

# **Sponsorship in Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous**

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## **1. Introduction**

“You can’t heal a sick mind with a sick mind!”

“You can’t solve a problem using the mind that created it!”

“Someone who's asleep can’t wake herself up!”

Catchy statements such as these, often heard in the rooms of 12-Step recovery, emphasize the critically important fact that no addict heals in isolation. Being powerless over our disease, all afflicted are dependent on a Higher Power who is capable of restoring us to wellness, who possesses the healing power we lack. And, one of the first things we learn in recovery is that “God works through *people*.”

12-Step meetings are the first vehicle wherein we discover that we are not alone anymore. As we listen to people’s stories and identify with what we hear, we realize that others have “walked in our shoes,” have been where we are, and have found freedom from their addictive behaviors and the deadly obsessions that fuel them. This identification with others generates hope that we too can recover, and keeps us coming back to meetings.

However, of necessity, the meeting format provides only limited time for each member to share. And, because “cross-talk” is strongly discouraged, no one can offer a direct response to an individual who is in pain or emotional distress, or to one who is confused or uncertain about what to do next, or even to one who is obviously mistaken about a particular ABA concept. Hence the need for someone who *can* offer such direct feedback, support, and guidance to the individual. That “someone” is a sponsor.

This document will not repeat what is written in our basic textbook on the subject of sponsorship, but rather will elaborate on certain other aspects of the subject and, in particular, provide specific and practical guidance to interested members.

## **2. The Need For Sponsorship**

Our literature is clear and emphatic about the importance of sponsorship: “Going it alone in spiritual matters is dangerous” (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p 60). Without a sober person with whom she can check out her thinking, the anorexic or bulimic is in grave danger of deluding herself regarding just about everything. Our thinking “stinks” most of the time, especially in early recovery (the first five years sober, or more), and our greatest problem is that we don't *know* it stinks. What seems perfectly logical to the eating-disordered mind often proves to be utter nonsense, but only *after* it is spoken aloud to someone who knows us well and loves us enough to point out the flaws in our thinking.

In ABA we have thus discovered the importance of sponsorship, and our basic text contains a lengthy section on this subject (pp 157-161). We urge every ABA member to study these pages in depth and discuss them with other members. Perhaps the most important statement in this section is on p 158: “*No one can take the Steps with any deep level of effectiveness unless she has a sponsor.*” In other words, a sponsor is vital to guide us through the 12 Steps. Most of us have discovered the truth of these words, sometimes by painful experience. And unless we do the Steps, our obsession with our bodies and with food is not removed, leaving us vulnerable to relapse.

### **3. Practical Aspects of Being a Sponsor**

There are a few basic principles involved in becoming a sponsor for another member. Here are the ones we see as most important:

- A sponsor should be *sober*. (For ABA’s definition of “sobriety,” see the ABA textbook pp 64-65.)
- A sponsor should *have an ABA sponsor* herself, for the reasons discussed above.
- A sponsor passes on her *personal experience* of ABA recovery, not theoretical knowledge acquired from a book.
- A sponsor should be *working the ABA 12-Step Program* herself; otherwise she will have no experience to share with her sponsee.
- A member will want to *pray and check in with her own sponsor* before agreeing to sponsor someone.
- A sponsor should be able to *be honest* with her sponsee. Sponsorship is a sacred trust. Lying, or withholding necessary truth, is a violation of that trust, and will cause harm. Honesty without compassion, however, is a tactic of our disease and will also cause harm.
- A sponsor should *hold in the highest confidence* what she hears from a sponsee. Careless repeating of what a sponsee has shared can destroy the bond of trust forever. The only exception to this is if the sponsor needs to consult her own sponsor about how to work with her sponsee in a particular matter; this exchange will, of course, remain confidential.
- A sponsor is simply a *vehicle for a Higher Power* to work through. Only the Higher Power can heal and restore us to sanity. So a sponsor can relax, pray, do her best, and trust God to do the *real* work in her sponsee.
- A sponsor is working with a sponsee *for her own benefit*, not because she thinks the sponsee “needs” her (even though she probably does!). In 12-Step recovery we learn that we need to “give our recovery away” if we want to keep it, so anyone who is willing to be our sponsee is doing us a favor.

In ABA we have learned that no one can recover without sobriety, so *the first job of a sponsor is checking whether her sponsee is sober in her eating and exercise*. If she is not yet sober, this assumes top priority. The sponsor gently but firmly comes back to this point again and again: “Are you willing to get sober—to

surrender all control over your food, exercise, body weight and shape to a Higher Power?” “Are you willing to go to any lengths for sobriety?” If the answer to either of these questions is “No,” then there is little that can be done except to pray for her. Most of us have learned that if a sponsee is not yet willing to get sober, we are wasting our time with her. Listening to an active anorexic or bulimic for any length of time is an exercise in futility and may leave us frustrated and angry. She may be in a blackout and have no memory of the conversation anyway. Better to take our leave, and to pray.

