

Arizona Sponsorship Workshop

Thursday, March 5, 2020

Segment Four – Panel shares and discussion on Steps 1, 2 and 3

- Techniques for working these Steps
- Literature used

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.

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Debbie

I'm a grateful member of Al-Anon. I thought I would just share a little bit about my experience with the different sponsors I've had as well as my dealings with sponsees. I've had four different sponsors in three different states, and usually the relationship ended because I was moving away.

I don't think my first sponsor had much experience in the program. She told me that she would help me work as far along in the program as she was. I didn't know differently so I thought that was fine. We were living in a state that each of us didn't like. That was a common bond we had and why I picked her. When we would get together, we didn't work through the Steps, but she would share the principles. If I was sharing a problem I was having, she would share what had helped her.

I got my second sponsor when I moved to a different state and that relationship was better because she was very involved in service work. She was the GR (Group representative) and then went on to be the DR (District Representative). We worked a little bit on the Steps, but mostly she taught me a lot about service and how important it was. As I worked through the Steps, she would share how that was important in service too.

I felt that each of those sponsors gave me something I needed. I could think that one should have done that or that one should have done that, but that's not the case. Each time I worked with a sponsor, I needed that sponsor for that particular time and place.

When I moved to Arizona, I got my third sponsor, and we started diligently working through the Steps. She told me we had to start all over at Step One. I was in a place where I didn't feel like I had really gone through the Steps in a very consistent way. When I got to Step Seven, she sent me a text saying that she would no longer be my sponsor. She didn't tell me why, and I didn't really ask. I was a little bit heartbroken, but I worked through that by just clinging to my Higher Power and coming to understand that, like it says on the Sponsorship Bookmark, sponsorship is not a lifelong commitment. I learned for myself that I had kind of placed that sponsor on a little bit of a pedestal so when her feet of clay showed up, I was the one who was devastated.

Now I have a current sponsor, and we've been working through the Steps and Traditions. We are just now starting the Concepts. She had also said we were going to start over at Step One. I was really mad. I said, "I've already been through one through seven. Come on, can't we just go on? You know, I want to at least get through these Steps in my lifetime!" I didn't want to go through them again but because I wanted to work with this person, I did it. It was amazing to see how much I learned by going through them all over. I would even say to her, "I know I didn't want to start these over but I'm really glad I did because each time I was in a different spot."

Each time I did Step One, I could see more of my powerlessness. I could see more of how that powerlessness and my unwillingness to admit it was making my life more unmanageable. As I worked through Step Two, I worked a long time on developing my relationship with my Higher Power. It ebbs and flows. I know I have a Higher Power, but I don't always want to utilize a Higher Power. I have to be constantly reminded how important that part is in being able to work the rest of the steps. Step Three has been the hardest, and I have to constantly remind myself that every day I need to turn my will and my life over to that Higher Power.

I'm very systematic in working the steps. I start out by using P17, which is the "12 Steps and the 12 Traditions" pamphlet; and I read whatever Step or Tradition I'm working on. Then I read P60 which is "Al-Anon's 12 Traditions illustrated." I have a simple mind and I'm also a very visual person so I need to have it illustrated for me. After I read those and took notes and pointed out things that I maybe hadn't thought of before, I then read *How Al-Anon Works* on the particular step.

After that, I read Al-Anon's *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*; I find that one puts it in basic English for me. It's the simplified version of *Paths to Recovery* which can sometimes get a little heavy as I'm trying to trudge through a step. I then go on to *Reaching for Personal Freedom*, P92, and I just read the little stories and don't answer any of the questions. Lastly, I read *Paths to Recovery*. After I've read all that, looked over my notes and thought about what I've learned from each of those readings, I answer the questions from the *Paths to Recovery* workbook. I work through them systematically. That's how I do my own Step work.

With regards to sponsees, I have five of them now, but they're not all working at the same pace. At first I was kind of one of those people that said, "Here's how I do it. You should do it along the same lines as I do." I came to realize that each one of those gals that I'm working with is different. They're in a different spot and I didn't get it all the first time I worked through some of those Steps, so I can't expect them to. They're all individuals. One is just trudging right through the Steps; she's in another 12 Step program so she's kind of familiar with how you work the Steps. She's very diligently doing a lot of reading and then answering the questions. Then others show up with their book and it has nothing in it. I want to say, "Shouldn't you have written some things out?" But they say, "No, I thought about them." It's just interesting and each one of them is in their own place so I respect that. I listen and, if they're talking about a situation, then I try to help them apply some of the steps they've already worked on.

