

**Experience Sponsorship
in Nicotine Anonymous (NicA):
Sponsors and Sponsees Share Their Experience**

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Introduction

Sponsorship is one of five *Tools* of recovery in Nicotine Anonymous (NicA). Sponsorship is how one member, especially a newcomer, receives the individual support and guidance from another experienced member. Seeking out a sponsor is not required, but we encourage it.

A sponsor is typically a member who has successfully let go of nicotine; and is willing and available to share his or her experience with a newcomer on a one-to-one basis. Becoming someone's sponsor is a voluntary service. As an experienced member, he or she has first-hand knowledge and understanding of what a newcomer may be going through. A sponsor is someone who can explain and guide a sponsee through the Twelve Steps of Nicotine Anonymous and other aspects of the program.

Getting free and staying free from nicotine is no easy task for most nicotine users. We find it best to have all the help we can. It is good to have a clear-minded and compassionate sponsor during withdrawal. It is important to be guided past the temptations and typical triggers that can occur and lead to a dreaded relapse, even after enjoying some time abstinent from nicotine.

It is suggested that you get a sponsor as soon as possible, whether you have quit using nicotine yet or not. As newcomers begin to attend meetings and listen to other members share, they can consider who they think would be a good fit as a sponsor. A newcomer can then approach and ask that member before or after a meeting, (or use the phone or email), to see if he or she is available and willing to be a sponsor.

By being a sponsor, a member has an opportunity to work Step Twelve and practice the tool of service. Members willing to be sponsors can announce and make their availability known. A sponsor offers what he or she has gained through her or his NicA experience, which is one of the best ways to keep, (or strengthen), one's own recovery. We come to believe in a Power greater than ourselves, and then serve a purpose greater than ourselves.

Working with a sponsee, a sponsor will often be reminded of what it was like when he or she was quitting. This helps a sponsor to maintain respect for this powerful drug, and gratitude for the gift of freedom he or she was given.

Nicotine Anonymous has various ways to make and stay in contact with other members. Our website provides information about them. As of this printing, there are several different formats for NicA group meetings including face-to-face meetings, internet meetings, (see the NicA intergroup, Voices of Nicotine Recovery meetings), and telephone meetings, (see the NicA intergroups Free Bridge or Primary Purpose).

There is also an internet blog, Unofficial NicAnon. There are also members who connect on social media, such as Facebook at *Nicotine Anonymous*, or *Nicotine Anonymous Brasil*.

Additionally, one can connect with the program via two pen pal formats: Email Pals and Pen Pals, (paper). These all are different ways to connect with other members who could potentially become sources of support and as sponsors.

This booklet's collection of members' experiences include: Some written in a workshop on the topic held at a World Service Conference; individual submissions sent in by members; from excerpts selected from our quarterly newsletter, *Seven Minutes*: all contributed over a period of years. It is hoped that these shares will help members understand the value of sponsorship and encourage members to be sponsors and/or become sponsees by seeking out a sponsor. As always, "take what you want and leave the rest."

Daily Meditation on Sponsorship

Sometimes all it takes to let go is the right person to hold onto.

– Steve Hartman

For too many years I held on to my cigarettes as if “for dear life.” I came to believe they were my best friends, companions that would always be by my side or pocket. When I reached for help, I reached for a cigarette.

As health concerns and prices increased, cigarettes became a love/hate relationship. When I became a NicA member, I began to study up on nicotine and all the toxic chemicals in tobacco smoke. My “love” was due to how nicotine raises the levels of brain chemicals (e.g., dopamine and endorphins) that create the illusion of pleasure, which reinforces the bond—the addiction.

I finally let go of cigarettes because, along with my original group members, I had an experienced sponsor as a “right person” to hold on to *walk through the Steps*. I remain mindful to hold onto all the resources the fellowship provides. *Our Promises* are true—“We now realize we have been participating in a grand hoax.” Our slogan, *Watch Your Steps*, reminds me, “As addict, one must beware of slippery places.”

Today, I will let go of illusions, and hold onto what is real—the Steps and my sponsor.

The Parable of the Ember

A member of the program of recovery, who previously had been attending meetings regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, her sponsor decided to visit her. It was a chilly evening and the sponsor found the sponsee at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for her sponsor's visit, the sponsee welcomed her, led her to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. Her sponsor made herself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, she contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the sponsor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then she sat back in her chair, still silent. The sponsee watched all this in quiet fascination. As the one lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and “dead as a doornail.”

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. Just before the sponsor was ready to leave, she picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the sponsor reached the door to leave, the sponsee said, “Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I’ll see you at the meeting in the morning.”

Author Unknown

Members Share Their Experience

Sponsorship makes us different

Nicotine Anonymous has five tools to help the still suffering as well as the recovering member. They are meetings, literature, phone list, sponsorship, and service. One of the major differences in 12 Step programs like NicA is sponsorship. More about sponsorship can be read in our pamphlets *To the Newcomer and Sponsorship in Nicotine Anonymous* and the *Newcomer's Booklet*. Sponsorship benefits the sponsee, as we know, but it is also a gift to the sponsor by helping her or him to maintain the best possible perspective on recovery.

Perhaps lesser known is how sponsorship benefits the fellowship as a whole. Sponsorship makes us different; it welcomes the new member and helps him or her to stay with it when all seems lost. I am aware that there are many members who do sponsor others. In fact, there are some who sponsor more than one sponsee, but I believe that sponsorship is worth a new emphasis, especially in light of a new and significant addition to our literature, the *Nicotine Anonymous Step Study Workbook*.

The benefits of working with a sponsor

As somebody who has always needed to handle things on my own, it has been a revelation that staying away from nicotine is something that I have never been able to accomplish by myself. It didn't seem to matter how much clean time I had or how confident I felt, I always ended up back in the same place, smoking again!

Although my core addiction is to nicotine, I have, in the past, worked with sponsors in other programs. I'm sure I learned a lot from working with those people, but there was something lacking in my attempts to work the Steps in recovery. Not that there isn't something universally true regarding addictions, but there are specific aspects of my addiction to nicotine that I needed to address with a sponsor who was familiar with nicotine addiction through personal experience.

This realization is continuously confirmed by the progress I have made in my recovery this time. Not only have I been able to navigate my way through difficult situations without smoking, but the quality of my life has improved tremendously.

An important aspect of working with my sponsor has been the *Step Study Workbook*, both my work when I'm alone and when going through the answers with my sponsor. I find that it provides an opportunity to examine and confront issues that I have avoided for many years. The workbook is, and will continue to be, a valuable resource.

During recovery I am faced with many challenging situations. What I am confronted with on a daily basis is very unpredictable, not to mention the emotional roller coaster I experience as I try to live without nicotine. I honestly believe that if I had to survive all of these situations without the help of a sponsor, I would have picked up a long time ago.

Another positive aspect of working with a good sponsor is getting the opportunity to actually open up and be honest with another human being. This is something that, as an addict and an introvert, I have never felt comfortable doing. I already see a change in my interactions with others and also in my relationships. I am looking forward to stronger and deeper relationships as I grow emotionally through my work in the program and with my sponsor.

I cannot emphasize enough how valuable it has been for my recovery to work with a sponsor. I recommend to anyone who seriously wants to live a healthy life, free of nicotine, to avail themselves of the help of a good sponsor to guide them through the Twelve Steps of nicotine recovery.

My sponsor as a beacon

Standing alone, sending out its beacon, a lighthouse guides a vessel as it makes its way toward safe harbor. Rough seas or smooth, storm or calm, both day and night, the steady beam and sturdy tower are an ever-present guide. So too is my sponsor.

My relationship with my sponsor has experienced all of the conditions of a ship at sea. It has been rough and smooth; joyful, painful, exciting, and frightening. Regardless, I have been able to navigate my recovery through regular attendance at meetings and the steady guidance of my sponsor.

Existing in the throes of addiction is turbulent and confusing. The struggle to recovery is likewise fraught with conflict. We each need help to direct our recovery as we attend meetings and try to grow through each of the Steps. We cannot navigate alone. We are no different than a ship at sea.

I wish I could say I am an ideal sponsee. I am not. I break promises, I cut corners, I relapse, and I make empty vows to improve. Still, I make slow progress and both my commitment to my meeting and to my recovery is genuine.

