

Arizona Sponsorship Workshop

Thursday, December 5, 2019

Being a Sponsor: 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
- That 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.

Both the Statement of Purpose and the Preamble are reprinted with permission of Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., Virginia Beach, VA.

Patrick

When I first came to Al-Anon, I was encouraged to get a sponsor, and that sounded kind of scary to me. I put it off for probably a good six months and then began to realize, you know, it

probably isn't that big of a deal. They're probably not going to be all up in my business. What I have discovered is that it's my program, and I get to decide how much to share, how much not to share. And the more comfortable I got with sharing about what I was thinking and feeling, the more I became willing to share.

My first sponsor, because all we had were women, was a woman. I was grateful for that. She told me that that we'd have to make sure I found a guy to sponsor me by the time we got to the Fourth Step. I wasn't really sure what that was all about, but I said, "Alright, I can do that. Of course, we don't have any guys in the group, so how's that going to work?" And they said, "Well, you can go to service meetings with us," and so that's what I did. I started taking people's names, but it still took me awhile. My first sponsor and I were beginning to start the Fourth Step and it so happened that that was the same time as I started to talk to one of the guys at the Assembly where we voted for officers. We were just out there talking in the hallway, and I asked him, "So what brought you through the doors of Al-Anon?" and he told me. And I was just like, "Wow!" I could so relate to him. And I thought, "I want what he has." My first sponsor said, when you run into a person that has what you want, ask them to be your sponsor, so I did. He said, "I don't know. I've never done that before (been a long-distance sponsor). Let me talk to my sponsor and pray about it, and I'll get back to you." And he did. He became my sponsor. His sponsor said, "Yeah, people do it all the time."

Since I've become a sponsor myself, I have come to really rely on those first two sponsors. I will still call my first sponsor every now and then if I need a woman's opinion on something. Sometimes she is just really good at the service manual. I love my service manual; I take it with me everywhere I go. There is a special section in there about sponsoring, what sponsors need to be aware of, so I use that as one of my resources, and I also use the pamphlets and literature. I find there is so much helpful information in there that helps to guide me as I work with sponsees.

One of the things that I needed to really look at was how much time do I have to "do justice," I guess is the word, to a sponsee? I've taken on several different service positions, and I am still finding that I have room for more sponsees. It's kind of interesting. My Higher Power guides me. I just listen to my Higher Power. When someone comes up to ask me now, it's like either I know I can or I can't. But if I can't, I am more than happy to help them find a sponsor that can be a great sponsor for them. They always seem to appreciate that.

One of the things that I realized is that it's important for me to do a lot of listening. I try to listen and when I feel like I need to say something, I try to listen a little more. And then I listen some more. And what I find is that as I listen, I learn. It's just as much a symbiotic relationship where I'm getting as much out of it as the sponsee gets out of it. I still talk to my sponsors, but what I am finding is that the more that I sponsor, the more I understand.

There is a big difference between giving advice and spiritual guidance. For me, I never want to tell a sponsee what they should do. It's their program; they need to figure that out for

themselves. So many times, all I have to do is ask a pertinent question and they are able to figure it out for themselves. Another way I can do that is also by drawing on my own experience, strength, and hope, something my sponsor has shared with me that helped me. There are many different ways that I can do that without actually giving advice. Sometimes I really would like to, but I know that's not going to be very effective. It never has been for me. When anyone has given me advice that I didn't ask for, usually I'm going to do it my way until I realize, "Well, maybe that would have been a better way to do it." I do like to let people figure things out for themselves. I know that it sticks with me better when I do that.

When I first sit down with a sponsee, I like to get a good idea of what it is they are looking for in a sponsor and make sure that I am the person that is going to do them justice. One of my sponsees said to me one time, "If you are going to open a book and try to get me to do some studying, just forget it." And I was like, how am I going to do this? And what I found was all I did with that person was just listen, a lot of listening, and then sharing my experience, strength, and hope with that person. My sponsor kept telling me that I really need to have her crack a book. But as we went along, I found that she was beginning to develop a relationship with a power outside of herself. I was dumbfounded that that happened. She actually got to the place where she was willing to turn her will and her life over to a power greater than herself that wanted only what was best for her. I called my sponsor and I shared that with him, and he said "No, she's opened a book," and I said "No, seriously, she didn't." And he said "No, she opened a book by listening to what you were saying." And that really touched my heart. I was like, Wow! As I thought about it, it was like when things first started out that's all there was. We didn't have literature way back in the day. It was all through sharing experience, strength, and hope. So it started to really sink in, and I figured it out. I can be flexible and not have to do every sponsee a certain way. I can work with them and try to meet their needs instead of me meeting my needs. Through that process I realized how relationships form. Each of my sponsees and my sponsors are great friends of mine now.