Claudia:

I am really glad to be here. I am grateful to all of you who keep coming back. My first First Step, Second Step and Third Step were a little different from lot of people. I had three sponsors in the first six months through no fault of my own. The first two said that I didn't need to do a Step One, a Step Two or a Step Three because I had walked into a meeting. Looking back, it seemed to be a mistake, but at the same time it was my Higher Power's brilliant way of teaching me a lesson. With those first two sponsors I tried to write a Step Four and share a Step Five with people I didn't know, leaning on a Higher Power I neither understood nor trusted. In a backward way, not first working Steps 1-3 taught me how infinitely valuable and essential those Steps are.

Steps One, Two and Three are tremendous for me because if I am in a pickle and I think it's your fault, I have a great tool. I can just go through Step One, Two, and Three. What am I powerless over here? Could God maybe help? I don't know, maybe. And

maybe I should let my Higher Power do my Higher Power's job, and I should just do mine.

In all of the step work that I do with a sponsee, I always ask them to do the same things. It's their choice, but I ask that they define the words of the Step because I think it's helpful if we're understanding what the Step is talking about and sometimes even what may have been meant when the Step was written. I ask them to read all of the literature on the Step, including the pamphlets, and to write brief reflections if something comes up for them. I ask them to call three people to find out what their experiences were for each Step. This is because I found out after I finished a Step that I knew what my sponsor knew and maybe I knew something that was mentioned in the meeting and that was about it. But then I started getting used to picking up the phone and talking to others and reasoning things out. I wanted my sponsees to share that too. And I'm coming to believe that I might not have all the answers and maybe those three people do. When they've finished their Steps, I ask them to write on their experience with each Step and I think it helps them to pull everything together. They get bonus points if they're willing to submit it to the Forum. That's what I ask them to do on each Step.

All the rest of the stuff I really kind of make up because I ask my Higher Power for help when I meet with a sponsee. Sometimes I'll just hear things that I wouldn't have heard without asking for help. Sometimes a sponsee will say something and inwardly I'll gasp because I have no idea how to respond. I'll say a quick prayer and then open my mouth and as I'm speaking, I'll be thinking, "Wow that's good!"

Step One reminds me of the pigeon story in our literature. We're totally, totally powerless over the pigeons and what they do, but most recently my Step One has been about finding my own power. I used to share in a Step One meeting, and I would say, "The Steps are all powerful; I love 11 of the Steps. This is not one of them." I hated being reminded that I could not change things outside myself, but after doing Step One a couple hundred times, it just started to make sense to me. I saw that if I could lay down everybody else and all their problems and their business, suddenly I had all this time. I had all this energy and all these resources to make my life look like I wanted my life to be. The other thing I learned in Step One is that I have got to ask my Higher Power to help. I really believe that if I don't ask him for help he doesn't worry about me.

Before I start the Steps, I remember that there's a spiritual principle behind each Step or maybe five. I heard somebody say once that there are three spiritual principles without which the 12 Steps can't be worked. The first one is humility. The second is humility. And the third is humility. Humility is just not my favorite thing. I would rather be God.

When I remember that I'm powerless in Step One, it does give me a sense that maybe my Higher Power knows better. A friend of mine says that in the first Step we learn what the problem is -- that we want but do not have the power to change this, that, or

him. But in the second Step, I learn what the solution is, and that solution gives me access to power. Step One and Step Two taken together remind me that I'm powerless, at least over other stuff, but with the help of my Higher Power, I'm bulletproof.

In *Courage to Change* there's a wonderful story about a gardener who takes a vacant lot and turns it into a beautiful garden; he works hard and waters and weeds, and the neighbor comes by and comments on the beautiful job that God has done. The gardener looks at him and says, "Yeah you should have seen this place when only God had it." This story reminds me that in Steps One, Two, and Three, and in a lot of places, my Higher Power does the heavy lifting, but if I'm sitting on my recliner eating bonbons, things are not going to get done.

I thought that knowledge was really important and so it's hard for me to work with sponsees who sound like me or sound like I used to sound. I've heard that if you spot it, you've got it, and if it makes you mad, you've got it bad. But in Step One, I get to watch my sponsees come to a place where they let go. I don't know yoga but a friend of mine told me today that the hardest yoga position is the one where you lay on the ground and don't move, and I get that. If I do a strong Step One and I really look at what's going on in my life and what little power I have over it, it makes it much easier to surrender.

I'm not going to characterize myself, but I have a lot of questions floating around in my head about Step One and I like to pull out whatever fits for any particular sponsee. In Step One I ask them "What kind of things have brought you to your knees?" They've all felt that feeling of powerlessness, but they didn't necessarily connect it to Step One. For me, it was the time my kid died; that was Step One.

Three days after my son passed, somebody asked me to sponsor her. I still tell her she's a heartless something or other, but sponsoring that person who was new to Al-Anon saved my life. In the first Step, in the second Step, and in the third Step, it was very real for me. And for an hour and a half a week at least it was not about me and my problems. It was about her and her Higher Power and the power of her Higher Power, and it saved my butt.

