

FREEDOM FROM PREJUDICE

The Origins of Prejudice

We have learned that HOW to live clean is more important than learning WHY we used. As a result of our sponsors suggesting that we look up the meaning of words in the dictionary, we learn that prejudice means premature judgment. When we take a personal inventory, we find our prejudice may have begun from emulating those whom we respect, from trying to fit in at school, from our religion, from ignorance or lack of exposure to people different than ourselves, or from blaming a whole group of people for what one member of that group did or may have done. Segregation and prejudice may have been necessary for survival when we were in environments controlled by prejudiced groups. In recovery we discovered that knowing WHY we are prejudiced is not as important as learning HOW to open our minds and become willing to live free from prejudice.

Addiction Makes Strange Bedfellows For some of us, recovery from prejudice began while we were still using. We may have used with whomever had the drugs, no matter what their age, race or sexual orientation was. In the process, our false preconceptions may have been confronted and some healing from prejudice may have begun. However, due to the self-centered nature of addiction, our contacts with those different from us were not always positive. The result was we developed prejudice or our existing prejudice progressed.

Our First N.A. Meetings

When we came to N.A. we were surprised to see people from all walks of life, even former antagonists, giving each other hugs. As we listen to others share, we discover how different the details of our using lives may have been. Yes, there were the hardcore heroin addicts, but there were also those who abused their pain medication, those seeking to bond with others with Ecstasy, crack smokers and so on... We wonder what all these people have in common, and in their sharing we hear that they have one disease, addiction, and they have chosen recovery in Narcotics Anonymous. Although disorienting at first, for many addicts this is the beginning of an awakening to the fact that none of these differences are important. We begin to understand that N.A. is a place for everyone seeking recovery from addiction. Prejudice in the Rooms of N.A. Although N.A.'s principles are opposed to prejudice, there are individuals who still believe their own culture or opinions are superior to others. An addict whose drug of choice was heroin may snub someone who smoked marijuana or abused prescriptions; a convict may make a point of clarifying that he or she is not a homosexual; a joke told at a break may be insulting to a racial group; or someone may try to promote their religion from the podium, offending those of other faiths. While these events are rare, they occur often enough that some addicts seeking recovery feel that N.A. is not for them. The Addict Who is Offended Without drugs, we often discover we are very sensitive people. Things, that we may have ignored or used over in the past, now offend and hurt us. It is crucial when this occurs, that we seek the support of other recovering addicts who want to help

us in our recovery. It may be necessary to do a reality check. Our friends may point out that the person who offended us is obnoxious to everyone, and is not singling us out because of our race or gender. The person we thought was ignoring us because of our age or sexual orientation may be having personal problems or is just distracted. Even when there are real acts of prejudice; our addictive minds offer self-destructive solutions. Our disease may tell us not to return to N.A., or it tells us to be alone and obsess about how we were offended. Ultimately, it tells us we deserve to get loaded. Our disease forgets to mention that N.A. is filled with people that care about us and who want to help us recover. It would have us fail to remember that in the past, sharing with others has always helped us more than isolating did. And most crucially, addiction never reminds us that using will cause us to lose everything we value and bring us to the bitter ends of jails, institutions and death. When another person's behavior offends us, there are a number of things we can do for ourselves. One thing we can do is to get to a safe place, with safe people and share about it. While prejudice can result in of unkind words or unfair practices, there are some people who still turn to violence. Personal safety is crucial. No matter how long we have been clean, there may be a tendency when offended to turn to old solutions like using and violence. This is why it is crucial to talk to our sponsor or other addicts with whom we feel safe and follow their directions. One suggestion may be to write about what happened. It may be beneficial to list what we resented. Other useful topics include our fears related to prejudice and how this may be familiar to things that happened to us in the past. If we are going to be thorough, it is important not to forget to write about the assets we have as a result of our recovery that may help us deal with the prejudice of others. Our sponsor may suggest that we include the person who hurt us in our daily prayers. While our initial prayer may be that they get what they deserve, we quickly move to praying that they find full recovery, including relief from all of their defects of character. There may be a specific reading that our sponsor or others direct us to. This may focus on how we overcome our own hurt and angry feelings. Alternatively, it may clarify N.A.'s principles of open-mindedness, so that we do not confuse one addict's opinions with the principals of our program. Each addict may need to do something different when offended. The most important thing, regardless of who you are and how you were offended, is to seek the support of others in N.A. who want to help you in your recovery.