I also discovered the importance of having a service sponsor. When I read that in the service manual, I was "Ha! I get to have two! Like a 'twofer.'" So I asked a gentleman and he became my service sponsor. He takes me through the Traditions and the Concepts; my personal sponsor takes me through the Steps. And I find that that really works very well. It gives me a well-rounded program. I am learning to become the person I have always wanted to be.

Christina

Throughout the time I have been in program, I really resonated with the pamphlet you read on sponsoring and having multiple sponsors because I think I am on my fourth one. I changed for various reasons either because of different need, or I changed something about what I thought I needed or other reasons. I have been with my current sponsor for about four years now: it has been good for me to stay put for a while.

As far as how I came to be a sponsor, it was sort of by strong encouragement, we'll just say. I had a conversation with my sponsor. I had come through all these crises and things were going well. I wasn't having those "hair on fire" moments as much anymore, and I started to get to this point where I wondered not necessarily why do I come to Al-Anon or why do I still come to Al-Anon, but I just wasn't feeling as connected to the program and that bothered me a little bit. When I talked to my sponsor about that, she said, "I think it's time for you to be a sponsor." I said, "Oh no, that certainly can't be true." My first thought was, "What do I have to offer?" I was very hesitant about it and was very unsure and really didn't see what I could possibly give to anyone at that point.

She just told me to just raise my hand and God would direct the person to me that I was meant to work with. It's funny. I've had a few sponsees over time and have learned a lot. I haven't been doing it for a long time, but I've learned a lot on how to set limits. It pointed out for me some of the gaps in my own program. You know when you go to meetings and you're working Steps, you kind of get that sense that, "Okay, all is well." Then when you start dealing with another person and their "isms," a lot of mine that I thought I had dealt with came to the surface. I got to work through that and some issues of my own like control. I wanted to take control over somebody else's program; that's not my role. I made a lot of newbie errors at first with trying to figure this out and how to be of service to a person.

At one point it was explained to me that a sponsor is just a referee between that sponsee and their Higher Power. So maybe I'm a referee or maybe I'm a translator. I'm just that in between. I'm not their Higher Power; I don't want to be their Higher Power. I certainly don't want them to try to put me in that role. I try to watch for that as much as I can. Hopefully that referee role where I'm just that translator between what their Higher Power is trying to say is something that resonates with my sponsees. I can give my experience, strength, and hope. I've had situations with women I've sponsored that I haven't walked through what they're going through and didn't have any experience, strength, and hope to give because it was nothing I've experienced. Part of that is knowing who else is in program; you know who they can reach out to. Part of the strength of this fellowship is that if I don't know or I've never experienced it, chances are you reach out and there are probably several people. I was able to encourage her to branch out to other people to get what she needed.

Today I try to keep it simple. I am there to work the Steps with that person. It's like Patrick said, I'm not their coach, I'm not their spiritual advisor, I'm not their life coach, therapist, anything like that. I'm their spiritual connection to their Higher Power via working the Steps and helping them find a spiritual solution to their problems in the way that I have.

My sponsorship line can be a little demanding because we do daily calls which limits how many people that I can sponsor at once. There was one point I was sponsoring four people with them calling me every day. I had this idea that I had to talk to each one every single day, so that was two to four hours out of my workday that I was trying to do that. I was creating a little bit of unmanageability for myself. That experience really helped me learn boundaries for myself and

being able to set limits and say, “I can’t talk to you today or let’s talk at another time,” instead of trying to be there and be all things to all people and making myself crazy.

Usually we have a conversation about sponsoring after the person has worked Step Five and beginning Step Six. That’s when my transition happened, and I was encouraged to start sponsoring others. All I do is encourage my sponsees to raise their hands. We walk through that initial fear when they get a sponsee to try to alleviate that feeling of “What do I do? What do I do?” I tell them “You don’t have to do anything. You’re not there to solve this person’s problems for them. You’re just there to listen and offer a spiritual solution. And if you don’t have the spiritual solution that they are looking for in that type of situation, then you just help to guide them to who does.”

I work in the behavioral health field, so sometimes I have to be careful not to put my personal or professional training in there. That’s a boundary I have to remember. I’m not a therapist in this capacity, just someone who is listening and offering my experience, strength, and hope (if I have it) and offering spiritual solutions. Sometimes if I have someone who is floundering in the program, my only response may be, “Can you go to a meeting today? Can you go to a meeting tomorrow? When can you go to a meeting? When have you been to a meeting?” That may be the best thing I have to offer that person.

In my line, we do ask that people go to a meeting at least three times a week and that they try to go to an open AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meeting once a month. It’s just basically to get that routine down, especially for a newcomer, to try to get into good habits of going to meetings on a regular basis. I have run into problems (kind of a deal breaker for me) if that person isn’t going to meetings. I tell them it’s like me trying to tutor you in math when you don’t go to math class. We don’t speak the same language when you’re not attending meetings. I’ll have conversations with them about what’s going on, I’ll ask what the barriers are for them to get to meetings and process through that, but meetings are part of the program. I can only ask them to do what I’ve done. For me, my program consists of regular attendance at meetings, talking to my sponsor on a regular basis, working steps, and talking to a service sponsor helps me clarify some of that stuff.