Step Two is my favorite step to work with a sponsee. I come to the solution, and for me Step Two is all about evidence. When I came into Al-Anon, I had a Higher Power. I knew what he looked like. I knew what he did. I knew how much he weighed. I knew all of this because somebody had given me all this information and told me all this stuff about my Higher Power. Then I found out that the experiences that I had of a Higher Power did not match the knowledge that other people had given me.

For me, Step Two is also about paying attention. Paying attention reminds me what my Higher Power is doing for me today and memory reminds me what my Higher Power has done for me in the past. Another thing I ask people to do in Step Two is to keep a

“Blessing Book.” It’s a record of things that have happened in their lives where it seems like it just might be God. If it’s odd, it’s God.

One time, I was working in accounting and lost my job. I got laid off. Usually I got a job in like three days, and this time it took three months and I panicked. I made a deal with my Higher Power -- this month if you pay the bills, I’ll pay the mortgage. Then I reversed it and it worked really well. I remember coming home from a meeting one Friday night, and I cried all the way home. I didn’t have the money for the bills, and I didn’t have the money for the mortgage. I pulled into the driveway and said “You’re going to have to do it all” and I felt so much shame. I got out of my car, went to the mailbox, and pulled out a check for \$1700 that had pretty much fallen from the sky. I didn’t cash that check for a week because I needed to bring it to my Friday night meeting and pass it around. Step Two is about swapping stories and seeing how God shows up for us.

I also ask my sponsees to write a letter to God and then to write a letter back from God. Every time, God shows up in those letters. One time I was supposed to speak and it was a big crowd. It was bigger than I was used to, and I didn’t know what I was going to say. I was freaking out. Twenty minutes before I spoke, I wrote, “Dear God, please give me the words tonight.” And then I wrote back, and God answered. I saw “Hi, Claudia. I really hadn’t thought about it. I thought you had it all handled.” My Higher Power shows up with a personality and a character, and I get to know that Higher Power and to know when he shows up.

Step Three is about how I finally take some action. I couldn’t turn my will and my life over, but there is a line in some of the literature that was really powerful for me. It talks about how a member tried to turn over her morning and pay attention to what happened. I don’t ask my sponsees to turn their will and their life over today. I ask them to turn over that red light or that electric bill. Start as small as you can -- the shoes you want -- I don’t care, but start turning things over and keeping track. A lot of times I’ll also ask sponsees to keep real records. I have them write about who they have trusted in their lives. I know that what we pay attention to improves.

Another tool for me in Step Three is to empty out my God box. When I feel totally hopeless and I just know nothing can go well, I empty out my God box on my desk and go through them one by one. Each time one by one, my Higher Power proves that he had an idea when I didn’t have any idea. I also ask my sponsees what being cared for means. A lot of my sponsees have no memory of being cared for, but when we talk about it, it seems like there’s always a grandparent or somebody. Then they can make their connection with being cared for by God. Step One, Two, and Three is not everything but it’s a good start.

Rick:

I always meet face to face with sponsees. We typically meet for an hour a week, and I mostly sponsor men.

The very first five minutes of the meeting, they may have some drama or something not directly related to what we're doing that they really need to get off their chest. If so, I let them do that first and that's the limit. I'll let him talk as long as they want if they want to talk about how they applied their program last week and what they did when things came up. From my perspective the absolute most important thing is putting it into action, just doing it. Usually, I have them read various readings and take notes. They bring them back and we discuss.

Everybody here is talking about some really cool things, and I appreciate everything that I've heard. Some were really, really good. My focus is maybe a little bit different than others, a little bit more on technique. Because I find it super helpful for me to ask a lot of questions, I'm going to go through these a step at a time here.

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives have become unmanageable. The focus of this Step for me is about being honest with yourself and about how it's affected you. I know my very first time I worked the Steps. I knew I was pretty powerless, yet I wasn't sure that my life was still unmanageable.

It took me a long time to get a sponsor. If there was a rating of 1 to 10, 10 being the most self-willed that you could possibly be, I think I was up near 10, and so of course I was full of fear. My whole life was based around fear and all those other things. I looked for a sponsor, but I couldn't find one good enough, if that makes sense. Finally, I found one after I started working the Steps by myself and had gotten stuck on Step Five. I found somebody and thought he would be okay and started working with him. After we spent about five weeks together as I read him my inventory, he said, "Are you done now?" and I said "Yeah," and he said, "Well okay... how are you feeling?" I told him, "I'm not feeling too good," so we started over at Step One.

I've done the Steps with maybe a couple dozen sponsees, and I used to let them pretty much decide to work from whatever book they like. Now I mostly focus on working from How Al-Anon Works. I like that a lot. The readings are beautiful.

