

By Young Addicts, For Young Addicts

The literature you're holding was developed by young members of Narcotics Anonymous. Young addicts around the world, living in all kinds of cultures and speaking many different languages, are getting and staying clean in NA. We are writing this to let other young people know that any addict, no matter how young, can stop using drugs and find a new way to live. Even though you're reading this, you might not be looking for a new way of life. Most of us weren't. We were just tired of all the frustration and trouble that came with using drugs. We still didn't know if we wanted to stop. We didn't know whether or not we were addicts, and we didn't like to think about staying clean for the rest of our lives. No one in our lives seemed to understand us, or what we were going through. Using drugs was the only thing that made sense to us, but drugs made it hard to stay out of trouble and keep people off our backs. Even when we did want to stop using, we couldn't figure out how to make it last very long.

If that sounds familiar, you might be like us. You can give yourself a chance to recover by trying NA like we did. Go to a meeting every day and find a sponsor. Talk to other members. That's what we did. We listened to other addicts share their experiences with addiction and recovery. We heard stories that sounded a lot like our own. When we first started going to meetings, some of us just sat in the back and watched. We might have had an attitude toward what members said, but we could sense that there was something honest and real about NA. Members didn't force us to choose recovery, but they made it possible to choose recovery if we wanted it.

When nothing else in our life made any sense, and we felt angry and depressed most of the time, NA welcomed us with warm hugs and smiles. Other addicts told us that we never had to use again, even if we felt like it. For the first time, we began to feel like we belonged somewhere. Not only did these people seem to care about us, they seemed like they could understand what we were going through.

You might wonder if you really belong in NA. We did. We didn't always see other young members in the meetings we went to. Some of the older members seemed to think we

were too young. Sometimes we wondered if they were right. But we stayed clean anyway, and now we've made connections with NA members of all ages. Addiction runs much deeper than our drug use. No matter how young we are, we have the same thoughts and feelings as other addicts. This pamphlet is our chance to share what we've learned—we weren't too young to be addicts, and we're not too young to get clean. We stopped using and we are discovering a new way of life. We might not be in the meetings you go to, but if you stay clean and keep coming back, we'll find each other.

There weren't young people in meetings when I stopped using. I stayed around for a while, and other young people started to get clean too. We identified with each other! Having someone young who could relate made a big difference.

We've had all kinds of experiences as young addicts. Some of us used drugs for years. Others only used for months or less. If we ever really had control of our drug use, we lost it fast. When we felt like stopping—which wasn't often—we either couldn't stop or couldn't stay stopped. Sometimes addiction caused so much pain and confusion that we thought we wanted to die. But we found NA instead. Young NA members are getting clean in high school and in college. We are getting clean as graduates and as dropouts. We are getting clean with loving families, nice homes, and no financial worries. We are getting clean poor and homeless, without a living relative in the world. The bottom line is that young addicts are getting and staying clean no matter what their background is.

I was really young when I got caught up with gangs and drugs. It was the only life I knew when I got to NA. I kept tagging for a while after I got clean because that's how I had fun. I was good at it. I finally stopped, and now I draw and paint instead.

Being young, most of us come to NA not really knowing who we are. We might have lived in places where drug use seemed normal. Or maybe no one around us used, but we found drugs anyway. No matter how we got started, using drugs seemed to help with the pain and confusion. We thought they would help us find our place in the world. We struggled with things everyone has to face growing up: sex, friends, families, school, responsibility, and everything else. We felt like everyone, even ourselves, was pressuring us to act or be a certain way. At first, drugs helped us cope. Soon they only made things worse.

What It Means to Be an Addict

We didn't know if we were addicts when we came to NA. We thought addiction was just a physical thing. We heard about addiction from our families, schools, books, movies, and music. We thought that addicts had to use drugs all day every day for a long time to become addicted. We weren't all "hooked" physically when we came to NA. Many of us used drugs that we didn't think were addictive or "habit-forming." We may not have experienced major cravings or withdrawals like other members. Even if we did, we thought that once we got over it, we could use again as long as we didn't go back to our "drug of choice." Some of us didn't even think we had used "real" drugs because all we'd ever done was huff paint, glue, or gasoline.