I was finding that my time with my regular sponsor was limited and the questions I had about sponsorship or being a sponsor were eating up my step work time. I ended up getting a service sponsor who I go to for more of those questions and guidance with that. She has a very good sense of boundaries and has been able to teach me that technique that she uses to help people. “Do you want to work this program or not? If you do, I’m with you all the way. But if you don’t, you get to have the same situation that brought you in here, but that’s your choice.”

For me, it is a hard decision. I’ve only had to let one person go because they just weren’t ready to work the program. That was difficult, and I had to process that with both my sponsor and my service sponsor. But in the end, somebody’s either going to do it or they’re not, and I need to be available to people that want to work this program and work the Steps. For the person that

just wants to call and tell me everything that he's doing and all the problems, there is time for that, but when there's no time for anything else and they're not attending meetings, to me, like I say, it's like trying to tutor someone who doesn't go to math class.

One of the things I do with a new sponsee is that I do sit down with them. I like to do it face to face rather than on the phone. Hopefully, we can grab a cup of coffee. I talk about who I am, where I come from, and a little bit about my Al-Anon background -- not the whole story, just a snapshot. We talk about what their goals are and a little bit about them and if we're a good fit for each other. And then I'm upfront. I'm going to expect you to call me every day. We set up a call time. I may not be able to talk to you every single day, but I'm going to do my best to talk to you several times a week.

The important thing is that that person is reaching out and making the effort because it's not my program, it's theirs, at least to get them in the habit of making that accountability to somebody every day. There is an expectation that they go to meetings and, if and when they ever decide they don't want to go to meetings anymore, I don't know if I can continue to sponsor them. I had one person that I was talking to in March, and the last time she had been to a meeting was in November. We kept having the same conversation about it over and over, so it got to the point where I told her when you're ready, come back. And it may be just a fact that this person wasn't ready. So we do have some of those conversations about expectations, but the biggest one is that I'm going to ask you to call me every day. "Is that something you think you can do or want to do?" and if they say, "Heck, no," then maybe they're not ready.

I had a person who asked me to sponsor her. She was working with something in the election back in 2016, and she told me I'm going to be busy and not going to have any days available until after the election, and this was in August. I said why don't you call me back in November because right now I could say I could sponsor you, but you're not going to be able to do what I'm asking you to do. It's not just about that person; it's about me working my program. I can't work my program if you're not working with me. I work my program with my sponsees. As Patrick said, it's extremely rewarding, but if they're not ready, willing, or able, I ask them to wait or find somebody else.

I don't know how to express enough how much I've learned from being a sponsor. I hated the idea of it. I said, "I don't want to do it. Please don't make me." But in doing it, just in the short time I've had the experience of it, whenever you hear that the sponsor benefits just as much or maybe more than the sponsee, believe them. At least in my case, that is totally true. It has enabled me to work the program in a much deeper, richer, and fulfilling way than even working my Steps could. It's my favorite form of service.

Beth

When I first came in, I didn't have anybody available for over nine months to ask to sponsor me. So by the time I was able to move to where there were people available who could share experience, strength, and hope, I thought I was ready to work my Fourth Step and I was desperate to find a sponsor.

I eventually asked somebody who I viewed to be diametrically opposite to me in temperament, but she had this inner peace that just radiated that I desperately wanted. She was willing, but she made me start over with the first step even though I thought I was ready for Step Four. Now I understand why. When I am asked to sponsor, I very rarely attract brand new people. Most of the time I attract people who have been in program for a while, but never had a sponsor before. They know the language, they are familiar with the literature, but they are starting to get a sense of something being missing from their program.

I did have one sponsee that asked me to sponsor her within the first three weeks of coming to Al-Anon, but she is the only one that was brand new. The rest have between three and ten years. I do have one who has been in and out for 20 years. I have that initial conversation, especially with the ones that have been around for a while, that I have been seeing for years at the meetings.

I don't have to tell them about me since they have been listening to me. I know some of their story since I've been listening to them so it's a matter of establishing what do they want from a sponsor. It differs tremendously from one to the next, and I find as a sponsor I need to be receptive to and respectful of what it is the person wants to get out of the relationship.

My resources, of course, are CAL (conference approved literature). I primarily use *How Al-Anon Works*, *Paths to Recovery*, and I love *Reaching for Personal Freedom*. At our first meeting my request is, "Are you going to be willing to spend a minimum of an hour a week working with me?" I don't require a daily phone call, but I do require a weekly check-in and preferably an hour or more to actually work. That seems to work best for both me and whoever I'm working with.