We go a paragraph at a time, and we read through each one. Like Claudia, I have everybody go through and look up the definition of the words in each of the Steps. We're very focused on that. We'll read a paragraph and discuss it. I always ask, "How does this apply to you?" I'm really trying to understand how they identify with what is being said because it helped me a lot to feel like I wasn't alone. If somebody else wrote about it and it's exactly what I'm feeling, that is very cool.

A lot of times I see people that have difficulty understanding; they think they have control over all kinds of things in this Step. Someone will say, "Well, I don't know how or why I don't have control over these things." I typically ask him to come back with a simple list. On the left side you write down everything that you *can* control, and on the right side you write down everything that you *can't* control. We talk it over and usually the first time there's a lot of things on the side they *can* control. If they really can't, we talk about it. When it's all done there's only one thing they can really control and that's themselves. That's pretty eye-opening. It certainly helped me when I did that the first time.

If they're pretty new, we often will talk about the three C's: they didn't cause it, can't control it, and can't cure it. We also talk about surrender a lot. It inevitably comes up from using the *How Al-Anon Works* readings. Because I sponsor a lot of men, it usually means to them that if they surrender they lost the game. They feel like a loser. We have to go through that and look at what that really means. We talk about things like "Navy surrender" which is just being able to see what reality is really like. If you talk about military situations where you need to stop doing what you're doing because it's not working and you surrender, it's a strategic withdrawal or reassessment. This seems to go better with them, and they often get over the loser perspective.

The thing that we also end up talking a lot about is caring versus controlling. That is something that's very strange for almost every one of them. I ask, "Are you allowing the alcoholic to have dignity for themselves?" And that's like 180 degrees from how they're thinking. They're trying to save the person and their person is not responding, not paying attention, and not doing what they're being told to do.

Then the question comes up about how we ever got into this situation where we think that we're going to be able to save them. How did we ever come to this belief that somehow we're powerful enough to do that? And how did we become so disrespectful of them? Usually, these things are really eye openers. It's fascinating to listen to them talk about their experiences in all those regards.

Because this is the very first step and usually most of the people I work with are very new, what will inevitably come up is how they face up to the pain of having to watch their loved one self-destruct? And that's a deep conversation that usually goes pretty well.

How did we end up moving from focusing on ourselves to focusing on others? It comes down to asking how well is it working and what can you do to not feel so much pain? Realizing how destructive it's been for them really gets their attention. On this topic I often tell them a story about when I was learning to be a lifeguard. The teachers were saying, "When someone is drowning, they're usually panicking. They have adrenaline flowing inside of them. They're super strong and they're super stubborn. The worst thing you can possibly do is to rush in and just grab them and try to save them because

the tendency will be for them to grab you so hard that you will both end up drowning.” You stay away, watch them carefully until they start to become tired. And that reminds me so much of the program. By the time people end up at an Al-Anon meeting, they are pretty much done.

I also like to ask, “Are you willing to let go of your illusion of power over alcohol or other people?” They all think there's no *illusion* of power. They just have the power. That's always an interesting discussion to have. When they start to seem like they're understanding what the concepts are and what it's about, I ask them if they're ready to move on.

In my experience it doesn't really matter if it has really gotten all the way down into their heart. Even if it's just mostly in their head, that's usually good enough. With every new Step, the prior Step somehow seems to move into their hearts. I'm not sure how, but it just makes more sense to them, they're not thinking about it, and they're putting the pieces together. I'm careful to go back periodically and ask them how they feel about the prior step just to make sure that everything's good. If they feel in their hearts that it's true, then it's true for them. It takes different amounts of time for everybody on all these things.

Step Two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. This stuff is focused on hope for a better way, some kind of a solution.

I've discovered that some people, after they read the *How Al-Anon Works*, where everything is written in the “we” and “us” perspective, will start talking about somebody else that it applies to. I find it's really useful to have them go back and re-read the same sentence but make it personal. For example, if the sentence is about our relationships being damaged and our lives becoming unmanageable, I ask them to switch it to “my relationships” are damaged and “my life.” That helps to put them right there in the middle of it. It's then harder for them to say, “Well, that applies to my wife.” When my sponsor had me do that, I found that to be really helpful.

Many people that I work with really don't see how they're insane. They know their alcoholic or the person that brought them in is totally insane yet they really can't see how their thinking has become distorted. A lot of times I ask them to tell me a specific example of how they last tried to help the alcoholic. What was the result? I have them do that several times over and over, and they start to see some sort of real pattern there. Sometimes they tell me up front, and I don't have to ask.

Do they know that there is a real solution to fixing the alcoholic or the other person? That's a good question and if they're not really there, that gets their attention. Walking them through their own examples is helpful. Mostly, I deal with men who cannot bring themselves to ask for help. It's just “I would not ask for help. I'd rather die.” And that's usually why they're there; they're almost dead.

