

# Predatory Behavior

## What is Predatory Behavior?

Many recovering addicts around the world have been thinking about the best way to address predatory behavior in the fellowship. In meetings, one of the most common ways this occurs is unwelcome sexual and romantic advances towards members, especially newcomers. While the vast majority of NA members do not engage in this kind of behavior, the unfortunate reality is that too many of us, especially our most vulnerable, have experienced it in various forms.

Some may perceive the discussion of this topic as controversial and divisive, but the future of our fellowship depends upon our collective willingness to engage in honest dialogue about difficult topics that affect our most vulnerable members. This pamphlet addresses predatory behavior in the fellowship from multiple perspectives, drawing directly from the experience of our members. What follows is a solution-oriented discussion, reflection, and list of suggestions for moving forward in a spirit of unity.

*"We want our place of recovery to be a safe place..."*

*Basic Text, "What is the Narcotics Anonymous Program?"*

## Historical Context

The problem at hand is a real part of our history. Though predatory behavior is not exclusive to our fellowship, it may be exacerbated in the recovery community. Most of us have heard the term "13<sup>th</sup> Step" used to describe a situation in which a member with more clean time takes advantage of a member in early recovery. This is a form of exploitation that deprives the newcomer of an opportunity to recover. It is predatory by nature because one person has more power than the other.

Understanding predatory behavior requires one to look beyond individual acts of misconduct and towards the institutional nature of sexism and the ways it has granted dominance to men over the course of history. While it's true that men experience sexual misconduct too, the vast majority of cases involve women. This is no less true in Narcotics Anonymous. These issues have always been prevalent in NA; partly because we are a fellowship of men and women who do not exist in a social vacuum. In other words, the problems in Narcotics Anonymous are often a reflection of the problems in society.

*“Mostly we know when we are doing something wrong, taking advantage of someone who is vulnerable, being controlling, deceptive, or abusive—and we have a responsibility to ourselves as well as to the other person to stop it.”*

*Living Clean: The Journey Continues, Relationships*

## **Awareness & Intervention**

When we remember that, “we differ in degree of sickness and rate of recovery” it seems inevitable that some members will interfere with the recovery of others. There are times, however, when it is necessary for members to intervene in predatory behavior. At the group level, experienced members are responsible for maintaining an atmosphere of recovery. This could mean ensuring that newcomers don't get surrounded by members of the opposite sex before or after the meeting. We can do this by directing newcomers to members of the same-sex who have long-term clean time and recovery.

However, making assumptions about a person's sexual identity and thus, their sponsorship needs, can be problematic. We can avoid this by getting to know the members in our groups. This will help ensure that an individual's needs are met. It may be more appropriate for someone who identifies as lesbian or gay to get a sponsor of the opposite sex. Getting to know the members in our groups, especially newcomers, will help us meet their needs better, and hopefully reduce the possibility of putting them in a situation where they are susceptible to misconduct, harassment, or abuse from someone of either sex.

*“An atmosphere of love and care in our meetings helps members feel comfortable and safe.”*

*It Works: How and Why, Tradition One*

## **Responsibility & Accountability**

We should first take responsibility for ourselves and the members of our own sex who are acting in predatory or inappropriate ways. The onus should never be on the target of the behavior because it is always the perpetrator who is responsible. Regardless of what the victim says, does, or wears, nothing justifies their mistreatment or abuse. Rather, by speaking with our fellow members about appropriate behavior and treatment of other NA members, we can model spiritual principles and demonstrate what it means to live the program. When this kind of atmosphere is developed in our groups, we can redefine the culture of Narcotics Anonymous one meeting at a time.

Narcotics Anonymous doesn't enforce rules or regulate behavior, but a safe atmosphere is integral to fulfilling our primary purpose of carrying the message. If any member is harassed, threatened, or abused, our primary purpose is in jeopardy. When someone feels physically or emotionally unsafe due to the behavior of another NA member, they may be unable or unwilling to remain in the meeting or come back again. This situation prevents the member from hearing the message, participating in their recovery, and benefiting from the program and fellowship. Predatory behavior threatens the livelihood of the individual addict and the fellowship as a whole.

