



In Times of Illness

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Recovery does not guarantee us freedom from living life on life's terms. In Narcotics Anonymous we can learn to accept the reality of life, which sometimes brings us illness or injury. We've learned in NA that we can apply spiritual principles to help us get through these difficult times. When we admit that we are powerless, we can accept our illness and any necessary medical treatment. It may help to admit that we are also powerless over the feelings we experience when we are ill.

Illness or injury is stressful, and stress can place us at risk of relapse. Often, we need the NA program even more when we are faced with illness. We can prepare ourselves for these stressful times by doing our best each day to lay a strong foundation in recovery. The steps we take today will serve us well when we need them.

Coming to terms with illness is a process. It is a process in which we often experience denial, bargaining, anger, grief, surrender, and acceptance. However, it's comforting to realize that these stages are a normal part of this process. Acceptance of something does not necessarily mean we like it—we can dislike something and still accept it.

"I was able to get clean in spite of agonizing pain. I asked God, 'Why me?' I found myself lacking in faith, acceptance, and hope. I just suffered through that first year and stayed clean by God's grace. Sometime during my second year in recovery, I began applying the principle of surrender to my illness and developing a closer relationship with my Higher Power.

There are many days I wish things were different. Some days I still ask, "Why me?" I now know that I can experience chronic illness and not return to active addiction. Sometimes I still get a case of the "if onlys," and other addicts share with me that they do, too. Even so, each day I thank God for the gift of NA, my life, and the love I have as a result of this recovery program."

It is important to share about our illness with our fellow recovering addicts. If possible, we attend more meetings than usual. If we are unable to attend meetings, we can ask that meetings be brought to us. The support of others is crucial when we are ill or injured.

Our experience in recovery shows us that we have a choice; we can view any experience as a crisis or as a time for spiritual growth. In this sense, illness and injury are no different than other life experiences. Even though it may seem more difficult to sustain the daily footwork of recovery while we are suffering, our solutions in illness are the same as those in good health. We can maintain our recovery during times of illness by consistently practicing a spiritual program.

Informing our Doctors

It is difficult for any doctor to provide us with adequate health care unless we are honest about our addiction. It is essential that we let our doctors know that we are recovering addicts. It may be necessary to tell them a little about addiction as we understand it. Most importantly, we make it clear that we choose not to take medication unless it is necessary. Our honesty will help our doctors accurately assess our needs.

“A woman I sponsor was scheduled to have major surgery. She felt shame and was afraid that the medical personnel would treat her differently if she told them she was an addict. Rather than lose face, she was willing to risk her recovery. Thank God, she shared those feelings with me. I helped her to see that it was important to walk through the fear and inform the medical personnel of her addiction. She chose to be honest with her doctor. As a result, her recovery was strengthened rather than jeopardized.”

While our doctors are responsible for our medical care, we are responsible for our recovery. We have a right to participate as an equal partner by informing our doctors of our needs and asking about our options.

Medication in Recovery

Narcotics Anonymous as a whole has no opinion on outside issues, including health issues. We are concerned with recovery from the disease of addiction. Although our recovery is complicated when we experience disease or injury, this does not have to lead us away from recovery.

The ultimate responsibility for making medical decisions rests with each individual. If we choose to accept it, however, a great deal of support is available to help us make these decisions. For instance, we can practice the Twelve Steps, maintain frequent contact with our sponsor, write about our feelings and motives, and share at meetings. With the support of others in Narcotics Anonymous, we find the strength we need to make healthy decisions for our own recovery.

The use of medication in recovery is often controversial. It's good to remember that the Basic Text recommends consulting professionals concerning our medical problems. When we remember that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using, we as members can set aside our judgment of others. Clean time is an issue for each of us to resolve individually with our sponsor and our Higher Power. An attitude of judgment on our part could cause great harm to another addict.

“I was one person who believed that, if you used anything for any reason, it was considered a relapse. Until I was faced with this situation in my own recovery, it didn't dawn on me that I might have to take medication. I can remember going to meetings and having people ask me if I'd relapsed, and telling me to pick up a white chip. This really hurt and scared me. I felt rejected and very alone because no one seemed to understand that I needed strength and hope.”

