

Arizona Sponsorship Workshop

Thursday, October 3, 2019

Segment Two – The Twelve Steps and working the program:

- What does it mean to “work” the Steps or the program?
- How can the Twelve Steps help me?
- Benefits of working the Steps with a sponsor
- How do I know who’s working the Steps?

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.

Reprinted with permission of Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., Virginia Beach, VA

Trevor:

I appreciate the opportunity to talk today. I must start off by saying I have only been in the program for a few months now. I am a newbie. Contrary to what I thought when I started --

that I was going to roll through all these Steps and be done right away -- that's not the way it works. My goal here in sharing is just to tell you my experience, how I got to where I am today, and how it's working for me today.

I came to Al-Anon because I realized that something had to change. My qualifier got a DUI over ten years ago. I started to notice some of the same things going on in her life, and I didn't want us to do that again. She has an eating disorder and with that she drinks and that allows her to eat.

I grabbed an Al-Anon pamphlet and was looking at it. I don't know if any of you have ever done that, but you can open it up or look at the website. I could immediately identify all these things that said, "me, me, me" all over them. You can't sleep at night, you find yourself worrying about other people, on and on and on. I came to Al-Anon so that I could try to help control the situation. I know before that I would try to control things. I would go with my wife to the grocery store and try to prevent her from buying alcohol. I would search cabinets and do all the things that an Al-Anon in this brochure says that we do. I travel a lot and it was eating me up, being gone, thinking about what was going on at home.

The more I felt like my life was out of control, the more I tried to control it and the more stressed I got. So I decided I needed to go to a meeting. The first meeting I went to had a beginners meeting. I met some great people, was hugged at the door, and they told me about the Three C's -- I didn't cause it, I can't control it, and I can't cure it. Hearing those with the Serenity Prayer right off the bat helped me start to relax and get some peace.

I went into my first meeting. I've been going about two and a half months. Once you go in as a new person, you're sort of overwhelmed with all the literature. I started out with just one book, and now I'm carrying around a book bag of all these different books. I've got ODAT (One Day at a Time), the Traditions book and all this stuff. I was overwhelmed with everything, trying to do it myself. It's like taking a college course and not having a professor or study partner or anybody to go through this stuff with. I needed somebody that could help.

What do you want to have with a sponsor? With my other friends not really being in this situation, I couldn't confide in them the way I do with my sponsor. It's been good to be able to bounce stuff back and forth with somebody else. He helped me unpack the literature. He's kind of like my Yoda Master in some ways. My sponsor asks pointed questions which help me self-reflect on my life. For an example, he had me write out an exercise and some of the questions he had were: What am I powerless over? What does powerless look like? My life is unmanageable because _____. What would I like to have in a wife? He had me write on these items and go through and talk about them. I thought, hey, I'm really getting this. He switched it around again like he always does, and he said, "I want you to be this person for her. This is the person that you should be." And that is one of the failings that I've had always from the beginning. I thought always that I could control things being the right person and that I was doing everything right. In retrospect, I wasn't. I need to get better myself, and that's why I'm here.

Find that person that you can have that kinship with, working on getting better. It's a slow process. That person will hold you accountable for what's going on in your life. You've got to make the Al-Anon meetings a priority, you've got to make service a priority, so here I am just starting out and talking to you. I'm trying. That's the great thing about everybody else in the program, they're all trying.

What does it mean to work the Steps? Well, I'm just past Step 1, and I feel like celebrating a bit. It takes a while. For all of you beginners like me, it's going to take you a long time to get through these. And they certainly help. They help me get some serenity and peace back in my life.

How do I know who's working the Steps? I think it's just evident in the person and the way they act.

Mike:

What brought me into Al-Anon was I'm married to an alcoholic, which wasn't evident until about ten or fifteen years into our marriage. I saw the progressive nature of the disease of alcoholism. I didn't know it at the time, but I was experiencing the same progressiveness of my Al-Anonism. My irritability, impatience, level of anxiety, and fears just kept growing slowly over time. As we hear in our welcome often, we become irritable and unreasonable without knowing it.