I do remind them that it's very safe for them to be in Al-Anon because they already know they're talking to people that understand. I like to ask, "Well, how did you feel after attending an Al-Anon meeting?" And almost inevitably they say that they always felt a little bit better. I'll ask them, "Well, do you know why you feel better?" And they just don't know why. And I say, "You will understand a lot of this. There are some answers in working the Steps."

I ask them what a Power greater than ourselves means? Their answers will always provide me a clue on how they're going to interpret the third Step when we get to it. The main thing in Step Two is for them to stop thinking they have all the solutions and answers and to start thinking about getting help from someplace other than themselves. Step Two in action would be any example they can give about something that caused them to feel better about their situation with the alcoholic. It does suggest that Step Two is true in their lives.

Step Three is one of my favorite Steps. It was so difficult for me because I spent a lot of time trying to develop a God as I understood him. Good luck with that! If you can understand God let me know because my experience is that never happened and never will. And after I worked the Steps my experience was that I didn't really need to. I just needed to pray and know that something was there. And when I prayed to it, I would get guidance and I would get power to do what I needed to do. What that power was seemed no longer important to me

My takeaway on that is that we're basically just opening a door. In Step Three, they're just making a decision to turn themselves toward that door and they know that there's another answer -- to give themselves over to something that can take care of them. I ask a lot of them to read the Step and I say, "What does that mean to you?" 75-80% of them think that the Step is to turn your life over to God, and right away they say, "No way that's gonna happen!" I don't know what it is. That's how it worked with my brain at first too; they don't see the word "care" anywhere in it. It's nice to get them focused on what that is.

Most of the people I work with have had pretty healthy childhoods. I will sometimes say, "Well, this kind of sounds like how my mom used to treat me." And it helps them too. I think it's important to find out or think about who cared for them. If they can see how that's so valuable, then they can share that. The other thing is that they're just making a decision. They don't actually have to give themselves over. I explain that it will come when they work the rest of the Steps.

Some people hate God. The good news about that is they actually believe. In those cases, I've found this really helpful. I say, "Why don't you fire your God and make a want ad for a new God?" They bring it back, and we read it over. They're always usually saying things like, "I want a God that loves me and takes care of me," and this

kind of stuff. When we're all done, I just suggest that maybe that's their new God. I never thought that would be true, but it usually works for them. They say, "Yay, that's good. I like that." They pretty much wrote their own script for what their God was to be.

I've dealt with two 100% atheists and both of them came to the consensus that the Power greater than them was the group or the people in the groups. Any God is enough. As I said, the main thing is just to have the door open so that they're willing to make the decision.

Questions and Member Shares:

Question: Debbie, with five sponsees, how do you balance service and your own needs?

Panelist response (Debbie): It's taken me a while to learn that. Some of them are needier than others. Lots of times I have to think about what my priorities are. Not all of them need to meet every week. Some of them are casual sponsees and others are not. I have one that sends me her writings on the Steps and Traditions that she's working on every day, and I respond to that. Then we get together when she finishes one. It's not as involved as you might think. If I have five people and I had to meet with them all for an hour to an hour and a half, that would take up way too much time. We do a lot of phone calling, and they are not always consistently working at the same pace.

Question: How do you help people who struggle with the concept of a Higher Power? Have you worked with atheists, and what helped them find a Power greater than themselves?

Panelist response (Claudia): I recently made amends to a sponsee I hadn't seen in a long long time. When I worked with her, I believed that it was my job in Step Two to help her come to an understanding of *my* Higher Power. She was an atheist, and I thought that was the wrong way to go. I work differently today, and I'm grateful that I work differently. I liked what Rick had to say about questions and just opening up the playing field. I will often ask them, "Tell me about this guy that you don't believe in." A lot of times they don't believe in somebody who sits on a throne with a long white beard, and I can agree with that. Sometimes it's a committee of living and dead people, and they may say, "I wonder what they would think." If they can't yet get to a Power *greater* than myself, it takes creativity on their part. Sometimes it's just moving from no Higher Power at all to a Power *other* than myself.

Panelist response (Rick): When I was working with one atheist sponsee, I made the mistake of trying to suggest that he should pray; it didn't go well. He said, "Well, you

know I just don't do that." I picked up a few books on Neurology and the structure of the brain and Psychology. The next time we met, I said, "Maybe there's a part inside of you that you're not consciously aware of that has a lot of solutions for you. Maybe you just can pray to that part of you and see what happens." Whether he did it or not afterwards I don't know; maybe I was overreaching. For myself, I find prayer is absolutely essential. I no longer struggle with having to know what this Higher Power greater than me is. I don't know where my prayers go. I just know that they go somewhere, and I get some answers, direction, and the power to do things I need to do. I will tell them that that's what happens to me, and I can't tell you if it's a God or not. Sometimes I think that might help. Just don't try to push anything of your own onto them. That's all I know.