Before I came to NA, all I really did was steal my parents' beer or weed, or even the pills in the medicine cabinet sometimes. I didn't use all the "hard" drugs other members did, but I used anything I could find.

Some of us only used drugs at parties or on weekends. Others used all day every day, in the bathroom at school or in our parents' basement or garage. We snuck drugs into juvenile hall. We didn't all use the same drugs. Some of us used things that we didn't know were drugs, like cold medicine or cough syrup. We did things we weren't proud of to get our drugs. Sometimes that meant lying to our parents or friends; other times it was burglary and living on the street. As younger members, we don't always relate to older members' experience with drugs, but we can relate to their obsession, compulsion, and self-centeredness.

In NA, we learned that addiction affects us in three ways: in mind, body, and spirit. It's not always about what drugs did to us; it's about how we did the drugs. Even if the drugs weren't habit-forming or addictive, *we* were. It doesn't matter which drugs or how much we used. What matters is that we experienced the obsession, compulsion, and self-centeredness that other members did. We thought obsessively about drugs and the using lifestyle constantly. We used compulsively when we said we wouldn't or when we didn't want to, and we couldn't stop or stay stopped when we wanted to. Self-centeredness

made us sacrifice whatever we could in order to feel different, even if it meant hurting ourselves and people who love us. Our lives were falling apart, and we were full of resentment, anger, and fear. When NA members talked about drugs, we couldn't always relate. When they talked about how they felt, we understood. We slowly realized that the types of drugs didn't matter—even the ones we weren't sure about, like alcohol, gasoline, glue, or anything else. For addicts, using *any* drug leads us to the same loss of control and feelings of hopelessness. As young members, we knew we couldn't use without ending up grounded, suspended or expelled from school, stuck in juvenile hall, or lonely, paranoid, and depressed.

Am I Really an Addict?

Some of us thought drug use was just a normal phase, a natural part of growing up. We thought drugs would get easier to handle as we get older and more mature, and then we would be able to use drugs without so much trouble. Some of us felt like we would never be able to handle drugs, but we wanted to keep using until we got older. We wanted to have as much fun as possible while we were young because we didn't think we'd have any fun when we got older. Some of us thought we'd never stop using, no matter how old we got, even if drugs still caused problems in our life. We thought our lives would be too boring without drugs, even though the drugs and the lifestyle were killing us. In the end, our reasons for using didn't matter much anymore. We were trapped in the lifestyle. We couldn't do anything different, even if we wanted to.

When I heard the reading, "an addict is a man or woman," I wondered if I had to be an adult to be in NA. One of the older guys told me he got clean before I was born. Someone else told me that using was still fun at my age. Was I too young?

Getting clean was confusing enough, but then older NA members told some of us that we were too young to be addicts. They treated us like we couldn't have had drug problems because they had used drugs longer than we'd been alive. Some of them tried to be nice by telling us that we are "so lucky" to find recovery at our age. Even if they're nice about

it, members who treat us differently because of our age send the message that our problems aren't as bad as theirs. Some of us left NA for a while because we felt like we didn't fit when other members treated us differently for being young. Those of us who were lucky made it back, in worse pain than the first time we got clean. Many of us had friends who weren't so lucky. They are still trapped in active addiction, or they died using drugs because they didn't feel like Narcotics Anonymous was for them.

When I came to my first meeting, I heard people say that they "hit bottom." They talked about being jobless, homeless, and penniless. The worst thing that happened to me was getting grounded. I wondered if I still had to "hit bottom."

Just because we're young doesn't mean that our lives are easier, or that addiction is any less deadly for us. Maybe we're too young to lose cars, homes, or families, but we're never too young to lose control of ourselves and our lives like other addicts. Anyone who finds recovery in NA is lucky to be here, not just young people. We know we hit bottom when we decide to stop digging. We don't have to be a certain age to make that decision. Anyone who finds NA, young or old, should have a chance for a new way of life. The NA members who helped us the most treated us like equals, not like children. We can keep our distance from people who treat us like second-class NA members. When we're not treated like children, we tend to act a little less like children. We take our recovery seriously. Sometimes, NA is the only thing in our lives we take seriously.