That was a real awakening when I showed up to my first Al-Anon meeting. I didn't even notice that after a while, I'd become just somebody that you'd not want to live with, put it that way. I had two kids at home at the time. They weren't afraid of my wife -- they were mostly afraid of me -- how I was going to react to somebody else's drinking, disease, choices, and actions. You know, it was my reactions that were causing the problems in my home. It wasn't so much the alcoholism. It was the damage that my actions brought on after the fact.

Shortly after starting to come to meetings, I worked the first five Steps on my own before I got a sponsor and did them all in my first meeting. I looked at Step 1 and said, "Yeah I've done that." Step 2 -- I've done that, and I got to Step 5 and I realized I couldn't keep going because I have to talk to somebody else. There was a guy that encouraged me to go to meetings, and he joined me at my first few meetings. I felt comfortable. He asked me every time he saw me if I had a sponsor yet, and I didn't know what a sponsor was and I didn't really care enough to ask him. I would just say, "No, I'm doing ok. I've got this." After a couple of months, I thought, "Wow, this guy really wants to sponsor me, I think!" I'm not always quick on the uptake.

I was afraid to ask him to sponsor me because I was afraid of the work that might come with that. I was afraid of the things that I might be asked to do, but things weren't really getting that much better for me. I'd been attending Al-Anon meetings for a few months. They helped, but things weren't really changing in terms of my own behavior. I was pretty desperate when I

showed up, but I started to get more desperate after I got here because the progression continued, both with my wife's disease and with my own. So I asked him to sponsor me.

One of the talking points is "What does it mean to work the Steps of the Program?" I just did it exactly the way my sponsor laid it out in front of me. There are some of those Steps that are action steps, where I've got to do certain things. I've got to write, I've got to read, I've got to pray, I've got to meditate. Some of the steps in the program for me are process steps. CAME to believe. That didn't happen for me overnight. That was a process. I like the way my sponsor explained that Step to me, which was if the Step said, "We believe," most of us would get stuck right there at Step 2 and not be able to move on.

He had a way of explaining the Steps to me that I would have never considered and offered a perspective that I was not going to be able to come up with on my own. He let me know that this says, "We CAME to believe." Are you willing to believe that? Are you willing to give that a shot? Are you open-minded enough to consider the fact that there might possibly be something out there bigger or more powerful than yourself that could help you? And if you can understand that, if you can get that, that's enough of a crack in the door to move on. I had to do some writing and reading around that.

When it comes to what does it mean to work the Steps of the program, I just have to be willing to be open-minded. I need to bring as much honesty as I'm capable of bringing to the relationship with my sponsor. I need to be willing to do whatever it is I'm asked to do and absolutely trust the fact that he would never ask me to do anything illegal, immoral, or dishonest. So what reason would I have to not be willing to do pretty much anything that I was asked to do? A lot of it I did with some hesitation and reluctance. Sometimes I whined and kicked and screamed and had little tantrums. He said that's all well and good, but just do it, and I don't really care how you feel about it. Just do it. And that worked for me.

The next talking point is "How can the Twelve Steps Help Me?" For me, the core of the Steps is to create a spiritual awakening of the likes that I have not experienced before. That's what the Steps do for me if I am thorough and honest in my work and if I am open-minded through the process. I just don't think it's possible for anybody to work the Twelve Steps and not have some level of spiritual awakening.

Our perceptions are different. I really appreciated listening to what Trevor was talking about and hearing him share. I enjoy listening to people that are a little bit newer in the program. You know it reminds me exactly of where I was the day I walked in here. We don't always know and we don't always trust the process, but we're willing to give it a try, and we're willing to get to that Twelfth Step that tells us "having had that spiritual awakening."

What keeps me coming back is that I know I'm not done. I know I'm not done growing, that spiritual experience is not over, and that awakening is not over. The more I keep coming back and the more I work with others, that is enhanced. The benefits of working with a sponsor -- I can only speak for myself and my experience in this. There is just no way I could have ever done this on my own. My beliefs were so rooted in my own experience, in my own tunnel vision view

of life and alcoholism. I would never have had the perspective that it really took for me to have a change in perceptions.

