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Disruptive Members at A.A. Meetings

In the Big Book, the chapter "Working with Others," lists some possibilities that may occur when an A.A. adopts the attitude that "Helping others is the foundation stone of your recovery." Helping a drunk may mean ". . . innumerable trips to police courts, sanitariums, hospitals, jails and asylums Another time you may have to send for the police or an ambulance. Occasionally you will have to meet such conditions." (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 97) In short, during the course of laying the foundation stone of recovery and helping others, an A.A. may find him or herself with a troublesome member. In meetings, where A.A.s find other drunks to work with, the possibilities described in helping drunks are also present, and occasionally, members disrupt meetings.

Although A.A.s strive to adopt certain attitudes and behaviors, such as "Love and tolerance of others is our code" (ibid, p. 84), members sometimes find that a troublesome individual's behavior is so violent or threatening that it has become difficult or impossible for the group to fulfill its primary purpose of carrying the A.A. message. Furthermore, Tradition One reminds the group that "Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first." (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 189) How a group handles disruptive and/or threatening members can cause conflict and controversy, so many group members rely upon the shared experience of others who have successfully dealt with a similar situation.

Often, groups or group members contact the General Service Office regarding disruptive members at A.A. meetings. G.S.O., in addition to upholding actions of our Conference and board, also functions as a repository for the shared experience of A.A. groups.

Some groups have shared suggestions on how to handle disruptive behavior. One group recommends that a member first approach the individual, informally and one-on-one, in order to discuss the problem and look for solutions. This group reminds one another to let the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions guide all communication, striving always to place principles before personalities and to treat all with kindness, patience, compassion, tolerance, and love.

In another example, one group shared how they dealt with disruptive and/or threatening members who did not respond to polite requests or one-on-one approaches: The group set up a group conscience/business meeting and, prior to all discussion, agreed to the following format:

- 1.) Each member can speak only twice on each topic, and
- 2.) Each member can share for only two minutes at a time.

Further, the group also found it helpful to define a disruptive/threatening member as anyone who interrupts the good orderly direction of the meeting so that the message of Alcoholics Anonymous cannot be carried. A disruptive and/or threatening member was also defined as one whose actions intimidate or frighten newcomers so that they cannot hear the A.A. message. Under these circumstances, the disruptive A.A. member is asked to attend the group conscience/business meeting. Whether or not he or she attends, the group discusses the problem. If present, the procedure is explained to the disruptive member. The disruptive member may be asked to stop attending the meeting for a specific period of time.

In the above instance, the member is not being “thrown out” of A.A., just asked not to attend the meeting. The First Tradition assures A.A.s that no member “can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled.” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 129) It is always hoped 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. Usually, this sort of action is taken as a last resort—after an individual has been asked to change his or her behavior.

Bill W., who always emphasized the loving, helpful, and tolerant attitude A.A. members should show each other, wrote in a letter in 1969: “This amount of charity does not mean that we can not 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.”

Indeed, Bill W. was no stranger to tumult, controversy, or disturbances at A.A. meetings. He also had faith that growth and good could come out of trouble. In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, he writes, “Within A.A., I suppose, we shall always quarrel a good bit. Mostly, I think, about how to do the greatest good for the greatest number of drunks Surmounting such problems, in A.A.’s rather rugged school of life, is a healthy exercise.” (p. 233)