

Arizona Sponsorship Workshop

Saturday, December 21, 2019

Segment One – Purpose and Responsibilities of a Sponsor: Thursday December 5, 7-8:30 pm and Saturday December 21, 10-11:30am

- Resources available to me (CAL, the example of my own sponsor)
- How much available time do I have to commit?
- What does a sponsor do/not do?
- Providing guidance vs. giving advice
- The first meeting: how do we decide if this might be a good match?
- Establishing a relationship-expressing expectations and boundaries, understanding the needs of a sponsee

Statement of Purpose:

We asked: “How can we support members by making healthy sponsorship more accessible and less mysterious to all members and to new sponsors?”

Newcomers and other members often feel anxiety and confusion about sponsorship. Reliable, flexible, sponsorship has a direct effect on regular participation, effective recovery, service, and retention of members. Sponsored members sponsor others sooner. Sponsors help us better understand the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts, and they teach us application of the spiritual principles ourselves. Solid sponsorship is the key to a flourishing fellowship. It conquers many challenges we face, both individually and collectively.

Suggested Preamble to The Twelve Steps:

The Al-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. We believe alcoholism is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery. Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination, political entity, organization, or institution; does not engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any cause. There are no dues for membership. Al-Anon is self-supporting through its own voluntary contributions.

Al-Anon has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps, by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics, and by giving understanding and encouragement to the alcoholic.

Tanya:

I'd like to thank the Area for giving me this opportunity to serve. I have been able to be on a few of the sponsorship workshops, and I have found them to be helpful and have left with a feeling of connectedness. It's exciting that we're able to do this on Zoom and also that we're

coming from all over the state of Arizona. I know we have people from a couple of other states here today and am feeling honored to be a part of this process.

When I came into the program and they said to me that I could get a sponsor and I thought that was an awesome deal. I was very excited and got a sponsor right away -- a temporary sponsor. I'm grateful that someone told me to find a temporary sponsor. She and I worked together for just a few months before I got my first longtime sponsor, and I have had four long-term sponsors. Sometimes things change and we need to change sponsors. One of the reasons I changed sponsors was because I moved out of state. Now the sponsor I've worked with currently for quite a long time doesn't live near me half of the year and Zoom and Skype make meeting possible.

There are probably as many ways to sponsor as there are relationships. I have two sponsors currently, because I recently decided to get a service sponsor. Even in the short time I've had a service sponsor it has evolved and I'm learning a lot from my two sponsors. With the people that I sponsor, each of those relationships is different. So with that brief little history of my experience with sponsorship, I wanted to look at some of the questions that were listed under segment one.

The first point was to talk about resources available to us as sponsors and people who are being sponsored. The literature is a resource that I use for myself in my recovery. As a sponsee and as a sponsor, the meetings are an excellent resource for me. My own sponsor can help me when I am sponsoring someone else. For me, the greatest resource is my Higher Power, because that relationship is available to me 24/7. I strive to remember to be aware of that relationship before I'm talking with someone as a sponsor or someone being sponsored. That has been my greatest resource.

The next question was how much available time do I have to commit? For me, this really changes. My schedule is not a typical schedule where I work a job from a certain time to a certain time. It is always changing, and so the time that I have available also changes. I'm really clear about that with people who asked me to be their sponsor and also in my relationship with my sponsor. Open and consistent communication has allowed us to talk on an ongoing basis, whether that's week to week or month to month, about how it's going to look for us.

For me in my relationship both as a sponsee and a sponsor, consistency is an important thing. I like to do what I call BAM BAM -- Book a meeting from a meeting. So, I may not meet with my sponsor or the person I was sponsoring every Wednesday, for example. Maybe we do that for a while and then it has to change, but either way we set up at our next meeting at the meeting we're at. If we cannot set it up then, we text with each other and find out what's going to work for both of us.

The next question was providing guidance versus giving advice. To me, this is a basic principle of our program. I think it said this in the reading from the bookmark.. It talked about listening. As a sponsor, I think that is one of my primary things is to be someone who can listen and be non-

judgmental and who can be unconditionally loving. When I think of the difference between giving guidance versus giving advice, I think of my role as a sponsor as someone who can share equally with the other person from my experience, strength, and hope. Sometimes I'm sharing the struggles that I've had and how I've overcome them. Sometimes I'm sharing the most recent reading that is helping me. Sometimes I'm sharing what my spiritual principle is that I'm working on currently. But mostly, I feel that if I'm asked a question, my role is to take the question as I would for myself, to ask my Higher Power to guide me, and to share with the person in their relationship with *their* Higher Power. I remind them that their answers come from within them and in their conscious contact with their Higher Power.