When I'm working with a sponsor, I'm working with someone who is not emotionally involved in my life, my problems, and my situation. He has a more objective view. He can see what's going on in my life from the outside looking in and is able to be honest about what things really look like when I'm not able to. I have all these preconceived notions and ideas. I have these perceptions and, most importantly, I have an emotional attachment to my own life and it gets in the way. It's hard for me to see that line between what's helping and what's hurting. Where am I crossing that line between being the type of partner in my marriage that God would want me to be and contributing to somebody else's disease? I can't always see that. For me, it's like being in a building and it's on fire and it's filled with smoke and the exit is right in front of me, but I can't see it. My sponsor can see those things. He's able to bring that clarity to the situation. Trust me, I don't always want to hear what he says, but the truth is, I do want to hear what he says. It just doesn't always feel good. The truth doesn't always feel good. But I know today, after having been here for a little while, after having worked these Steps, having sponsored others through the Steps; what I know today is that feeling of discomfort is a red flag. That means I've got something to work on. I've got another opportunity in front of me.

He kept it simple for me in the beginning. It was let's start showing up in your relationship the way your God would want you to show up. What are some of the characteristics of your Higher Power? What does that look like? Let's start being an example of what that looks like. And slowly over time, I was able to start replacing judgment and criticism with love and understanding. It doesn't mean that things immediately got better in my house. They didn't. It took a little while; my wife's drinking continued for a while after I started going to Al-Anon. I noticed that even though that was continuing, I was getting better as a process of working these Steps with a sponsor. Had I tried to do it on my own, it just wouldn't have worked.

If I had the answers, if I had the solutions, if I had better ideas, then I wouldn't need to be here. What brought me here was running out of ideas and being out of options. Like he said to me, "If you're not done thinking, then go get done thinking and come back when you're ready." But I didn't have any better ideas, and I knew from a practical standpoint I didn't have the answers. That's why it was so critical for me to work the Steps with a sponsor who could share his experience of the process with me.

That last talking point is, "How do I know who's working the Steps?" I can see it in their examples and in how they show up. It really is not my business to pass judgment or have an opinion on that. My job is to show up and be the best example of what God's love can look like that I can be. When I'm looking for a sponsor, if that's what this is really geared toward, how do I know who's working the Steps when I'm trying to find a sponsor? I am simply looking for somebody that exhibits some of the principles of this program: kindness, understanding, love, and tolerance.

The biggest thing for me with sponsorship is honesty. I'm not going to grow or receive the benefits of this unless I have a sponsor who is absolutely honest with me. I trust that process

and trust that there's a God in the process. I trust the fact that this person was put in my life for a reason. I don't always know why, but I trust the fact that it works.

JP:

I'm a grateful member of the worldwide fellowship of Al-Anon Family Groups, which includes Alateen. When I think back to when I heard someone say that, I kind of wanted to gag. I stayed with the program long enough to understand what it means and am so happy I did.

My situation was a little different. When I came into the program, my wife had been in the program for fifteen years, and she left the literature around the house. I had read the literature. I read most of it before I got to the program, but I certainly didn't work it, and it certainly didn't do as much good as it's been since then. The real reason why it didn't was because of the first word of the first Step: "We." I didn't have a "we" that was working it. And that's an important part of this fellowship.

What does it mean to work the Steps of the program? To me, it means I learn about it and try to live them.

The speaker then read from page 141 out of One Day At a Time.

One of the cases of this was for me, and I figured it out. I had listened to the Steps read a thousand times before someone read Step 11 with a different tone and I understood for the first time that Step 11 says, "Praying only for **knowledge** of His will..." It doesn't say understanding. I'd always been looking for understanding. That in and of itself said I wasn't really doing Step 3. I was really saying, "Okay God, I'll do this if I agree with it." But if I only look for knowledge, there is nothing to argue about; there's nothing to agree with. It is what it is. So that repetitive reading of those and hearing somebody else read them totally turned that Step around for me. It has been very powerful in my life.

I'll just finish this up, "They seem to dig into our consciousness and unearth for us the wonderful potential for good in all our relationships with life." And then the quote is, "If I had only half an hour of quiet time alone each day, I would devote it to studying the Twelve Steps so they would ultimately become an integral part of my thinking." And that's really what I want to do. I want to think and I want to act consistently with the program.

I came into the program because of our youngest son's drinking. It says in our opening that we "become irritable and unreasonable without knowing it." I knew it. I was irritable and unreasonable, and I knew it, and couldn't do anything about it. That pointed out to me that I qualify for Step Two in that I have an insanity from which I needed to be restored. That's what got me to go to my first Al-Anon meeting.