What Narcotics Anonymous Is

Before we came to NA, our parents, guardians, schools, and courts pushed many of us in lots of directions. We heard all sorts of ideas about addiction and recovery. Some of us were sent all over the place—school guidance counselors, family or group counseling, religious groups or individuals, treatment centers, and twelve-step programs. NA seemed like it was just one branch in a bigger organization. Many of us didn't even know what "narcotics" meant. We thought NA was just for people who took certain types of drugs.

My parents sent me all kinds of places. I was on probation and seeing a psychiatrist, and going to all sorts of “anonymous” meetings. I thought they just had different classes for different drugs. I thought “narcotics” meant pills, and I took pills sometimes.

After a few NA meetings, we found out that it’s a separate program, not part of anything else. We found out that NA deals with addiction, not drugs. We might not relate to members about the drugs they used, but we can relate to their reasons for using.

“Anonymous” means a lot of things. One meaning is that we respect the privacy of other members. But it also means our program can work for anyone, regardless of who they are. This means we’re never too young, and it doesn’t matter what drugs we used; we all have the same disease. We used drugs to feel different or to stop feeling, but we ended up with a lot of the same feelings other addicts had. We know what they mean when they talk about anger, resentment, fear, guilt, shame, and anxiety. We experienced all of those in our addiction. We sometimes still do in recovery, but we learn how to get through it.

Some of us have parents or other family members in a twelve-step program. They might still be involved. Before we came to NA, we often judged these family members. We may have grown up in twelve-step meetings, and we didn’t want to be like our parents. We based a lot of our ideas about twelve-step programs on these people. They may have pressured us to get involved in recovery. When we decide to be members of NA, we might feel pressure to do things a certain way in recovery. We might feel weird if we go to meetings with our parents and their friends. In order to get the most from our recovery, we established our own network of people in recovery we could trust and relate to. Some of us got comfortable talking recovery with our parents or family members. We’re free to do that, but we keep in mind that we’re ultimately responsible for ourselves and free to find our own path in recovery.

I Was Underage

Some of us get clean when we live with our parents or guardians. By law, the adults in our lives have to make our decisions for us. It’s up to them to let us be a part of NA. We have to follow rules in our homes and at school, or we get in trouble. When we can make

it to meetings, we are lucky to meet people who give us guidance and support. Members tell us they believe in us and that we can get through it if we hold on, ask for help, and take suggestions. Knowing that they care helps a lot. Some of us aren't as lucky. We might have to fight just as hard for respect in NA as we do in our homes or at school. When older members didn't show us respect, we stayed clean just to prove them wrong. Many of us didn't realize how important recovery was until we decided to fight for it.

I'm afraid when I go to school because I know what will be put in my face every day. I dread being grounded because I know what happens in my head when I'm alone. I can't wait until I'm old enough to move out, get a job, and take care of myself. Then I'll be free to recover.

The decisions we make usually have to be approved by some adult. Our parent or guardian might not let us go to NA meetings. But one choice, at least, is truly ours alone—the choice to stay clean. It might be a while before we're free to live life the way we want to, but we hold onto our choice of recovery, even when it's tough.

Sponsorship

A sponsor is an experienced NA member who helps us apply the Twelve Steps to our lives. Some of us lived in smaller towns and didn't have many people to choose from. Others lived in bigger places with more NA members to choose from. We look for the best sponsorship relationship possible. Some of us thought we should get someone older who could be an authority figure. Others wanted a younger sponsor, someone we could relate to better, who wouldn't push us too hard. We learned that our sponsor's age doesn't always affect his or her sponsorship style. The most important role of a sponsor is to guide us through the steps, so it's best to find someone we can relate to who has a solid grasp of recovery. The informational pamphlet (IP) called *Sponsorship* has a lot of helpful information, like the suggestion that we avoid sponsorship relationships that could lead to sexual attraction.

