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compare. Try to focus on the feelings the speaker has conveyed rather than the specifics of their story. While it is tempting to say, I didn't do this or that, therefore I don't belong here, focus on whether you have felt similar emotions to those of the speaker.

It is important to know that you are not expected to be comfortable with this level of sharing with others. If you do want to talk to the group about your feelings that is fine, but is not required. Initially, you may find it easier to talk to your sponsor or another member alone. However, some people find that sharing their feelings during the meeting, although challenging, can actually be quite helpful.

**Problem:** I'm not like these people, they can't understand me. Group members from AA, NA and other 12-step groups are men and women from all socioeconomic classes, races, and ages. It is more common for people to associate and form relationships with those who seem more like them on the outside. Some new members find it difficult to believe that anyone who seems to have a different life experience, based on their social class and age, can really understand their problems and offer useful assistance.

**Solution:** Remember that you have many things in common with group members that brought you all together in the first place. The common thread is your collective effort to stay clean and sober and to help yourselves and others to recover. While levels of education and income may differ, this does not mean that you cannot receive or offer understanding and help to each other.

Even with this in mind, you will find that some meetings feel better to you than others. You may feel more comfortable and freer to share with one group than another. This is normal and it is important to go to enough meetings so that you can decide which are best for you.

**Problem:** How do I become a member? Some organizations have a number of rules and procedures for becoming a member. What are they?

**Solution:** There is only one requirement for membership in AA and NA. The requirement is a desire to stop drinking and using. No one else decides whether you

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qualify for membership. That is a personal decision to be made by every member. Once a person has decided to be a member of the fellowship as a whole, it is suggested that he or she join a particular group and become involved. This might mean helping out with set-up and clean-up, attending group business meetings, going on commitments with the group, and speaking at meetings. Again, the degree of involvement is up to the individual.

**Problem:** Too many people smoke. They're just addicted to coffee and cigarettes instead. It may be unpleasant for you to spend time in a smoke-filled room.

**Solution:** Once very simple solution to this problem is to find nonsmoking meetings to attend. There are a growing number of these and they are listed in the meeting book as (Non-Smoking). It may also help to develop an attitude of tolerance for people who are making major changes in their lifestyle and need to attack one problem at a time. Many members do quit smoking when they feel comfortable with their abstinence, but are hesitant to give it all up at once. Many meetings now offer both caffeinated and decaffeinated coffee, providing for individual choice.

**Problem:** Are these people for real? Chances are you have never experienced another group quite like AA or NA. They are somewhat unique and it is hard to believe that all of this good humor and desire to help is genuine.

**Solution:** An important part of both the AA and NA programs is giving to others that which has been given to you. This means sharing with others the experiences you have undergone and how you were helped by AA and NA to deal with them. In addition to helping each other, this process helps members to stay clean and sober themselves.

Many people are struck by the amount of laughter and humor; you will probably hear that the development of a sense of humor about life is critical to recovery. AA and NA members see themselves as people who took everything too seriously and while recovery is a serious business, one must learn to laugh at oneself. The appropriate expression here is, "If I didn't laugh, I'd cry." The laughter does not mean that you or anyone else is discouraged from talking about serious and painful matters. Your sharing will be taken seriously whether or not you speak with humor.

## Self-Help Groups

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### Problems and Solutions



*Honor America's veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being*

## Participating in 12-Step Groups



### Problems and Solutions

Every newcomer or returning member to AA and NA is faced with experiences that may seem strange or even a bit overwhelming. Some methods for dealing with these situations and feelings are to anticipate them, know that others before you have mastered the same situations, and discuss and practice some solutions. Many of the solutions may seem unnatural and awkward to you at first. This is perfectly normal. Remember that in order to feel comfortable with a new way of behaving, you must first practice it for a while. The following questions and experiences will probably sound familiar to you. Please bring up any other questions with your counselor.