I'm glad I did. I got started right away with the study of the Steps. For the first twenty or so years in the program, I went to a Step Study meeting every week. We went through the Steps

and when we got done with that, we went through the Steps again. Now, we'd take a break the third week of each month, study the Traditions, but then we'd go back to the Steps.

Over that time, I got to hear a lot of different people share their perspective and their understanding. That greatly advanced my understanding because people presented ideas that I did not get just by reading it myself. That breadth of input meant very much to me learning what the Steps meant.

As far as a sponsor goes, I had a live-in sponsor. For Steps One, Two and Three, she was there. However, when I got to Step Four, this was a problem because I wasn't so fearless that I was going to do a Step Four with my wife. There was a slight pause for five years while I decided to do Step Four. At this Step meeting that I went to every week, we would spend two weeks on Step Four to make sure everyone got a chance to share. Every week I'd say "Well, I haven't really started this Step and I don't know why." After I shared that for a year or two or three or four, a lady said, "I can tell you why you're not doing Step Four. It's because you're afraid of Step Five." And of course, she was right! I couldn't do Step Four until I found somebody with whom I could do Step Five. When I found that person, Step Four was easy. That's the wrong term. It was doable. I did my fourth and fifth Step with him and was able to move along since.

I can't say that I was as good a sponsee as I am a sponsor. I take a lot of guys through the program today. I sponsor several of them and make them work. I use the *Paths to Recovery* and expect my sponsees to write out the answers to all the questions at the back of those chapters on the Steps. When we get to Step Four, I ask them to do the *Blueprint for Progress*. We go through it together, reviewing it a chapter at a time. I expect them to write out the answers. Of course, if I was going to ask somebody else to do that, I had to do it myself. I also wrote out all the answers to those questions myself. Then as we would go through it, we would help each other a chapter at a time. We were kind of doing a 4th and 5th Step together. As I took more and more guys through those books, I was going back reading my answers and was able to see how I had changed over the course of the years. I've been doing it for a number of years now and my answers today are very different than what they were. I thank God for that because it shows me some growth.

In Step Four, it's frequently mentioned that it's like peeling the layers of an onion. At first, that kind of disturbed me, but then I came to an understanding of that. That's my Higher Power's way of protecting me. I can only deal with a layer of Step Four that I am willing and that I am able to work with. When I grow some more, I can come back and do another layer of that onion -- another layer of what is in my life that is keeping me from being all that I can be. Step Four is very, very powerful to me and we spend a lot of time on it. I have had sponsees that have taken 18 months to do a Step Four, and it was fine. I let my sponsees go at their speed. I don't push them, I don't pull them. I encourage them, and I expect to talk to them every week. But how fast we get through it is up to them, not up to me. Because I don't know how long they need. So that's the way I do it.

Then it says, "How can the Twelve Steps help me?" Well, the Twelve Steps help me in every part of my life. I wish I'd had these when my kids were younger. I would have done some things

differently looking back. But I'm a GREAT grandfather. I am doing that very well, and I have the program to thank for that because it helps me to grow. Overall, that is what the Twelve Steps did.

Now, I go back to Step 11 because today I try to live by Step 11, and that is "Praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out." First, I have no problem with the power to carry it out. If I'm doing my Higher Power's will, I know I will have the power to do that. It's when I'm doing my will that I don't have the power. All I need to know today is what does He want me to do. I don't have to understand why. I just need to know what. And that has helped me. Sometimes, I only need to know what to do in the next five minutes or the next half hour.

I never ask about tomorrow, I only ask Him about today. That allows me to not worry about the future and not concern myself too much with the past because I'm only doing what I know and my Higher Power I call God keeps my time frame reference very short which is good for me. I have no reason to fear because the next five minutes I see no disaster hitting me. If I get to tomorrow or next week or a month or a year down the road, there's all kinds of disasters. But I only have to worry about today. I only have to worry about the next five minutes. So that's how Step 11 has helped me. It's shortened my time horizon and has kept me focused on what I can do and not about what I can worry about.