Somehow, through all of this, my sponsor sticks by me, a constant positive influence on my journey toward recovery and abstinence, a beacon to pierce the dark, a tower of strength to aspire to.

My thoughts on being a sponsor

Sponsorship is one of our five tools of recovery. I believe in the principle of paying it (the gift) forward to another member. As a sponsor, there's a healing for both of us, as well as accepting the truth that "to keep it we need to give it away." Serving as a sponsor is one way to express my gratitude for the support and wisdom I received when I was welcomed at my first home group.

Over time, my efforts as a sponsor have hopefully improved with both experience and the expanded literature resources from World Services. Early on, the first edition of *Nicotine Anonymous: The Book* had the Questionnaire and the chapters on the Twelve Steps for me to work on, and then use with sponsees. The guidance of the *Third Step Prayer* remains invaluable, such as, "Show me the way of patience, tolerance, kindness, and love."

Then another pamphlet came, *H.O.W. Nicotine Anonymous Works—Honesty, Openness, and Willingness*, to keep mindful of those principles. Now, the *Nicotine Anonymous Step Study Workbook* provides a hands-on method to work the Steps. We have a lot to draw upon to enhance sponsorship relationships.

Two of my current sponsees are using the workbook. I meet with one before one local meeting, the other after a second local meeting. The workbook helps them to consider the various aspects in the meaning and value of each Step. Answering the questions can be a way to work their Step Four inventory. Step Five is practiced by their honestly admitting this searching inventory "to another human being." Their workbooks, as mine, have become a resource of our personal wisdom, truths, and insights to draw upon as we come upon the "blind curves" ahead on our recovery road and face them with a new confidence and faith.

In addition to these valuable fellowship resources, my experience in sponsorship relationships has reinforced my beliefs in some basic tenets about support that helps develop honesty, openness, and willingness

to facilitate positive changes of behavior. These are factors that worked for me.

Make safe! Make safe. It's essential to create trust by honoring confidentiality and how we consider NicA to be a "gentle program." I seek to avoid judgmental statements or criticisms. That said, when I see or hear self-defeating behavior of a sponsee, I may basically ask, "How is that working for you?" Reacting with questions is better than declarative statements, such as, "You shouldn't do that." Questions keep the focus more on my sponsee's process and less on mine. Trust and proper boundaries foster safety and reduce defensive stagnation.

Listen rather than lecture. I need to remind myself to catch when my "good intentions" may become more about "gaining attention" for my status. I realized from when I first joined NicA meetings that there was a form of grace in how members listen without interrupting or crosstalk. With sponsees I will often simply reflect back what I hear. I may share my experience with the caveat, "Take what you want and leave the rest," but I want to stay attentive and listen first. If I am asked for advice or how I'd answer a question in the workbook, I may ask what about the question is difficult or unclear before I share from my own experience.

Sponsorship has increasingly shown me that we are not completely unique in our shortcomings. As stated in chapter five: "We were not awful. We were humbled to realize that we were normal – and just very human." Certainly that is true in our common experience of succumbing to the lure of tobacco use in our youth and quickly becoming addicted.

I like to ask my sponsees what character strengths they have to draw upon. We discuss what their other life goals are and then look at how nicotine use may impede achieving those goals. I think it is essential to emotionally nourish ourselves by being mindful of our strengths, talents, and what we do right, along with our gratitude and our daily good luck.

As part of their inventory, I may ask what words/sentences they have used to give themselves "permission" to use nicotine. From my own experience, I realized that as long as I had told myself things such as, "I need a cigarette" or "smoking relieves my stress," my brain believed those lies and my body behaved and lit up. I had to challenge those lies with truths, such as, "I want a cigarette, but I don't *need* a cigarette." Or another truth is, "Smoking does not relieve my stress or solve a single problem, it only reduces withdrawal symptoms." Further, smoking only ensures the stress of the next craving and the ongoing self-loathing for not stopping the insanity.

To sponsor a member who is still using nicotine or in the early stages of recovery benefits my own recovery. To recall the initial struggle reminds me to be humble and patient with anyone's struggle. Over time, I have witnessed members with many paths who had the same goal of gaining freedom from nicotine.

As a sponsor, I benefit by being kept aware of the responsibility to be a model and example to newcomers. That is another aspect of our WE program. My behavior does not just matter to my life, but to members of the fellowship I come in contact with. That's a form of making a general amends for the secondhand smoke of my past.

Being a sponsor is a form of practicing our *Seventh Step Prayer*: "*My Higher Power, I place myself in your hands and humbly ask that my character defects be lifted from me so that I may help others. Please grant me willingness, courage, and strength so that through my actions I may reflect your love and wisdom. Amen.*" The tool of sponsorship is among the ways I experience *Our Promises*: "Gradually, our interest is focusing on Nicotine Anonymous rather than nicotine." I stay focused on the solution, not the problem. I give back what I have been given so that fellow members "are granted the same peace I seek."

Sponsorship and service have enhanced my life

My first experience with sponsorship was amazing to me. I asked this man who was attending the Nicotine Anonymous meeting with me each week to be my sponsor. He hesitated, mostly because I was a young woman and he was an older man. I was obviously a newcomer. I am sure he was concerned that sponsoring me would be breaking all the rules he had been taught. Perhaps only by the Grace of God, he did it anyway. However, he did stipulate that if any woman capable of sponsoring me were to join our group, he thought it would be best if he turned the job over to her.

He and I worked together through Steps One, Two and Three. After that, I had joined OA and he knew I was working with a female sponsor in that program. Also, I was still the only female in the first NicA group in my area (called Smoker's Anonymous at the time). So he suggested I complete the Steps with her assistance. I did as he suggested. However, I eventually did get a female NicA sponsor. She was truly a guiding light in my early recovery as well.

I still think of these two people as my NicA mom and dad in many ways. They truly taught me many of the things about life that I never learned from my biological parents. They were both able to provide many kinds of guidance and love I did not receive growing up. Best of all, they were able to lead me through the Steps so that I truly had a model for living. I was amazed that they simply shared their own experience instead of insisting that I follow a strict set of rules. They just suggested I do what they had done: read the literature and, with guidance from my own Higher Power, work the Steps to the best of my ability in the way that seemed right to me. Those first experiences with sponsorship and the NicA program as a whole were to completely reshape my life – even though I did not know it at the time.

At this point, I have been in NicA for nearly 20 years. I still have a sponsor. I also now have sponsors in other 12-Step programs as well. My sponsors richly bless every area of my life by sharing their experiences with me. I hope to always have a sponsor who is willing to share experiences, especially spiritual experiences, in life and to listen to mine as well.

I began sponsoring other people in NicA very soon after I completed working my Ninth Step in this program. That is what I had heard most people, including my sponsors, had done – it seemed to be working for them.

For perhaps the first year or so, I had a difficult time with sponsoring or at least I perceived it as difficult. I was being asked fairly regularly to sponsor newcomers. I would gladly tell them that I would do it and give them my phone number. Some of them would call a few times, others not at all. But it seemed to me like none of them were committed to the program or wanting to work the Steps.

My sponsor had explained sponsoring to me as three jobs where each of us had a role and the entire process depended on each of us. The first role was that of the sponsor, to share her or his own experience, strength, and hope – and to listen. When I sponsor, I simply tell them what I did when I worked the Step and how that turned out for me – what I learned. Then I listen to anything they have to say. I also try to avoid giving advice or consulting in the way that a therapist might do. I have found that when I was being sponsored, I learned best when the sponsor simply shared his or her own experience. So that is what I do.

The second role was that of the sponsee and that role was to work the Steps to the best of their ability. The third and most important role was that of the Higher Power. That role was to remove the addiction. Somehow, that simple explanation worked for me. I still use it to this day with the people I sponsor.

I also have one boundary for myself that has helped me stay in my own role and not try to take over the recovery of those I sponsor. I don't ever call them unless I am returning their phone call until they have completed working their Ninth Step. The only exceptions I have made about this were when they have had a death in the family or have been very ill. This has really worked well for me. I explained these things to each person who asked me to sponsor them and finally, when my HP felt I was ready, I began to collect sponsees

who did want to work the program and recover.