If, however, the sponsee is willing to get sober, then the sponsor can assist her by first encouraging her to be assessed by a physician and registered dietitian and then by brainstorming possibilities for meal-support. Almost nobody can get sober without full meal-support for at least the first few months. The options around this are virtually endless: family members, friends, neighbors, personal chefs, commercial meal-provision services, restaurants, treatment centers, frozen prepackaged meals, or some combination of these and other avenues. There are many suggestions in our textbook in Chapter 7, “Getting Sober” and in the document “Sobriety is Surrender: What Does *That* Mean?” which is available for free download on the ABA website. Both sponsor and sponsee will want to familiarize themselves with these materials.

Many people have special nutritional needs (e.g., their weight needs to increase or decrease, or they may have food allergies or medical conditions requiring special attention), so the sponsor should encourage her sponsee to seek professional assessment by her doctor and/or dietitian. *Any specific instructions about her dietary needs should be given directly from the dietitian to the meal-support helper, not to the sponsee herself.* Furthermore, it is rarely advisable for the sponsor to make suggestions about what her sponsee should eat, since the sponsor is often needed for *emotional* support as her sponsee seeks to surrender all control of her food to her Higher Power, working through the dietitian and her meal-support helper. Getting embroiled in suggestions about food itself often blurs the boundaries between meal-support helper and sponsor, and becomes a barricade to effective sponsorship.

Once the sponsee is sober, it’s important to encourage her to start working on the Steps immediately, starting with Step One. The sponsor will offer concrete suggestions for doing each Step based on her own experience of it, which will naturally emerge from the way she herself was sponsored. There are many published resources on the Steps; if the sponsor used one or more of these guidebooks, then she will probably suggest that her sponsee use it too. But remember we cannot pass on anything of real value except our own *experience* of the Steps, so it is best to rely on materials with which we are familiar. Some sponsors like to study with their sponsees our primary textbook, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, as well as the ABA text, often in conjunction with Step work.

It is usually helpful for sponsor and sponsee to work out a specific time for face-to-face or telephone contact each week, allowing enough time for a thorough check-in regarding her Step work and any challenges to sobriety that week. If it's not possible to set aside the same day and time each week (e.g., because of shift work), then a date can be made for the next week before ending the session each time. If unforeseen circumstances arise for either sponsor or sponsee, requiring a change in the date or time, it's important to contact the other person immediately, to avoid wasting her time.

#### **4. Practical Aspects of Being a Sponsee**

Acquiring a sponsor may seem like a formidable task, but it is really quite simple. Here are a few suggestions:

- The best way to find a sponsor is to *attend meetings and listen carefully* as different members share.
- A member can *ask her Higher Power* to bring to her attention the particular persons who might be a good “fit” to be her sponsor. Often these will be members who embody a quality of recovery that the new member hopes to attain herself.
- A potential sponsor needs to be *sober, have an ABA sponsor herself, and be working the 12 Steps*. These three basic qualifications often become apparent through her sharing during meetings. If uncertain, she can be directly asked these questions later on.
- A member can *approach a potential sponsor* after the meeting and ask her right then and there to be a sponsor, or she can ask for her phone number and call her later. Personal contact, at least through a phone call, is more respectful than text-messaging.
- If the first person(s) declines the request to be a sponsor, *it's important not to take this personally*. A negative response is usually due to a person's availability (either time-wise or emotionally at that point in her life). Just continue asking other members until someone is available.

Having found a sponsor, the primary responsibility of a sponsee is to be *honest* with her sponsor. To advance in recovery the sponsee needs to admit quickly to any relapses, and to be open about her thoughts and feelings. The ability to be honest will grow as the relationship unfolds and trust develops. Slowly, the sponsee feels more comfortable talking with her sponsor about things that could threaten her sobriety. In particular, significant life changes like marriage, breakups, moving house, job changes, economic setbacks, and parenting issues can be challenging. A sponsor is often helpful by listening and offering feedback based on her own experience of such things.

The sponsee needs to *be respectful* of her sponsor's time by calling at the time agreed upon and not later. A good sponsor will expect this of her sponsee and will model adult responsibility by being available at the appointed time, as well as by allowing her sponsee to make the call rather than chasing her down. Since we

recover only through *taking action* on our own behalf, the sponsee needs to practice doing this; if the sponsor were to reach out to her, it would deprive her of the opportunity to take action.