Some of us are tempted to treat sponsors our own age more like friends than sponsors. We do often develop deep and lasting friendships with our sponsors, but it's important that our main focus is working the steps. Hanging out and having fun with a sponsor all the time, especially if we have a lot of the same friends, can make it hard to be as honest as we need to

be. Opening up with someone can take some practice. It's usually easier to practice that honesty with someone who isn't biased. Some of us had to find a new sponsor to keep growing in our recovery, someone we didn't hang out with all the time. But sometimes close friendship can be a foundation for the trust we need to work the steps. Either way, we have to learn how to tell somebody what's *really* going on in our heads and hearts, and we have to learn to take suggestions. That's how we start working the steps.

The steps can help us address addiction in areas of our lives other than drugs. Obsession and compulsion can affect the ways we approach sex, food, money, relationships, video games, the Internet, and countless other areas of our lives. Some of us take healthy behaviors like exercise or schoolwork to unhealthy extremes. We treat these behaviors or feelings like drugs: We think about them constantly and we can't always stop ourselves once we get started. Many of us have experienced depression, anxiety, anger issues, self-mutilation, and eating disorders. A sponsor is often the first person we trust enough to talk to about these problems and who can help us begin to look for solutions.

When I was using drugs, I started cutting myself. First it was just a little, here and there. But then I did it a lot. The drugs made it easy. When I got clean, I kept on cutting. I couldn't figure out what was wrong.

Getting clean in NA and applying the steps to our lives gives us a chance to address these issues. We talk to our sponsors about our problems. If our sponsors can't relate, we find other members who can. We look for solutions. If we need more help than we can get from our sponsor and other NA members, we go to the appropriate professionals. If we have concerns about medication in recovery, we rely on support and guidance from our sponsors or members with similar experiences. We consult NA literature. We don't give up on ourselves. The Twelve Steps won't provide an answer to every problem in our life, but as long as we work the steps and stay close with other NA members, we will be able to stay clean and get through our feelings while we look for a solution.

I Was the Only Young NA Member

Some of us feel a different sort of isolation because we're the only young people in NA where we live. We can go get coffee or food with older members after a meeting, but sometimes we just feel like spending time with people our own age. Loneliness and isolation—the same feelings that led many of us to use drugs in the first place—come back quickly when we don't have friends our own age in recovery. We jump at opportunities to travel to other places for NA dances, conventions, and campouts. We have to take advantage of every chance to meet other recovering addicts our age.

Many of us connect to young NA members in other places through technology and the Internet. Recovery-related online chat groups, email lists, and social networking sites make it possible to stay in touch with members all around the world. These forms of communication don't substitute or replace real-life meeting attendance, but they give us access to other members we can relate to. We are really careful about how much personal information we share on the Internet, though. There are people out there who try to take advantage of young people, and the Internet makes it easy for people to pretend to be someone they're not. Before meeting anyone in person, we talked to our sponsors, parents, or other people we trust. We made sure to be careful and to avoid putting ourselves in dangerous situations.

My first NA convention was a real turning point for me. I was doing something fun as part of my recovery and gaining trust from my family at the same time. When I went to another convention months later, people from other states still remembered my name—that's love.

There are thousands of young people getting and staying clean all over the world. We can meet some of them at NA functions, sometimes far from home. When the time comes to go home, it can be tough to say good-bye. We don't want the events to end. But when we leave, we have new friends in recovery, no matter how far away they live. We look forward to the next chance to hook up with young NA members from other places.

When we stay clean, we eventually get a chance to welcome young newcomers to our own home groups. This can be exciting and terrifying at the same time. We tell these new

members that recovery works, even for young people. We are living proof. When we tell them to “keep coming back,” we really mean it. We need them as much as they need us.

Won't Life Be Boring Without Drugs?