How do we decide if this might be a good match when someone asks me if I will be their sponsor? I like to refer to the literature and specifically our sponsorship bookmark. I encourage them to look at that pamphlet or we could read it together, discuss it. We talk about what they are looking for in a sponsor. I will share what works for me as a sponsor. There's a couple of things that I have found over time that work for me. One is consistency, and that consistency can be defined between myself and the other person. It isn't the same in every sponsorship relationship that I have. The other thing is that that person and I are both attending meetings. They don't have to be the same meeting. A lot of times they'll say to me that they don't know which, of course, is a totally valid response. Typically I'll ask them if they'd like to take some time to talk with their Higher Power about it, ask some other people, and see if they can come up with an idea of what might work for them. We can meet in a sponsorship relationship for a month or maybe two months -- whatever works for us -- and check back in with each other. I also like to check back in with my sponsors. I find that checking back with each other after that first meeting thirty, sixty, or ninety days later helps us to say okay this is what's working. This is maybe something we'd like to change a little bit. As the sponsorship bookmark says, we grow when we're in Al-Anon and so our relationship may need to change. Maybe we change and we aren't in the sponsorship relationship anymore, but maybe the relationship changes and we continue in a different way.

There is a questions about establishing a relationship, expressing expectations and boundaries, and understanding the needs of a sponsee. One of the sponsors I have right now says that expressing boundaries is a physical thing for her, and she likes to think of it in a spiritual nature. I can't say I totally get it. That's why I have a sponsor. I can keep talking to her about it. What I'm learning is to have more conscious contact with my Higher Power when it comes to things like boundaries and expectations. I read recently in some of our Conference Approved Literature about boundaries and what I took away from it is that when I have a boundary, it's not so much about trying to change or control the other person as it is about knowing what my limits are.

As in all service work, sponsorship is another service opportunity. I am going to have the opportunity to grow. I am going to have the opportunity to learn more about expectations and boundaries. For me, understanding the needs of a sponsee is really an ongoing growth

experience or journey. I am continuing to be in connection with my sponsor, continuing to have communication with the people that I sponsor, and, most of all, having conscious contact with my Higher Power and asking for guidance. How am I going to work this? What kind of boundary do I need to set? What are the limits that I have in this situation? As far as understanding the needs of the sponsor to me, that is really about communication. In my experience at this point, each sponsee has different needs. Of course, sometimes there are similarities, similar tools that we're using, but for me, it's a process. It's something that I'm learning about as the journey goes along.

I'm excited to hear the other speakers and to hear what the questions are today. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

Gene

The first point is sponsorship purpose and responsibilities of a sponsor. When I went into my first meeting, they suggested I get a sponsor. Being so desperate, I did exactly what I was told. I listened, I paid attention, and I heard somebody that I thought was amazing. It took me a few meetings to get the courage to speak to that person -- I was literally shaking.

I look at the question about the first meeting and how we decided if this might be a good match. He has been the example. He suggested to get together for coffee so we did. He asked me a little bit about my story. He shared a little bit about his story. He shared a little bit about literature and talked about resources available to me and I asked how it works, what I needed to do, what *he* needed to do, how the Steps went, etc. That's where I first learned about literature. He made suggestions -- *One Day At a Time, Paths to Recovery, Courage to Change*. That's how I got my start, and I have found that many people I work with are in the same boat.

I was not aware that we had so much literature. One of my regular meetings I go to is a literature meeting. I'll never forget the first time I walked in the room and I saw that literature on the table. I said, "Oh, my God, there's a ton of stuff!" There are so many resources. I'm still learning every day how much we have. How do we decide who we want to work with? I knew immediately when I met with my sponsor. I just felt so good.

I have a service sponsor. I got into service and, of course, I like following instructions, so I followed the advice of those who said if you're going to do service, you should get a service sponsor. I said, Okay, now who? What do I do? It was funny. I thought of somebody and that person who I was thinking of came to my meeting and I've never seen that person in that meeting ever. When I said hello, I paused. It was the probably the weirdest communication I've ever had with anybody. It was baffling. I called that person the next morning and I said, "You probably thought I was pretty weird last meeting." And the person said, "Well, yeah." I explained the story that I was looking for a service sponsor, you were on my mind and then you appeared. God guides.

I have to remember part of this selection process is bringing in my Higher Power. My Higher Power spoke loud and clear. I have to remember that when somebody asks me. I talked to my sponsor a couple of weeks ago, and I said the diversity of people that I'm working with is amazing. What is God doing? He's helping them, and he's helping me. I remember that I'm part of something greater and that I get to participate with others.