Question: How do you know when a sponsee is ready to move on to the next Step?

Panelist response (Claudia): Mostly I follow their lead, but you get to know what a sponsee needs. Sometimes they want it done perfectly, and I can relate with that. I have sponsees who would be on Step One still if I would have gone along with them and now they're in the concepts. A lot of sponsees don't realize this is not going to be their only rodeo. And I just talk to them about what is important to know and understand and put in their life before they move on to the next Step. That's really what it's about for me. Thanks.

Panelist response (Debbie): Somebody told me once, "It's not just a one and done." So, just keep moving forward. And if you need to go back, go back and explore that Step some more.

Sometimes it's real obvious. One sponsee works very diligently. She is on a path like me. She wants to go through them; she wants to understand them. It's really easy to say she's ready to move on to the next one when she finishes her reading and answers the questions. At the end of a step, I have her write a little summary of anything new that she learned or hadn't thought about before. It's just all individual, and I agree that some of my sponsees will stay on a step forever because they don't want to move on to the next one.

Panelist response (Rick): My experience is that I sort of sense from what they're saying that they're starting to get it. I start asking if they are ready to move on and for a summary of what you've learned in this step. Most of the time, that seems to work just fine. I try to keep moving forward. We keep going with the literature, stay on it, and some things will stick with people. We just work around it in different ways.

The thing about a Higher Power in Step Three is one of those things that can be really hard for people to move past if they really don't have something that they can at least hold on to. I just do my best to say, "You don't have to know the answer to this. You're just making a decision to go in this direction." And that seems to help a lot of them. I just ask if they think they're ready.

Member share (Terry): Before I share, I just wanted to go back briefly to the question about working with atheists and agnostics.

When I came into the program, I was somewhere in between being an atheist and an agnostic; I didn't grow up with faith. One of the things that was helpful to me and that I hear often in our meetings is that this program is a spiritual program and not a religious program. We can all create our Higher Power. Being a child of the '60s my previous sponsor used to say, "With our Higher Powers, we can just roll our own." I wanted to add that.

One helpful thing that I was thinking about is working the first three Steps together. I think you do need to work through them individually, but it also helps to look at them as a group. The shorthand is: "I can't, you can, I think I'll let you." And when I was first new in the program, that was kind of a nice little mantra I could use in the morning.

I was fortunate to have a wonderful sponsor for 10 years before she moved across the country. I've actually really struggled to find another sponsor. There's my true confession about sponsors and sponsorship. It really pains me a lot that I don't have someone here in Juneau anymore that is a close sponsor. I can always call her and there are members to talk to, but I'm searching for that sponsor.

One thing I like to have my sponsees do on the First Step is write out what they're trying to control. Then they write out what they are powerless over. We then talk about how similar these things are and how oftentimes it's just one list. The Serenity Prayer also really helps me with the first three Steps. Every day I can say that prayer and ask myself, what am I trying to control and what am I powerless over? The answer is usually pretty obvious.

Question: Claudia, in Step Two, you mentioned that you have your sponsees keep a journal. This person would appreciate some clarification on what you keep/use the journal for.

Panelist response (Claudia): I call it a "Blessing Book," and they write down any experience they have where it seems like a good possibility that it came from a Power greater than themselves. I told this story of this \$1700 dollar check. That's in my Blessing book, and it's evidence. When I go back through that Blessing book, I find evidence that my Higher Power keeps showing up.

Question: We do a lot of writing while working Steps but how do you work with a sponsee who doesn't learn well that way?

Panelist response (Rick): I worked with a sponsee once who didn't read very much; he was not very good at it. He was a great storyteller though, and so we just did things

pretty much verbally. We talked about stuff in normal, everyday conversations. I would read some of the text. I'd ask, "Do you mind if I read?" He'd say, "No," and I would just read and then we talked about it. There are different things you can do. I find that it's hard to get men to do a lot of writing, but maybe it's because I don't ask them.

Panelist response (Claudia): I know the power of writing. If they cannot write, that's one thing. Then there are stories they or I will read, and we will tell stories around the Steps, but some people just don't want to. I once had a sponsee who did not want to write, and I just insisted that she write some. She was amazed to find out that writing rather than typing slowed her brain down enough to shut the little itty-bitty committee off.

Panelist response (Debbie): I would just say that that's an interesting concept. I have some sponsees that do not write their questions out so I'll have to consider that.

Question: How do you handle it when you're working with a sponsee carrying a ton of pain?

Panelist response (Rick): I've had a couple of sponsees who've come in just so resentful that they've wasted so much of their lives. I find it super helpful to start reading some readings on forgiveness. The objective being for them to forgive themselves. Some of the readings on forgiveness help them understand that they don't have to keep beating themselves up. There are different types of pain so it's important to try and understand what the source is.