*"In Narcotics Anonymous, we are concerned with protecting ourselves from ourselves."*

*Basic Text, Tradition Two*

## **The Safety Statement**

One practical step that groups might take to address predatory behavior is by implementing a "Safety Statement" (see below) into their format. This can be integrated into the opening reports of trusted servants or included as a separate reading. The "Safety Statement" below is adapted from "Informational Pamphlet #29: An Introduction to NA Meetings."

### *Safety Statement*

*We strongly discourage any harassment, threats, or disturbing behavior before, during, and after our meetings. This includes unwelcome sexual and romantic advances towards members, especially newcomers. Our meetings are for sharing NA recovery. It is the responsibility of all group members to help maintain an atmosphere in which every addict is safe to recover. If you feel harassed or threatened, share your concerns with the meeting leader or a trusted servant.*

*Adapted from IP #29: An Introduction to NA Meetings*

The statement above is *not* fellowship-approved literature and material from this pamphlet is not intended to be read at a meeting. However, if a meeting decides, through group conscience, that the statement doesn't conflict with the traditions and doesn't affect other groups or NA as a whole, then group autonomy enables them to include it in their format. The "Safety Statement" has been adapted from IP #29 to be more suitable for the group setting. If groups are considering the inclusion of the "Safety Statement" in their meeting format, they can assure members it is closely derived from

IP #29, which is fellowship-approved literature. Most importantly, the “Safety Statement” embodies the spiritual principles that are needed to cultivate an atmosphere of recovery for all our members.

*“An atmosphere of recovery in our groups is one of our most valued assets, and we must guard it carefully...”*

*Basic Text, Tradition Two*

## **Moving Forward**

The “Safety Statement” is a small, but important step forward. It represents a shift towards accountability and responsibility that begins with the group, which is the most powerful vehicle for carrying the message. As we move forward by shedding light on predatory behavior in the fellowship, there are sure to be difficult discussions ahead. This is uncharted territory full of unanswered questions and we must navigate it together. This is how we grow as a fellowship.

One important area of uncertainty is how we handle reports of harassment, abuse, or threatening behavior. Our collective experience is usually sufficient for dealing with the issues in our groups, but we are not professionals. There may be times when we should suggest that a fellow member seek outside help from a mental health professional or, in extreme cases, law enforcement.

What follows are a preliminary list of questions that will likely surface as we begin to reflect on the best ways to move forward. These questions may serve as a starting point for discussions at business meetings or annual group inventories.

- What should a meeting leader or trusted servant do when a member reports an incident involving predatory behavior?
- Are we equipped to handle such reports? If not, how can we train trusted servants to deal with these issues?
- When should members intervene in predatory behavior?
- What is the best way to approach or confront a member who is engaging in predatory behavior?
- What kinds of incidents fall under the realm of “outside issues”?
- When should we suggest that members seek outside help?
- What protections are in place for minors and young addicts who attend our meetings?
- How can we assure parents of young addicts that their children are safe in our meetings?

- How do our home groups take an inventory of these issues on an annual or semi-annual basis?

These questions represent the beginning of a necessary and fundamental healing process that should take place among reflective NA members around the world. Rather than problems, these questions present us with opportunities for spiritual growth. When we come together in a spirit of unity, nothing is too great a challenge. Our resourcefulness, experience, strength, and hope always prevail when our minds and hearts are open to God's will for us and the power to carry it out.

### **Spirituality in Action**

There is a growing number of us, men and women, who want to make a difference and become part of the solution. It's especially important, now more than ever, for us to organize by holding learning days, workshops, speaker jams, conventions, conferences, and other forums that feature speakers and topics that address predatory behavior in the fellowship. We should make an effort to seek out those individuals, groups, areas, and regions who have already been working diligently to make progress. Discussing this topic openly doesn't cast Narcotics Anonymous in a negative light, but instead demonstrates our honesty, courage, and willingness to apply spiritual principles to a problem that has been affecting NA members for too long.

As we look toward the future, we should always be concerned with the safety, protection, and recovery of all our members, especially newcomers, young people, and other vulnerable addicts. We are not defined by how we treat our most experienced members, but by the actions we take to ensure the recovery of the addicts who need us most. Breaking the silence on this topic is a spiritual act of love, faith, and courage that has the power to help our fellowship right now and in the future.