How much time do I commit to that participation? I meet some people twice a week, I meet some people once a week, and I meet some people every second week. I get calls from a couple of sponsees on a regular basis. Others save it all up for when we meet once a week. I look at principles of flexibility, patience, and tolerance. It's mutual. I learn how to be a sponsor and work with a sponsor involves the principle of mutuality. Together we make decisions. We get to learn, to talk, to reason things out. Part of that is how much time do I need? How much flexibility do I have? I remember early in the program I called my sponsor, and I said, "I need to talk, and we can schedule a time next week." He says, "Well, we can talk in 20 minutes," I could not believe the demonstration of flexibility and love. That is an example I want to pass on to others. One of the benefits of being a sponsor and having a sponsor is that I get to learn to love unconditionally. I get to learn to trust somebody. That availability of time is different for everybody as we establish different relationships.

What does the sponsor do or not do? I look at relationship, mutuality, and how we work together to do things. One of the things I try to do the most is listen. I try not to give advice. I work to focus in on the principles, focusing in on their needs.

Steps, Traditions and Concepts and all available literature that we have are valuable. With sponsees, we work with certain literature. With my sponsor, I work with different literature. I want to make sure that I stick with the CAL (Conference Approved Literature). I want to make sure it's Al-Anon and reach out for help when I need help when I'm working with somebody.

This leads to the next topic of providing guidance versus giving advice. My sponsor says try to focus on just sharing your experience, strength, and hope. I am reminded to be aware of what my motives are when I share my experience, strength, and hope with a sponsee. I think it can be very easy for me to give advice in a way of sharing with them so I need to look at myself. I have to be honest with myself. There are moments where I am motivated to share my experience, strength, and hope because I have an Aha! moment. That is such a beautiful part of that sharing and the relationship between sponsee and sponsor. I get so much out of it. I have seen tears, I have seen laughter, I have seen joy, and I've seen just such a spark within me when that happens. I'm not giving any advice; I'm just sharing my own growth and experience that I've gained from working with somebody else. That is such a powerful thing for me. So, when I look at guidance versus advice, the best thing I can do is to listen, pay attention, and share a part of me if I can.

I'm reminded in this whole relationship that God is infinite. God brings us together for different reasons that I cannot imagine. For that, I'm very grateful. When I was working with a sponsee, I

figure that has God brought us together because I need to learn more about this too. Well, I could go on forever on this, but I'll pass. Thanks.

Sue

I'm a very grateful member of Al-Anon, and I want to thank you for putting this together. This is just an amazing thing to be able to connect with our technology. I'm just so inspired.

My journey in the sponsor-ponsee relationship has been interesting. When I first started out in Al-Anon meetings, I kept hearing about finding a sponsor and having that special one-on-one connection with someone. Because of my family disease of alcoholism, the last thing I wanted was somebody getting close to me because I lived in isolation for so long. That kind of a relationship was very intimidating and scary for me, and I didn't share about it too much in meetings. I just kept listening and was very reserved. I would identify and hear people talking about how they did it. I realized that, at least for me, I needed to start with my relationship with myself just a little bit before I could expose myself to another person.

It took me a while, and I realized over the years that I might not be the only person that thinks that way. I started looking at some of our rich Conference Approved Literature, and I picked up *How Al-Anon Works*. I was trying to understand this sponsorship process because I just wasn't getting it. Most of it was because I didn't feel worthy of someone being willing to be my sponsor. Then all those attitudes that come with it-- feeling like I've got too much for somebody else to be able to handle or wondering if someone would be able to help me. If I can't help myself, how can somebody else do it? When I saw the chapter in *How Al-anon Works* on breaking our isolation, that's when I started thinking about sponsorship! I looked at it again this morning just as a reminder because this is a program of repetition, at least for this Al-Anon member. I need to be constantly reminded that I am so overqualified for this seat in our meetings.

I have to keep coming back because the more I do, the more I learn about myself and my relationship with my Higher Power. My sponsor was the person that was the conduit for that. The resources for me has always been our literature and all of the members that are in the Al-Anon meetings that share about their own trials and tribulations about sponsorship.

How do I do sponsorship? How do I know I'm ready? Today I see people coming into Al-Anon for the very first time and they're at their first or second meeting and they're thinking, "Oh, I'm ready to find my sponsor, work on all these Steps, and do all these things." I have to laugh to myself because I kind of thought a little bit like that too. By the same token, I knew there was no way I was ever really going to get it all at once. It does take time and I need to give it time because giving it time today is about living in the solution and not living in the problem.

I finally got to that point where I was able to relate to someone. My Higher Power has a wonderful way of leading me and guiding me exactly where I need to go because I kept finding

myself in meetings and hearing this one particular person. Her story was just so much like my own. She had a spouse in recovery. She started in Al-Anon after her spouse started in AA. She had two boys that she was raising using the principles of this program and would bribe her boys to go to Alateen meetings. These are all the things that I was just starting to do. It seemed like everywhere I went, I was hearing this person. I didn't even realize that she lived only three blocks from where I was living at the time.