Prejudice as a Defect of Character

Even if no one offends us, it is important to look at our own prejudice. Our primary purpose is to carry the message of hope for recovery from addiction. Our Sixth Step tells us that part of recovery is becoming willing to have all of our defects of character removed. Prejudice, like all defects of character, isolates us from others, separates us from our higher power and alienates us from ourselves. It is crucial that we have no reservations, and that we seek the help of others and our higher power to remove the defect of prejudice from our hearts. Some of us found that answering the following questions assisted in identifying whether or not prejudice was one of our defects of character. Do I stick with people from my background at meetings? Do I laugh at jokes that make fun of people because of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation or religion? Have I ever kept silent (silence is complicity) when I observed prejudice in N.A.? Have I ever not reached out to a newcomer because they appeared to be

homeless or more affluent than I am? Do I secretly believe that those who did not use the same drugs I used are not really addicts and do not belong in N.A.? Has someone ever told me they were offended by something I said or did at an N.A. meeting or a service committee? Do I rationalize my prejudice towards a whole group of addicts, because one member of that group harmed me in the past? Have I ever refused to sponsor someone of a different culture, sexual orientation, or religion because I thought they would relate better to someone more like themselves? Do I feel superior to other addicts because I am richer, smarter, or have more clean time than they do? Do I direct my attention at breaks to attractive addicts and ignore others who are unattractive, but who might need to talk? If my country was at war with another country, would I make immigrants from that country feel welcomed at the N.A. meetings they attend? Have I resisted making amends to certain individuals because of the group they belong to? Do I ever judge or criticize others sharing at N.A. meetings because they have different beliefs than I do? Have I ever verbally or physically assaulted someone because of his or her racial or ethnic background? Am I prejudiced against others and myself from my culture because I feel less than?

Overcoming Personal Prejudice

Our experience in N.A. is that we can act our way into right thinking, but we cannot think our way into right action. Once we become willing to have our prejudice removed, there are a number of actions we can take. One action is sharing in meetings that we need help with our prejudice and ask for anyone who has been given relief in this area to talk to us at the break. Another action is doing the writing our sponsor suggests to help us see that the prejudice, which we thought was protecting us, was hurting others, ourselves and the Fellowship of N.A. Questions that some addicts have found useful to write about include: What role did I play in the problems I have with people I am prejudiced towards? How does my fear limit my recovery and make me vulnerable to relapse? Are there acts of bigotry that I am ashamed of? Do I make it a point to greet people at meetings who may look isolated or uncomfortable? What reservations do I have about asking God to remove my prejudice? What assets do I have that can help me overcome my prejudice? Some of us pray for tolerance, open-mindedness and love. We can be of service to those who we used to fear and get to know them as individuals. We can make direct or indirect amends for how our prejudice has harmed others. It is often this last action that affirms to ourselves that we no longer need prejudice to survive. We begin to see the strength of our diversity. We are then able to live in N.A. and society without fear and resentment towards other groups of people.

Confronting the Prejudice in N.A.

N.A. is a worldwide Fellowship, with all recovering addicts having a voice in its maintenance and growth. When someone speaks from a place of prejudice and not a single person says or does anything, we are giving our informal approval of this kind of behavior. This can be more hurtful than the original actions, for the addict who is a member of the group who was slighted. Not all addicts will respond the same, but all addicts need to respond. For some addicts, the response will be a reaffirmation of their own commitment to seek recovery from their own prejudice, as a result of seeing how ugly it is in others. Other addicts may reach out privately to those who have been

harmed and offer their support. Some addicts may directly approach the individual to let them know that prejudice does not have a place when speaking from the podium or in our service committees and encourage them to get some help. If prejudice occurs at a meeting, it is an opportunity for the trusted servants of that meeting to address the matter. We must remember that prejudice is a defect of character and that the prejudiced person is also an addict in recovery. It is clear when addressing prejudice that it is the behavior that is intolerable, not the addict. We want the addict to feel welcome to keep coming back to our meetings. No matter how upset we may be, if we come from a place of anger, we will just be multiplying the impact of prejudice. It is crucial that we come from a place of love. Love for the addict that is harmed by the prejudice of others. Love for the prejudiced addict who needs our help to be relieved of this defect of character. And love for the Fellowship that gives us freedom from addiction and freedom from our defects of character.

"Please open my mind and my heart and show me the way to make N.A. a place where an addict, any addict, will feel they have found their way home. "

The Price of Prejudice

The Fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous is committed to the principle that no addict seeking recovery need die from the horrors of addiction. At every meeting we remind ourselves that "anyone may join us regardless of age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion or lack of religion." Prejudice is a defect of character we cannot afford to ignore. The price for our Fellowship of ignoring prejudice is that we become hypocrites and abandon our own spiritual principles. The price of prejudice for us as individual recovering addicts is just as devastating. Prejudice isolates us from our fellow members. Our experience has been that the help we need to stay clean often comes from unexpected sources. Our sponsor may not be home and our friends may be busy at the moment when the obsession to use hits us. Our experience has taught us to accept help from any recovering addict or face the possibility of relapse and death. Our diversity is our strength.

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The email below -- if you have input, please don't hit your reply button, but send it directly to Craig at dr.craigpw@verizon.net -- thanks!