*Listening closely* to a sponsor's feedback is an important aspect of recovery. If she makes specific suggestions to the sponsee, it's a good idea to consider following them, rather than dismissing them out of hand. Remember, such suggestions come out of her own experience of recovery, so they might be useful actions for the sponsee to take if she "wants what the sponsor has." On the other hand, a sponsor cannot be the sponsee's Higher Power, so it is still necessary for the sponsee to pray about any suggestions made to her, to discern if they fit for her or not. If a suggestion doesn't seem to fit, the sponsee would do well to talk to her sponsor about that.

## **5. Long-Distance Sponsorship**

The practice of long-distance sponsorship originated in Alcoholics Anonymous in the early years of that Fellowship's existence. If AA was to spread beyond the confines of Akron, Ohio, and New York City (the twin nuclei of AA in its pioneering time), it was necessary to reach alcoholics living in other places. To get sober and stay sober, alcoholics needed both to hear the AA message and to receive support from sober people who were themselves supported by existing groups.

The essence of 12-Step recovery is "one drunk talking to another, sharing experience, strength and hope." When the Big Book was published in 1939, AA soon discovered that this communication process between drunks could occur through the printed word just as effectively as orally. The book found its way into the hands of alcoholics living throughout the U.S. and, within a few short years, internationally.

Newcomers to AA, however, needed more than the book if they were to get sober and stay sober. They needed ongoing personal support. Some of them traveled to Akron or New York and stayed for a time with sober people while they immersed themselves in AA meetings and in the 12 Steps. They then returned to their homes and started new meetings so that they, too, could begin carrying the message to other alcoholics (a critically important aspect of staying sober themselves). These folks continued to receive support for their recovery from sober people they had met, using letters and/or telephone contact.

In ABA we too have discovered that long-distance sponsorship works just as well as face-to-face sponsorship, provided that the same parameters discussed earlier are met (the sponsor is sober, has a sponsor, is working the Steps, etc).

To begin the process of finding a long-distance sponsor, it is often helpful to attend the ABA telephone or online meetings, make a note of the phone numbers of members who offer them, then call someone later and ask her about becoming

a sponsor. Some meetings have a specific time during the meeting when prospective sponsors are invited to offer their phone numbers for the newcomer. For other suggestions, consult the document “How to Find a Sponsor” on the ABA website.

The precise arrangements of long-distance sponsorship are worked out between sponsor and sponsee. Many sponsors wish to connect only by telephone because it allows greater intimacy than email or text-messaging. Others will encourage these more indirect methods of communication. The frequency of contact will also be worked out on an individual basis. Whatever arrangement is being used, the sponsee assumes responsibility for placing the call and pays the long-distance charges. There are many inexpensive options for doing this (phone cards, calling cards, phone apps, etc).

## **6. Terminating the Sponsor-Sponsee Relationship**

The process of sponsoring and being sponsored is a work-in-progress, without black-or-white answers. Both members are simply showing up and doing their best—and out of this entire sometimes messy business, a Higher Power blesses both of them with further spiritual growth.

Terminating the relationship at some point is often part of the process of sponsorship. In one sense, *all sponsorship is temporary*. When the arrangement is no longer allowing the sponsee to learn and to grow in her recovery, it is time to consider ending the arrangement and to look for a different sponsor. Here are a few examples of reasons to terminate:

- The sponsee finds she can no longer be honest with her sponsor.
- The sponsor repeatedly fails to be available at the appointed time.
- The sponsee keeps relapsing while working with a given sponsor.
- The sponsor has relapsed.

A sponsor may also resign from working with a sponsee for any one of a variety of reasons. Examples are:

- The sponsor notices she cannot be honest with the sponsee any longer.
- The sponsee repeatedly fails to show up or call at the time she committed to.
- The sponsee continues to relapse or insists on a definition of sobriety that is incompatible with the sponsor’s experience.
- The sponsor no longer has time available to do the job adequately.
- The sponsor herself has relapsed.

Whichever party is initiating the termination, be sure to act with courtesy and respect, without blaming or scolding. A sponsee could simply state that her needs are not being met at this time, that she needs to find a different sponsor. A sponsor could state that the arrangement is not working, that she believes she is no longer the right sponsor for her. Remember to thank her for working with you, for the time and effort she has put into the relationship, and to wish her well. If

the sponsor is resigning, she usually offers to continue working with her sponsee until she finds a new sponsor (the exception to this is if she is resigning because she herself has relapsed).

