

Managing Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour in AA

At a recent meeting of Wiltshire Intergroup, which included a report on Conference 2015 by Delegates (which covered the recommendations of Committee 5) it became obvious that Groups within Wiltshire wished for more detailed guidance on dealing with predatory sexual behaviour within the Fellowship. Intergroup agreed that a guidance note should be prepared as soon as possible; the Secretary accepted this task. The following is a précis of the full guidance note written for AA Groups in Wiltshire.

While most relationships between Fellowship members are healthy, inappropriate sexual behaviour does occur within the Fellowship. This can affect recovery, obstruct groups in their primary purpose and bring the Fellowship into disrepute. It is sometimes known as 13th Stepping. The AA Group ought to be a safe place; sexual predation makes it unsafe for those targeted.

13th Stepping can be defined as someone with a degree of sobriety preying sexually on a vulnerable, newer member. It does not necessarily imply actual sexual relations, and could include inappropriate touching, lewd talk or any unwanted sexual attention. If the predator's advances are rebuffed, inappropriate reaction to rejection may include spreading rumours about the person concerned.

Our Fellowship is not perfect; in accepting this we need to remember that *‘Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity’*.

Newcomers are vulnerable and highly susceptible to approaches by those with longer abstinence. This puts the 13th Step predator in a position of power that is abused for personal sexual satisfaction or some other gain, with little thought of the impact on the newcomer's recovery.

Those who feel unsafe, or are the recipients of unwanted sexual attention, may leave the rooms and drink again. Even if they remain within the Fellowship, it is possible that recovery will be delayed, self-esteem further diminished and the ability to develop trust in fellow members affected.

What of the effect on the predator? Perhaps they think they are secure in their sobriety – but are they? If they succeed in their predatory efforts, do they honestly feel that they have done ‘the next right thing’? Have they not given way to personal gratification at the expense of another - who came to the rooms seeking help? Have they not exploited the vulnerable? Is harassment

of a newcomer by lascivious talk, invasion of personal space or inappropriate touching acceptable? How is this carrying the message? Has their Step Four been '*searching and fearless? Do they 'practise these principles in all (their) affairs'?*

To avoid weakening the group's ability to achieve its primary purpose action needs to be taken. The behaviour happens within the group and must be handled by the group. Some action is essential as soon as the problem is noticed. '*Our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern*' does imply the need for some leadership.

Here are some suggestions:

Prior Consideration. Group agreement is needed before the problem happens on:

- A planned approach to this behaviour that the group is prepared to carry through.
- A policy on wording of a statement by the Secretary before meetings that sexual harassment will not be tolerated.
- A plan to deal with incidents when they arise.
- A policy on temporary exclusion of members from that meeting if they continue to behave inappropriately.

Vigilance. Members should be vigilant, particularly before and after meetings, and note suspicious signs. These are fairly obvious and may be innocent, but should raise doubt, especially if a pattern of behaviour is present. These signs could be:

- A member always greeting newcomers of the opposite sex with more enthusiasm than the same.
- A member who always tries to sit next to the newcomer of the opposite sex.
- Newcomers leaving with a longer serving member of the opposite sex.
- Longer serving members having quiet one-to-one conversations with newcomers of the opposite sex.

Action. Suggested actions could include:

- Abide by the strong recommendation that men should help men, women help women. 12th Step calls should also follow this suggestion.
- Speak openly at group conscience about the dangers of 13th Stepping.

- If there is doubt about any group member's behaviour, they should be gently spoken to, reminded of the need for all members to be treated with respect and invited to consider their behaviour in light of the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions. It should be made clear that what they are doing is wrong.
- If the perpetrator's behaviour does not alter, it is acceptable to suspend them from attending that group until it does. This does not 'ban' the individual from AA, which would go against Tradition Three. It suggests that individual moves to another group on a temporary basis. It should be made clear that it results from the perpetrator's apparent inability to change. It should not be the first resort but follow the initial invitation to amend their behaviour.
- Suspension must be agreed by group conscience. Likewise, return of the rehabilitated member requires agreement by group conscience.
- Care should be taken over which members are endorsed by the Group as Twelfth Steppers, greeters, or group officers.
- Beware of false accusations.

The Perpetrator or Predator. It is suggested that perpetrators consider undertaking further moral inventory. They are likely to be in a degree of denial; this denial may be such that they can see no wrong in what they are doing and have blocked out the potential damage they may be causing by the same illogical thought processes many of us employed to justify our drinking in the past. These could include a feeling that they have an entitlement to sexual gratification, a misguided sense that they are actually helping the newcomer, the view that they are only behaving naturally, resentment because their advances have been rejected or even that it isn't their fault.

If the perpetrator's advances have been rejected by the potential victim, has he or she taken revenge by such actions as blackening the other party's name, sending inappropriate electronic messages and the like? Again, this is not the behaviour expected of a member of the Fellowship who professes to be in recovery.

Remember, people don't come to AA for sex, they come for sobriety.

The Victim. First, the victim of this sort of harassment should understand that the behaviour to which they have been subjected is not condoned by the Fellowship, and that in bringing it to the attention of the group they are performing a valuable service. The following points are made to enable them to take the right path if they are threatened by 13th Stepping:

- Remember that the predator will always look for the easy prey.

- Avoid sharing about past sexual misdemeanours in open forum at meetings – save this for your sponsor, or for one-to-one conversations with fellow members of the same sex.
- Remember that not everyone in AA is a ‘nice’ person – we are all human, with human frailties.
- Don’t accept lifts to and from meetings from members of the opposite sex.
- If you are targeted, tell a senior member of the group (of the same sex as yourself) straight away. Do not accept this sort of harassment; it is unacceptable either inside or outside the Rooms.
- Recognise that this is not your fault.

Conclusion. Inappropriate sexual behaviour occurs within AA. It is toxic for the victim, the predator, the group and AA as a whole. To avoid these toxic effects, groups need to acknowledge it, have a plan in place to deal with it when it happens and ensure that their own rooms are a safe place for the vulnerable recovering alcoholic. Complacency, in turning a blind eye to sexual impropriety, may kill.

Ken M
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Further information on handling inappropriate behaviour can be found on pages 82-85 of The AA Structure Handbook for Great Britain.

