

Understanding Anonymity Online

“Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.”

What is the purpose of anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous? Why is it often referred to as the greatest single protection the Fellowship has to assure its continued existence and growth?

If we look at the history of A.A., from its beginning in 1935 until now, it is clear that anonymity serves two different yet equally vital functions:

- At the personal level, anonymity provides protection for all members from identification as alcoholics, a safeguard often of special importance to newcomers.
- At the public level of press, radio, TV, film/video, other public forms of the Internet and social media platforms, anonymity stresses the equality in the Fellowship of all members by putting the brake on those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation to achieve recognition, power, or personal gain.

When using social media, A.A. members are responsible for their own anonymity and that of others. When we text or post something online, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others.

The word “anonymous” in our name is meant to provide as much privacy as an individual may desire regarding membership in A.A.

Anonymity on a Person-to-Person Basis

From its earliest days, A.A. has promised personal anonymity to all who attend its meetings. Because its founders and first members were recovering alcoholics themselves, they knew from their own experience how ashamed most alcoholics are about their drinking, how fearful they are of public exposure. The social stigma of alcoholism was great, and those early A.A. members recognized that a firm assurance of confidentiality was imperative if they were to succeed in attracting and helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

Over the years, anonymity has proved one of the greatest gifts that A.A. offers the suffering alcoholic. Without it, many would never attend their first meeting. Although the stigma has lessened to some degree, most newcomers still find admission of their alcoholism so painful that it is possible only in a protected environment. Anonymity is essential for this atmosphere of trust and openness.

As valuable as privacy is to new members, it is noteworthy that most of them are eager to share the good news of their A.A. affiliation with their families. Such a disclosure, however, is always their own choice: A.A. as a whole seeks to ensure that individual members stay as private and protected as they wish, or as open as they wish, about belonging to the Fellowship; but always with the

understanding that anonymity at the level of the press, radio, TV, film/video and other public forms of the Internet and social media platforms is crucial to our continuing sobriety and growth — at both the personal and group levels.

Anonymity at the Public Level

After its first few years of success, the Fellowship attracted much favorable attention in the press. Articles praising A.A. appeared in magazines and newspapers across the country. With each new article, the ranks of A.A. grew. In those days, everyone still feared the consequences of public disclosure; and so the first press coverage guarded members' anonymity for safety's sake.

As public awareness concerning alcoholism increased, the stigma decreased, and soon some A.A. members began to publicly acknowledge their affiliation in the media. One of the first to do so was a famous ballplayer whose comeback was so spectacular that newspapers lavished attention on his successful struggle against alcohol. Believing that he could help A.A. by revealing his membership, he discussed it openly. Even the founders of A.A. approved his actions simply because they had not yet experienced the costs of such publicity.

Then other members decided to break their anonymity in the media — some motivated by good will, others by personal gain. Some members devised schemes to tie in their A.A. affiliation with all sorts of business enterprises, insurance, sales, places known as “drying-out farms,” even a temperance magazine, to name a few.

It did not take long for those at A.A. headquarters to realize that overzealous and self-serving anonymity breakers could quickly jeopardize the Fellowship's hard-won reputation. And they saw that if one person was made an exception, other exceptions would inevitably follow. To assure the unity, effectiveness, and welfare of A.A., anonymity had to be universal. It was the guardian of all that A.A. stood for.

More recently, the arrival of new forms of communication such as social media offers fresh vehicles to carry the A.A. message to the public. Modern communication flows in ways that are instantaneous, relatively open ended and evolving quickly. Reconsideration of how to protect anonymity is key for A.A. members and groups as we use any new channel of communication.

The Spiritual Significance of Anonymity

In stressing the equality of all A.A. members — and unity in the common bond of their recovery from alcoholism — anonymity serves as the spiritual foundation of the Fellowship. Back in 1948, Bill W., our co-founder, wrote: “One may say that anonymity is the spiritual base, the sure key to all the rest of our Traditions. It has come to stand for prudence and, most importantly, for self-effacement. True consideration for the newcomer if he desires to be nameless; vital protection against misuse of the name Alcoholics Anonymous at the public level; and to each of us a constant reminder that principles come before personal interest — such is the wide scope of this all-

embracing principle. In it we see the cornerstone of our security as a movement; at a deeper spiritual level it points us to still greater self-renunciation.”

Some Questions and Answers About Anonymity

A.A. members as well as many people outside the program are sometimes puzzled about how to put the principle of anonymity into practice. Some of the most frequently asked questions about both personal anonymity and anonymity at the public level include:

Personal Anonymity

Q. After I tell my loved ones about my A.A. membership, should I ask them not to disclose this information to anyone else?

A. This is entirely a personal matter, but it is usually best for all concerned to let the A.A. member decide who shall be told and when.

Q. If relatives, friends, and business associates comment on my improved appearance and functioning after I become sober, should I tell them I'm in A.A.?

A. Members of the immediate family and close friends are usually pleased to learn about an alcoholic's membership in A.A. As for business associates, it might be best simply to say that you've stopped drinking and postpone the decision about disclosing your membership until after you have been in the Fellowship for several months.

Q. What should I do if I meet old acquaintances at A.A. meetings?

A. You need not ask them to protect your anonymity; they are there for the same, or similar, reasons. They will generally respect your privacy and you, in turn, should respect theirs.

Q. What should I tell my loved ones about protecting the anonymity of the A.A. members they may meet?

A. Explain that anonymity is extremely important to A.A. members. Each A.A. member decides if and when to share aspects of his or her recovery, and with whom. Accordingly, it is hoped that family members and other friends of A.A. members protect the anonymity of their loved ones who are in A.A., and that they protect the anonymity of other A.A. members whom they may meet. This includes not disclosing to others the fact that a person is an A.A. member. In addition, let loved ones know that when an A.A. member dies, it is important not to identify an A.A. sponsor or A.A. friends, as such, in the obituary, in the media, or online.