I have had experience with sponsoring a male. We really weren't doing Step work, and I would not meet with him face to face. I would only deal with him, other than in meetings, by telephone calls. After he left Arizona, he still called me intermittently for about a year until he was finally able to find a male sponsor. I just thought that it was safer to not be in a face to face relationship with an opposite sex member.

Since I'm retired, I have a lot of time to commit and that helps. My focus in life right now is Al-Anon and recovery. I am doing five meetings a week. I currently have five sponsees, four of which I am meeting with for a minimum of an hour a week. One is an hour and a half, one is around two hours, and two are one hour. The fifth one is intermittent phone calls – she is just using me as a temporary sponsor until she goes back north and finds a new sponsor because

she fired her old sponsor after she came down here and realized that situation wasn't going to work.

I do not tell my sponsees what to do. I will make recommendations, but it's usually along the lines of, "You know, you seem to be struggling with this. There's a super good page in *Courage to Change* or in the *ODAT (One Day at a Time)*. Why don't you try reading that page every day for at least a month?" And that's usually as close as I get to a direct order. I am much more likely to say things like, "Hmm. You sound like you're struggling with that step. I think maybe you should go back and read the step before again and let's re-answer some of the questions."

Especially the first three Steps, I want them to read everything on the Step, how it works, and then read and answer the questions in *Paths to Recovery* and answer the questions in the *Reaching for Personal Freedom*. I expect them to write the answers and then read me their answers and we will discuss them if I don't feel that they are complete or well thought out. I have one sponsee, my newbie, who really has a lot of difficulty communicating on paper so we do spend a lot of time with me basically asking the same question in different ways so she can view it different ways. She responds much better verbally than in writing. We really talk more about the questions than my other sponsees do who write better and spend the time to get fuller answers.

Besides my expectations, a lot of that first meeting is usually looking to see where our schedules mesh. I have certain meetings that I go to, and I have certain times that I set aside. If we cannot find a spot that is mutually acceptable to both of us, then it won't work. That can be touch and go sometimes.

The next topic is expressing expectations and boundaries. My sponsees have all been around me long enough. They know that I am a pretty strong personality, and I'm not going to couch anybody's nonsense. If they're making excuses, I'm going to tell them that they are. I'm not going to let them get away with denial and trying to pull the wool over their own eyes. I'm going to respond back as I see it; and if they can't accept that kind of honesty, then sooner or later they're going to fire me. So far that hasn't happened.

I am always super honored when I am asked to sponsor. When I came into these rooms, I was completely socially unacceptable. To find myself at this point in my life actually attracting people who want me to sponsor them, it flabbergasts me. I do not understand why I'm attracting these people. What do they see in me that they like? I'm honored. I'm pleased as punch. It's a great big warm and fuzzy. I don't understand it. The only thing I can think is that it is a Higher Power thing. I have spent a couple of years with just the one sponsee, and then all of a sudden this last year (I have been doing a lot of 11th Step work and really focusing on Step Eleven) people are coming out of the woodwork saying, "Will you sponsor me?" It's got to be my Higher Power working in my life that I've reached a point of spiritual growth myself that other people are looking at me and wanting what I've got. "Ok. Thank you, Higher Power. I

don't know how to react to this, but I'll do the best I can." It seems to work both for me and for the people I'm sponsoring.

One of my sponsees is long distance year-round. She lives in another city. She's been around long enough that she's done the Steps and really doesn't feel like re-doing steps right now. But she's really interested in working the Traditions; to me, that's such a blessing because I've been a Tradition freak since I first came into program. She's already committed that when we're done with the Traditions, she wants to continue reaching and do the Concepts. I'm just thrilled to death that I have somebody who wants to study the program in depth at that level who wants to be working with me. It gives me a chance to further my knowledge of them. Especially with the Concepts, I keep finding myself going to the service manual. Like Patrick, I carry my service manual everywhere I go.

Questions:

Question: What literature do you use in working with a sponsee and how to do you use it?

Panelist response (Patrick): When I'm working with a personal sponsor and doing the Steps, I like using *Paths to Recovery* and then the Al-Anon's *Twelve and Twelve* and *Reaching for Personal Freedom*. Depending on the Step, we will also use the daily readers with the index in the back of the book for the Steps; they can be looking at those readings.

My initial sponsor would have me write out every single word of the Step and then, using the dictionary, go and write down the definition that works for me of that word. I walked away from those Steps really with a different understanding. And with the daily readers, in each paragraph she'd have me write a little nutshell -- what did you get out of that? And if I couldn't do it in a sentence, I'd go back, and I'd read it. That helped me with my comprehension because in the alcoholic home I had lost all that. The other thing that it really helped me with was that it got me to write. So now I was able to journal and it was amazing.