When I stopped using, I thought I wouldn't be able to have friends or fun anymore. Everyone my age uses drugs. I just wanted to be a normal person who could go to parties on the weekends. The “spiritual” thing made getting clean sound boring.

Now that we're clean, our ideas of fun begin to change. Still, things like spirituality and working a program don't usually sound like much fun. As we get to know other members of all ages, we learn that “spiritual” doesn't have to mean taking ourselves seriously all the time. We get to design our own “new way of life.” We have fun as our sense of humor changes and we connect to people in new ways. We find a place for ourselves in NA, something most of us didn't have when we were using drugs. NA members come from all walks of life and have all sorts of interests. They help us find ways to entertain ourselves without drugs. We develop or renew our interests in things like music, sports, travel, or the outdoors. We can go to concerts or go dancing in clubs. Sometimes we stay up all night playing cards or video games. We might discover talents such as playing the guitar, writing, or photography. We stay close to other NA members and stay clean as we get to know what the world has to offer, and what we can offer to the world. Being clean we found that there are so many more things we are free and comfortable to do, things we were afraid to do when we were using. We all get a chance to find new ways to have fun, as long as we stay clean and aren't afraid to try new things.

Sex, Drugs, and...

We all have our own sex histories when we come to NA. Some of us get clean before we have sex for the first time. Others were sexually active before recovery and stay active when we get here. Most of us go through a lot of stress or unmanageability about sex in our early recovery. As young members, most of us are still trying to sort out our feelings about sex. Some of us are uncomfortable or unsure about our sexual orientation. Coming to terms with sexuality in recovery can be a difficult process for all of us, especially when our sexual identities put us in the minority.

Being young when there was an explosion of young people in NA made me uncomfortable because I'm gay. I felt isolated around other young people because there's so much pressure to fit in, but I didn't.

Some of us feel a lot of shame or guilt about sexual experiences. For many of us, this includes abuse. Drugs might have helped us manage pain, confusion, and helplessness related to sex, sexuality, and our past. It's scary to imagine staying clean because we don't want to face those feelings. Other members can help us move forward and learn how to handle uncomfortable feelings. We are honest with people we trust, and we begin to overcome the pain or confusion about who we are and what we've been through. When we share honestly about ourselves, the people around us begin to open up, too. We often learn that we share a lot of similar experiences and feelings. We don't have to be alone.

Some of us have been so drained by our drug use that we aren't even ready to think about sex. But we're young, and many of us are overflowing with hormones and hyperactive sex drives. Now that we're clean, we no longer have drugs to treat loneliness. When a bunch of us spend all our time with each other, it's not a surprise if members sometimes end up sleeping with each other. This usually leads to chaos, unmanageability, and hurt feelings. Many young members' lives have been complicated by unplanned pregnancies in recovery. Sex and its consequences can leave us hurt and confused. We need a sponsor we trust and talk with openly, and we have to lean on our sponsor for support. If we don't have a solid recovery foundation, drugs might seem like the only way to handle our feelings. We share what we're going through and ask for guidance and support. Our sponsors can help us get through anything clean. NA doesn't guarantee that we won't experience feelings; it guarantees us we can get through them clean, if we ask for help.

The People in My Life Kept Using Drugs

When we first get clean, we might live with family members or have roommates. We see our old friends at school on a regular basis. We've known these people for a very long time, maybe our whole lives. Those of us who were involved in gangs before coming to NA can't always just walk away safely. NA members tell us to give up "old playmates, playgrounds, and playthings," but sometimes there is no way to avoid them. We can't get

people out of our lives if we live with them, go to school with them, or are locked up with them. We might get harassed or threatened by our old friends when we get clean. Our family members might use in front of us. This makes it tough to focus on recovery.

I was really excited about recovery after my first NA meeting. But I still had to go home at night and be around my parents. They partied loud and late. I could lock myself in my room, but the sounds and smells still got in. I even tried running away from home, but the cops made me go back.