I finally got up the courage to ask her to be my sponsor and she accepted. We both sat there in the car crying because my thing was getting up the courage to ask. Her thing was waiting for me to ask her because she knew that she was the one for me. This was the person that I was able to do my Fourth Step with and to work through the Steps with. She was the person that showed me how to do all of these things that are part of these questions.

The next point is how much time do I have to commit? We learned as we went along. We had to be respectful because we both had full time jobs. By then her children were in their late teens and in their 20s. My kids were just coming up in all those things. We just did it as best we could. She was honest, and she told me if there were times that she wasn't available. She says it wasn't about not being available for me. It was that if I needed something, I should call. I had to be responsible and ask for what it is I needed. If I just called it a check in and say, "Hey, it's just me. I'm calling to check in," that's fine, but if I needed something, I needed to tell her because she couldn't figure it out for me if I didn't tell her. Then we could try to do things and figure them out together and that's exactly how we did it.

She never told me what to do or when to do it or why to do it, but she shared with me *how* she did it. It was up to me to take what I liked and leave the rest. I was so grateful for that. The last thing I wanted was someone else telling me what to do, how to do it, and why to do it because that's how I lived my whole life before coming into Al-Anon. I didn't want and think a sponsor had that type of authority. That relationship taught me about that.

We were able to meet sometimes over meals and sometimes after a meeting. Again, all these foundations were things I needed in order for me to be able to be a sponsor one day. It took time working through the only real workbook we had which was the original *Blueprint for Progress*. I remember looking at that book the very first time thinking, "Oh, I don't really want to answer all those questions. That's scary!"

We went through every one of those questions. By the time we were done, it literally took nine months of just meeting and talking and answering questions. I said, "Look at that. It took us nine months. That's how long it takes to have a baby!" It felt like I had been reborn. It was the first time that I started really feeling my feelings and understanding what it was that was going on in my life that was directly related to the family disease of alcoholism and to have a better understanding of myself. I needed to practice these Al-Anon principles and to apply these in my life, not just for me personally, but with my family members -- my immediate family, my children, the relationship I had with my parents. None of those people, other than my husband,

were in recovery. I thought that because I was an Al-Anon member, my children were going to get this by osmosis and that they were not affected by the family disease of alcoholism. I had a lot of rethinking that I needed to do as a sponsee.

Then someone asked me to be their sponsor! I was taken aback. I didn't expect it at all. I thought the person that asked me to be their sponsor already had a sponsor, but they never did. I just worked with that person the way my sponsor worked with me. It's how everything works in this Al-Anon program. We can't give it away if we don't have it.

It was an interesting process. We had the big *Blueprint for Progress* that was out and the different kinds of questions that were in there. I said the same thing to this person -- that there's no beginning, middle, and end. This is a process because recovery is a process. It's a journey not a destination. It's something that we're never going to finish doing. We're constantly going to understand things about ourselves as we grow. When you get to a point where we feel we've gone as far as we can go, then you move on to the next step of your life.

It's not anything that I take personally because I can't own this as a relationship. It's not that kind of a thing. It's been interesting to see how the sponsor/ sponsee relationship has really helped in my relationships with others such as family members, coworkers, and colleagues. Even in those situations, I don't necessarily tell people what to do or how to do it. Even as a supervisor or an administrator, I try to do things by modeling behavior and by making suggestions. I say, "You might want to try this." Some people just don't want to try it! Some people are comfortable stuck in whatever they're stuck in, and that's okay. I don't have to be stuck! That's what this relationship has taught me. It taught me to listen and it taught me to think. It taught me to be careful about how I say things. I would not want anything to be misconstrued as a directive or a judgement because that's how I lived my whole life.

It's different for each person but I have found that the spiritual principles are the common bond. It always brings me right back to that. Just because I'm a sponsor, I'm not any better than anybody else. Just because I'm a sponsee doesn't mean I'm less than. This is a fellowship of equals, and I have to be able to really abide by that if I'm going to take on that responsibility of being a sponsor. Being a sponsor is a service position. When I perform service at the local or the area level, my whole Area World Service Committee is my service sponsor. These are my resources. These are my go-to people. When I got involved in service, I didn't know what all of these terms meant. What is a guideline? What is a task force? What is a thought force and why do we have to do it like this? Why can't we use things like Robert's Rules of Order? I brought to Al-Anon what I thought I knew. I had no understanding that Al-Anon has its own way of right-sizing itself. It has its own way of conducting various activities and conducting business. It is the Al-Anon way of conducting business that has made such a real big difference in my life.

