

The Only Requirement...

... for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking. This is perhaps one of the most inclusive statements ever made by an organization — and one that is lifesaving for alcoholics caught in the deadly grip of their disease.

The Third Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous states that anyone who wants to join AA can. No dues, no forms, no initiation; no dress code or badges or funny hats. But the founding members of Alcoholics Anonymous were by and large also members of the most privileged class of the day — predominantly white, male and Christian — and quite often the exclusivity that characterized their social and business settings spilled over into their AA gatherings. Some thought “the fairer sex” could not be real alcoholics, and that people of color were better off “staying with their own.” Gay, bisexual and transgender people — considered aberrant by the medical profession — were ignored. The mentally ill were shunned for fear of wreaking havoc on groups. Atheists, though tacitly accepted, were often condescended to by others who assumed they would soon “see the light.”

Even as more women joined the ranks of AA and as meetings became more integrated, there was still, in more cliquish groups and provincial areas, an unspoken and subtle resistance to those who were different.

Sadly, some of this continues to this day, perhaps not in the explicit use of racist, sexist, homophobic or gender non-conforming slurs, but with silence — a silence that can be just as alienating as hurtful words. Dennis, who is African-American, says that at non-urban meetings he is often met with reticence and not openly welcomed.

When Deirdre is honest about her atheism, no one is rude — they just say nothing at all, and she is rarely invited out for coffee. Roland, meanwhile, has been snubbed by those who, unlike him, believe in an anthropomorphic “god.” Jesse, a transgender man, often feels invisible at meetings and is turned off by the gendered language in AA literature. He is concerned about the dearth of literature for transgender people — another form of silence.

Nola, a gay woman, was uncomfortable at straight meetings when she was a newcomer and then experienced real prejudice during the AIDS crisis. Janice, who is black, was offended by a speaker at a predominantly white meeting who said she had been mistreated by black people her whole life. Roland was once told by someone to pull up his jeans, which he took as a not-so-

subtle racial slur. Dennis is also concerned that AA's striving to make the literature race-neutral discourages people of color to share that racism is indeed a part of their story and fears that removing that truth could lead to a drink.

Although most members acknowledge that marginalization due to race, gender and other factors occurs less in AA than it does elsewhere, it does occur, and, in the spirit of the Third Tradition, it is essential to continue practicing love and tolerance with people whose skin color, language, sex, orientation, beliefs and social status differ from our own. Janice is adamant about this: "Welcoming people and making them feel comfortable is not something that comes naturally to some of us, but it has to be done." Her point drives home the importance of greeters at meetings, the literal hand of AA reaching out as someone first walks through the door. It is hard enough for an alcoholic who has just hit bottom, who is sick and terrified, to take that enormous step. But if that person looks or sounds or acts differently from most of the people in the room, it is imperative that someone make them feel welcome at once.

Janice says that her sponsor drilled it into her head that "There should never be a stranger at a meeting." And it's not just words that welcome, but actions. The offer of a cup of coffee can be a life saver: it encourages the new member to stay — and perhaps even to stay sober.

Some lateral attempts at inclusion in AA are "special meetings" — for example, women's, LGBTQ, and atheist and agnostic meetings — but oftentimes the very groups formed to be more accommodating can end up being insensitive themselves. Deirdre went to a gay women's meeting where there was a lot of complaining about bisexuals. At a largely African-American meeting, Angela was offended by people saying how terrible it was to drink and drug with "lowlifes in Harlem." When attending men's meetings, Jesse is hurt by careless comments about transgender men and the use of the T-slur. Nola says two of her dear friends in AA were ostracized from a "Christian" AA group because they were lesbians.

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Mail address: P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station
New York, NY 10163

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"When anyone, anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there..." The AA Responsibility Statement is one of the cornerstones of our Fellowship, but it is critical to remember how different the hand that reaches out may be from the one that reaches back. Although special meetings do serve their purpose in making certain members feel more

comfortable, it is each member's responsibility to make every meeting as open and welcoming as possible. AA is indeed a program of progress and not perfection; still, the progress needs to be steady, taking into consideration that society's conditioning and our own apathy at times can be deterrents to helping another alcoholic.