I have never witnessed anything as beautiful as watching someone go through the Steps for the very first time and come out transformed on the other side. For a time I was getting a little overwhelmed with the number of people I was sponsoring. So, I have also found it helpful to limit myself to only three people who are actively working through the Steps with me at any one time.

Over the years, I have made deep lasting friendships with both people who have sponsored me and with those I have sponsored. We grow to love each other in a way that resembles what I always thought healthy family love might be like. I also feel this way about other friends I have in recovery, normally others with whom I have shared some form of service in this program, such as starting a meeting, helping write literature, and working on the World Services board or committee. It is amazing to me how much sponsorship and other forms of service in this program have enhanced the quality of my life just by the dear people who are now included in my life.

For me, there have been so many “bright spots” that they would be hard to count. Yet sponsorship is even more than that to me. Sponsorship is the hearth in the center of my recovery home, the warm place where family gathers – where we all accept each other exactly as we come. We share our experiences there. And when we leave to go back out in the world, we go knowing there are others who understand, who believe in us, and who also trust that there is a Higher Power guiding us all along this road.

I have come to rely on my sponsor to help me through the Steps

To me, a sponsor is a recovering nicotine addict with current long-term nicotine freedom, who has gone through the Twelve Steps in Nicotine Anonymous and knows the Twelve Traditions. A sponsor can be available to help me with day-to-day challenges of life and help me apply the spiritual principles from the Steps and the program.

I have come to rely on my sponsor to help me through the Steps. We talk by phone about our answers to the questions in the *Nicotine Anonymous Step Study Workbook* on a regular basis. I check in just about daily via text or email. I share issues and uncomfortable situations I experience, and my sponsor shares her experience, strength, and hope with me. When I am lacking in serenity, I look to my sponsor to help me remember to turn things over to my Higher Power. My sponsor suggests resting in the arms of my Higher Power. My sponsor helps me to improve my relationships through reminding me of "Awareness, Acceptance, and Action" and other program slogans. She told me of the story of the person who falls into a hole repeatedly and then finally goes around the hole. The things my sponsor has told me have been great lessons in improving my life.

When I was struggling to get a sustained quit, my sponsor encouraged me to pick myself up each time I picked up, and to try again. She suggested I focus on surrender. I had some reservations about going to any lengths not to light up. She said, "Don't light up, even if your butt falls off." We continued to do Step work even though I was still in a cycle of quitting and smoking again.

After two years of struggling, my miracle happened. I finally surrendered without reservation. My sponsors were very important—leading me to nicotine freedom. We owe a debt of gratitude to sponsors everywhere who give of their time and hang in there as we sponsees sometimes struggle to get a quit.

Sponsors are also there to help the sponsee maintain a quit. They are invaluable to this program. I hope to become a sponsor someday soon. I have heard it said, "You can't keep it unless you give it away."

All my suggestions

To my sponsee, I said, “All my suggestions I give to you to make your life better and more manageable are going to be completely free. The only ones you’ll pay for are the ones you don’t take.”

As a sponsor, I need to exercise non-codependence

One of the most frustrating parts of being a sponsor is having a nicotine user who expects me to make them stop using. The most important part I need to pass on is: Although this is a “we” program, quitting is a personal decision and a personal responsibility.

We can’t really quit for someone else. We have to quit for ourselves. The addiction is with us forever. We have to embrace the first three Steps. That’s each member’s responsibility.

As a codependent, I need to exercise non-codependence – and that is hard. I have to, as a sponsor, not be willing to create the illusion that I can take responsibility for someone else’s quit. I have to make that clear.

We work the Steps by phone

I was looking for a sponsor who speaks clear and soft, and who has patience as a listener. Distance and experience were not a priority. We work the Steps by phone by setting a date, time, and how long.

We use the *Step Study Workbook*. I do not write in it because I want to do it again and again, and use it when I am a sponsor in the future. I use a notebook to write down my answers. My sponsor gives me homework for the following week, but I can work further in the workbook if I use my time wisely. If we need a break, we talk and make a plan.

Distance, experience, and gender should not be a block to become a sponsor or sponsee. Encouragement is a must to continue growing in the fellowship and to learn to give service.

Today, being a sponsor is a great joy!

My sponsor set me up for the Hope that I was looking for. Through her experience, she gave the strength I needed to overcome my addiction to nicotine. Without my sponsor, I would not be here today to sponsor others.

Today, being a sponsor is a great joy! With the first sponsee I had, I wasn’t sure what I was doing myself. But now, I have a tool (workbook) to help me as a guide to ensure I am mirroring myself to show my sponsees the strength that they need to go forth and let go of temptations to use nicotine. My hope is for them to live free of nicotine.

My sponsor doesn’t tell me what to do or how to do it, but she helps me sort it out

I have to do the legwork. My sponsor tells me so. I have to go to meetings. I have to call my sponsor or other people to get and share hope and inspiration. I have to read the literature and work the Steps. My HP wants me to try. My Higher Power (HP) is not going to grab cigarettes out of my smoking fingers. My HP is not going to incinerate the dollars I use to purchase cigarettes either. I have to do my part. It is part of growing up

– the hard part.

The groups help me learn other ways I can practice my part. My sponsor is amazing and willing to help me work my program. It's my program and I have to find out what that means. My sponsor doesn't tell me what to do or how to do it, but she helps me sort it out. She shares her experience, her strength, and her hope with me. It's up to me to ask for what I want. It's out of my hands whether I receive what I ask for. I am thoroughly grateful for my sponsor; she is a voice of love and inspiration, and I get exactly what I need.

My thoughts on the four sponsors I had

The first had been a drug and alcohol rehab leader for people who had been arrested for breaking the law. I found this out only recently. She right off said, "If you are going to quit, why do you still have cigarettes in your place?" She was tough and our relationship didn't last long. BUT, she planted that seed of pure logic – that haunted me.

I attended every meeting and found a sweet woman who had just the right touch. Somehow, she magically and enthusiastically read me the long serenity prayer while I took everything to the dumpster and quit that day. Alas, she had too many sponsees already.

My second sponsor heard me on the phone lines and offered her service. We filled lots of hours talking about life, my abuse of my NRT (nicotine replacement therapy), and healthy living. She inspired me to exercise and eat healthier; I learned a lot from her, too. But she didn't do Step work.

My third sponsor and I became good friends, but she, too, didn't do much Step work. Also, she slept 16 hours a day and I started to feel like she wanted to have someone just to talk to. She only watched religious TV and did the rosary four times a day. I know it shouldn't be relevant, but I'm a political junkie and I moved on.

Then I started going to another 12-step meeting for other issues I had. Suddenly I realized the only true way to work the program is to do the five tools and live the Twelve Steps.

I now have a sponsor and we just click. I'm working the Third Step for the third time, and my life is totally changing. She works at my pace, is convinced my HP will lift the obsession with my NRT, and never gives up on me. She is smart, kind, compassionate, and has an unshakable bond with her Lord. My opinion is ... I know we are in it for the long haul together and I've never had this much hope before. I love her and am forever grateful I found her. My humble opinion is ... never quit quitting.

The excellent role model of my sponsor

I tried twice before to work the Steps with my sponsors, but for some reason I thought I could skirt by Steps One, Two, and Three. I don't recommend that! It seems I ended up with a metaphorical charley horse in my leg from trying to skip the early Steps: even though I tried Steps Four and Five, not addressing Steps One, Two, and Three (besides what we read at our weekly reading of the Step in our NicA book) kept me from being able to land on Steps Four and Five with any sure footing – I "fell." I fell into self-righteousness and denial that there was anything my Higher Power could do to help me with challenges that occur in daily life.

Thanks to desperation with my character defects and the excellent role model of my sponsor, I finally became willing to study all of the Steps, i.e. to really "work" them and let God work in my life. So far, I have written on and shared my work on Steps One through Eight with my sponsor, and I constantly apply Steps One, Two, and Three, as well as Step Ten.

I now have an amazing Higher Power. My understanding of, and relationship with, that Higher Power

keeps getting better and better. (My understanding of, and relationship with, me keeps getting better and better, too!) My relationship with my Higher Power is definitely the best relationship I have had, with the unconditional love from my sponsor and all of you in NicA being a close second!