As a sponsor, I utilize my resources. I can't be a sponsor if I don't go to meetings. I can't be a sponsor if I'm talking to a sponsee who is not going to meetings. If there is one ground rule, that's it. You have to go to meetings if you want me to sponsor you because I can't give you my

program of recovery. I have run into people that want to try to do it that way. I'll be the first one to put the stop on a sponsor/sponsee relationship and say, "I strongly suggest that you just go to meetings for a while and get this program under your feet and into your heart a little bit. Then you can figure out how you want to work the Steps and how you want to do your Fourth Step. When that time comes, I'm sure your Higher Power is going to put the right person in your path that's going to help you do that. The same way that happened for me."

Because of this family disease of alcoholism, I have to be careful because I can get lost sometimes in relationships with other Al-Anon members or even get lost in doing service and not keeping a balance. I have learned how to establish boundaries in the sponsor/ sponsee relationship, and I'm so appreciative of that. It's because my sponsor modelled that for me. If she wasn't available to talk for whatever reason, she would say I'm not available. She also encouraged me to try calling other people. She was not the only person that I could talk to. There were other people in our fellowship that I could talk to and I needed to broaden that network so that I didn't ever feel that I couldn't handle a situation because she wasn't there to talk to. I have shared the same with sponsees.

The only thing that I don't do as a sponsor is tell anybody what to do. I don't tell anybody how to work their program other than they have to go to meetings. If we can get together, it's nice to meet face-to-face. If we cannot, that's okay. We can always meet on the phone. We can always talk. We can always send a text message and ask if we can talk later.

If I'm going to take the risk of having that first meeting, it's because I already feel it in my heart and in my spirit that it's a match. I know based on how I identify with somebody as they share in the meeting, because that's where we're always going to hear each other. It's an amazing thing to see other people connect the dots. You can feel it in a meeting when we're talking about a particular topic and then are able to talk afterwards and chat more. It makes me realize that these are the dots they're connecting! Oh, this is how I understand what spirituality means! Oh, this is what I understand what meditation is now! It's not that I have to sit and go "MMM" in silence. Meditation is for me is just making that conscious connection to my Higher Power in any way shape or form, whether it's reading a piece of Al-Anon literature, reading my page of the day, or whatever it is I need to do, I encourage my sponsees to do the exact same thing.

We get into the literature. There is a phrase that I've said for many years. You can't mix the milk with the magnesia. Even though there is a lot of self-help literature out there, I stick to Al-Anon because otherwise I get confused by bringing all of this outside stuff. There are all different kinds of things that can help me in my journey in recovery but I find that what helps me the most is just reading Al-Anon literature. When I can, I go to open AA meetings because it's important for me to understand what the alcoholic goes through too. I encourage my sponsees to do the same thing, whether it's going to an anniversary meeting or going to an Al-Anon meeting where we're going to have Al-Anon, Alateen, and AA speakers so that we can understand what it's like. That's where it helps me understand that the only difference between

the alcoholic and me is that they have a compulsion to drink. My compulsion is the alcoholic -- what they're doing, why are they doing it, and when they're doing it. I wonder if they're going to stop, how come, and if only. I have to constantly be on my program because I can so get easily sucked into all of those "isms" and behaviors.

Having that confidential, private, and special sponsor- to-sponsee relationship became so pivotal in my recovery. It helped me, as it says in Chapter Seven in *How Al-Anon Works*, about breaking that isolation, knowing that other people are going through similar things I am. And that I am still going through things, just like you are as the sponsor to the sponsee. It's a wonderful opportunity for my own personal growth and recovery. I'm grateful that I can share that with another person who is struggling and trying to do the best they can for themselves, having been affected by this family disease of alcoholism. I am also grateful for the opportunity to see them be able to pay it forward and to really practice this whole concept. There are no rules here. There is no right or wrong way to do it. It's about sometimes going feet first and saying, "Okay, I'm ready!" Once I'm ready, my teachers appear.

I want to thank you all for being here for the roles that you play in your sponsor and sponsee relationships and for your commitment to Al-Anon and our program. Thanks for letting me share.

Questions:

Question: How often do you meet with sponsees and how often do they generally call you?

Panelist share (Tanya):

I generally meet with the people that I sponsor once a week, but that is different for each person. Sometimes it's every other week, and sometimes it's longer than that. It depends on the situation. Usually my sponsees call me just when we have made the plan to call, but I always encourage them to call me when they need to and sometimes they do.

Question: If a sponsee talks about outside issues at a meeting or when at the podium, how do you handle it?

Panelist share (Gene):

It's different if a sponsee does that versus another member. Quite often when I meet with the sponsee in our one-on-one meetings, we talk about sharing. In the service manual, it describes the benefits of sharing at a meeting, and the benefits of working with a sponsor for all your private issues. Page 39 in the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* talks about benefits of sharing at the meeting and how to share in a meeting. I like to review that with them and feel that clarifies it a lot. I know one-on-one issues come up and that's part of life and I appreciate that.