Panelist response (Claudia): I think I've had a lot of low bottom Al-Anons because I was one. There's been some articles out lately about the antidote to addiction being connection, and I have found that to be true for myself and for others. A lot of the people I sponsor start with no skills in sharing themselves and making connections. One of the things I truly believe in is "the meeting after the meeting." The opportunity to say, "Ah, I'm okay, how are you?" Anything that works. My job as a sponsor more than anything else is using love and intuition.

Panelist response (Debbie): I agree with that. I think that it has taught me to be compassionate towards those who are struggling. I know one sponsee was living with an active alcoholic, and I really could not comprehend that because I would have left that person a long time ago. I got to understand that she loved the person. This went on and on and on, and I never tried to convince her to leave while all her friends were saying, "You need to leave him." Finally one day I just said to her, "How much more abuse do you want to take?" and she said, "That was the one thing I needed to hear." I didn't even know where that came from (well I do know where that came from). But I was very patient with her. I tried to be compassionate. I listened the time she called the police and this and that. I tried to be sympathetic and tried to encourage her to admit her powerlessness, to just use the Steps we had worked through on that. I think

in that case she just needed reassurance because it is very difficult when you want to take a different stance and are changing things that have been going on for a while.

It's scary. I remember the first time I said "No" in a relationship I was in; I was nearly undone. It wasn't pain, but I was just beside myself and I immediately called my sponsor. I told her, "I just said 'No' and I feel really yucky and it's awful." And she said, "Of course you feel that way because you've always said 'Yes' when you meant 'No.'" So, I understand that it's hard to make those changes, and we must be supportive when somebody is going through a painful experience.

Member share (Richard): This was a really great listening experience for me when I came into the program. In college I had taken Theology. I was also raised with a lot of spiritual people, but all that love and experience came through the filter of alcoholism. For me it all got twisted into ideas of guilt, shame, and judgment, and also the idea of having to earn. It was great for me when my first sponsor was showing me how he was working through the Steps.

He was just totally different from me. While I was very conservative and closed in on myself, he was just sort of an outrageous crazy character. He was talking about how his alcoholic version of God was this deadbeat that was screwing up his life. He said, "He wasn't doing the job so I had to fire him. I wrote him a pink slip and got rid of him." And he made it so funny where I was wanting to make it serious; that was just the perfect antidote for me.

I also remember how he really listened to me and somehow, when I would be in a spot, there would be a part of me that didn't want to call him up. I thought I knew what he would say, and I didn't want to hear it. Then I would call him up, and he would say something totally different. It would be just what I needed to hear. I think that was because he really listened to me.

There was power in him seeing/hearing something different than I was saying. I remember early on when someone talked about difficulty in saying "No." He challenged me to say "No" to every request during that day. It started out really easy just doing that, and then it got a little hard so I had to tell them "I'm doing this because my sponsor told me to." I got the experience of seeing myself being a people pleaser. That's really where I learned. It helped because of my background of thinking that pleasing was the way to God. It wasn't a gate; it got in my way. I try to work with people through their experiences.

My wife just invited a new person in the program to call me up to be his sponsor. I said, "Before you even start the Steps, have you learned something from the first couple of meetings?" He got excited and told me a few things. I think that's good because you want to believe that the program works before you start the Steps. The Steps aren't going to be easy. They confront you with things that you're not going to

want to change. You have to have a reason to change. Believing in the program gives you the drive to move forward. As was mentioned before, I also think they should talk to others. What they hear might be just as good. I'm no guru. I'm just another member.

I remember early on I heard this person say, "You know, I heard what this person said about the Higher Power and I picked that out. Someone else said a little bit about their Higher Power so I picked that out. Then another and another and I had this image of this Higher Power." While sitting there at the meeting listening to this guy, I thought "I could do that." But then he said it didn't work because he had everybody else's idea of a Higher Power and not his own." And I said, "Oh crap!"

The most important thing is to listen and keep encouraging them to move forward. As Rick said, you come to the Higher Power and whatever it is for you, that first Step is enough. I must guard myself against intellectualizing and thinking, "Oh, I want you to get where I am." I have a sponsee whose Higher Power is the program but I'm not sure about that; it doesn't seem very personal. How do I get to a point where the God I turn my will over to doesn't even know me – that it's just the program? As I say, it's *my* struggle sometimes to just be all right where he's at. I must accept and allow him to work his way through to wherever God wants him to be.

Member share (Michelle): When Rick was talking about helping his sponsees learn the difference between caring and control, I was really struck by it. That is an ongoing lesson for me, and I'm fascinated at how people who have ended up being my sponsees face a similar struggle. That's one of the ways that sponsorship helps me grow, and I hope it helps them grow too.