**Problem:** **Everyone seems to know each other!** When you walk into a meeting you are likely to find a room full of people talking and laughing together. Even if there are newcomers at the meeting, it is almost impossible to pick them out from the others. This can be an intimidating experience, as it is when making an effort to join any new group. Your experience is not unique. Most people feel awkward and unsure of themselves when they meet people for the first time.

**Solutions:** There are several ways of dealing with these feelings and some are better than others. You may be tempted to quickly find an empty seat and make every effort to be invisible and unnoticed. While this may help you feel a bit less nervous for the moment, it will probably not help you in the long run. A more long lasting solution is to introduce yourself to someone. While this may seem to be a frightening solution, it will help you to begin meeting people right away. If you are willing to take this kind of risk early on in the program, you will probably feel much more a part of the group. Other solutions include: find out who is chairing the meeting, and then tell the chairperson that this is one of your first meetings here

and that you don't know anyone; ask if this particular meeting has a temporary sponsor program; ask if there is some way that you can help in setting up or cleaning up after the meeting; or just pitch right in and help.

**Problem:** **They all seem so happy and I'm not.** You may feel a bit out of place when you walk into any meeting because there is a lot of laughter and good cheer. You may feel that these people can't possibly understand how you are feeling because they don't look as though they are or have ever been scared and unhappy.

**Solution:** It is important to remember that all of the people in the rooms of AA and NA were also new to recovery at one time. They do know what it feels like to make the dramatic changes that you are making. They also know what it felt like to be in a room full of people where you seem to be the only one who doesn't know anyone. Again it is up to you to make a move and introduce yourself. If you do this you are likely to find that people are understanding and supportive. Be as open as you can about what you are feeling.

**Problem:** **I don't get along in groups.** Not everyone feels comfortable in groups and it takes some time for them to learn this skill. You may have had an unpleasant experience in a group setting or maybe you tell yourself that you don't know how to act in a group.

**Solution:** Keep in mind that you are facing many new situations, some of which you will have to learn how to handle. You cannot expect yourself to feel comfortable in a group if you have not practiced the skills you need in order to do that. Introducing yourself, speaking in front of other people, and eventually welcoming the member who is newer than you, are all things that will become easier to do with time.

**Problem:** **How do I introduce myself?** Many people are not comfortable introducing themselves as an alcoholic or drug addict when they first come into the program. In fact the whole procedure of identifying yourself and having the whole group respond may seem silly and embarrassing.

**Solution:** You don't have to say that you're an alcoholic or

drug addict when you introduce yourself. The only requirement for being at a closed meeting is that you have a desire to stop drinking and using. No one will challenge you for not calling yourself an alcoholic or addict. Here are some alternatives that you can use until you are more comfortable with this 12-step custom. **Alternatives:** Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and this is my first meeting; Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I want to stop drinking/using; Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I have a drinking or \_\_\_\_\_ problem.

**Problem:** **There is too much talk of God.** One of the things that strikes many is the frequent reference to God or a Higher Power. You may feel so uncomfortable with this part of the program that you stop listening to what others have to say or stop going to meetings.

**Solution:** There are quite a few atheist or agnostic newcomers, and belief in a Higher Power is not a requirement in AA or NA. Programs emphasize the importance of developing a belief in something greater than yourself. The definition of that something is left up to you. AA and NA very clearly state that they are not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization, or institution. The emphasis is on the development of spirituality rather than religion. The group or program as a whole serves some people as a Higher Power. The belief that a group of people is more powerful than any other person alone is not uncommon or unique to 12-step groups.

**Problem:** **When I get as bad as these people, I'll quit.** Many newcomers are struck by the tragedies many current members have faced and are willing to share with the group. It may seem that you are not as bad as they are and that if you were, you certainly wouldn't tell a room full of people about it.

**Solution:** It is not uncommon for people to feel uncomfortable when they are not used to sharing in groups. What may seem inappropriate outside of AA and NA is perfectly acceptable in the program. The stories you hear may be difficult to listen to and may seem unrelated to your experience at first. This is why AA advises you to make efforts to try to relate to the speaker, rather than