

Sponsorship -- A Return from Isolation excerpted © 1990 S.L.A.A.

What is a sponsor?

A sponsor is a person who gives us individual support and guidance in applying the S.L.A.A. Twelve Step Program of recovery to our lives. A sponsor is neither a parent, a therapist, nor a confessor. Accordingly, a sponsor is a person with whom we have no ulterior motive, whom we do not pay, and from whom we seek neither absolution nor judgment. Our sponsor is, in fact, a fellow addict. As such, a sponsor does not counsel from a pretense of higher moral ground. Sponsors are not "perfect" people working "perfect" programs. Sponsors are human, too, with struggles and confusion, just as anyone else in the Fellowship. Indeed, seeing the imperfections in our sponsors helps relieve us of our own compulsion to be perfect.

The beginning of the sponsor/sponsee relationship

Recovery rarely is accomplished in isolation. When we incorporate the experience of others into our lives, we begin to experience a broader view of life and recovery. With our S.L.A.A. sponsor, we learn to become honest and open, asking for love, support, and guidance in our lives. Through the patience and understanding of our sponsor, our fears of condemnation and shame slowly fade. Gradually we become more able to be vulnerable and open with our sponsor. This increase in trust allows us to more fully benefit from another's help. From the attention and acceptance we receive, we begin to fold that acceptance into our inner selves, which promotes our healing. With our sponsor, we begin to address recurring problems. Our sponsor helps guide us through the rough passages many of us experience as a result of letting go of our addiction. We explore options which had previously not occurred to us. A sponsor shares his or her own experience and feelings from having been in situations similar to ours, taking care not to give advice. By listening, a sponsor supports the sponsee without trying to "fix", and offers understanding without judgment.

How is a Sponsor Selected?

A sponsor ideally has solid abstinence from his/her addictive patterns and is willing to guide the sponsee through the Twelve Steps. We look for someone who has found sobriety, freedom, or joy through the Twelve Steps and who understands the process of S.L.A.A. recovery. Perhaps his/her qualities or character assets seem to complement our current phase of spiritual growth. A prospective sponsor's time in the Program, i.e., months or years, is only one of the criteria that can be used to select a sponsor. We attend a variety of meetings in order to identify certain individuals in the Fellowship whom we come to know and respect. Criteria that some of us have used to select a sponsor include:

- Will this person be honest with me and point out my areas of denial?
- Can I trust him/her with my secrets?
- Am I comfortable with this person?
- Does he/she listen attentively to me?
- Can this person discuss his/her own experience rather than give advice?
- Is he/she willing to work with my "bottom line" issues?
- Does he/she also have a sponsor?
- Does this person's level of spirituality complement mine?

- How is this person working the Steps?
- How much time can he/she give me on the phone? In person?
- Do our schedules fit in well?

Ideally, the prospective sponsor has a sponsor of his/her own. As in much of the recovery process, identification with others is paramount. A sponsor who has been sponsored him/herself will be more likely to relate to us. We are reassured when the person we choose for guidance is seeking guidance as well.

A sponsor should be a person we are not in danger of acting out with, or are likely to find intrigue with. A potential sexual partner as sponsor would interfere with the primary purpose of the sponsor relationship, which is recovery through the program of S.L.A.A. Sometimes this means that the sponsor and sponsee should be of the same sex: sometimes of the opposite sex. Discretion, common sense, and our Higher Power can guide us in our selection process.

Once we have obtained a sponsor, we commit ourselves to maintaining regular contact with that person. The frequency of contact is determined jointly by the sponsor and sponsee - as we each become familiar with our individual needs and boundaries. Sometimes a person we ask to be our sponsor declines. Although disappointed, we need to remember that this is not a personal rejection. Rather, this person may simply be unavailable to us at this time for any number of reasons. Our Higher Power is taking an active role in forming this relationship, and requires only that we continue to pray for guidance, "do the footwork" and ask another.