When someone we know has been taking prescribed medication, we can help them by offering support and by sharing our experience, strength, and hope. We fulfill our primary purpose by supporting another addict's recovery with an attitude of care, love, and concern.

The power of the disease of addiction cannot be underestimated. Regardless of how we work our mental and spiritual program of recovery, we may react to medication like we did when using drugs. It doesn't matter what the medication is or whether it was our drug of choice. Any medication may unleash the craving and the compulsion that haunted us while we were using. Our experience has shown that no drugs are risk-free for us.

“My body does not know the difference between taking needed pain medication and abusing drugs. Today, I have to get honest with myself and turn to my Higher Power for help. Each time pain medication is prescribed for me, I explore my motives for taking it. Am I taking medication to get high? Am I imagining or magnifying this pain? Is this medication necessary right now? If it is necessary, a network of safeguards can be set up among my sponsor, recovering friends, family and medical personnel so that I'm not in control of the medication. I would probably be the worst person to regulate or control the taking of any drug.”

Just as we may view illness as an opportunity to justify using drugs, we also may go to the other extreme. Sometimes we stubbornly insist that we know better than the doctor, refuse all medications, and neglect problems that require attention. Ignoring health problems because of fear or pride may, in fact, make matters worse for us.

“When I was about a year and a half clean, I suffered my first bout of a recurrent illness. My sponsor told me not to be a martyr and to go to my doctor, who knows that I am a recovering addict. I didn’t listen, and as a result I was hospitalized for five days, in traction and on strong medication. If I had followed my sponsor’s suggestion, I would have been on a milder medication for a much shorter period of time.”

Over-the-counter drugs can also pose a very real threat to us. Even though some over-the-counter drugs are marked “non-narcotic,” they may be mood-altering. It is important that we consider their use as carefully as the use of any other medication. Any drug, prescription or non-prescription, has the potential to be abused.

Sometimes, alternative methods of treatment can be used. Many of these methods require little or no medication or the use of medication that doesn’t alter our moods or our thinking. This is another way in which we can exercise responsibility for our recovery, even during illness. Some NA members share that they have felt spiritually strengthened by exploring and utilizing these alternatives.

By living the Narcotics Anonymous program, we find a measure of consistency in our lives. We can also apply the program to help us find balance when we are ill. Sharing openly with our doctor and our sponsor, relying on a Higher Power, and practicing the Twelve Steps are ways to help each individual find a balance that is comfortable and appropriate.

Emergency Care

Sometimes, emergency room treatment becomes necessary. When this happens, we are often asked to make quick decisions. It would be easy to rationalize or justify the use of medications that may not be necessary. It’s a good idea to have another addict to support us in these difficult situations if possible. Relying on others can alleviate the fear and irrational thinking that we may experience when we face emergencies alone. Isolation is often dangerous for addicts at times like these.

“Even though I thought I was alone, I wasn’t—because I prayed. I then called my sponsor, who met me at the emergency room. Once there, I was examined and offered medication. I explained my addiction to the doctor and asked if not taking the medication was life-threatening. With my sponsor’s support, I was able to make an informed decision.”

The presence of a trusted friend and faith in a Higher Power are invaluable in an emergency situation. The strength we gain from this support can help us make decisions that will enhance our recovery, instead of endangering us. Even in an emergency, we can still apply our program of recovery.

Chronic and Terminal Illness in Recovery

Some members may be faced with the diagnosis of a chronic or terminal disease. It is only natural for this news to be received with fear, despair, or anger. Doubt and hopelessness may eclipse our hard-earned faith in a Higher Power. We have found it possible, however, to continue our recovery while struggling with a chronic or terminal disease.

“When I first heard my diagnosis, I ran through a range of emotions. ‘It’s not fair; I already have the disease of addiction. How much should one person have to deal with?’ During this time I became angry with my Higher Power, fearing I had gotten clean only to die. At the same time I felt guilty—like I had no right to feel all those things. I felt as if I were whining when I should have been grateful that it wasn’t worse.”

