

## **Safety In AA : What are a groups options when dealing with continual bad behavior by a specific member?**

Hi, My Name is Andrew W. and I am an alcoholic.

My topic for this presentation is Safety in AA: What are a groups options when dealing with continual bad behavior by a specific member? This topic has been relevant in my sobriety a few times over the years, and it has not always been clear cut on what the right thing to do is. I plan on outlining my experience, and what I have found in the literature, then ending with a plan that you can implement or borrow pieces of for your own group. I refer to the literature as much as I can in my sobriety to find the right answers, so I'll start by giving you a reprinted quote from Bill W. that I found in an AA newsletter from 2010. Bill had sent this 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.”

I think this quote is a great foundation to begin on. In my opinion it's an extension of our first tradition. The first tradition long form states “Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. AA must continue to live, or most of us will surely die. Hence, our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.” Both the first tradition and Bill's quote support the idea that we must look out for the whole before we look out for one, that we have a responsibility to ensure that no one person is disrupting the many's sobriety. Our goal is to continue this program in a way that is beneficial to the most alcoholics possible, and as members we have the same mission. Sometimes keeping that mission a focus means we cannot help everybody.

It is important to me to mention that disruptive behavior covers a wide variety of scenarios. Being disruptive doesn't just mean interrupting meetings, or “taking meetings hostage”, it can also mean any behavior that gets in the way of any members sobriety. Any behavior that makes another alcoholic feel unsafe, or uncomfortable in a meeting can be deemed disruptive. I've seen various degrees of behavior unfit for a meeting, from speaking during other's shares, becoming aggressive towards other members, sexually harassing peers, and many others. The tough part is obviously the subjectivity of these examples. However, I think we can agree that most of the time, while we might not be able to specify every type of instance of disruptiveness, we know it when we see it.

But from there were do we go? How do we go about confronting, or dealing with members who may be causing harm at our meetings? I'll give you my own experience, then refer back to the literature. At my home group, HNS in Lake Oswego, we had a member whose behavior was disrupting multiple women after the meeting. A few male

home group members and I heard from a few women that this member was cornering them after meetings, engaging in unwelcome touching, and overall making them feel uncomfortable. Some of us had even seen this behavior but hadn't realized what was really going on until it was brought to our attention.

We took this situation very seriously, and came to the conclusion that we needed to sit down with this member and speak to him. I have problems with codependency, and this situation was a nightmare for my feelings. But, thank god for more assertive people, two male members and I sat down with this man and spoke to him in a tolerant and kind manner. We did not yell or talk down to him. We simply told him what we had heard, that it was not ok, and we needed him to change his behavior, or leave. It was very uncomfortable and unnerving, because he denied any knowledge of this. After that meeting he never came back again, for better or worse. This situation showed me the importance of looking out for the group as a whole, and not accidentally protecting a single member because of fear, or bias. The sad part was that we may have lost a female member or two before we knew about the situation. While we should not put anyone's sobriety over anyone else's as a general rule, we also have to be wary of letting one person create a situation that causes multiple people to feel unsafe or uncomfortable in a meeting. In that case, someone's sobriety may have had to become more important to us than another's.

As Tradition 4 states that our groups are autonomous, each group may choose to deal with these types of situations as they see fit. There is no required steps to take, or plan of action that must be employed when something problematic arises. However, the General Service Office does have literature on this exact topic that outlines what is and isn't in line with the traditions.

There is relevant service material on the website, catalogued as SMF-209, that is titled "Safety and AA: Our Common Welfare". It gives some great suggestions for our groups to operate by. It brings up our third tradition and how, there may be no requirements other than the desire to stop drinking to become a member, we still have a duty to AA as a whole to provide a safe place for those seeking help. I think this is an important issue to remember. As members of AA, it is our duty to freely help those who are still suffering, and if we are watching others' sobriety be hindered by another, it is ok to ask someone to leave a meeting.

It goes on to mention our topic in a section titled "Dealing with Disruptions". It mentions that some groups have plans in place for addressing disruptive behavior, to protect the unity and safety of a group. This is something I might be bringing back to my home group. Having a group conscience on how to deal with these situations can be beneficial because in the moment it can be hard to find the right thing to do. It also mentions that some groups announce what the expectations for members' behavior in the meeting is during the introduction, in an attempt to curb or give precedence if an incident arises.