At meetings I heard, “I used to come to meetings because I thought I would use nicotine. Now I come to get in touch with my Higher Power.” There was a time when I could never imagine going to a Nicotine Anonymous meeting to connect with my Higher Power. Originally, I just came to “quit.” Ironically, I still have not “quit.” Instead, ten years ago I was freed from my addiction. This way has been much easier than every time I tried to “quit” in the past! Both parts of that statement I heard are now true for me today: I used to come to meetings because I thought I would use nicotine. And, now I come to get in touch with my Higher Power.

I don’t want, however, to lead myself to think I don’t need meetings. My addiction is always looking to get me arrogant, so it can say, “Forget all these Steps, service positions, phone calls, literature, and meetings! What do you need them for anyway?” I do not want to give my disease a microphone! I have heard one too many people share about going out and how the slip happened long before they picked up. I take their experience to heart. May they be free from their addiction. May all nicotine addicts be free from this addiction.

I could not have come this far alone (member of Unofficial NicAnon, a web blog)

A very strange thing happened. A few weeks after I quit, a woman I know in another 12-Step program asked me to sponsor her. It seemed a bit odd to me, because she has more time in that program than me, but she insisted that I “had what she wanted.” I said yes and within a few weeks her mother, who had smoked for most of her life, was diagnosed with lung cancer.

It ended up that for the next three months, while her mother was dying and while I was going through the worst part of my withdrawals, I had a “task” to be there for this other woman and help her through this difficult loss.

I now realize what an incredible gift this was. Every time I was tempted to fall back and smoke – and there were many rough days of extreme emotions, deep grief and rage – this friend/sponsee would be there, telling me about what it was like to help her mother face the end of life because of lung cancer. I had the feeling I was being shown what my other option was. It helped me to choose to just wait, and get through the next moment, the next hour, the next day, by reaching out to someone in the program.

I also felt I was being shown what “service” really is: being there for others means that we are essentially being there for ourselves! It means a kind of sharing that helps us reach deeper and deeper levels of compassion, understanding, health, and love, as we learn how connected we all truly are.

My sponsee’s mother died, quite young, at the end of September. My heart was, and still is, deeply touched by this odd connection; by how this woman helped me during the hardest months of my withdrawals, even though it was not in the cards for her to get free from smoking. She was certainly not a “bad” person because she couldn’t stop – she had a good life, and was deeply loved by her husband, children, and grandchildren. But I can’t help but think that, although there is no judgment toward her, they all would have liked to have her around a bit longer. For me, she will always be my “unusual angel,” a form of help that I couldn’t have imagined on my own!

As I write this, it is nine months since my last cigarette. I must admit I am happy, but also a bit shocked! I never thought I could make it this far, and it has taken awhile for me to feel somewhat “normal” again. I have made “sobriety” my absolute priority, and my Higher Power has seen me through, making sure I have the resources I need to survive while I recover.

Being connected to the program, working the Twelve Steps, having a sponsor, and reading others’

thoughts online has made all the difference. I could not have come this far alone, and I plan on sticking around so I continue getting better, one day at a time.

I send best wishes to all those who are trudging this path, no matter where you are in your recovery. It is such a gift to get free of this powerful addiction – and it is a gift to share it with all of you!

Recovering through online meetings

I came into Voices of Nicotine Recovery (VONR) as my only hope for finally putting down one of the substances that was slowly killing me: nicotine. Like many other nicotine addicts, I tried many times to stop smoking, but could not. After trying different cessation programs, hypnosis, medications, nicotine replacement products, counseling, willpower, cutting back, switching brands, seminars, and workshops, I entered the rooms of Voices of Nicotine Recovery. Finding the program was a miracle in itself.

This was my very first 12-Step program. I was not familiar with how to attend an online meeting, but took one step at a time. I downloaded Paltalk and attended my first online meeting in November 2008. I was welcomed by everyone and was amazed at the people who shared their time free of nicotine. I was asking myself, how can this be? Will I be able to say the same thing some day?

As time went on, I got a sponsor, kept going to meetings, and came to a decision to set a quit date. I quit on that date but ended up picking up again. I had three more relapses after that first quit date, but never stopped attending the VONR meetings. Each time I was honest about the relapse. The other members accepted me, understood how that could happen, and welcomed me back with open arms. They told me to keep coming back. Then the miracle happened, I put down the cigarettes for good, one day at a time.

The miracle happened for me because I first was able to admit my powerlessness over nicotine and that my life had become unmanageable. I came to believe that a Power greater than myself could restore me to sanity and then made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God, as I understood Him.

Another important piece was finding the right sponsor. She was not the first person I asked. In the beginning, she could only commit to sponsoring me till I found someone else. Well, my Higher Power and hers had something else in mind ... it's two years later and she is still my sponsor! I am grateful for her and am blessed to have such a wonderful sponsor.

I keep going to meetings today to share my experience, strength, and hope with the nicotine addict who still suffers, to remind myself that I am a nicotine addict, and to give back to this program that changed my life forever. It has not just changed me physically, but has also changed my emotional and spiritual life. I am so blessed because of this program. Thank you, Voices of Nicotine Recovery. You have saved me and given me a life that I never imagined for myself. I am no longer a victim but an active participant in life. I am living it free of nicotine, one day at a time. Keep coming back, it works if you work it – and you are worth it!

Am I entirely ready?

I have known for years now that smoking no longer suited me. It saw me through much healing and growth over many years – or did it? When I look at the recovery and growth I've had while still smoking in another 12-Step program, I imagine how much more will come as I put them down at last. I will learn to look into myself and to God to satisfy my needs, and finally get past a life full of fantasy and fear. At my sponsor's brilliant direction on Step Six, I looked at my smoking addiction as a defect of character.

I am done with being afraid to feel or just scratching the surface, shutting down my emotions, and always acting as if everything was okay. Like finally admitting I was powerless over the alcoholic in my life, I

am grateful I decided to admit I am an addict. I suffer from this “disease of more,” as my sponsor calls it, and I continue hurting myself. Whatever makes me feel good – or not feel at all – I need to have more of, yet I still cannot find the happiness I seek.

Like alcohol to the alcoholic, my addiction to cigarettes has impaired my emotional and spiritual growth, as I have never been able to accept life on life’s terms. I struggled for weeks and weeks early in my program on an assignment from my sponsor for Step Four, when she asked what would give me the “happily ever after” I so desperately sought. I could have given her the pat recovery-speak answers, like “letting go and letting God,” “surrender,” “seeking His will, not mine,” or “accept life on life’s terms” – stuff that might satisfy most sponsors, yet I knew this was not my truth. Then I suddenly realized, and I asked her, “Could it be walking through this muck?” Yes, that was it!

Being willing to have God remove my addiction to smoking means to me: NOT DEPENDING ON A “THING” OR PERSON TO TAKE AWAY MY FEARS AND ANXIETIES – FACING THEM INSTEAD. FACING ALL THE HEARTACHE AND PAIN, FINALLY AND FULLY!

My journey to complete freedom ...

I got into recovery many years ago in other fellowships, but it took me 18 years before I was willing to go to NicA and work the program. That happened after I was working Steps Six and Seven in another fellowship and kept writing and sharing that I was ready to have all my defects of character removed, except for the smoking. I didn't want to let go of that. Then, all of a sudden, one day I was ready and somebody steered me toward NicA. I went to meetings, got a sponsor, worked the Steps, used the tools, and got smober. I have been smober since Aug. 8, 2011.

Today I continue to work and live the Steps and have a recovery routine. On a daily basis, before I get out of bed, I say the first three Steps and work the 11th. During the morning I work the 11th some more with various readings, journaling, and meditation. In the evening, I write and send a daily 10th Step to my sponsor and finish up with the 11th again. When I go to bed, I do spot check inventories. I work and apply all the Steps as they are relevant to my life. I sponsor and do service. I go to meetings, study the literature, and regularly work through the Steps with different literature. I keep close to my HP and surrender repeatedly. All of this keeps my head in recovery, which I never take for granted, and so am granted a daily reprieve by the grace of God, as I understand God.