Recently, AA published four new or updated pamphlets: "Women in AA," "LGBTQ Alcoholics in AA," "AA for Alcoholics with Mental Health Issues — and their sponsors," and "The 'God' Word — agnostic and atheist members in AA". There is also a new Grapevine book, *One Big Tent*, with stories by atheist and agnostic members, which has been a real comfort to Deirdre. Dennis is passionate about the pamphlet on mental health issues: "So many people who are suffering with depression are terrified to talk about it because of the judgment of others, be it vocal or silent." Janice concurs, "Nearly everyone I'm close to in AA is getting outside help." And although Jesse appreciates the LGBTQ pamphlet, he still feels there should be one specifically created for transgender and gender-non-conforming members.

Criticisms notwithstanding, AA has a laudable track record with respect to inclusion, especially when compared to dues-paying and induction-requiring organizations. Although he wishes there were more stories in the Big Book about people of color, Dennis has always found AA to be extremely accepting: "It is rare that I feel like an outsider." Deirdre says that the question of what she believes or doesn't believe regarding a higher power never comes up in the meetings she attends, but she observes that sexism is everywhere — even in AA Jesse feels most comfortable in meetings that use gender-neutral language and loves that AA is open to whatever kind of meeting someone wants to start — as long as the primary purpose is to stay sober and help others. Angela feels lucky that she has always loved meetings and early on found friends of all colors and types to "trudge the road" with her.

Janice has attended meetings where, she says, "The moment I walk through the door, I have been greeted as a true 'fellow' member. The smiles seem genuine, and there is a curiosity and interest in who I am and why I'm there." Unfortunately, she points out that this is not the case with all meetings, white or black: "Harlem meetings can feel just as exclusionary as some on the Upper East Side." Although Nola may have felt uncomfortable at some meetings due to her sexual orientation, she adds, "No one was ever rude or unwelcoming ... I can think of no organization more accepting than AA Like many of my fellows, I believe the world would be a better place if every human being attempted to live by AA's Twelve Step principles." But she is also aware that getting sober in an urban area may be a very different experience from doing so in other parts of the country. Roland agrees, with an important caveat: "AA is more accepting on principle; however, principles are only as good as the practitioner's understanding of their importance — and their willingness to actually practice them."

Beyond literature, what other actions can be taken with respect to promoting inclusion at meetings? Dennis feels that a regular part of the announcements should include the statement from the Big Book, "We are not doctors..." so that newcomers with mental health issues are not afraid to seek outside help for their problems other than alcohol. He also feels AA is not inclusive enough regarding prayer — that it should be a neutral space with respect to beliefs,

because “AA is fluid and people are ever changing.” Jesse finds the “men with the men/women with the women” language of sponsorship announcements in meetings estranging, because any concerns in choosing an appropriate sponsor should have more to do with sexuality than with gender. He also feels that adapting meeting announcements to be non-binary would be more inclusive. On the other hand, some people, both cis and transgender, appreciate hearing language in meetings in the pronouns that they identify with. Deirdre thinks that local intergroups should be taken to task when they stop listing agnostic or secular AA meetings — that “atheists, agnostics and freethinkers can and do have profound recovery in AA without G-O-D” — and that, in this matter, AA needs to widen the door of inclusivity even further.

Roland feels strongly that no one should ever be judged or criticized for their clothing style, and he would like to see more focused literature and discussion in meetings about our willingness to practice AA principles in all of our affairs, and what actions we are taking to that end. Angela is forgiving yet cautious: “Slightings and stupidity have more to do with ignorance than with trying to offend. In fact, I do think people try not to offend ... but we need to keep the rooms safe.”

In the new AA pamphlet “The ‘God’ Word,” there is a quote by AA co-founder Bill W., who, on the subject of diversity in AA, brings it home: “We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all ... Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA so long as he or she [or they] declare.”