When it happens at a meeting, I don't want to embarrass anybody. We're all there for a reason to help each other and support each other. So after a meeting then I would maybe step in and encourage them, thank them for speaking, and then go ahead and review that again with them if we haven't had a chance to do that.

Question: Is there ever a situation where you would give a sponsee direct guidance without her requesting?

Panelist response (Sue): Honestly, the only time I would give direct guidance is if someone is in physical danger. It has come up in different meetings that I have attended. I have not had that instance where I have had to do that, but only when someone has been confronted with physical violence is the only time I will say that you need to do something and get out. That's really the only time.

Question: Thank you. All right, this is for all three speakers. It's an interesting question. Do you ever court a potential sponsee? Do you ever tell anyone else that you'll sponsor them without them asking?

Panelist response (Tanya): I'll speak to that. My answer is no.

Panelist response (Sue): No. No, I wouldn't. I don't.

Panelist response (Gene): I do not do that either.

Question: I would love to hear a brief reason for why you don't do that.

Panelist response (Sue): For me, I think that Al-Anon is a program that unfolds lovingly. It won't unfold lovingly if I intrude and say, "I'll be your sponsor because you need me." It's not very humble for me to think that I need to be someone's sponsor.

Question: What if your sponsee does not have a spiritual connection. How do you handle that?

Panelist response (Tanya): If I'm understanding the question correctly, it would be what if they don't have their own Higher Power or a relationship with own Higher Power. I can't say that I've ever had that happen. In the first meeting, if not right in the first couple of meetings, we have a talk about what their relationship is with their higher power. If they express to me that they are having some challenges with that and they're feeling disconnected, I'll share some of my experience, strength, and hope. I have had times when I felt really connected to my Higher Power and other times when I did not -- when I actually have felt like there is no such thing as a Higher Power. I'll share that experience with them and also refer to the literature.

Question: How do you encourage sponsees to get deeper into the conference approved literature?

Panelist response (Gene):

Listening to the previous question and to this question, I really do think attraction makes a big difference if a sponsee would get attracted to me because they like the spirituality they see. When I look at how do they get deeply in the Conference Approved Literature, I try to set an example. I read it, I refer to it, I look at it. Many times, I read something and share what I read. I think that the enthusiasm that I have for the literature hopefully transfers into the person that I'm working with to have that same enthusiasm.

Question: Have you ever worked with a sponsee who had trouble feeling their feelings and how did you handle that?

Panelist response (Sue): Oh, I have worked with a sponsee that has had problems feeling their feelings. All I have said to this person is to keep coming back. Keep going to meetings, referring to different passages in the literature that sometimes we'll read together. I think in *Reaching for Personal Freedom* workbook, there's also a chapter in there about feelings. Sometimes we'll go over the same question over and over because every day is a new day when you're in Al-Anon. What you can experience today isn't necessarily what you'll experience the next time you read that same question. How many times have I read the page of the day and my daily reader knowing that I've read this page in the past, but for some reason it says something different?

In the situation where this sponsee was having difficulty feeling those feelings, the only thing we talked about was the possibility of maybe seeking outside professional help. That was that person's idea and they asked me what I thought about it. Whatever you think is going to help you, then that's what you need to do. That's how I handled that particular situation.

Moderator: Terry T. has volunteered to speak for a couple minutes on the topic.

Terry: Like Sue, I'm extremely grateful to Arizona for offering this sponsorship workshop. I briefly wanted to share my experience with getting a sponsor because someone asked the question about courting a sponsee. I was new in the program, very broken and very shy. I had been going to meetings for about six months, and there was a woman who really spoke to me that I wanted to ask to be my sponsor, but I was much too shy to do that. After the meeting we were briefly talking, and she just looked at me and asked, "Do you have a sponsor yet?" And I said no. I was expecting she is going to ask me if I want her to be my sponsor, but she just looked at me and didn't say a word. That did give me the opportunity to be brave enough to ask for her to be my sponsor and it changed my life.

I wanted to speak about the spiritual principles of the program and how I bring those in when I do sponsor members. Being an open-minded listener is so important in reflecting back what I hear. To me, that is just a huge lesson in respect and being non-judgmental. It gives me the opportunity to practice letting go of being judgmental. I grew up in a very judgmental environment; I lived for many years with a lot of judgment. I found that making a commitment, especially when I first came into the program, seemed terribly scary. It's very helpful to reiterate when I do have a new sponsee or when I'm talking about sponsorship in a meeting to let people know it's not a lifelong commitment. Commitment is a responsibility, and that's one of the things we are trying to learn is healthy responsibilities.