Step 12. I thank God that I have had the result of these steps. The result of the Steps is a spiritual awakening. I'm much closer today to my Higher Power than I ever was before. So that spiritual awakening changes the way I look at life. It helps me to see life differently, and the people around me appreciate that. I'm in technology, so I refer to myself as JP Version 2.0, and Version 2.0 is much better than Version 1.0 was. People seem to enjoy it much more.

The benefits of working the Steps with a sponsor. Like I said, I didn't do that as well as I could have. I know as a sponsor, I'm okay. As a sponsee, I'm lousy.

How do I know who's working the steps? Is that any of my business? The only thing I can do is I observe people over time. And if you watch them in meetings, you can see the tension go out of their bodies. And that's the way I know they're working the Steps. If they're working the program, they are growing. The tension and their ability to laugh is much different than what it was. And with that, I think I'm going to close. Thank you.

Question: How has working Step 1 changed the way you relate to your wife?

Panelist Response (Trevor): I just have more serenity, and I'm more at peace now when I work with my wife. I try to look more introspectively at myself on how I want to be treated and to recognize the disease for what it is.

Question: How did you know when you were ready to sponsor?

Panelist Response (Mike): I knew I was ready to sponsor when my sponsor told me I was ready to sponsor. Really, that's where I get my direction. I follow that lead and, in my particular case, he told me that when I had completed Step 3 and that I had made the decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of my Higher Power that I was now ready. Everybody's experience with that is a little different, but that was mine. At that point, he said, "Start raising your hand, start talking to newcomers, start going to where potential sponsees are, and start carrying the message."

Question: You said when you came in, that you didn't have a "we." How did you develop support in Al-Anon?

Panelist Response (JP): It was before I came to Al-Anon that I didn't have a "we." It was when I was reading the literature at home. Within the fellowship, really as soon as I went to my first meeting, I felt very accepted and I felt a part of the group. That, by itself, was enough to create a "we." I saw the people that had been in the program for a while and the peace and serenity they had, and I wanted to be a part of that. So that's where the "we" came from for me.

Question: How has your style of sponsorship changed over time?

Panelist Response (JP): I'm easier today. I give my sponsees more options than I used to. I continue to use *Paths to Recovery*, though I may switch over to the new book, *Reaching for Personal Freedom*. If I get a new sponsee, we might go through that. I'm taking another of my sponsees through it, though he's already done *Paths to Recovery*. Now we'll probably do *Reaching for Personal Freedom*. Now when I say, "Go through the *Paths to Recovery*," that's the Steps, the Traditions, and the Concepts. We do them all.

Question: What is the toughest time you've had with a sponsee and how did you navigate it?

Panelist Response (Mike): Early on as a sponsor, I don't think I grasped the idea that I did not have the power to cure somebody. I understood that from the perspective of alcoholism in my wife, but I was struggling as a new sponsor. Like JP mentioned, he doesn't push them through the Steps or pull them through. They're going to work the Steps at their pace. At first, I was pushing and I was pulling, and I was getting frustrated when a sponsee didn't seem as concerned about their recovery as I did.

It reminded me why I'm in Al-Anon, right? Because I care more about what they're doing than they did. And I had to learn how to back off from that. I had to learn how to work with guys where they're at knowing that we all come from a place of different experiences. At the same

time, the challenge for me was to learn how to maintain consistency in the way we approach our Step work regardless of what somebody's experience has been.

It was something that I learned from my sponsor. He wasn't going to tailor the Steps to suit me. It was my job to work the Step, to perform the work as it was laid out in front of me. So that was probably one of the bigger lessons. The other was just patience, tolerance, kindness, and understanding that none of us are here because we're well. It is a process and there is no right way to do this.

Question: Can you tell us more about how your sponsor is your "Yoda Master" as you called him?

Panelist Response (Trevor): He laughed at that when I told him that I thought of him as my Yoda Master. He's just someone I can talk to, and he makes me think with his comments. He has a way of turning it back on me to make me think about myself. I appreciate that. When we sit down and we have our coffee every Monday morning, he has a list for me; we go through questions and he makes me think. You need to have that dialog. It's a healthy thing to have somebody to talk to, who can challenge you about your actions.

Question: You said you expect to talk to your sponsees once a week. What happens if that doesn't happen?

Panelist Response (JP): If they don't, then they don't grow as fast as they could have. I don't beat them up, I don't give them any punishment. It's an expectation and they either meet it or they don't, but there are no consequences to it other than "How well are you working your program? How serious are you about wanting to get better than where you are?"