We form a network of people in and out of recovery who don't use. We rely on these people for support when we have a hard time. We know we never have to use again if we don't want to, but sometimes we feel like using when we see drugs everywhere. When we feel like using, we reach out to NA members. If we can't get hold of anyone in NA because we're stuck in school or juvenile hall, we read literature, write, or talk to friends who aren't in NA but don't use. We stay clean no matter what. Thoughts of using come and go, but they get weaker each time, and they lose power when we reach out for help.

Most of us had good friends before getting clean. It seemed like our friendships were deeper than just using drugs together. We didn't want to abandon our friends just because we stopped using. Now that we're clean, we find out that our real friends are the ones who support our recovery. These friends respect us by not using around us. If they spend time with us, they do it in safe places, away from drugs. A lot of our old friends can't or won't do that. We don't have to feel like we're ditching these friends. We make it clear that we can hang out with them, but only if they support us. We are trying to take care of ourselves. Most of us have had to end relationships that put us at risk of relapse.

Relationships Outside of NA

When we get some clean time, many of us meet new people outside of NA through work, school, or our new hobbies. We might feel insecure about recovery. A lot of the cool people we meet seem to use drugs. We already fear rejection, and being clean just seems like one more way not to fit in. If we keep working the steps with our sponsor, we learn how to feel okay about ourselves. We eventually stop feeling like everyone is judging us, or like we need drugs to relax or fit in. We start to realize that most people don't care that

we don't use drugs. People who do reject us for staying clean end up being the types of friends we don't want in our lives anyway. Our sponsors and other friends in recovery help us check our motives so we can avoid putting ourselves in dangerous situations.

My parents wouldn't leave me alone when I got clean. They always wanted to know where I was going and who I would be with. Why couldn't they just be happy that I stopped using?

We might expect people to trust us again now that we're clean. We're proud to feel like we're headed in the right direction for once. It's frustrating when friends or family don't seem to believe in us. But if we spend all of our time in meetings or with our NA friends, the people in our lives can't see how we have grown or changed. We were gone all the time when we were using, and now we're gone all the time in recovery. What's different? For many of us, NA is where we first learn to be honest. We can practice that honesty with our parents and authority figures, who usually just want to know that we're not hurting ourselves anymore. The people in our lives often want to feel like part of our recovery. We can help them stay involved by introducing them to our sponsor or NA friends. This could help them understand a little better.

We have to spend time with people in recovery if we want to stay clean. We have to go to meetings regularly. We have to learn to live clean before we can be successful with school, work, family, or anything else. Our family relationships, schoolwork, and jobs might suffer in early recovery. As we grow stronger in our recovery, we learn to manage the other responsibilities in our lives better.

After I got a few months clean, family members started asking how long I had to keep going to "those" meetings. I didn't know what to say. It's a just for today program, but don't we ever get healthy enough to stop going to meetings?

After we stay clean for a while, our friends or family members might think that we've overcome addiction. They may ask why we still go to meetings. Sometimes we wonder the same thing. Won't we ever be done? We might cut back our meeting attendance and lose touch with people in recovery. If we do, we find out that clean time doesn't make addiction disappear completely. Old thoughts and feelings come back quickly when we

lose touch with NA, and we can't always spot them ourselves. We need meetings, our sponsor, and our step work to keep moving forward. If we do things our own way, the desire to use eventually returns. It doesn't take long to realize that we have to work a program if we want to stay clean. Those of us who relapsed after staying clean for a while drifted slowly away from the program first. We went to fewer meetings and talked to NA friends less. We forgot what it means to be an addict in recovery, and we relapsed.

Relapse

The word "relapse" can seem scary. We might feel like we have to walk around on tiptoes, like one wrong move can send us back to using drugs. We see more young people relapse than older people, and we might worry that we'll be next. The truth is that relapse doesn't just happen. Relapse comes when we are not doing what we need to do, or when we put ourselves in bad situations. We talk openly and honestly with our sponsor to prevent these things from happening. Relapse doesn't mean that we are complete failures; it just means that we've missed something. With NA in our lives, we never have to use again. If we relapse, we need to learn from it instead of beating ourselves up.

