

PREJUDICE IN NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

[The following is not a policy statement from the World Service Board of Trustees. It is intended merely to stimulate thought and discussion on the topic of prejudice and how it affects Narcotics Anonymous.]

WSB External Affairs Committee

"The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using," isn't it? That's what our Third Tradition says. But in some N.A. groups, it almost seems as if a few more membership requirements have been added. Though it may not be said aloud, the impression you get from such groups is this: "You've got to come from the same racial, or ethnic, or social, or economic, or educational, or sexual background as we do in order to be accepted here. It's not enough, just to have a desire to stop using."

In July, the World Service Conference held a workshop in Arlington, Virginia. One panel focused a portion of its discussion on the subject of prejudice in Narcotics Anonymous. Participants felt the discussion was long overdue, and that we as a fellowship should begin to further explore ways to "raise our consciousness" and, thus, to begin changing our attitudes and behavior. The purpose of this article is to begin raising our awareness of how we treat one another so that, ultimately, any addict seeking recovery, "regardless of age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion, or lack of religion," may find what they seek among us.

Awareness

We can't begin to change unless we're aware there is a need for change. As addicts, we reflect the society we come from. We bring our racism, classism, sexism, and all our other prejudices with us into recovery. We accept unacceptable behavior, in ourselves and in each other, because "that's the way it's always been." We all suffer, to greater or lesser extent, from this kind of thinking; it's the way of the world we've been raised in.

What can we do? Well, to deny our bigotry only allows us to continue in old thinking and behavior. But when we admit we discriminate, we can begin to address that thinking and behavior with the tools of recovery.

In N.A., we're told to "show up and tell the truth." When addicts hear other addicts share their pain and their fears, something wonderful happens. Open discussions in our meetings can be very important in helping us see how prejudice affects our ability to recover, and our ability to carry the message to others. Choosing "Freedom from Prejudice" as a discussion meeting topic, for example, can open the lid on the defects we try to hide from one another, and sometimes even from ourselves.

Sponsorship is another tool to be put to work. What would occur if we all took a mini-inventory of ourselves, an inventory focused on prejudice, its affect on our lives, and its impact on the life of our fellowship? And what would happen if every N.A. member talked with their sponsor about their fears of people from other backgrounds or lifestyles? Whenever we work the steps with open minds and hearts, healing beings to take place.

Into Action

When we can accept that we are indeed bigoted, without making any excuses, then we're ready to take action. The miracle begins when we accept that, as individuals and as a fellowship, we frequently fall short of our own principles. Yes, this is who we are today - and yes, today, we need to change. Acceptance here does not mean, "Well, that's just the way things are." Acceptance means taking responsibility for ourselves, and seeking the courage to change.

At the Arlington workshop, individual members shared about their own experiences of prejudice - not only ways in which they had felt its cruel sting, but ways in which they had inflicted that sting on others. People talked about not being hugged because they were black; being shunned because of their use of essential, prescribed medication; avoiding members who have disabilities; being fearful of people from different educational levels; avoiding anyone with different sexual preference from their own. Some of these things hampered their own recovery; some hampered their role in supporting the recovery of others; all of it made them hurt. They admitted it, and they asked all of us, as a fellowship, to help them change.

Yes, it's true: we come from a prejudiced society. That does not mean, however, that we must remain forever bound by prejudice. The N.A. program offers freedom, not only from drug addiction, but from the insidious defects of character that keeps us from living full, healthy, happy lives. By working the steps, we can rise above our shortcomings. In doing so, we can set an example for one another, and for others in our communities, of what spiritual recovery is about.

How can you "show up and tell the truth" about prejudice in N.A.? You can:

1. Raise the topic at a discussion meeting.
2. Contact your regional convention committee, and ask them to hold a workshop on prejudice at the next convention.
3. Ask your area and regional service committees to consider whether prejudice affects any of their services.

4. Talk with your sponsor about how prejudice - yours and others - affects you and your recovery. Talk with those you sponsor, too.
5. If your group conducts an annual inventory, ask that "prejudice" be one of the subjects they examine.

Prejudice in N.A. hurts the whole fellowship, from the oldest old-timer to the newest newcomer. We, as members of a fellowship based on spiritual principles, can not and must not settle for anything less than freedom from prejudice.