Question: Can you clarify the term 'line' of sponsorship?

Panelist response (Christina): As soon as that popped out of my mouth, I thought, that's a term that's kind of "controversial." My service sponsor doesn't like it and has told me so on several occasions. When we use that term, it's a carryover from the other program where basically a line would be that I have a sponsor and she has a sponsor and she has a sponsor and then I have sponsees. So sometimes in that realm, we try to stick together and have some activities. This Sunday, for example, my grand sponsor is having a get-together. She has one every year at her house, and she brings her sponsor, her sponsees, and then all their sponsees. It's kind of interesting because there are forty of us there so it's nice to see this group of women that are all connected through a sponsor.

I got my program from my sponsor, and she got it from her sponsor, and she got it from her sponsor. So even though people may change sponsors and every year the faces change at this event, each year it's just nice to see that group of people. It's like family.

My service sponsor doesn't like it because she says it sounds exclusionary, and I guess I can see her point on that (you're in my line; and you're not). I am a little cautious about using that term, but it's just been something I've used for so long. It's really more just to say that my sponsor has a sponsor who has a sponsor and I have sponsees and once in a while we get together and it's just how we do things. For example, our flavor of program is requiring the daily call times which a lot of groups don't do and a lot of sponsors don't do. I want to be up front about that with anybody that I'm sponsoring that that is an expectation that is a little different than other people they might talk to.

Question: Give you give us an example of confronting a sponsee?

Panelist response (Beth): Most of the time that I've had to deal with that, it's been denial that they are trying to control something that is none of their business to control. It almost always goes back to the First Step and back to "Hello, you're dealing with a disease. They are not waking up in the morning saying how can I make your life miserable. It's a disease. It's not about you."

I've got one who has real issues with her son. I say, "He's a full-grown man. You do not need to take care of him. He's not a child. He needs to learn to stand on his own two feet. If you keep cushioning the blow and rescuing him, it's not going to happen." My sponsee says, "But I need to take care of him. I'm his mother," and I say, "No, he's an adult now."

I get blunt about that failure to see reality. I think a lot of that is because I had such a hard time with acceptance when I first came in. I thought if I accepted something that meant I approved. It took quite a while, but I had to realize that acceptance is just admitting that it's real. I tend to be pretty blunt and straightforward about, "No, you're not seeing reality. You don't have to like it, but it is real."

Opened to all

Moderator:

One of the participants commented that "After eight years in Al-anon I finally realized that I was not fully participating in the fellowship without a sponsor. I now have a sponsor and am benefiting from my sponsor's experience. For the past eight years, I guess, I saw a sponsor as someone you would run to when you were falling apart, a shoulder to cry on. Now through my sponsor and these Sponsorship Workshops, I have learned that I do not have to be in a crisis to benefit. I am so grateful for the workshops. I am blessed."

There is a question. What can we do to introduce the importance/benefits of a sponsor early on within 3-6 months of being in Al-Anon?

Member response (Claudia):

It seems like we spend a lot of money, Al-Anon as a whole, in Public Outreach getting people in the doors. At your first meeting, you're like the cat's pajamas and everybody comes to talk to

you. And then at the second meeting, you're kind of out of luck; you're old news. That's one of the reasons why Melody and I put together this workshop. If you have other ideas, please email one of us. I am going to open that question to anyone here. How do we make sponsorship available to people more quickly, while they are still falling apart?

Panelist response (Patrick):

When I see a newcomer come in, I make sure that I go and talk to them. I share with them about how important it was for me when I finally got a sponsor and what a difference that made for me. And they will say "But I'm been looking. How do I find a sponsor?" And I tell them exactly what my temporary sponsor said to me. "When you hear something and you want it, then you ask." Almost inevitably they will ask me, "Will you be my sponsor?" And it's great. I really enjoy that.

Member response (Melody):

Whenever there is a newcomer at a meeting, I like to share about the tools of the program that I use, one of them being sponsorship. I talk a little bit about that relationship and how my sponsor helps me to work the Steps which are another tool in the meeting. So I introduce the idea of sponsorship in that way.

Moderator: I have asked Janet to speak on the questions from the first topic "Being a Sponsor".

Member share (Janet): Currently I sponsor three people. I've only been sponsoring for maybe two years now; it's been a wonderful experience. I am grateful for a sponsor that I can ask about some of my questions or experience with my sponsees that I have questions with.

I usually just sit down with them if they've asked me. I say, "Let's get together and chat and see what your expectations are." That works best anyway. We set a time for how often they want to get together. All of them were people that really were ready to start working the Steps. I have asked if they have any particular method that they wanted or what literature they want to use. And they usually then let me give a suggestion. I usually like to use *Paths to Recovery*, and *Blueprint for Progress*. Occasionally I use other literature. I think that what's really wonderful about being a sponsor is that I'm not their leader or mentor. I am a peer with experience. I can see it from the outside while they are sharing. While they are going through the Steps and sharing some of their life, I can ask some questions which I think may open up some awareness for them. I am grateful that they all have agreed to meet with me either for an hour or two a week.