## 7. Common Pitfalls in Sponsorship

The sponsor-sponsee relationship is a vital and rewarding aspect of recovery for both people involved. Sometimes, of course, it will be a messy business because “all people, including ourselves, are to some extent emotionally ill as well as frequently wrong...” (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA*, p 92). Making mistakes and sometimes feeling hurt or angry, combined with working through these feelings and giving and receiving apologies, are part of the recovery process and provide excellent opportunities for practicing these much-needed life skills.

Here are a few examples of common pitfalls in the sponsorship process that afford opportunities for learning and growth:

- *The Myth of the “Perfect Sponsor”*: Members sometimes delay getting a sponsor because they are looking for one who seems perfectly suited for them. This is foolish, for two reasons. Firstly, rarely does anyone in early recovery actually know herself well enough to know what she needs. Secondly, there is no such thing as a perfect sponsor. There are only sober ABA members eager to share their experience, strength, and hope with newcomers in order to stay sober themselves. At some level, it doesn’t matter who sponsors whom, because it is the Higher Power who is doing the real work in both parties. All they have to do is show up and participate in the process.
- *The Sponsor Who Thinks She is God*: Sometimes ABA members think they have the answers for other people and feel hurt or angry if their sponsees don’t follow their suggestions. They may also “take it personally” if their sponsee relapses. This is all simply evidence of the sponsor’s residual self-centeredness. She too is always in need of further healing.
- *The Bosom-Buddy Sponsor*: Sometimes a sponsee will expect her sponsor to become her friend, or she will ask a close friend in ABA to become her sponsor. This is rarely a good idea, because the parameters of friendship are quite different from those of sponsorship. For example, a good sponsor is willing to give feedback—based, of course, on her own experience—that the sponsee might not like hearing. A close friend is less likely to take the risk of giving such responses, out of fear of damaging the friendship. Furthermore, a friend may be so close to the sponsee’s situation that she doesn’t even notice thinking and behaviors that the sponsee needs to have pointed out to her.
- *The Sponsor Who Wants to be a Mother*: Occasionally a sponsor will behave like a controlling or overprotective mother, hovering over her sponsee and blurring the boundaries between them. She may try to shelter her sponsee from difficulties that she needs to go through in order to grow.
- *The Sponsor Who Thinks She’s a Therapist*: A sponsor may take it upon herself to offer psychological explanations for challenges her sponsee encounters in her thinking or feelings. Or she may offer opinions about what

medication she thinks her sponsee should take, or what medical investigations or psychotherapy she thinks her sponsee should engage in. All such matters are best left to professionals. They are “outside issues” that have nothing to do with sponsorship. They are not a sponsor’s business.

- *The Sponsee Who Flits Around*: Sometimes a sponsee will have trouble committing herself to the ABA approach or to the work of recovery. She may attend other Fellowships that deal with eating disorders using a conceptual framework different from ABA’s. This could be an indication that the newcomer is not yet ready to make the radical surrender of all control over food, exercise, weight, and shape that will allow her to be sober in ABA. She might even argue with her sponsor about whether such a surrender is necessary in her case. (Such a viewpoint is often termed “terminal uniqueness”!) In such a case, her sponsor may encourage her to go ahead and try other approaches, wishing her well and inviting her to come back if other recovery paths don’t work for her. As the ABA text states, “We do not believe that we have a monopoly on the path to recovery from...anorexia and bulimia” (p xvi). Nevertheless, the sponsor in this case will probably let the sponsee go, since she is wasting time and effort that could be better spent sponsoring a member who is fully committed to ABA.
- *Developing a Resentment Towards a Sponsor*: This is a common problem for most ABA members, especially in early recovery when a sponsee has little experience in identifying that she even *has* resentments, let alone practice in owning them and dealing with them through Steps 4 and 5. Most often, the sponsee blames her sponsor for wronging her somehow, and may see herself as an innocent victim or feel misunderstood. This can be an exquisitely painful situation. The best approach is to be honest with the sponsor, as respectfully as possible, and see how she responds. An emotionally mature sponsor will listen calmly and not take this personally or get defensive, but will thank the sponsee for her openness, indicate her understanding of how difficult resentments can be, and offer concrete suggestions for dealing with these feelings, based on her own experience. Alternatively, if the sponsee has a second sponsor in a different Fellowship, it may be helpful to first talk to her about the resentment. Her more objective viewpoint could help the sponsee work through her resentment.

Maintaining a sense of humor about all of this is helpful, and the ability to laugh at ourselves is a sign that we are becoming emotionally and spiritually healthy. Once we can laugh, we know that a Higher Power is restoring us to sanity, because sane people don’t take themselves too seriously and can see how very funny all of us human beings are as we fumble about in our attempts to get along with one another.