The mood swings and feelings we experience as a result of illness are normal. We give ourselves permission to feel exactly as we do, and to look for ways to cope, not escape. We can view our illness as a curse, or we can walk through it in a positive manner that will work toward our benefit. Once again, we find ourselves in one of life's situations where our attitude will play a large role in how successfully we pass through the storm. In fact, our survival and recovery depend on our mental and spiritual approach.

A renewal of our commitment to seek recovery in Narcotics Anonymous is essential at times like these. By renewing our commitment to turn our will and our lives over to our Higher Power's care we open a channel that allows this Power to work in our lives. Prayer and meditation are powerful tools in seeking the best path through our illness.

Reaching out to others who are living with a chronic or terminal illness will help us to realize that we are not alone. Giving our support to and sharing our experiences with others can help us to avoid the self-centeredness that is at the core of our disease.

"My gratitude for a few addicts and my sponsor leaves me without words to convey my appreciation. They didn't allow me to isolate or wallow in self-pity. Calling and stopping by daily, taking me to meetings, fixing up their cars with pillows and blankets so I could ride comfortably are a few acts of their kindness."

The importance of our continued involvement with the fellowship cannot be over-emphasized. Although some of our fellow addicts will be frightened of chronic and terminal illness, there will always be members whose warmth and emotional availability we can rely on. If we encounter fear or misunderstanding in other members, it can be used as an opportunity to share about our illness with them, or simply acknowledge their feelings of fear. We can let them know that any support they are able to offer would be welcomed.

Although not all of us are directly affected by a chronic illness, most of us will know of someone who is suffering from a serious disease. It may help us to remember that our Basic Text says, "Separation from the atmosphere of recovery and from the spirit of service to others slows our spiritual growth." It is our responsibility as recovering members of NA to provide the unconditional love and support that is so desperately needed by our seriously ill members.

"The last months, I felt that I was never doing enough, that I wasn't repaying my friend for what he had given me. The guilt was tormenting me. I believed that I wasn't a good friend at all. But I shared about it with friends and at meetings, and by being open to the message of recovery, I realized that I was doing the best I could and that my effort was good enough."

People who are close to someone who is chronically ill, whether they are a friend, a partner, or a sponsor, may find themselves dealing with feelings of helplessness, fear, inadequacy, and sadness. All of these feelings are to be expected when someone we care for is ill.

Perhaps the most painful feeling is the anticipated loss of a loved one. During these times, we need to remind ourselves that our loved one is *living* with an illness. By placing the emphasis on life, we can appreciate the day, not rob ourselves of the precious here and now, and remain free from worry about what the future may hold.

"A man I sponsor, with almost ten years clean time in NA, telephoned me with some bad news. Doctors said he had an incurable disease that would kill him within sixty days. He lived for two years, however, and continued to work a program of recovery. His courage inspired all of us, and he will be missed. His example in living the NA principles will always be remembered."

Working the steps is vital in leading us toward acceptance. Through this process, we prepare ourselves to handle the reality of illness with all the spiritual strength and hope our recovery can provide. We gradually learn to allow for the changes in our body, mind, and spirit.

We have found that we can cope with illness or injury if we follow the simple suggestions offered in this pamphlet. Building a strong foundation in recovery gives us an advantage. We can survive the ups and downs of life by applying spiritual principles each day.

Suggestions to Follow When Faced with Illness

Some of our members have found the following list of suggestions helpful in dealing with the impact of illness on their recovery.

- Go to as many NA meetings as possible.
- Work closely with your sponsor.
- Read NA literature.
- Reach out to other NA members. Ask for support.
- Write about your feelings.
- Practice the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.
- Pray and meditate.
- Share your thoughts and feelings honestly and openly.
- Identify yourself as a recovering addict to health care professionals.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before taking over-the-counter drugs.
- Arrange for an NA member to be with you during surgery or other medical treatment involving drugs.
- Honestly evaluate your condition and explore alternatives to medication.
- Continue on your path of recovery in Narcotics Anonymous.

Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous

1. We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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Twelve Traditions of Narcotics Anonymous

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on NA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry the message to the addict who still suffers.
6. An NA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the NA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, or prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every NA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Narcotics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. NA, as such, ought never be organized, but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Narcotics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the NA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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