

A Service Structure For Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The future of Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous depends upon maintaining our unity through the lively operation of a service structure that allows the collective voice of ABA members worldwide to guide and direct our principal service board, the General Service Association of ABA. In practical terms, this requires the election of General Service Representatives by all active ABA Groups and their participation in regular international meetings of these Representatives. Furthermore, in order to continue its current functions, the General Service Association itself requires greater participation and support from ABA Groups around the world. This document discusses these needs in depth, concluding with several practical actions to be taken by all Groups.

I. Background Information

Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous (ABA) originated in 1993 in Edmonton, Alberta, a city in western Canada. ABA grew slowly as a tiny grass-roots 12-Step Fellowship, spreading by word of mouth and remaining geographically localized in Edmonton until 2002. By that point, a significant number of anorexics and bulimics were maintaining sobriety and—in the true spirit of 12-Step recovery—knew we had been given this gift not only for ourselves, but for the purpose of reaching out to other sufferers with a message of hope.

To begin this process of “carrying the message” ABA published an anonymous textbook of recovery in December 2002, and to everyone’s amazement the book virtually sold itself, reaching people all over North America, Europe, and the South Pacific within a few short years. New ABA Groups sprang up everywhere as members banded together to offer and receive mutual support.

In order to publish the ABA textbook, the General Service Association (GSA) of ABA was founded and incorporated as a non-profit society in March 2003. It has functioned ever since then as ABA’s principal

service board, overseeing the development and distribution of our literature, the establishment and support of new meetings and Groups, the planning and execution of ABA retreats and conferences, and all endeavors to foster public awareness of ABA. The prime focus of the GSA has always been on maintaining ABA unity and on finding ways to support the growth of ABA throughout the world, that the ABA message may reach all who might benefit from hearing it.

In matters pertaining to development and governance of our Fellowship as a whole, ABA has always followed the lead of Alcoholics Anonymous, whom we regard as our “grandparents” in recovery (ABA text, p 81). In 1935 the Fellowship of AA was born, and its 12-Step Program for individual recovery from alcoholism was formally written down in 1939 when the Big Book was published. Under the grace of God, AA’s pioneering members successfully negotiated all the interpersonal problems and disagreements that could have destroyed the entire movement. Out of the difficult and confusing early years of AA, the 12 Traditions were developed and adopted in 1950 as essential principles to govern Group operation. In 1962, the 12 Concepts for World Service were formulated to serve as guidelines for the increasingly complex international service structure of AA. All the principles contained in the 12 Traditions and 12 Concepts were distilled from the sometimes painful experience of AA members working together to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous.

What does all of this have to do with Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous? Simply this: ABA, now in its 19th year, is encountering many of the same adolescent problems that could have destroyed AA in its early years, and if we are to survive we too must negotiate these problems. Failure to do so will mean not only that ABA will no longer be here to make possible the recovery of its current members, but also that it will not exist for future generations of sufferers from eating disorders. In addressing our current and future challenges, we can draw from the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous, while at the same time using ABA’s collective conscience to operate a service structure that is uniquely our own.

II. The First Essential: Unity, Our Common Welfare

ABA's major problem in recent years has been fragmentation. By 2010 we had evolved into an unorganized collective of individual Groups around the world, each of which operated in isolation from all the others. Why? Because ABA lacked effective and consistent two-way communication. The GSA, through its elected Board, its Central Service Office in Edmonton, and its service employees, can be visualized as the central hub of ABA worldwide. The member Groups of ABA make up individual disconnected points on an outer circle. But without spokes linking these points to the hub, there can be no wheel. These "spokes" that we desperately need are wide-open two-way communication channels between the GSA and ABA Groups.

At regular intervals, information flows from the GSA office, primarily by mail and email, to all registered Groups around the world. But unless information flows back to the GSA, there is no actual communication! Because so few responses have been received when anything was sent out, the GSA has lacked even an accurate record of which registered Groups are still in existence. Requests and pleas for up-to-date information have often been ignored, so the GSA has remained ignorant regarding the state of most ABA Groups.

How are we addressing this problem? To answer that question, we need to move on to consider our second big issue, the governance—or leadership—of ABA as a whole.

III. ABA Governance: Letting God Lead Us

It is critically important for all ABA members to know and to constantly remember that the ultimate authority for the governance of ABA rests *only* in "a loving God as expressed through our group conscience" (Tradition 2). Although the GSA was founded to lead the infant Fellowship through its early years, it is and has always been merely "a trusted servant" of ABA, developed as a service board responsible to the whole of ABA (Tradition 9).

In order to work effectively, a servant must be directed by its "master"—God, *as expressed through the group conscience*. In other words, the awesome privilege—and onerous responsibility—to steer the ship of the ABA Fellowship rests solidly with ABA members

everywhere. Each person is responsible to show up and find her/his sober voice at the level of the Home Group conscience. This collective voice of each and every Group must then be transmitted to the whole of the ABA Fellowship, in order that ABA may be led in accordance with God's will for us as a whole.

How can this transmission take place? The solution to this question lies in the key concept of the General Service Representative (GSR), a sober member elected by each Group to serve as its link with the whole of ABA. This position is vital to the unity of Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous because it ensures ongoing communication between the GSA and the Group.

The GSR's role includes:

1. Promptly informing the GSA of all changes in Group information, e.g. membership numbers, meeting time and location, name and contact information of the current GSR, etc.
2. Passing on to the Group, at its business meetings, all information received from the GSA.
3. Communicating to the GSA all Group questions, concerns, suggestions, ideas, etc.
4. Representing the Group in regularly scheduled meetings with GSRs from other Groups, through conference calls or videoconferences.