I am so grateful to have nicotine out of my life, one day at a time, and to have the associated fear, guilt, and shame lifted. I love breathing the fresh air and smelling the freshly mown grass and flowers. I love not stinking of cigarette smoke. I love not being enslaved by the “NicoDemon.” I love feeling like I belong in the world and have a right to exist. I am grateful for HP, NicA, the fellowship, and the program – all of which have played their part in my being able to get and stay smober for far longer than I had ever been able to before. (My last quit prior to this one lasted less than a day.) Withdrawal was tough, but I knew from experience that it would pass. I threw myself into recovery and surrender to get me through. Today, I don't miss smoking and rarely think of it. When I do, it is now easy to surrender.

Sponsorship is my lifeline of recovery

What I thought was hindering me or helping the least has actually been a great teacher: for example, my emotionality. I've gotten into great trouble because I tend to overreact without first thinking. I have had to become aware of how I'm in such a hurry to respond, and find ways to catch myself before I blurt out something I'll regret. I believe working with my sponsor on this issue and being in relationship with my HP has helped me practice this new behavior. I can forgive myself now if I blow it, because I'm accountable for my

choices. There is no blame. I'm human.

Sponsorship is my lifeline of recovery and progress along my spiritual path. It's the kind of one-on-one work that has made me accountable, humble, honest, and even more able to listen to my HP. I need these relationships because I need their gifts. Sponsorship is the form of service that is the most meaningful for me because of the close relationships I have formed.

I work the Twelve Steps with my sponsor and consult with her regularly to reason things out. From having kind, patient, and tolerant sponsors, I've learned that sometimes I just need to be heard. I don't dump all my emotional baggage on her, but I do appreciate being heard, listening to her insight, and applying the principles of the program to whatever is occurring in my life.

Now, as a sponsor, I listen, then bring the discussion back to the Twelve Steps. I am patient, tolerant, and kind, and then hold up the mirror by telling you what I heard you say. I'm the kind of sponsor who helps you find the next right thing, and then lets go for you and your Higher Power to work through changes. I learn more about my own recovery from helping you than I ever dreamt possible.

There were no sponsors at my group

I remember crying at my first NicA meeting because I knew when it was over, I was going to go outside and smoke. I didn't think I could get even one day free from smoking. There were no sponsors at my group, but I bought the Nicotine Anonymous book and started reading it.

At first, I just couldn't get Step One. I knew I was powerless, but my life didn't seem unmanageable from smoking. I only smoked about four packs per week (we have large 25-packs here) and while I was sometimes disgusted by my habit, most of the time it seemed okay. I could afford it, I wasn't sick, etc. This scared me because it seemed like there would never be a good time to quit if I kept on "enjoying" it. I wanted to start a family and didn't know how to make myself quit. I had friends who smoked all through their pregnancies and they seemed unable to quit. That's when I came to NicA and found the missing pieces ... I can't believe I didn't see the unmanageability in my smoking before!

My favorite piece of literature at first was the *Serenity Prayer for Nicotine Users* pamphlet. It was a new idea for me that the cravings would pass whether I indulged them or not. I had never NOT indulged them since I was 15 years old.

There is currently no NicA in Toronto that I know of, but I continue to order the literature to pass out to friends who are considering quitting. I share the NicA internet link and tell my friends about the program.

I share my Tenth Step with my sponsor each day

I wrote out my Step Four with all the courage I could muster. It was pages long and contained things I did not want anyone to read. But I was desperate. This was my first 12-Step program and I had been building up trouble for so many years. Once I started writing it all out, it poured like water. Just in the writing, I began to feel some relief. As I talked it over with God, I began to feel like my integrity could actually be restored. By the time I sat down with my sponsor to read it to her, I knew the process was really going to improve my life. Once we were done, I felt as if the weight of the world had been removed from my shoulders.

Of course, I am still nowhere near perfect and don't expect to get there in this lifetime. Perseverance with progress in overcoming my character defects and old ideas has begun to come easily as I continue working Step Ten each day. It allows me to continue to stay honest about those things and ask God for help in making

the necessary adjustments as I go. Also, because I share my Tenth Step with my sponsor each day, it gives me a sounding board to keep me from veering off the path too far. I have come to see my Tenth Step as necessary maintenance in my day, like brushing my teeth or taking a bath. It feels good.

I had been clean 14 years, but had neglected to get a sponsor, or work the Steps.

I continued to go to meetings, and felt quite sure I would never smoke again. I was working three jobs, went to meetings when I could, and continued to do service work. The time came when I felt something missing, something yet to be done. I had been clean 14 years, but had neglected to get a sponsor, or work the Steps. Having been raised in a dysfunctional home where secrets were kept and bruises were hidden, the thought of asking someone for help was terrifying. I eventually summoned the courage to ask a member of our group to “go for coffee.” We chatted and, still afraid to ask, she finally said, “I will be your sponsor.” Today, by the grace of God, she is still my sponsor and accepts me as I am: fears, defects, and all.

Her first assignment for me was to work the Steps. My first thought was, “piece of cake.” (It always amazes me how much I think I know, yet in reality ... have no clue.) I worked the Steps and Traditions with my sponsor, and I continue to work them today. And each time I do, I gain more awareness of the gifts that the Steps and Traditions offer: the blessings of our fellowship, a prayer that can change an entire day, longtime members who have experience, strength, and hope to share with those who are still suffering, and a Higher Power who cares, accepts, and loves us, regardless of where we are on this journey.

Without the guidance of those who have gone before me, I would most likely be five years away from death, the age when both my grandmother and mother died from this disease. I would be angry because I could not smoke in a restaurant. I would be resentful that a pack of cigarettes costs \$8. I would not be able to hike in the beauty of the desert because I would be struggling to catch my breath. And my list of grievances would go on and on as I reached for another cigarette.

As a fellowship, we share our joy with others of being free from this powerful addiction. We also share in the sorrow of members we have lost due to complications of this addiction. I often think of those members and feel an obligation to carry the message on their behalf, as well as those who still suffer.

This fellowship did for me what I could not do for myself, and I am truly grateful and blessed for the miracle of being free of this powerful addiction.

Against all odds

I am a person with a severe mental challenge. It took years to get on the right combination of psych meds that work for me. I smoked all that time, about 20 years, before I was able to get a sustainable quit from a pack-a-day habit. I had read articles that people with my diagnosis had a nearly impossible chance of getting a quit from smoking.

I found Nicotine Anonymous and VONR (Voices of Nicotine Recovery) online meetings about two-and-a-half years ago. I had many failed quits. I kept coming back to meetings and contacting my sponsor. I wrote on Step One, all 50-plus questions of the *NicA Step Study Workbook*, twice, with two different sponsors. Members of the group stated that I should never quit quitting and my miracle will happen.

My miracle is happening now. I have challenges with crazy emotional ups and downs, like a lot of people with newly gotten nicotine freedom. My ups and downs sometimes bring on paranoid thoughts with other intrusive thoughts as well. In addition, I hear voices in my head. I am learning to use logic and the Twelve Steps of recovery to sort through my mental states. I am learning that my Higher Power, whom I call God, is a

loving and caring God, whom I can trust. My sponsor says, “Rest in the arms of your Higher Power.”

The ability to trust in others is a new experience. I’ve had trust issues since I was a child. Through honesty, openness, and willingness, along with being nicotine-free, I am growing healthier physically, spiritually, and, most amazingly, mentally and emotionally too! Relationships are my challenge right now. Family issues and asserting myself are ways I am learning in a big way.

I am introspective through looking at my emotions and reactions, especially by writing about things that upset me, and discussing issues with my sponsor. I also discuss the amazing and exciting things so I don’t get off-keel that way either. With my mental disability, I try to remain in balance and maintain a low-stress lifestyle. This gives me the best chance for keeping my serenity.

So, against all odds, I am nicotine-free for almost five-and-a-half months now. Thank you Nicotine Anonymous and VONR for helping me to not use nicotine, a day at a time.

With my sponsor, I learned that recovery was a process with many stages

I found a sponsor. We started reviewing my Step work. My despair and fear gave way to hope, and my smoking rapidly diminished. A new vision of a life without smoking emerged. I began to revitalize my life and learn to live without smoking. I was even forgetting to smoke!

With my sponsor, I learned that recovery was a process with many stages: recognizing denial, becoming willing, hitting a bottom, and getting sick and tired of being sick and tired. I prayed for willingness. I grew my desire to stop smoking by attending meetings, sharing, doing service, listening to others, and working the Steps with my sponsor.

