

Some women will be uncomfortable sitting close to men, particularly at a first meeting. The greeter might want to offer her a seat with empty chairs on either side, or have another woman in the group sit next to her. For other women, creating this kind of distance may increase her sense of shame and separation and actually discourage her return. In this, as in all our suggestions, we as autonomous groups are best served by seeking guidance from a loving Higher Power though our collective group conscience. If your meeting sits in a circle, the circle might be widened to create more space between the chairs. Some of us may choose to move so we do not have a direct view of the woman newcomer, avoiding objectification and taking care of our own recovery first.

A woman newcomer often finds it difficult to ask questions or speak out at a meeting, so we might want to let her know what to expect. We can assure her before the meeting that hugs and holding hands are optional. She may not feel comfortable speaking at the meeting, and she may not know she can pass if she prefers. It's a good idea to let the woman newcomer know that sharing is optional, and that she may use only her first name or make up a name the group can use to address her. We might assure her that some new members do not share for weeks, and that this is just as acceptable as sharing at the first meeting.

At the Meeting

It is often during the meeting itself that our efforts to establish our own sobriety are most apparent. When we are sober, our behavior will be appropriate and shares will focus on recovery. If we have identified those available to offer temporary sponsorship beforehand, the greeter or trusted servant will then be able to point those members out to the newcomer.

A woman newcomer may feel obligated to reciprocate hugs when offered; she may not know that it is O.K. to say "no" and to set physical boundaries for her own sense of safety and well being. We would do well to keep in mind the words of the boundary statement: "Because of the nature of our addiction, we are careful about touching or giving hugs to others in the fellowship without permission." (Sex Addicts Anonymous, page 12) It is not necessary to require a hug when offering a woman newcomer her one day chip. It is best not to ask her to distribute sobriety chips and congratulatory hugs. Because the close of a meeting is a time when physical contact is common, we might want to have the trusted servant make a statement like, "For those who wish, let us form a circle and close with the Serenity Prayer. Holding hands and hugging are optional."

Incidentally, this care about physical contact applies to all group members. If we feel attracted to or triggered by a newcomer, we need not feel obligated to hug or greet them.

After the Meeting

It is often helpful for the designated greeter to speak to the woman newcomer again during the fellowship time after the meeting. In a predominantly male meeting, she may not immediately identify with the stories she has heard; she may even question whether she belongs in SAA. The greeter might call her attention once again to 4 Special Welcome to the Woman Newcomer. The greeter might additionally remind her that the only requirement for SAA membership is a desire to stop one's addictive sexual behavior, regardless of whether that behavior resembles that of other group members.

It is also a good idea to remind her of other resources available to women in SAA, information which could be included in a woman newcomer's packet. (these include the women's tab

on the SAA website, the Women's Outreach List, and the phone and on line meetings for women.

Above all, it is very encouraging to invite the woman back. We can offer to meet her at the next meeting if she'd like to see a familiar face

=== Fellowship

If we meet as a group afterward for fellowship, we might want to let her know where we are going, and invite her to join us. But it is not wise to pressure her to come along or offer to drive her. It may be a while before she feels comfortable socializing with the rest of the group.

During fellowship, she will be most helped by conversations that focus on recovery. It's best for us to avoid outside topics. Concentrating on the SAA message will help assure her that we are there for recovery. Fellowship time provides an opportunity to ask her if she has any questions about getting started in SAA. We also want to use appropriate language when we answer her questions.

Follow up

If the woman newcomer has asked for temporary sponsorship, the sponsor can help by getting in touch with her between meetings to ask how she's doing. These follow ups are most effective when they focus on recovery. We do not want to give out personal information, nor ask her for personal information, although she may volunteer it. It is best to invite her only to SAA meetings and fellowship events and of course, to encourage her to keep coming back

Finally

When in doubt, it may be helpful for us to remember when we were scared newcomers to SAA. The need for support, assurance, and safety that we experienced then are not so different from that of the woman newcomer. Many people do not return to SAA meetings for reasons unrelated to gender; they may not be ready, or they may not actually be sex addicts. In the end, we cannot control the behavior of newcomers, male or female. It is our responsibility to keep the meeting safe, sober, and focused on the solution. It is ultimately the newcomer's responsibility to keep coming back.

Tri County Recovery

Safe and Sexually Sober Meetings
Helping Women feel Welcome in your meeting

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SAA

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History and Purpose

While we recognize that gender issues are not the only blocks to retaining newcomers, this pamphlet was written at the request of many groups who asked the question, "Why don't women keep coming back to our meetings?" The suggestions in this pamphlet come from workshops and personal experiences of members and groups in the fellowship. It is the combined effort of women and men recovering sex addicts wanting to make sure that our message is cared to all who seek it. We hope these suggestions are helpful to your group as you seek the will and guidance of a loving Higher Power as expressed in your group conscience.

Making it Easier for Women to "Keep Coming Back"

"Discovering that we are not alone is a liberating experience for us. It is a great comfort and relief to know that a fellowship of recovering sex addicts exists and that we have somewhere to turn to help us recover." - Sex Addicts Anonymous, page 10.

A woman walking into her first meeting is in reality no different than any other newcomer. Why then, do so many women not return to a place that can offer so much support? There are many reasons. The shame and stigma society places on the female sex addict is particularly intense. In addition, a woman may fear being in a meeting with no other women in attendance, or may feel uncomfortable around other members who aren't maintaining sobriety. Although we cannot control all of the factors which prevent women or any other newcomers from coming back, there is much we can do to help women feel safe and welcome in our meetings.