Some of us weren't afraid of relapse. We felt like we could do anything clean, even if that meant being around people who were using. We might have wanted to "relax" or have fun with people our own age, and sometimes those people use. We didn't realize how dangerous this was until the thought of using crossed our minds. We might think it would be nice to "just do a little" to fit in with people our age, but we can never do just a little. If we put a drug in our body, we gamble with our lives. Many addicts—including young addicts—have relapsed and died. Some of us would rather die than return to the miserable lives we had before NA. When we remembered where addiction takes us, we realized that we want to stay clean. We found an NA meeting as soon as we could.

It didn't seem like all the young people I met in NA really wanted to stay clean. Some of them relapsed all the time and didn't care. When I relapsed, I felt so stupid. I didn't want to tell anybody. They would think I was just like the others.

We might think it's harder to stay clean young because we think we have a lot longer left to live than older members. We know that NA is a "just for today" program, but we feel like we have a lot more days left than older members. Maybe we do have more days left than they do, but maybe we don't. Today is the only day we know about for sure. We stay clean for today, and if we want something different tomorrow, next month, or next year, we can make that choice when we get there.

Relapse often seems more common for young people in NA. Many young people are forced to come to meetings by parents or authority figures. They might pretend to be interested, but only until they get a chance to use again. This can be frustrating for those of us who do want recovery. These young people come to NA and become our friends, only to turn around and leave as easily as they came in. It hurts to see people leave, especially when we know how much NA has done for us. We might be tempted to go find them and try to bring them back. We have to be careful not to put ourselves in harm's way. We might be afraid to get close to other newcomers because they might leave, too. Over time, we learn to carry the message without placing unrealistic expectations on new members. We share freely what we've been given. The newcomers might not want what we have right now. We share our hope so they'll know where to find it when they're ready to try something different. We stay close to friends with clean time. These friends help us get through the pain and frustrations of seeing people come and go.

A Spiritual, Not Religious Program

When I came to my first NA meeting, I heard all the "God" and "spiritual" stuff and thought it must be some kind of cult or religion. My parents worried NA would make me an atheist, but I thought they'd make me some kind of religious nut.

When we find NA, we might wonder if we have to believe in certain religious ideas. In time, we learn that we don't have to believe anything we don't want to believe. Our background and experience with religion and spirituality vary widely from one member to the next. The spiritual part of our disease is complete self-centeredness, so the spiritual part of recovery can simply involve trying to be more aware of other people and the

world beyond our own wants and needs. We can do that no matter how young we are, and no matter what we do or do not believe in. And we can take part in that kind of spirituality without surrendering to a hopelessly dull lifestyle. We learn to respect others' beliefs and focus on how we can help each other stay clean. Some of us are atheists and others devoutly religious. Our individual beliefs don't affect our ability to carry the message of recovery together in NA. We all believe that NA makes it possible for addicts to stop using. That is the foundation for our common ground and mutual respect, and we learn how to have friends with different beliefs.

Being young, some of us have to stay involved in religion somehow to please our parents, guardians, or authority figures. The Twelve Steps encourage us to get in touch with our own beliefs. We might feel confused if people in our lives tell us what we have to believe. We can look for similarities between what we're told and what we believe. We might be able to reason with our parents or guardians or discuss our ideas with them. We may simply have to respect their wishes until we're able to choose for ourselves.

I Felt Unsafe in NA

At my first meeting, I heard lots of good stuff. When the meeting was over, some creepy old guy asked me how old I was. I told him sixteen, and he asked me if I wanted to "go out" sometime. A couple of women with cleantime overheard and stepped in to help me.

Most people who come to NA focus on recovery, but occasionally we meet people with other motives. They often seem just as nice and friendly as anyone else. They probably are, but they might also be willing to take advantage of other members if they get the chance. Narcotics Anonymous is not immune to the dangers found in the rest of society. We should be as careful with NA members as we are with people not in recovery. That applies to financial, religious, romantic, sexual, and any other situations. We need to make sure we know and trust the people we are involved with outside of meetings. We come to NA to learn how to stay clean, not to loan or borrow money, meet sex partners, or promote our religions. We don't have to talk to anyone who makes us uncomfortable.