One of things I got from this sponsorship workshop that was good is that I had one sponsee who would come to me and she would have spent all week with problems that she had. So instead of saying, "Please call me," I say, "I just want you to know that I'm available for you to call when something is happening instead of waiting 24 hours or even a week to call me to discuss it." Usually when we get together once a week, we spend the first 15 minutes or 20

minutes talking about how their week went; not where they had dinner with someone, but issues related to Al-Anon, more personal, and then we start working on the Steps. It's been a really great experience. I'm learning a lot from these workshops, too.

Question: How did you come to decide to talk to your sponsees on a daily basis? Was it because your sponsor did that with you? Is it a daily check in? Or do you spend 30 minutes a day or an hour? Is there a time guideline?

Panelist response (Christina): The daily call time was not my decision. It was how my sponsor did it and how her sponsor did it. The mindset behind it is more of getting into the habit. I have a friend who is in the same group of people that I am so she has the daily call time as well. She said that when she was new in program, she could not open her mouth to anybody. But she's a good "doobie" and she is going to do what she's told. So when her sponsor asked her to call her every day, that helped her get into the habit of talking to someone that she didn't know very well daily. And that's what the point of it is -- to get out of that "I'll only call you if my hair is on fire or maybe I won't call you at all" kind of mentality. It's just getting in the habit of that connection every day with somebody.

I think where I made my mistake in the beginning is that I was spending 45 minutes to an hour a day with some of my folks and discovering it's not productive all the time depending on the person. What was happening was that person was getting a venting release of everything. When it came time to go to a meeting, there was no propulsion left for her. There was no pain left. She got it all vented off every day with her sponsor, so to speak, and then she wasn't going to the meetings. Whereas if you have that pressure, you want to go to the meetings.

For me, it is a bit of a check-in. Even when I was on daily call time with my sponsor, I didn't talk to her every day, but I was expected to just check in and leave a voice mail or a text about how I was doing. What I tell my sponsees is, "Do you need me to call you back? If so, you need to tell me on your voice mail or your text because otherwise I'm going to assume it's an information only call." I really put the burden on them to ask for what they need. Part of it is a daily routine of reaching out to somebody in program whom they don't know very well, getting to know that person, and seeing if they're going to follow what we've asked them to do. If they need to ask for help, they need to let me know. Otherwise, if they call me and leave me a voice mail and don't explicitly say, "I need you to call me back," I probably won't because I won't put myself in somewhere where I wasn't asked to be.

Moderator Comment:

I am really grateful for the questions and the answers because there are so many different ways to do sponsorship. There's something in *Courage to Change* or *Hope for Today* that says that there are as many right ways to do sponsorship as there are stars in the sky. I used to think there were two ways – my way and the wrong way -- but I'm working on it.

Question: You said you needed to be respectful of and receptive to what the sponsee needs. What does that look like for you?

Panelist response (Beth): For me it looks like a lot of listening. Because so many of the people I'm attracting have more than a year of Al-Anon under the belt when they come to me, I have to give them credit for having learned something about themselves already whether or not they have worked with a previous sponsor. It's not like most of them are brand new and don't understand the words. Most of the people I work with have got a pretty good idea of what it is they want to be working on in depth. It's not up to me to be their Higher Power. It's up to me to communicate well with them and share ideas and information about what we're going more in depth about.

I do want to comment on the previous question about how we encourage members to get a sponsor. In my home group, we give newcomer packets out to newcomers, but we also give them the district meeting list and we ask them to pass it around so that we can give them our names and phone numbers. I'm a night owl so I always write under my name and phone number that it's ok to call me at 2 a.m. That way, they know there's somebody awake and available in the middle of the night. The other thing is I always make sure I tell people is that the phone does NOT weigh 500 pounds.

Member share (Claudia):

I love sponsorship. It's my favorite service.

I use all the literature. I try to read a page from three different ones every day and encourage sponsees to get into the habit of daily reading in different literature. I also encourage them to have at least five people that they can call, people who kind of know their story, people whose recovery they admire, people who have heard that 12 years ago they ran off with the milkman and they have a tendency to be compulsive. Also, I don't get into trouble with sponsees who are overly dependent on me.

I strongly encourage weekly face to face meetings with a sponsee. Phone calls are generally rare for me that way unless the sponsee is in crisis. I do not generally reach out to sponsees unless I know they are hurting and then I'll text them or pick up the phone and just say, "I'm thinking of you. How are you doing?"