Living with alcoholism, I was overly responsible about the wrong things. This gives me an opportunity to take on responsibility but in a healthy way. It helps me look at my boundaries -- how much time we have, how much commitment, and to look at the commitment as not being forever. It's okay for your relationship to end, and that was a hard thing for me to learn because my character trait of loyalty has jumped the fence many times by being way too loyal. I have stayed in relationships much too long.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share in this.

Question: What has being a sponsor taught you about yourself?

Panelist response (Tanya): One of the things that being a sponsor has taught me about myself is that I still have a lot of space to grow and that I don't have the answers. When I started sponsoring, I was really scared because I thought I had to have the answers. I learned that I don't have to have the answers, but I do have a wealth of literature and people to support me.

JP: Surprisingly, one of the things that I learned being a sponsor is to be gentler with myself. When I find that I'm starting to beat up on myself, I now say, "But what if a sponsee came to you with this situation. How would you respond?" I would respond lovingly to him and be non-judgmental. I have learned that in many situations I can step back and try to be a sponsor to myself. Thank you.

Panelist response (Gene): One of the beautiful gifts is that I get to learn to love differently. Each relationship has helped me grow in ways I cannot imagine. A lot of that is how to be supportive, how to love, and how to be vulnerable.

Question: I have a sponsee who attends a pyramid sponsorship meeting. She wants me to tell her if she should stop going there. I have told her about discussions on pyramid sponsorship and my own personal experience, but I don't direct her. Do you have any thoughts?

Panelist response (Sue):

Earlier I said Al-Anon is going to be what our Al-Anon members make it to be. I am doing the best I can to follow an Al-Anon program as it is outlined in conference approved literature.

I cannot direct anybody how to do their program. As crazy as that sounds, it's like telling the alcoholic to stop drinking and go to AA. I cannot direct anyone how to work on this program of recovery. All I can do is tell them how I do it. This is what I read. These are the meetings that I go to, and you're more than welcome to join me to understand what the difference is. If you want to know if something is Al-Anon or not, look it up in our literature because when I look up pyramid sponsorship, I don't see it anywhere. When I look up things like cross talk, I don't see it anywhere. That tells me that it's not Al-Anon in some way, shape, or form. In this way, I'm doing my best to work an Al-Anon program.

Someone mentioned an expectation. I expect a sponsee to work an Al-Anon program. I'm surprised that someone who goes to a pyramid sponsorship meeting even has an Al-Anon sponsor outside of that. That might be an indication that the person is questioning and wondering. It's important for my recovery that I go to different meetings and don't just go to the same meetings all the time. It's important to branch out and that may be just another suggestion that you can give to a sponsee.

Question: What is pyramid sponsorship?

Panelist response (Sue):

Depends on who you talk to and where you live because some of these things are very regional. My understanding of pyramid sponsorship where I lived in New York was that you go to a meeting where someone tells you that they are your sponsor, and that sponsor has a sponsor that shares all of your information with that person, which in and of itself violates all of my understanding of this special sponsor/sponsee relationship. That's my understanding of pyramid sponsorship, that my information that I share with the sponsor that sponsor shares with her sponsor and that her sponsor is like my grand sponsor. The minute I heard that I just went in the opposite direction. I don't want any part of that kind of stuff because that to me was no different than my family. There was no sense of confidentiality, even in my family of origin. I told something to my mom. My mom told her mom. Her mom told her sisters, and by the time the other people got the story you know it was so distorted. It had no semblance of what I said or what my concern was. Why would I want to do that?

Moderator: Maureen B. is going to talk for a couple minutes on the topic. Thank you, Maureen.

Maureen: I'm Maureen and a grateful member of Al-Anon Family Groups. The question was asked about what I've learned from being a sponsor or having a sponsor, and that's what I was going to share on. I have learned so much about having a relationship, period. I didn't have that growing up. I did not learn how to have a good relationship, one that's healthy. I didn't learn how to give and take. It was always a take, take, take kind of thing. Having a sponsor has helped me to learn how to have a relationship, and that's what I try and do with my sponsees and with

my sponsor. It's not necessarily doing things outside of the Al-Anon program or out of the sponsor and sponsee relationship, but just being able to be open, honest, and share my experience, strength, and hope and listen to what they have to say. I loved everything everybody had to say today, and I've been learning a lot from these workshops.

As far as sponsors, I've had two sponsors in my recovery. The first one I worked through the Fourth Step with and after that, I just quit talking to her. I was still new in the program and didn't know that it would be worthwhile to my recovery to be able to say something to her about that relationship. At any rate, the next time I got a new sponsor was when I was asked to be on a panel, and I was sharing about my sponsor. Afterwards I was mingling with everybody and this gal approached me. She said, "It sounds to me like you need a new sponsor," and I just said, "Would you be my sponsor?" At this point I was working and lived 45 miles from the nearest meeting. I was restricted to what meeting I attended and didn't know a lot of people.