Then the promised miracle occurred. I got down to one cigarette a day. I asked a simple question – why am I doing this? My answer was ... I really don't know why. I don't need or want this anymore, so I stopped smoking. Yes, I was uncomfortable, aggravated at the cravings, but I did not panic this time. I accepted the cravings. I wanted what I saw in my sponsor. My sponsor showed me the path out of my addiction. We did it over the telephone by building a nonjudgmental relationship. The power used was love and unconditional acceptance.

This is what Nicotine Anonymous and the Free Bridge phone meetings are all about. They link people together, in the context of Twelve Steps, and enable freedom and recovery. WE get free from addiction, and stay free. The program and my sponsor taught me about acceptance, serenity, humility, and surrender. Now, I'm looking forward to sponsoring others. We keep what we have by giving it away. This is how recovery happens. It is a WE program.

Today, I understand my addiction better and have learned to do something about it. I don't smoke anymore, just for today. I have not graduated from this program. I have stopped smoking for today with the help of the Free Bridge members and my awesome sponsor who believed in me when I could not believe in myself. Thank you.

You mean I have a choice?

The days following putting the cigarettes down, I felt raw all over, like an open wound freshly exposed to air and sunlight. My body worked overtime to begin the healing process and take in newly available oxygen after all the years of constant irritation from inhaling hot toxins into my body. My metabolism went haywire without nicotine's stimulant: sleep, appetite, emotions, focus – all were affected as I withdrew from the

violence of nicotine.

The addiction gave way, and then I had to learn a whole new way of being in the world without relying on nicotine as my crutch, my escape, my friend. New feelings bubbled up at the most inconvenient times. I reacted to the slightest provocation. In one particularly angry moment, my sponsor asked me, “Is this really where you would like to put your energy?” This stopped me in my tracks. You mean I have a choice?

As the healing continued and the veil of smoke lifted, I began to gain clarity about how to be at peace in the moment, how to choose to be happy, joyous, and free. What I learned is to surrender, and let the god of my understanding take care of the people, places, and things that are outside of my control – which is just about everything beyond my nose.

My sponsor had me work the 4th Step by making a list of my fears

It took me six months to get a 60-day chip. I’d get two weeks and go out for two weeks. I’d get almost a month and have one and break down sobbing. I raged at my family, my coworkers, and myself – but they put up with it and loved me anyway.

I got a 60-day chip that had a hole drilled in it. I put it on my keychain so I could see it every day. I chewed on carrots, I chewed on stir sticks. I went to the meeting every Tuesday night. I was the literature person, the chip person, and the secretary.

After a year, I finally got a sponsor and my recovery picked up speed. She had me work the 4th Step by making a list of my fears – things I had never admitted to myself. I had to let go of my fear of gaining weight. I admitted that I was afraid of being alone. And then I had to admit my fears out loud to another human being.

Diary of a quitter

First entry:

I am at Day 3 of a new quit, nicotine-free. I recently had a quit using the patch and the gum. So great, I was smoke-free for 56 days, but was still on nicotine replacement. I started smoking again. This time I have a new outlook which makes me more adamant about working the program. I have a new sponsor and she wants me to go to 90 meetings in 90 days and start again with Step One. She wants me to contact her at least every other day. I feel mentally clear and notice things like colors and scents.

I know I cannot pick up a cigarette and I cannot play games, as they say, “romancing the cigarette.” This means I need to be honest about what triggers me and avoid it. I got rid of an ashtray and a few lighters I found. These make it too easy to excuse picking up again. I cannot smoke anymore. My lungs were hurting when I smoked.

I want the promises of the program to come true for me. When tempted, I have a spiritual Higher Power to call upon and a phone list of people like me who want to stay nicotine-free. I keep busy sharing at meetings and writing emails to my NicA friends. I have wonderful literature and Step work each day. It is going to be a lot of getting into action so the “NicoDemon” can’t tell me lies that I would otherwise believe. I am already enjoying the freedom and the time, money, and life saved.

Thank you to NicA and VONR (Voices of Nicotine Recovery) online meetings, and to my spiritual Higher Power – I am so grateful!

Next entry:

I have 40 days nicotine-free as I write this. I am so grateful for this quit. I have started co-chairing VONR meetings. Service is really strengthening my quit.

Nicotine Anonymous literature has been a great help also. I read *A Year of Miracles* every day. I am working in the *NicA Step Study Workbook* with my sponsor and am on Step One. The workbook is great for getting in-depth questions to work the Steps. I have a phone list and an email list to stay in contact with NicA and VONR members of the fellowship. I am using the slogan, "Put a little prayer in your air," to increase my conscious contact with God/HP. When I feel bad and get into a mental craving, I remember I am "a puff away from a pack a day."

The lie I tell myself is, "Oh, you can have just one cigarette. It will be ok. No one will find out." This is crazy thinking because I will put the horrible drug of nicotine back into my body again, thereby setting up the craving and smoking cycle all over again. I will regret picking up the cigarette. I will wish for my quit all over again. I want to stay quit. For me it is the better way!

Weekly meetings and phone calls with my sponsor, and using the *Step Study Workbook*

A year into my nicotine-free time, I teamed up with a sponsor to work the Steps. Weekly meetings and phone calls with my sponsor, and using the *Step Study Workbook*, have thus far brought me to Step Six. I look forward to working the Steps further, and the recovery they are bringing about.

I keep in contact with my sponsor almost every day

I keep in contact with my sponsor almost every day, turning my 10th Step over. I can't remember the last time we talked about nicotine itself. Now we just talk about life and how to apply these great Steps and principles to all aspects of it.

The support and instruction from my sponsor

At the end of a meeting, I went over to a fellow who had stopped smoking six months earlier. I asked him to be my sponsor and I began taking instructions from him rather than from myself. I also tried acupuncture and when I was done, I still wanted to smoke and knew I would have to go through withdrawal, something I didn't want to do. But I accepted it and continued to take instruction from my sponsor.

It was at that point that I stopped, by the grace of God and the support and instruction from my sponsor. I haven't picked up since, and that was 21 years ago. It's really a blessing because I have grown to the point that cigarettes are no longer a part of my life. I don't have to fight any urges. In fact, I never really think about smoking at all, regardless of the stress and other things that go on in my life. I keep up with NicA by providing service all these years. I think that's what has helped me as well. I have been blessed.

A sponsor I felt I could relate to

I had tried, connived, tricked myself, promised myself, and used any and all kinds of nicotine replacement. I had even quit for seven years! But here I was again, five years into another bout of smoking, and more addicted than before. I was so ashamed; it took me several months to even admit I'd lost a seven-year quit. Surely these folks would think I was an idiot!

Actually, no. I am an addict. I can't live with it, can't live without it. I would eat the stuff if I could, ingest it any way possible. I can't stop myself. It's an insidious addiction, and I am among people who get that.

It took listening to people share to find a sponsor I felt I could relate to, who had the kind of recovery I really wanted, and that I knew wouldn't take any bull**** from me. I asked, and she said yes. She immediately gave me an assignment, which I liked. And I got to work. She has shown me how to practice trusting in baby steps, and how to allow my HP to work in my life. These have not been formal lessons, just what I've picked up over time by listening to my sponsor, and by working on them.

I am allowing all this to happen, because I have chosen not to smoke today. I deal with life on life's terms rather than smoke at anyone or anything I could blame. Today, I feel my feelings as they occur – and it's okay. I may not like the feelings I have sometimes, but they don't last. Just like the craves.

My smoking never solved anything. But it WAS ever-so-slowly killing me. I am learning to ask my HP for help, and the craves and feelings aren't such big scary monsters any more.

Recovery from this addiction is hard work. You gotta want it bad. You gotta show up, do the next right thing, keep focused on recovery, breathe, practice, practice, practice, and go to any length to not light up. AND recovery has its perks. Like your health improving almost immediately. Like the laughter and fun we get to share with our fellow group members. Like the amazing spiritual high you get from standing in a circle holding hands and praying with 16 people who you know and love from endless hours of working on recovery together. Like a warm welcoming hug from your sponsor, and feeling like you're home again, safe at last.