This fourth role is vital to the future of ABA because, as noted above, Tradition 2 states that the voice of the ABA membership itself *must* be heard by the GSA on any and all matters pertaining to recovery. If ABA Groups begin, through their GSRs, to relay their collective voice to the GSA, then the GSA can be more effectively directed by a loving God.

Because the GSR has the important job of bringing her or his Group's voice (determined by group conscience) to meetings with other GSRs and to the GSA, the GSR needs to be carefully chosen by the Group. The election of its GSR is one area where it will be particularly important to ensure that "principles are placed before personalities" (Tradition 12).

We suggest the GSR be a person with the following qualities:

1. Length of sobriety sufficient to allow clear thinking and good judgment, probably a minimum of one year.
2. Demonstrated to be an active participant in the Group—someone who consistently “shows up” and desires to be of service.
3. Knowledge of and commitment to the principles and unique program of Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous.
4. Good listening skills and ability to communicate clearly.
5. Solid, in-depth understanding of service for the common good. (Study of *The AA Service Manual* would be good preparation for the GSR.)
6. Willingness to fill the position for at least one year.

Alcoholics Anonymous states, “By choosing its **most qualified** man or woman as GSR, a group helps secure its own future—and the future of AA as a whole.” (Pamphlet on General Service Representative, emphasis added)

IV. The Third Essential: Support for the GSA

Because the GSA is the servant of ABA, it needs to be supported on many levels by her “master,” for a servant, by definition, can do nothing on her own. A servant’s work will be effective only if the one directing her is doing so clearly and reasonably, while at the same time accepting responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of the servant to keep her healthy. What this means for all of us is that, while the GSA is responsible *to* ABA, the ABA Fellowship is responsible *for* the GSA. The relationship must be fully collaborative and founded on a deep level of mutual trust and respect. Otherwise it simply won’t work.

Let us therefore examine the kinds of support ABA’s servant needs. The first of these is **spiritual**. The GSA needs to be upheld by ABA as a whole—through prayer, and through the generous donation by ABA members of their time and talents to ensure all areas of its mission are accomplished. Sober ABA members are needed to serve on the GSA Board itself, as well as on its standing Committees (Literature & Outreach, Retreat & Conference, Public Information, Phone Meeting Support, and Personnel & Central Office). In this electronic age of

instant communication, these bodies can include members all over the planet. Teleconferencing and videoconferencing and other such methods can be used to bring members who are widely scattered geographically into the same “room” for meetings. While ensuring that the GSA thrives with such a robust supply of people and ideas feeding it, such innovations also deepen ABA’s worldwide unity.

Secondly, the GSA needs **financial** support from all ABA Groups. Although all Board and Committee members donate their time and energy, the GSA has significant monthly expenses. A small number of paid employees are needed to keep the office operating. Rent, telephone, internet, office supplies, professional accounting services—all must be paid for. If the GSA and its office cannot stay afloat, ABA Groups cannot be served. Literature would no longer be printed or shipped, inquiries by telephone and email would go unanswered, no support would be available to people wishing to start new Groups, and no unifying entity would keep ABA together. In short, if the GSA were to collapse, so would ABA itself. Thus, by supporting the GSA, ABA Groups are supporting *themselves*. They are ensuring their own survival!

According to Tradition 7, every ABA Group ought to be fully self-supporting, which means that *all* Groups, not just a few, ought to pay a share of the GSA’s expenses as soon as they are able to do so. Currently, Group donations account for only a small fraction of the GSA’s annual income, while the single largest source of income is profit from sale of our textbook. Because of the rising cost of nearly everything, for the past three years the GSA has been operating at a deficit, slowly eroding the prudent financial reserve it had previously established. The GSA offers a heartfelt plea to its “employer”—ABA Groups everywhere—to remedy this situation through *regular* financial contributions. A letter is enclosed requesting all Groups to take up a special quarterly collection throughout the year, specifically to support the GSA.

V. Conclusion

The Fellowship of Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous is God’s handiwork, and all of us who are members owe our lives to it. Our continued wellbeing and the lives of those who will come after us

depend upon ABA's unified survival. To ensure that survival, ABA has developed a service structure that brings to the fore the collective voice of ABA members worldwide, a voice to responsibly direct and support ABA's servant, the General Service Association of ABA. We hope that all who care about ABA will participate wholeheartedly in this service structure.

VI. Practical Actions

We ask all Groups receiving this document to take the following actions, if they have not already done so:

1. Schedule a business meeting as soon as possible—attended by all Home Group members—and read this document aloud in its entirety at the meeting and discuss it. You may wish to make several copies of it so that everyone can study its content.
2. As a Group, review the attached Mission Statement and Terms of Reference of the GSR Committee, to deepen everyone's understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the GSR.
3. As a Group, discuss the qualifications needed for a GSR and elect an appropriate individual to this position. (If you already have a GSR, ensure that he or she is qualified and is ready, willing, and able to take on the deeper responsibilities proposed in this document and in the Terms of Reference.)
4. You may wish to elect an "Alternate GSR" to represent the Group if the GSR is unavailable for any scheduled meetings of the GSR Committee.
5. Ask your GSR to provide her/his complete contact information to both the GSA's Office Manager (email: gsaoffice@aba12steps.org) and the Secretary of the GSR Committee, Jessica (email: claflin@ualberta.ca.)
6. Ensure that your GSR is ready to begin participating in the GSR Committee monthly teleconferences. Details, including directions for calling in and an agenda, will be sent in advance of each meeting by the Committee's Secretary, *as long she has received the GSR's contact information!*