She's been my sponsor ever since. She does a lot of service work and I have learned a lot from her. We've done the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts and that's what I try and do with my sponsees. So far, I've only gotten through Concepts with one of them. It's not my program, and I'm just there to share my experience, strength, and hope to guide them.

My sponsor now lives on the East Coast. We had a little problem with this silly time change. We have worked through that and that seems to be going fairly well. I usually talk to her every week. She knows every little detail there is to know about me, and I still get so much recovery from her. When I have a question or a sponsee asks me a question I can't answer, I definitely reach out to her. Then I can share with my sponsees what her experience, strength, and hope has been.

I love what was said about the literature and also about having a support group. I do try and encourage sponsees, particularly the new sponsees I get, to make those phone calls and have other people on their support system in Al-Anon. I also encourage them to make those phone calls when they are *not* in crisis, because it's easier to pick up the phone when having a good day, did today's reading, and so on.

Thank you so much for asking me.

Question: I'm still struggling with the difference between guidance and advice.

Panelist response (Tanya): To me, giving advice is telling someone what to do, how they should do it, or why they should do it. To say, "I think that you should..." is giving advice. Saying something like "When I was in a similar situation, I read in this conference approved literature...", is giving guidance.

Question: What do you do when you have a sponsee go dark, meaning you don't hear from them at all? Do you track them down, or do you let them go?

Panelist response (Sue): I'll speak to that. I have had sponsees that go dark. As an Al-Anon member, I learned that sometimes I just need to let people be. I will reach out and say, "Hey, how are you doing I was thinking of you today. Give me a call whenever," but I'm not going to do that every single day and continue to do that because that's not working my program. I have to keep focused on Sue and Sue's program. I can't work my sponsee's program.

Panelist response (Tanya):

I just want to add that I wish there was a black and white answer to this. When this first happened to me, I looked for an answer. Where does it tell me what I'm supposed to do because I would like to know what the rule is so I can just follow it and do it. This was a place for me to grow. I eventually grew to the place that Sue mentioned, but I had to work on myself and ask my sponsor for help and look to the literature. I had to ask other fellow travelers in Al-Anon what worked for them because for some reason that particular question was one that hit my buttons.

Melody: I want to thank everybody for participating in these workshops and for being willing to speak because I have just learned so much. I'm so grateful to be a part of it. I was reminded that when I first got a sponsor, I wanted so desperately for her to tell me what to do because I just was a shy little girl that didn't know anything about anything. I wanted someone to tell me what to do. She just kept saying that we'll pray about it, and I thought, "What the heck is that supposed to do?" I wanted her to tell me to take this step and do this and that with this person and that person, and she just would not do it. Today I'm very grateful for that because I found the answers that were right for me in my own time. What she *did* do is to work with me, take me through the Steps a few times, the Traditions and the Concepts. I utilize my sponsor a great deal just to study the literature. I have to keep doing that on a constant basis. I try every year to make a new commitment. This year it's going to be working The Concepts out of *Reaching for Personal Freedom*. I haven't done that work yet, and I think The Concepts in my current position is something I need to do. As a sponsor, when I meet with my sponsees, I often say, "Let's read some literature, let's work a step, let's talk about the program. I listen to what's going on in your life and I want to get to know you, but there's no solution in that. It's what tools you can use to apply to the situation. Thank you.

Question: What is your experience with sponsoring members of the same gender, different gender, or gender orientation?

Panelist response (Sue):

Well, I can share that I've worked with sponsees that are of the same gender, of a different gender, and a different gender orientation. At the end of the day, it was about Al-Anon. It wasn't about what their sexual orientation was or anything like that but about recovering from the family disease of alcoholism and how it affected our lives. It was not an issue. There was a gentleman who asked to me to be his sponsor, and he said, "Should I ask your husband's permission first?" I thought that was a funny question. Why would he ask my husband? I said, "Well, are you going to ask my husband's permission to sleep with me?" because that's the only thing he would need to know. This is not a relationship that involves him.

It's been so ingrained to hear people say that a woman sponsors a woman and a man sponsors a man, but it's about who you identify with that is going to help you through that process. As long as I know where I am in my program, I'm okay. I don't have to worry about other things getting mixed in.

Claudia: I'd like to speak to that for a second. In the past, I've sponsored two guys, but they were interested in guys so it just didn't come up for debate. But there was a really sweet guy in one of my meetings who came up to me and asked, "What's pyramid sponsorship?" And, it was what he was in, and he was interested in working the program using Al-Anon literature. He asked for my help to find a sponsor and it seems like a lot of the men use AA literature. He asked about ten people, and didn't get anywhere. Finally, I agreed to temporarily sponsor him, and it's been such a gift. My sponsor pointed out that our literature says humans sponsor humans, and my sponsor also pointed out that I was about 30 years older than he was.