Being young, people in and out of recovery might think we're inexperienced or naïve and try to take advantage of us. We have to rely on people we trust, such as parents or guardians. We also need people in NA who we can trust, so we build that trust by getting to know people gradually. We begin with a sponsor, who can help us get to know other members. We learn to be extremely careful in choosing the members we spend time with alone. If we spend time with our new friends, we meet in public places until we get to know them better. We should never go into anyone's home, or let anyone into ours, if we're not comfortable. Members who care about our well-being will be patient earning our trust and won't pressure us into uncomfortable situations. The trustworthy people in NA, just like anywhere else, are far more common than those who would take advantage of us. We still need to be careful and patient, just to make sure.

I Learned to Party Without Drugs

Most of us face major life events and milestones in recovery. We might graduate from high school or college, or we reach the age to drink or go to bars and clubs. For the rest of our lives, we will have weddings, funerals, and family celebrations to attend. Every year we'll face various holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and New Year's celebrations. We might feel pressured or have expectations about these events. We have to accept the idea that we can't celebrate the way many other people do.

When I first got clean, I wondered how I would celebrate my graduation or my birthdays. What would happen when I could get into bars and buy alcohol? What if I ever got married, would we be able to toast? What would we serve the guests?

We are able to appreciate most events better clean than we ever could before. There might be some family events and celebrations that we can't handle. Our friends and family won't always understand why we choose to stay clean. We don't have to justify our decisions to anyone. We simply explain that we don't want or need to use drugs for any reason. We ask our family to support our decisions. We rely on support from our sponsor and friends in recovery. We ask NA members to be with us in unsafe and uncomfortable situations. They help us remember that we can get through anything clean, no matter what anyone expects of us, including ourselves.

I Found My Voice in NA

When I came to NA, some people told me we're all equal in recovery. I was confused because other people told me to take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth. I thought they didn't want me to share because I was young.

When we're new to recovery, some of us are terrified of sharing. Others find it easy to talk and tough to listen. Older members might pull us aside and tell us to "sit down, shut up, and listen." It might feel like they single us out because we're young, but usually it's because we're new. Experienced members suggest that we listen so we can let some new ideas into our overactive minds. Over time, those of us who love to talk often become better listeners. Those of us who are afraid to share get a chance to speak up. Our hearts pound and our hands shake, and we usually don't even remember what we said. But we get through it, and it will be easier the next time. We can learn to balance when to share and when to listen. We learn to ignore members if they assume that our age is an indicator of the quality of our recovery.

Service

When I was involved in service, they called me "the kid" and didn't take me seriously. After serving with these members and gaining their trust, an older member with no qualifications ran against me in an election because he said it was "irresponsible to let a child do an adult's job." I was elected unanimously.

Service is crucial to recovery in Narcotics Anonymous. Service committees dominated by older members might intimidate us. Some of us have been afraid to get involved; others have stayed quiet when we do get involved. A few of us find it easy to be assertive, or even aggressive, in service. Older members with prejudices might be reluctant to accept our help. If we remain consistent and humble in our willingness, we'll eventually find ways to serve. The most important thing is to remember the primary purpose: to carry the message to the still-suffering addict.

More Will Be Revealed...

No matter how old, most people who come to NA have a lot of growing up to do. The core of our disease is self-obsession. That means that older newcomers struggle with the same childishness that we do when we are new. One of the biggest differences is that we haven't practiced our immature behaviors nearly as long as they have. Sometimes their "old behaviors" are our "new mistakes." We learn to work a program of recovery alongside our fellow members, helping them when we can and accepting their help when it applies. We may look or feel different from older members, but we're all staying clean just for today. When we open up to other members, we learn that we have a lot more in common than we thought. Narcotics Anonymous makes it possible for addicts of any age to grow up and grow older, clean in recovery. Just for today, we have our whole lives ahead of us. By staying clean, we're free to be who we want to be.