When I was growing up and also when I was raising my own children, I really thought that the way to express love was to keep an eye on things, keep my hand in things, and make sure that everybody had a soft place to land if they fell down. I didn't recognize that letting go of control didn't mean I didn't care. I was confused. I didn't understand that loving someone was enough and that it doesn't have to be this constant struggle and effort of maneuvering, manipulating, and managing.

I find that a couple of my sponsees who have adult children have these issues. It's hard to know when to let go. I really love working with them because what we talk about is also what I need to hear. I keep getting these reminders because it's not like I've got it all figured out. When I was with a sponsee the other day, I said, "While we're together, why don't you write a list of the things that you are powerless over?" And everything on the list was pretty much someone's name and a problem that followed it.

That was great for me too because that's what my life was about before I got into this program. How do I manage everything that's going on with everybody else so then I

will feel okay? As long as they keep doing what I need them to do, my life will be fine. Then I don't have to spend a lot of time on my life.

In a strong sponsorship relationship, I really find I am learning and growing along with my sponsees. That is a complete surprise to me. I really thought my sponsor just knew everything, and she would just tell it all to me. I never really grasped how much she was getting out of it until I became a sponsor too.

Question: Rick, what do you tell a sponsee who says the alcoholic does not deserve dignity or respect? What guidance do you provide?

Panelist response (Rick): In my mind, the sponsee needs to heal a little bit before they can even understand the reason why they would even want to look beneath the surface of what's going on with the alcoholic. In the forgiveness section of How Al-Anon Works, it talks about looking beneath the surface and finding that part of them that deserves love. Further along in the program, there will be a time and a place for that, and it will start to make sense to them. In the meantime, while they think the alcoholic is the most evil person in the world, that's fine. I just remind them to focus on yourself.

Question: How has your program grown by sponsoring others?

Member response (Claudia): I've heard that if you want to learn something, you can read on it, you can practice, or you can train. But if you really want to learn something, you teach it. I may believe I know what the first Step is all about, but when a sponsee asks, "What does that have to do with personal responsibility?" Hold on --I really have to think more deeply about my program.

Somebody once told me that early on in Al-Anon, we learn about the Steps and what the words mean. Then we go a little deeper, and we learn how to act on those principles. Then we go a little deeper and deeper until after maybe 30 or 35 years, our program and our recovery is in our cells. My story is that when it's going to be in my cells, I won't have to think anymore. I won't have to shut my mouth or sit on my hands, because I'll be so holy.

Member response (Rick): From my perspective it's been unbelievable. For as many sponsees as I've had, I have that many perspectives of how to see the world. After hearing a number of Fifth Steps, it's become so clear to me how much more we are alike than different. I've really come to feel much more connected with people. We all have these same fundamental fears deep inside of having heard other people voice the exact same things over and over. I say the flavor of the ice cream is different, but it's still ice cream.

Member response (Debbie): I've really appreciated each one of my sponsees because working with them makes me think about my own recovery. For example, I have one person that has a medical condition where her cognitive thinking is a lot slower. As a result, I've had to really slow down. I like to chat, and I'll be rattling away and she'll say, "Can you repeat that?" I say, "I don't even know what I just said to you." It's really caused me to stop and think.

Recently she was sharing a situation that was troubling her while her parents were in town visiting. She was having a little bit of a struggle, and I said, "It's very similar to what I do with my husband." I shared the example of how it used to bug me when he'd leave his dishes in the sink. I'd sometimes leave them there and then get all frustrated with him. Now I know I can just wash up that dish and not even let it even bother me. She said, "Oh, is that what you do?" I said, "No, but that's what I'm going to start doing!" Sometimes when I'm sharing with them, I'm actually getting feedback for myself. That's kind of how my Higher Power sometimes has a good chuckle on me.

Question: Do you share your story first with sponsees to ease their fear of sharing themselves?

Panelist response (Rick): I don't usually tell my whole story because it's too much. I do tell related pieces of my story when they're relevant to something that the person has said. I'm really more interested in what they have to say, and they don't I need to hear my story again and again.

Panelist response (Claudia): The East Valley has a monthly meal event with both an Al-Anon and AA speaker. When I was new, I would come in just in time for the speaker to start, sit in the corner, and just listen. From hearing other people's stories, I found out that I belonged. I will often tell a sponsee my story, especially one that struggles with sharing themselves. A big part of my story is not being able to share myself because if you knew me, you wouldn't like me. When I tell them what it was really like for me at first, it's really powerful.

A friend of mine told me that whenever there's a newcomer in a meeting, there should be a hologram over everybody's head that shows what they looked like when they came into their first meeting.

But now I think there ought to be a hologram over our heads that shows our Higher Power. If there are 20 Al-Anon's sitting there, then there are 20 different Higher Powers and then it may be not so overwhelming.