Wow, was that ever the best thing I could have done

I jumped in with both feet. I went to every meeting I could. I came in early and chaired meetings. I attended a Step Study (and then another and another – but that is another story). I read everything I could get my hands on. I found a sponsor. Wow, was that ever the best thing I could have done. Not only did I now have a group of people I could rely on, but I had one person in particular that I could talk to about anything and never feel judged or criticized. Then came the call for service work.

I always remember hearing the phrase, "You can't keep it unless you give it away." I didn't quite understand that until I became a sponsor myself and volunteered at the local meeting.

Sponsorship - Sharing the Gift of Surrender

My sponsor saved my life through simple suggestions based on her experience, strength, and hope. In the first few weeks of my sobriety, I would call and say, "I am having an urgent unbearable craving!!!" She would say things like, "Okay, I understand, let's try some deep breathing together," or tell me to lay down where I was and recite the serenity prayer until the craving passed. And pass it would.

Other times she would say "Okay, go brush your teeth for several minutes." I would go do this and, remarkably, the craving would leave. My sponsor had wisdom from her experience for how simple actions that let time pass would give me time to understand that the cravings will pass. As a young man who had little patience, especially when satisfying my nicotine cravings, this was a somewhat revolutionary concept to me. I realized that getting over the craving was not about brute force. Rather, it was about letting go completely, accepting the craving for what it was, and not doing the one thing that would guarantee more cravings—using nicotine.

It seems so simple, but it was so difficult at first to not use nicotine. I was completely defenseless when it came to nicotine. What my sponsor taught me was that by accepting the craving, I was surrendering the craving. This opened me up to something new—hope for a life without nicotine.

That was almost 18 years ago and those simple suggestions still ring true today—and for many things beyond nicotine. Surrender is my gateway to a new power and a new solution for many of my most pressing life challenges. I share this idea of strength through surrender with my sponsees, especially my male sponsees. For some, social attitudes about surrender may conjure up visions of weakness and being less than others.

Like many guys, gay or straight, I see myself as strong, independent, and self-reliant. These traits may be all well and good for some folks when it comes to getting along in the world under some circumstances. But when it comes to being a nicotine addict—self-reliance is a liability. I had to let go of the idea of the "self-sufficient modern man" capable of anything I set out to do. I had to go deeper to find the man inside me that has a source of strength that is not self-generated, but rather higher-powered. I have watched my sponsees grow into this idea themselves and watch new lives spring from their former nicotine-induced despair.

From those early days all the way to today, the gifts of sponsorship have opened my eyes to new ways of approaching life. I am forever grateful for this experience. I will continue to believe in the power of two nicotine addicts coming together to overcome this powerful addiction through honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness. It has transformed my life in so many ways. Quitting nicotine was not an ending, but rather a beginning. A beginning of a new life built on courage, walking through my cravings, through my fears, and then to my dreams. It all began with that one step of surrender.

The Steps of relief and change in beautiful ways

I came into the rooms of Nicotine Anonymous defeated and desperate. All my life I had falsely believed that I could quit smoking when and if I really wanted to. I held onto that delusion and denial until I was about 46 years old. By then my lies to myself about my addiction to nicotine were catching up to me because I still hadn't found the power to stay quit. Instead, I found myself more powerless over nicotine than ever and it terrified me.

I have been a lifelong athlete, aerialist, and dancer. I had used nicotine for so many things, some knowingly and others unknowingly. I did "controlled smoking." I never really got out of hand with smoking until the end. I was always able to only smoke one cigarette at night or a few within a day. I smoked more when in the company of friends who smoked, or during a break-up, but I considered this reasonable. I still felt in control.

By the time I showed up on the shores of Nicotine Anonymous, I had begun to smoke way more. Not only was I smoking more but I also began to constantly crave, more and more. I did not recognize myself in this new addicted style of using nicotine and that really scared me. I have a degree in Neural Physiology and knew that I could not keep smoking like that without having dire physical consequences. I was smoking even though I was terrified of the physical ramifications. I was feeling ill nearly all the time, yet I couldn't resist smoking.

I entered the rooms hopeful, while also convinced that I'd never be able to quit and stay quit. Still, I had to at least try and save my own life. I did not want to lose my athletic abilities. I lived for them and they always made life worth living. I came in thinking, "I'll just show up at these meetings and hopefully that alone will cure me."

I had no intention of getting a sponsor. I continued to fail. The last thing I ever wanted to do or intended to do, was to get a sponsor and work the Steps. But, at last, my desire to be smoke-free was larger than my fear of actually committing to this program.

I went through with showing up at my sponsor's house every week and working the Steps with her. I couldn't believe I was actually going through with it, even right up until completing the Ninth Step. I couldn't have been more surprised that my journey through the Steps with a sponsor was the most healing experience I had ever had. I was so afraid of those Steps and showing up to do them with another person. Through that process I was finding the wherewithal to go without smoking. I was able to call on her in times of intense discomfort and she would let me know I was exactly where I was supposed to be. She helped me understand that all of the discomfort I was going through was perfectly normal.

Getting a sponsor and working my way through the Steps cleared away a multitude of false, unhealthy belief systems. The process helped me to understand that I was being healed and restored, not just with my overly active mind, but with my whole heart and being. My sponsor and the Steps set me on the right track. Long, long ago when I picked up using nicotine, I had gotten on the wrong track.

I realize now, I am on a journey out of the shadows of nicotine addiction. My identity as a smoker has changed and I am starting to experience joy, clarity, intense gratitude, and a growing self-esteem. Life holds hope, promise, growth, and optimism. I am confidently embarking upon a journey of discovery of my true self, and who I really was always meant to be.

Working the Steps, admitting secrets.

I have been with one of my two current sponsors for over twenty years. Before I asked one to sponsor me, I had known him, casually, for over four years. I had worked with him on various projects and committees. I also had spent time with him at several Nicotine Anonymous World Services conferences. So I had a good sense of what this man was all about. I had heard you should look for a sponsor that has what you want. This man was exactly that person, and having him as a sponsor has profoundly impacted my life.

Although I was not new to recovery when we started working together, I was actually in a very dark and dangerous place in my personal life. Almost ten years earlier in another fellowship, I had been very active in my recovery. However, I had started to drift away from that program. I was going to fewer and fewer of those meetings. It had been several years since I had a sponsor.

I completed a Fifth Step several years earlier, but I had done that with a clergyman who was also a member of that 12-step fellowship. Although it was somewhat of a relief to have finally completed the Fifth Step, I did not continue to work with this person because he was not my program sponsor. Even though I had shared all of the dark secrets I could remember in that Fifth Step, I had

done so with a person I was not to see again. I did have a sponsor at that time, but I was very selective with what I shared with him. So, ultimately, I found myself alone again with my secrets.

Around this time, I kept myself very busy with several service commitments in Nicotine Anonymous. Keeping busy helped me to avoid (postpone, actually) dealing with many of the issues that I revealed in my earlier Fifth Step. However, when a three-year NicA service commitment finally came to a close, I found myself with very little structure. Soon I was awash in self-pity and self-hatred. I didn't like myself very much and I was not about to let another man get to know me at a deep level.

Over a period of several months, I stopped attending as many meetings as I used to go to. By the end of the year that followed my service commitment, I believe I was actually very close to completely eliminating meetings from my life. Had that happened, I believe it would have only been a matter of time before I drank and smoked again.

The first time I sat down with my new sponsor I shared some intimate details of my life. I didn't share everything at that point, but I did talk about a few issues that had been weighing heavily on me.

One of the issues was that I had been legally married for almost 12 years at that time, but had only lived with my wife for less than a year. Although my wife and I had discussed getting a divorce several times in the eleven years following our separation, I did nothing to bring that about. I believe now that what I was really doing by staying married was keeping myself unavailable for a relationship with a woman. I just didn't like myself, and the thought of letting a woman get to know me was too painful. So, I stayed married and unavailable.

At some point during this first talk with my sponsor, he suggested I might want to consider getting a divorce. It was not the first time I had thought about that, but for the first time I made the decision that that was exactly what I was going to do. I made a commitment to myself and to my sponsor that night that I would take whatever actions I needed to take in order to get a divorce. Although I didn't realize it at the time, the very next day I first met the woman I would start a family with two years later. I do not believe the timing was a coincidence.