On providing guidance versus giving advice, I know what it's like to have a few different sponsors. I think I lost count at 9 or 10, but I spent 3 ½ years in a group called Pyramid Sponsorship. Pyramid sponsorship is called that because it's not exactly a one-on-one situation. When I asked my sponsor to sponsor me, she said the first thing you need to know is who your grand-sponsor is and great-grand-sponsor is and there are actually eight levels. And I was like, "Wait a minute. I just want somebody to talk to." But I learned a lot of good things. I learned that it might be a good idea when I chair a meeting to have read some literature on the topic. I learned that service was not optional. I learned about respect. I learned something about

communication. But when I got done with that, I wasn't any better at making my own decisions, and that was tough. The group I was with was very adamant about what they called "direction", but it was advice. It was "Do this, date him, go to school here," and it took me a while to realize that I didn't want something like that. I'm glad I got out, but I learned a lot.

The literature tells us in several different places that there is a place for advice and that's when someone's safety is in danger. If somebody's boyfriend says he's going to kill her if she does that again, it might be a time to call a taxi. I do like the idea of a daily call if a person is in crisis. Then you get the little details and you can put them all together so you get a better idea of what the story is than when you hear them once a week and they're in a good place, having coffee and they're upbeat, even if they got beat last night or whatever.

I love the idea of not giving a lot of guidance or advice because I know that good judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment. I've learned a lot from the mistakes that I've been allowed to make with sponsors who have loved me enough not to say, "Don't do that. That's stupid."

Regarding establishing relationships and expressing expectations and boundaries, the first time I meet with a sponsee we talk about what they want it to look like. We talk about how I do it. I used to say that I sponsor how I was sponsored, but that's not so these days. I sponsor how God and I are led and how that sponsee needs to be sponsored. When I meet with a sponsee, I meet with them an hour and a half a week. I give them about 5 minutes to vent and they tell me what a horrible day they've had. Then after their 5 minutes, I say, "Let's work a little and I'll give you time when we're done." And it's unbelievable. We'll do some step work and I'll say, "Ok, we've got a little extra time, let's talk about your problem." And, they don't have a problem because they've spent over an hour working on recovery.

I learned again today that if I'm not having fun in service work and if I'm not learning in service work, it's time to re-think the way I'm doing things. Sometimes sponsees and sponsors just run out of steam and it's time to work with somebody else.

Question: I find that dual members don't stick around long as sponsees. Has anyone else experienced this and, if so, what, if anything, have you done differently?

Panelist response (Patrick):

I have a dual member. I've had a couple of dual members. One didn't stick around very long, but I have another one that is still with me. He has probably been the most dependable sponsee that I have, and I learn so much from him. It's amazing. What is the difference? I don't know, but I do appreciate the experience, strength, and hope that I receive from a dual member.

Member response:

I have two dual members. I feel like they have been the most devoted and dedicated. They are people that have been sober for a long time, real active in AA, and have done the Steps at least once through AA. It was interesting, though, when we were starting Step Nine with the making amends, I could see she was lapsing back into thinking that she was making amends related to her drinking days. I said, "This is different. If you have any that you still need to make that are related to your drinking, then you should go over that with your AA sponsor." But yes, they have been awesome with huge growth in Al-Anon for both.

Member response:

I guess both of us are not cut out for dual sponsorship maybe. I've had the same issue. I've had several sponsees who were also members of AA. I have a real firm boundary that they are working with a sponsor, that they are working their original program. I don't particularly want someone coming in drunk to my Al-Anon meeting.

I have had someone express to me that it was hard for them to be in AA and know that if they drank, they would die. They didn't have that same conviction that if they did not work a solid Al-Anon program really bad things would happen. It just seemed like it was harder for them to grasp that fact. That's the only thing that I've seen.

Member share (Flo-Ann):

I am very happy to be here. I just moved here from Michigan, so this is pretty exciting. I've been a sponsor for many years, and a sponsee for many years. I too use that term "my line of sponsorship." I have a grand-sponsor and a great-grand-sponsor, but I'm a little unique in the sponsoring. I sponsor with homework. I use the original instructions which is sometimes a bit controversial in Al-Anon. I need to read the original instructions; I take my sponsees through that as well. I don't require a daily call, but I require a weekly check-in and we need to talk for at least an hour a week.

I will go as slow or as fast as the sponsee wants to go. I've taken a sponsee through all Twelve Steps in a week and a half, and I have been working with somebody for several years and we're still just creeping up on Step Nine. So as much as they want to put into it, I'm willing to walk through it. I just need to see progress, just a little bit of progress. If I see them progressing, there's no reason for me to be concerned. They're doing it at their pace. Everyone learns and absorbs things differently.

In the beginning when I first started sponsoring, I wanted to drag them along and try to get them to do it as fast as I possibly could. That was a learning experience. That didn't work out so well, if you can imagine. I decided that I need to take a step back and apply the Traditions to my sponsees as well. That was a great learning experience.