So that's the only thing I do -- let them know what I expect and it's okay if they don't meet my expectations. I no longer allow that to get me a resentment. I'd like to go to a question that Mike answered about "What's the hardest thing you've encountered as a sponsor?" The hardest thing I've encountered as a sponsor is a sponsee that really needs it but that quits coming back. I had to learn that, that too, is something that I can't control.

Question: When sponsoring someone new to me whose been in the program a while and has done the Steps a few times already, is it okay to not do the Steps? In other words, start with the Traditions or other literature.

Panelist Response (Mike): I've sponsored a few guys, several, that have been in the program for quite a few years, even more than myself. We sit down and we have a cup of coffee and we talk about what this is going to look like. We're going to work the Steps again. I say that I know

you've worked them, but I don't know what your experience has been with that. It's going to be difficult for me to do the job that you've asked me to do if I'm not a part of that experience of walking through the Steps together.

Panelist Response (JP): I tend to accept people where they are. If they've worked the Steps, but they haven't worked the Traditions and the Concepts, we can move on to the Traditions and Concepts because I'll get a pretty good idea of whether they need to go back to the Steps.

I sponsor several dual members, and I don't accept their AA going through it as their AI-Anon going through it because we're looking at it from a different perspective. Most of them are very willing to go through it. When a dual member goes through it in both programs, they come out with a tremendous understanding of what the Twelve Steps are because they've looked at it from two very different perspectives. But an AI-Anon member who's done it with somebody else and thinks they don't need to – I'll give them a chance to not need to.

Question: What traits do you admire most in your sponsor?

Panelist Response (Trevor): He's straight and to the point. He's very direct and he's honest. It's a great thing. It's not always what I want to hear, but it's what I *need* to hear. And that for the two of us working together is the most important thing.

Question: How do you know if you need to end a relationship with a sponsee?

Panelist Response (JP): I have never ended one. A number of sponsees have ended it, and that's okay. I tell them when they first come in, whenever I'm not doing a service to you anymore, if I'm not helping you to grow, then it's time to move on to somebody else that can help you because I never want to hold a sponsee back. Some of them have left, and that's fine. We continue to go to meetings together and we're friends but no longer sponsor/sponsee, and that's okay.

Panelist Response (Mike): My experience is similar to that. I've never let or, for lack of a better term, I've never *fired* a sponsee. The instruction I received from my sponsor was that you're not allowed to do that. I've always encouraged guys to – if they're not getting what they need – to look around. I'll offer to help them find what they're looking for. This is not personal, and I am not the most important thing in this relationship. There's God involved in this, and I always need to remember that.

My job is to learn how to work with people where they're at and to bring a level of honesty and accountability to that process. I'm not going to get outside of my experience. I pass it on the way it was given to me. If I'm going to start changing the way we do things, then I'm getting outside of my experience. And I'm not willing to mess with somebody's life in an area that I don't have experience in, and I'm going to stick to that. What I've learned is, it's going to work

for some, and it's not going to work for others. And that's okay. Because I don't have "the" solution, I have "a" solution that's worked for me. That's what I must pass on. If they choose to leave, they choose to leave. And I'm proud to say that there are no hard feelings over that. We still go to meetings, we still say hi, we still hang out, and it's not a personal thing. I don't consider it a failure on my part or on their part. There are a lot of different things out there, and everybody has a responsibility to find what works for them.

Question: What do you do when you notice yourself trying to "fix" your sponsee?

Panelist Response (JP): I slap myself on the hands and say, "Cut that out!" I go back and review the three C's. I review the three C's relative to my sponsees just like I do with my alcoholic son. I must remember that their Higher Power is in control. And that it is not me. That's where I go with it

Panelist Response (Mike): Again, it's that understanding that I don't have the power to cure anybody or to fix anybody. If my motives are rooted in changing others, they might be a little misdirected. I try to keep it simple, and that's my favorite slogan, "Keep it Simple." It's my job to walk people through the Steps, as close to the way that I was walked through them as I can. It's not my job to change or control them. It's simply my job to be honest with them in what I see and to bring them through the Steps the way that I was brought through them.