That evening with my sponsor was the beginning of a process where I would let another man get to know the real me. With his help, I started anew, working the Twelve Steps of recovery. He suggested I write my own Third Step prayer. I did. It was a transformative experience. I actually believe that writing that prayer required me to take a deep look into my own soul.

In my prayer, I acknowledged that I felt I was a broken man. The way I had been living had created a soul-sickness in me. But I also believed that I was, in essence, a good man and that God could help me to become the fullest possible expression of the man He created me to be. I read my prayer to my sponsor. I cried. I am crying now as I reflect back on that experience.

We moved on to the Fourth and Fifth Steps. This was the point where I shared all the intimate details of my life that I could recall. This was huge for me. I had never really trusted other men. To let another man know me at my core was a risk, but it was well worth taking.

Now, whenever I have an issue come up, I can talk with my sponsor who already knows my background story. It allows (and encourages) me to be honest and accountable to at least one other person that truly knows me. We talk about my character defects. He gives me some suggestions about

dealing with selfishness and fear—two character defects that were often present in my life. He had me write out a list of people I had harmed and we talked about how I could make amends to these people providing it didn't cause them additional harm. Today, I continue to work Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve to the best of my ability.

In my recovery journey, I have sponsored a few other men. I can't say that I feel I have been a very good sponsor, but I do want to try to be of service to others just as my sponsors have been so willing to be of service to me. Perhaps as I continue to grow in the program, there will be other men that will look at me, just as I looked at my sponsor, and think— "I want what he has."

Giving back what was given

Early in my recovery, I resolved to attend my "home" meeting every week—no matter what! Our meeting was on a Monday night. I am an avid football fan. During football season there is the weekly broadcast of the Monday night game. This created a real conflict, especially if the "home team" happened to be playing. Nevertheless, I kept that commitment to myself week after week, even though sometimes I was the only one at the meeting. I was there for *me*, and I wanted to learn how to live life without nicotine!

After I had gone a few months without nicotine, I realized that in order to stay quit I would need a sponsor to help guide me and work the Twelve Steps of recovery. I found a gentleman at a neighboring meeting that I also attended. After a while I asked if he would be my sponsor. I remember his favorite saying about sponsorship was, "If you went mountain climbing, wouldn't you want a guide to show you the way?" He became my sponsor and together we worked the Steps to the best of our abilities.

In the beginning it was rough, as all nicotine addicts know. I wanted to "quit" the program every other day, but having someone to talk to was a real relief. With his help, patience, and guidance I learned to use the tools of Nicotine Anonymous to relieve the obsession to smoke. My sponsor taught me two lessons that changed my life and helped me become a non-smoker. One was that I needed to surrender my will, and the other was that asking for help was not a bad thing.

Not only did my sponsor help me to have a life without nicotine, he became my dear friend for over fifteen years, until his passing. Today I get to continue his legacy by helping others learn to live nicotine-free.

The greatest gift I ever gave myself, with the help of my sponsor, was to be able to live life without nicotine. A close second is the joy that I get sponsoring other nicotine addicts to help them receive the gift of recovery. When I celebrated my 20th year of freedom from nicotine, the joy and gratitude was just as strong as that very first day! Thank you, Higher Power, and thank you, my dear sponsor, for guiding me along the path of recovery.

A humble servant to my sponsees

When I sponsor a fellow nicotine addict, I have a lot of confidence. Since God did for me what I could not do for myself, I know God can do the same for my sponsees.

My entire program of recovery is in God's hands, including sponsorship. It has been 20 years since I first turned my will and my life over to the care of God in another 12-step program. I have faith that my sponsees will, in their own time, recover, be restored to sanity, and live free from nicotine.

In my 15 years of sobriety, I have sponsored a dozen or more people. The results have been mixed. Many sponsees have completed the first three Steps and have maintained their sobriety. Some attended meetings on a regular basis and some did not. A few have admitted their powerlessness with other addictions and have prioritized other programs.

Others have just disappeared, never to be heard from again. Those have been the toughest experiences as a sponsor because I wonder if I had done something wrong. At meetings, however, I'm reminded of how treacherous nicotine addiction is and that God is in charge. We continue to pray for those still suffering. Through it all I have learned many lessons that make me a better sponsor and a better human being.

The biggest lesson I learned is that my sponsees' success comes from my commitment to service and not from my personality. Early on, I relied too much on my intelligence, my diligence, and my being a "good person" to support newcomers. No matter how favorable these traits are, they are no match for addiction. We sponsors really are powerless over our sponsees' addiction just as they are.

I also learned to know when to start talking about a quit date with my sponsees. Often, they either want to try quitting right away or they try putting it off as long as possible. Since ours is a spiritual program, success depends on surrender. Of course, I tell my sponsees that they can do what they want, but I will only ask them to consider a quit date as they are about to complete Step Three. They usually understand that our way to abstinence is very different than their previous attempts. Being used to confusion and chaos, they appreciate order. They are relieved to learn there is some sense involved in picking a quit date. This gives them new hope, a critical element in early recovery.

I learned to be very clear with my sponsees at the outset and throughout our working relationship that I am supporting them in the program of Nicotine Anonymous. This means we will be utilizing the five tools of the program and focusing mainly on working the Steps. We meet on a regular basis, often weekly. I review their plans for attending meetings and ask them to consider how they might employ each of the tools. Then, I support them in gaining the benefits from the ones they choose. I'm always reminding my sponsees that this is a "we" program and encourage them to be okay with receiving help.

I learned to be a better listener, to use my intuition, to keep cheering on my sponsees even when I catch myself with doubtful thoughts. I share my personal experience of recovery from nicotine in ways that let them know that we addicts are all more alike than different. I help guide them by giving them options and asking them to choose. For example, "You can answer the questions in the *Nicotine Anonymous Step Study Workbook* or we can read from *Nicotine Anonymous: The Book*. Which would you prefer?" It's always their choice.

When miracles happen, we celebrate. I'm big on celebration. I often tell my sponsees, "The more you celebrate, the more you celebrate!" Gratitude replaces doubt. Accomplishment fuels hope. Recognition makes their progress meaningful and real, even when they may want to diminish it. Chips are the best! I try not to overdo it because I know people arrive at our meetings defeated, still

aching from so many failures. However, this is exactly why we need to shine with joy and live as an example of the benefits of the program.

I am currently sponsoring three people—the most ever at one time. I’m rewarded with a beautiful sense that comes from knowing I’m truly helping a fellow addict. I consider it an honor to be someone’s sponsor. I’m so moved and inspired whenever a newcomer looks at me and asks “Will you be my sponsor?” My faith grows as I witness the courage and strength it takes to ask for help.

So, I attend meetings regularly and I share my immense gratitude for the program and the people in it. I hold a visible service position and after meetings I remain in and around the room in case anyone needs support. To newcomers I simply ask, “Do you have everything you need?” and “Is there anything I can do to support you?” Sometimes immediately and sometimes after several meetings, they will find it in their hearts to ask for sponsorship.

Today, I am a humble servant to my sponsees. I know that miracles can happen. As a recovering atheist, alcoholic, and nicotine addict, I know anything is possible when a Higher Power, through our 12-step program, moves in our lives.

Twelve gifts of NicA (*Sung to the tune of a popular holiday song*)

The first gift of NicA, the program gave to me
a desire to be nicotine-free ~

The second gift of NicA, the program gave to me
a way to escape the insanity ~

The third gift of NicA, the program gave to me
acceptance for whatever my path might be ~

The fourth gift of NicA, the program gave to me
a way to humbly take inventory ~

The fifth gift of NicA, the program gave to me
five...outreach...calls!

The sixth gift of NicA, the program gave to me
health, love, and prosperity ~

The seventh gift of NicA, the program gave to me
a brighter outlook and clarity ~

The eighth gift of NicA, the program gave to me
Our Promises, five tools, and the five Ds ~

The ninth gift of NicA, the program gave to me

a heart full of serenity ~

The tenth gift of NicA, the program gave to me

a greater interest in friends and family ~

The eleventh gift of NicA, the program gave to me

a sponsor for accountability ~

The twelfth gift of NicA, the program gave to me

a gift for others and a trust in a loving HP.

DRAFT