Once they've done the Steps, I will also take them through the Traditions. I have yet to get anybody enthusiastic enough to do the Concepts, though. I would be very happy to take somebody through the Concepts if they were willing, but usually Traditions are as about as far as any of my sponsees have ever wanted to go.

I do a Monday night Traditions study with sponsees and sisters in recovery, and it is a "Traditions as they apply to healthy relationships" and it is also a Zoom thing so that's kind of cool deal. I've gone through the Traditions study with my sponsor and a couple of my sponsees and some of her other sponsees. This will be the second time through officially. It's amazing how much the Traditions will help relationships with your significant other -- *my* significant other. That's the reason why I'm still married to him. I'm still married to my alcoholic, and he's been sober for 12 years going on 13 so it's been an amazing roller coaster ride.

The sponsorship, though, is integral because it keeps me talking the language and keeps me in the program. I don't remember which one of the speakers said that they learn as much from their sponsees as the sponsees learn from them, but it's so true!

Every time I take somebody through the Steps, I'll try to explain a concept that they're not really understanding and when I get done explaining it, I go "Wow, yeah!" I'm completely surprised that I come up with it. I've had sponsees say, "Oh, remember when you said this," and I'll say, "No." I swear to God, I believe sponsorship is blessed if we're really doing our job as a sponsor. I do a little prayer before I talk with my any of my sponsees, and it seems to be my Higher Power talking through me. If I don't remember what I said, that's pretty much what I believe -- my Higher Power has guided me to tell them what they need to hear. Sometimes the things that come out of my mouth just shock and awe me, like I didn't even know that I understood that as well as I did and didn't know that I even knew that concept. I believe that it's like learning a foreign language. If I don't practice it every day, then I'm going to lose it. So thank God for the sponsorship because it keeps me talking it every day and it keeps me explaining what I think I know and what I do know.

Open Comments

Member share (Melody):

I resonated with your share, Claudia -- the idea of "I sponsor the way my sponsor did," but that's not necessarily the way now. For me, it has evolved to where I've learned a great deal of flexibility because I was very rigid. "This is the way I was sponsored; this is what I was told to do, so this is what I'm going to do in how I sponsor." Over the years, I've learned what's comfortable for me, what works for me, and it's not exactly the way that I have been sponsored.

One of the greatest gifts from being a sponsor is learning to be flexible. I can carry that out into the rest of my life. It all goes back to letting God into the relationship and letting him direct me where it needs to go. Beth was talking about having a sponsee that isn't very good at writing. At

first it was “You’ve got to read, you’ve got to write, you’ve got to do this...” I too have had sponsees who have a really hard time putting pen to paper, but we can sit down and go through the questions and they can write out something while we’re working. That’s much better than them not doing anything at all.

Member share (Clem):

When I first came into the doors of Al-Anon and decided to get a sponsor, there were two guys. I picked the one who was least like me because the one that was more like me, I figured, couldn’t possibly offer me anything. So I picked the other guy, and he was my sponsor for five years. It was during that time that I felt like I was walking on eggshells at home; the disease was rampant at home. I desperately needed the program that he had to offer. After about five years, though, everything changed. We didn’t have alcoholism in our house anymore; it had been a few years, and I was looking for something else. As it turned out, the other guy showed up in my Friday night meeting whom I hadn’t seen in forever. I asked him, and he said, “Yes,” and he is my sponsor today.

My first sponsor said that he thought there were two ways of sponsoring; one was to be like a drill sergeant and the other one was to plant a seed, water it, and watch a rose grow. And that’s the way my first sponsor sponsored me. I really liked that and adopted that, which seems to work really well. I tell my sponsees, “This is your program. You work it. I’m there to help you get you through the Steps and help you work your program the way I worked it and that’s it.” It’s been eight years now, and I’m truly a grateful Al-Anon.

Question: How do you and your sponsee determine when they are ready to move to another step?

Panelist response (Beth):

When we have completed all the questions in *Paths to Recovery* and *Reaching for Personal Freedom*, we have a serious discussion. Does my sponsee feel that they have completed that step and do they feel ready to move on? If we are both satisfied that they have answered everything fully, they’ve learned what there is to learn at this point in time (because more will always be revealed), we can then start on the next step. It’s kind of mutual. I usually will try to come up with a prayer of some sort, whether it’s the Third Step prayer or Seventh Step prayer, depending on which step it is, to transition us to moving forward to the next step together holding hands. Then the next work can start.

Panelist response (Patrick):

What seems to work for me is the same thing as in my own program. When I felt that it was second nature to me, then I was ready to move on. I can see in my sponsees when they are actually working the Steps and it’s second nature to them and they aren’t trying to control everything, then it’s time to move on to the next step. If they start to have problems with that again, it’s time to go back to Step One.