A "Safety Card for AA Groups" is available from GSO that gives a more brief explanation of the previous topic. At one point it states "Calling the proper authorities does not go against any AA Traditions and is recommended when someone may have broken the law or endangered the safety of another person". This is important to share because our anonymity is paramount to our program, but not at the expense of anyone's safety. A few paragraphs down there is a quote that states "Anonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal or inappropriate behavior".

I have had a wide range of countless other experiences with disruptive behavior in meetings that are less serious than the one I previously mentioned. I think the first step is to define for your meeting what qualifies as disruptive behavior. Most meetings have a "turn cell phone off" announcement, and some have a "no cross talk" as well. But these issues in my experience rarely end up with a member being asked to leave the group. Usually if they become an issue, a simple comment to the member will get them to stop. But what about the more serious issues that can arise? Quoted from the service material, SMF-209, meetings have discussed the following topics as disruptive behavior, "sexual harassment or stalking; threats of violence; bullying; financial coercion; racial intolerance; sexual orientation or gender identification intolerance; pressuring A.A. members into a particular point of view or belief relating to medical treatments and/or medications, politics, religion, or other outside issues. In addition, there may be other behaviors that go on outside of typical meeting times that may affect whether someone feels safe to return to the group." These are topics that are rarely mentioned in an introduction for various reasons. Having a list of your groups idea of inappropriate behaviors is a good start. With a group conscience, you can compile what the behaviors are, so that there is less guessing if someone is a problem.

Next, having a plan for how to deal with varying degrees of disruptive behavior is recommended by the literature. For some, simply asking the person to stop will be enough. Someone is talking while others' are sharing? Pull them aside after the meeting and ask them kindly to please refrain from side conversations while the meeting is going on. Is someone sharing for far longer than necessary each week, taking the meeting hostage? Either have a guideline that's mentioned in the announcements on how long people can share for, or once again pull them aside, and with love and tolerance ask them to shorten their share so that as many attendees who need to speak have the opportunity to do so. It also doesn't hurt to mention, as I've heard in some meetings introductions, that if you didn't get enough time to share, ask someone after the meeting if you can speak with them.

Is someone engaging in illegal activities? This is where you might find differing opinions on what plan of action to take. This is why a group conscience is so important on these matters. If their illegality is not hurting anyone else necessarily, you might have to take it as a case by case basis. If they are hurting someone else, I'd be hard pressed to find any situation where calling the authorities isn't the right thing to do. We also have

to be careful of letting our own opinions guide what is and isn't illegal. Sexual harassment and/or threatening behavior can absolutely be considered illegal, and should not be taken lightly. Let the authorities decide what to do if you see someone exhibiting these types of behaviors, we are not lawmakers just as we aren't doctors, and shouldn't be deciding if someone is safe or not. This brings us back to keeping AA as a whole safe. We cannot sacrifice an innocent member's sobriety for the sake of another who has hurt or is hurting them.

Of course, it is possible that the offending member may not comply. They may not listen to your suggestions, they may not change their behavior. They might continually show up to the meeting long after you have asked them to not come back. If they are engaged in illegal activities of any sort calling the authorities might fix that. But if they are being disruptive without breaking the law, there is not much you can do if they refuse to comply with any guidelines. These situations can cause meetings to die when they go to these lengths. The good news is our sobriety moves on, and we can continue to help others no matter the meeting.

The most important thing I learned in this process is the value of our group conscience, and our duty as AA members to uphold our first tradition. Alcoholics Anonymous is a microcosm of the world. Sometimes the ugly parts of the outside make their way in to our community, it is inevitable. But we can take the suggestions of our literature to help guide us to making the right decisions. We can trust the process of our group business meetings to provide us with the right answers if we remember that upholding the traditions is of our utmost priority. We must do our best to make sure all those who still suffer have a safe place to relate, otherwise we may not be around to help the future desperate alcoholic. As the first tradition states, "AA must continue to live, or most of us will surely die."