I learned some hard lessons early on. I've talked to a lot of guys about this. There's some fear sometimes about being a sponsor. We get so much more out of sponsoring than our sponsees realize until they start to sponsor. Then they see it. Until then, they don't realize how much we're getting out of this, how much we're learning, how much we're growing. I am way more understanding, kind, and sensitive now that I sponsor than I was when I was just a sponsee. It's not my job to change and fix -- it's just my job to lead them through the Steps and let them have their own experience.

Question: This person lives in an area where there are few men in meetings. How do you feel about cross-sponsoring? i.e., women sponsoring men.

Panelist Response (Mike): Again, that's another area that's evolved for me. I was brought up with the idea that men work with men and women work with women. Then suddenly, a few years into that, my sponsor started sponsoring a woman. I said, "Oh my God, the wheels have fallen off the cart. The whole program's falling down. We're all going to pay for this. The whole world's coming unraveled." Again, an opportunity for growth and understanding that I don't have all the answers. What I think is not necessarily right.

This was an area where there were not a lot of women available. There happened to be more men, and that's the way it worked out. I've come to a place today where there's just no room,

at least for me in my program, to distinguish between genders, sexual orientation, religion, race, creed, or color. It just doesn't matter. An Al-Anon member is an Al-Anon member, and that's it. It's not my job to figure out who's in the right place and who's not. If somebody asks me to sponsor them, I'm going to assume that God's involved in that process. And I'm not going to worry so much about what I think is right.

Panelist Response (JP): I go along with what was said. It somewhat depends on what kind of problems they are having. If I was having a problem with my wife, it would not be a good idea for me to have a female sponsor unless she's older than I am, and those are dead! It's tough. What I would say today to those in the rural communities is go online and look for an online meeting. Go to the WSO and look at the registered meetings and find one because you can find people through that. It may not be ideal to have someone remote, but it may be best if your area of difficulties is gender specific. We're blessed today to have that as an option.

When I came into the program, it was the same way. I was the only guy in most of the meetings I went to. Sometimes there were two of us, and that really felt great. And it was one of the reasons I didn't get a sponsor for a while because I had very limited options. At that time, the online meetings weren't there. Today I would. I would suggest maybe they look online for a sponsor of their gender. In the meantime, I'll help as much as I can.

Additional Shares:

Member share: I just wanted to say that for me, my sponsor was the first instance of unconditional love that I had ever experienced. She was the fourth person. I had gone through a couple of sponsors. I guess I do have a question. How do you know when it's time to change sponsors? I know the answer is when you're no longer learning and growing. Also, you can have more than one sponsor. It's such a complex subject, this whole thing.

Member share: I haven't really had that experience that I know of. Maybe that's why some guys left. Maybe some guys left my sponsoring without telling me that that's what they were doing. I think both people – both the sponsor and the sponsee – would know it. I think they both would see that we're not moving forward. As a sponsor, if I'm not giving you what you need as your next step in growth, I think that it would be obvious to both of us.

Member share: I also don't have any experience with that. I've got the same sponsor today that I had when I came in, and I feel blessed about that. I guess my suggestion would be for someone, before they make that decision to change sponsors, to check your motive. Are you trying to work this your own way? Are you trying to run the program your own way? Are you trying to do your own thing? Have you been open minded? Have you been willing? Have you done everything that you've been asked to do?

Often, we come to a place where they've said yes to all those things, and it felt right to make that change. My responsibility as an Al-Anon member is to go get what I need. I certainly

wouldn't begrudge anybody, but checking motives is good to do before we start changing relationships.

Member share: This program is just such a miracle. One of the guiding pages for me is page 299 in ODAT. It has the Aesop's Fable with the tale of the wind and the sun, and who could get the coat off the man first. The wind went first and blew hard and just wanted that coat off the man, and the man kept clutching the coat around him even tighter. Then it was the sun's turn, and the sun came out and warmed up the day and the coat fell off. And a guiding thing I've found in my life is we're not here to yank each other's covers off. We're here to provide light and love and go through the Steps and do the work. It's such a privilege to be a part of this program and a part of someone's life. That they can feel at some level that someone heard them, and understands, and the coat will come off.