Some Common Misconceptions

Many of us, male, female, or transgender; came into the fellowship with pre-conceived ideas about the nature of our addiction. For example, we may not believe that women can be real sex addicts. We may even encourage them to attend meetings in another Twelve Step Fellowship where they may "be more comfortable," furthering this mistaken belief. However, we find when we share together at meetings simply as sex addicts that we are more alike than not.

As sex addicts we have often found ourselves objectifying others regardless of gender. Men and women alike have had difficulties seeing each other as anything but caricatures, exaggerating the other's differences, and discounting or denying the similarities. We may have feared acting out with or being triggered by members of another gender. Or we may have concerns about triggering them. Additionally, for those of us in relationships, our partners may be opposed to our attending mixed meetings.

As well as these issues between men and women, there are often issues among women themselves which may make it difficult

for the woman newcomer to return to our meetings. Women sex addicts may view female newcomers as competition or as untrustworthy. On the other hand, women may be overly enthusiastic in their welcome of the woman newcomer which can be just as disconcerting to her as being rejected or ignored.

These behaviors, fears and misconceptions often create barriers between men and women and even between existing women members and the woman newcomer pushing us apart rather than drawing us together. However, when we place our trust in a Higher Power of our own understanding, we are able to join in unity to recover from sex addiction.

Sober Meetings, Safe Meetings

While people from all walks of life can have their lives wrecked by addictive sexual behaviors, so too can people from all walks of life experience a restoration to sanity and a spiritual awakening by working the Twelve Steps of Sex Addicts Anonymous. Knowing this to be true, the most important thing we can do is to maintain our own sobriety through the spiritual growth that results from working the steps. A group that maintains spiritual growth and works toward sobriety will inevitably become more attractive to new comets.

Becoming a more welcoming meeting starts well before any newcomer shows up. Members of a group that is truly "carrying the message" will be less likely to engage in behavior that may threaten or confuse a newcomer regardless of gender. A newcomer in a sober meeting is also more likely to conclude that the group has what he or she wants, and that it is worthwhile to come back.

Many of our groups hold annual Group Conscience or Group Inventory meetings in which we examine the health and sobriety of the group. Questions examined might include how many members of the group are working the Steps with a sponsor, and how many have completed the Steps at least once. We might also ask whether the general amount of sobriety time the group has is growing or staying stuck. Members who are qualified and available to be sponsors and temporary sponsors can be identified and made known to other group members.

It's a good idea to establish sobriety requirements for trusted servants, if practical. Using the SAA Group Guide as the meeting format is an excellent way to ensure that a group is clearly carrying the message of recovery. In particular, reading the SAA meeting boundaries statement (from Sex Addicts Anonymous, page 12, first sentence through the end of paragraph 2) helps to remind us all what behavior is appropriate in a sober group.

In a sober meeting, sharing centers on our sobriety and our new life in recovery. Graphic language, body part descriptions, and references to the places we acted out are discouraged. It is suggested that our attire reflect our group's commitment to sobriety. The shares focus on recovery rather than on acting out. Healthy and safe meetings bond in the solution to the problem. Unhealthy and unsafe meetings bond in the problem.

Some of our groups split in two when someone who is new or who is coming back from a relapse requests a First Step meeting. One group shares their First Step with the member, while the other group continues to discuss step work and sexual sobriety. This plan helps ensure the person needing a first step gets appropriate support

and attention, while it keeps the group's focus on recovery. It also helps support those who might be disturbed or triggered by the disclosures shared in a First Step.

A Plan to Welcome Women

Group Inventory or Business meetings are also good places to make a plan to welcome women newcomers. We can see if a sober woman in our group or Intergroup can be available to take calls from women newcomers. One of the trusted servant positions in the group can be a greeter for women newcomers; this may be an elected or volunteer position, but as with other service positions it is a good idea to have a minimum sobriety requirement; the group might set a minimum of six months or longer of continuous sobriety.

It can be very helpful to offer women newcomers a list of safe contacts they can call for support between meetings, and this too can be developed in advance. The list can include sober women SAA members from the local area who have agreed to help newcomers. If no such women are available, men who have agreed to perform this service and have met a minimum sobriety requirement may be listed. The safe contact list can also include information on how to get on the SAA Women's Outreach List; this information can be found in the women's section of the SAA website

The group may wish to consider preparing a newcomer's packet especially for women. This packet can be collated in advance and placed in a special envelope, or a reminder list may be made available to help the greeter pull together the right information when a woman newcomer arrives. Such a packet might include:

- * Basic SAA Literature, such as Sex Addicts Anonymous A Pathway to Recovery and Three Circles Defining Sexual Sobriety in SAA.
- * A Special Welcome to the Woman Newcomer, a pamphlet that provides support and encouragement for women entering SAA. It also includes information on the women's pages on the SAA website
- * Information on Women Only Telemeetings and Internet Meetings, which may be found in the meetings section of the SAA website under electronic meetings
- * Safe Contact List your group has developed
- * Temporary Sponsorship Information, including contacts for people who have agreed to be temporary sponsors for women.

Before the Meeting

It is always reassuring to meet someone we've talked to. If a woman newcomer has inquired about a meeting beforehand, it is helpful to arrange to have a sober woman available to meet her at the entrance, or some other open, well lit space. If a woman is not available, the greeter for women newcomers can take this role.

It can be scary or triggering to be the only woman in a roomful of men. One way to reassure the woman newcomer is to invite her into the meeting and let the greeter/group know she is new. The greeter might introduce her to sober members of the group. It can be helpful to show her where the literature table is, and invite her to take any literature that interests her. If the group has developed a literature packet for women newcomers, this would be a good time to offer it.