes on whether or not this disruptive member should be banned from this A.A. meeting.

Again, the group is not banning the member from Alcoholics Anonymous. They are banning him or her from attending this meeting for a specific amount of time and alternative meeting options are presented.

Bill Wilson wrote that we are not a "punitive" society. Banning for a certain period of time is not "punitive." It is a group conscience decision based on the First Tradition, "Our common welfare should come first." If the behavior is serious enough, the A.A. member is commonly banned for three months, six months or even one year. It is explained to the A.A. member that, at the end of that time, they are welcome to come back to the business meeting to acknowledge that they understand the disruptive nature of their behavior and that they plan to cooperate with the smooth running of the meeting in the future.

Now we get to the logistics of what do we do if the person who was banned comes into the meeting. Experience shows that no A.A. member should be asked to eject or to react to the disruptive behavior of another A.A. member. Even the most sober A.A. member can be involved in a physical confrontation which we want to avoid at all cost. This necessitates that we consider the person as a trespasser and the police are called into the meeting to remove them.

The group that I am talking about contacted the Community Officer of the local police precinct and discussed the situation ahead of time. When the time came that police help was needed, the group knew exactly how to handle it. In their case, each meeting chairperson had to agree to call the police if the banned A.A. member showed up at the meeting.

Of course, once the police were called and came into the meeting, there were people who had not attended the business meeting who were outraged. They were invited to the following business meeting so that the process of protecting the meeting could be discussed. This group makes an announcement at the beginning of every meeting that generally says, "Based on our First Tradition, 'Our common welfare should come first,' disruptive members will be asked to leave this meeting."

This group also has short guidelines for meeting chairpersons. I have attached them, for your reference, along with a past article on disruptive members from *Box 4-5-9*.

I hope this information has been helpful. This is a very difficult situation for an A.A. group to face. As we know, the ultimate authority in A.A. is a loving God as expressed through the group conscience. Each group has different experiences, and we hope you will continue to discuss the matter, and that it will be resolved in the spirit of love and service.

All of us here at G.S.O. send our best wishes.

Yours in fellowship,
Steve Smith
General Service Office Staff

Attachment: Guidelines for Meeting Chairperson re: Disruptive Members (Local Shared Experience), *Box 4-5-9* Article on Disruptive Members