Member share: I was wondering if everybody could answer. As a sponsor to a sponsee, do you have certain things that you require? For example, my sponsor requests from the very beginning that I do some sort of service. I notice that many people are very reluctant. It wasn't a problem for me, but I think if I were to sponsor, it would be important for me to ask. I know that as Al-Anons, people are already busy so I would be reluctant to ask that.

Another question, is it necessary to write it all out? My experience with my sponsor is she doesn't have me write a lot of things, and I'm not a great writer. We just discuss everything, but it takes longer maybe. We discuss that together, this assignment part. I don't get too many assignments other than reading the literature about the step that I'm on. I kind of like that. The service question is the one that is real pertinent to me right now.

Member response: Relative to service, the best thing I can do for my sponsees is to be an example. And I am, and have been active in service for a long time, so I think I am. I encourage them to do service, I don't demand that they do service. I do share that service has helped me to know, understand, and appreciate this program more than I would have if I hadn't done service. It has broadened my perspective, providing opportunities that I wouldn't have dreamt of. It's kind of a case of, "Why wouldn't you do service?" It's such a good thing. You want to learn a skill? Do service in Al-Anon. You won't be criticized. You don't have to be perfect. So that's where I am with service. As far as writing is concerned, the reason I ask the guys to write is I think in circles and I talk in circles. But I write in straight lines, so it straightens out my thinking when I write it down, so I don't circle back like I will either talking, or worse yet, thinking.

Member response: Service is one of the things that I absolutely want of a sponsee – "demand" seems like such a strong word. It's direction. If we're working together, you're going to be involved in service. Now I don't tell them at what level that's going to be. We sit down and have a cup of coffee and we talk about, okay here's my program for you. You decide whether this is something you want to get on board with and start working on or not.

I believe in being honest with people up front and letting them know what to expect. I'll be honest with you. I won't ask you to do anything that's immoral, dishonest, or illegal. But I am

going to ask you to go a certain number of meetings a week and call me every day at a certain time for a while. I'm going to ask you to find a home group. I'm going to ask you to attend your home group meetings, a home group that has regularly scheduled business meetings. You need to pick up a service commitment. I don't care what that is. I don't care if it's setting up chairs. Just some sort of commitment where you have some sense of responsibility. Where you are not just coming in and taking, you're actually developing an attitude of "what can I bring to the table? What can I add to this?" Rather than, "What can I take from it?"

I agree completely that I have learned lessons in service in Al-Anon that I would never have learned, and humility is probably one of the bigger ones. Looking around and seeing that I can go to my same neighborhood meeting every week, but until I go to an Assembly or a regional meeting and see how big this really is. It's humbling. We get a chance to see so much love in service in action. I don't learn that by staying in my little world forever.

Member response: I've learned for me that different sponsees work the Steps differently, and I used to try to fight that because I knew the right way. Somebody once told me, "You're just like everybody else. You think that the way you see things is the way things are." My sponsees really help me see that there are different ways and different right ways. On writing, I heard that about I write in straight lines. My writing slows me down.

On service, I don't have any sponsees that would benefit from working an eleven step program. If I don't at least encourage them to do service -- and I don't care what it is -- to do service, to show up, to be there for somebody else, then I'm cheating them. The other thing about listening to something my sponsor says helps me, even if I know she's totally wrong. To do what she says, so I can prove she is wrong. It teaches me that I don't know all the answers.

Member Share: I just wanted to share on an experience I've had. My sponsor had moved out of state a couple years ago, and I wanted to find a new sponsor and work the Steps again. There was a woman at a meeting that I admired very much so I, maybe in retrospect, impulsively asked her if she'd be my sponsor and she agreed. Within a short amount of time, I realized we weren't matched at all.

Due to that experience, when people have asked me to sponsor them and I've said yes, in the beginning I sit down with them and talk about what their expectations are and what my recommendations are. My style is similar in terms of which literature I use, but I make sure that they still feel comfortable with me before making a commitment. I don't want someone to feel obligated or that they might hurt my feelings. I'd rather it just be a good experience.

I do meet with each of them once a week. Every couple of weeks during the first couple of months, I ask if they are comfortable with things, the speed we are going, the literature we are using, because I don't want somebody to feel like they are hurting my feelings. They need to put themselves first. That's all I wanted to share. This has been wonderful. It has reinforced what I've been doing as a sponsor and reinforced my relationship with my sponsor.