Q. What if I see public figures at a meeting?

A. Like everyone else, public figures should have the protection of anonymity to the extent that they desire it.

Q. I've heard a number of people, inside and outside of A.A., say that well-known A.A. members should be encouraged to announce their membership to help promote the Fellowship. Why does A.A. continue to maintain the Tradition of anonymity for celebrities and other members?

A. Those Traditions developed out of the experience of the early members. At first, they too felt that well-known A.A. members could help the Fellowship by breaking their anonymity. But it soon became apparent that, if one anonymity breaker stepped forward, others would follow; and if

members were to strive for public acclaim and power, the spiritual unity so essential to the work of helping fellow alcoholics would soon be lost.

Q. I know that I should not reveal the names of members that I hear in A.A. meetings, but what about other personal information?

A. It is understood by A.A. members that personal disclosures made in A.A. meetings are to be treated as confidential. For example, if friends outside the program are acquainted with some of your A.A. friends and know of their membership, you should be careful not to violate confidences picked up at meetings, however harmless they may appear at the time in any form or channel of communication.

Q. Is it okay to tell someone if I witness or experience inappropriate behavior that happens either during or outside meeting times? Can I alert the proper authorities if there is criminal behavior?

A. Groups strive to provide as safe an environment as possible in which members can focus on sobriety, and, while anonymity is central to that purpose, it is not intended to be a cloak protecting inappropriate or criminal behavior. Saying something about inappropriate behavior or calling the proper authorities does not go against any A.A. Traditions and is meant to preserve the safety of all members.

Q. Should I tell people who seem to have a drinking problem about my A.A. affiliation?

A. This is a personal matter. However, the spirit of the program is one of sharing and a recent study of A.A. members shows that a high proportion of them joined the Fellowship through another member. Before reaching a decision about such matters, most members find it helpful to discuss them with sponsors or A.A. friends.

Q. Should I reveal my anonymity to my boss so that I can attend early A.A. meetings regularly?

A. Asking for special favors because of A.A. membership is not in the spirit of the anonymity Traditions.

Anonymity in the Digital Age

Q. I maintain a website and social media pages. At what level should I protect my anonymity on the Internet?

A. Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as websites featuring text, graphics, audio, and video can be considered the same as publishing or broadcasting. Unless password-protected, a website requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio, and film/video. Simply put, this means that A.A.s do not identify themselves as A.A. members using their full names and/or full-face photos. It is suggested that when A.A.s gather as A.A.s or as an A.A. group on social media and other similar platforms that these pages are set to “private” rather than “public.”

Q. Should I be concerned about the anonymity of others who view my sites?

A. When we use digital media, we are responsible for our own anonymity and that of others. When we text or post something online, we should assume that we are publishing at the public level. When we break our anonymity in these forums, we may inadvertently break the anonymity of others. For more information on anonymity online, see the A.A. Guideline on the Internet at www.aa.org, and the October 2010 issue of AA Grapevine on Preserving Anonymity in a Networked World.

Q. What if I appear as an A.A. member on TV, in a film/video, or a podcast, or allow my picture to be used in a newspaper, magazine, or online publication but do not give my full name? Is this considered an anonymity break?

A. Yes, if full-face photographs and other easily identifiable photos of A.A. members (who are described as A.A. members) are published or broadcast, even though their full names are not given, these are considered anonymity breaks.

Q. What about making or posting videos of talks and meetings? Are these considered to be anonymity breaks, since people are seen full-face and clearly identify themselves as A.A. members?

A. Realizing that anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, it is recommended that talks by A.A. members as members be given in person, rather than be recordings in view of the temptation of recordings to “place personalities before principles,” and thus encourage the development of a “star” system in A.A. (as per 1980 General Service Conference resolution).

Q. Are virtual A.A. meetings considered “public”?

A. These online gatherings are not streamed to the general public; however, information about the meeting is provided to A.A. members, potential members and the general public, similar to in-person meetings. While some members feel comfortable using their full names and faces, other members feel it is more aligned with Tradition Eleven to use only their first name and last initial or turning their camera off. For safety purposes, some groups have provided helpful reminders in their group format that picture-taking or screen shots are not in keeping with anonymity principles.

Spot-Check Inventory

Some additional questions that can be helpful in evaluating whether our actions may or may not be in conflict with the principles of humility and sacrifice that underlie our anonymity traditions:

- Is my posting about the message or the messenger?
- Am I carrying the A.A. message in the hopes of helping someone else, or am I simply “shouting from the rooftops”?
- Am I taking my story and affiliating it with political causes?
- Am I being extra cautious about not identifying other A.A. members in photographs or statements?
- Am I avoiding the temptation to incite controversy through caustic argument or bullying others who may disagree with me?
- Am I providing helpful information about A.A. for those who may need our help?

Facts About Anonymity in A.A.

It is the A.A. member’s responsibility, and not that of the media, to maintain our cherished Tradition of anonymity.

- A.A. members generally think it unwise to break the anonymity of the member even after his or her death, but in each situation, the final decision must rest with the family. A.A.

members, though, are in agreement that the anonymity of still living A.A. members should be respected in obituaries or in any type of printed remembrance or death notice.

- A.A. members may disclose their identity and speak as recovered alcoholics, giving radio, TV and interviews, without violating the Traditions — so long as their A.A. membership is not revealed.
- A.A. members may speak as A.A. members only if their names or faces are not revealed. They speak not for A.A. but as individual members.

Experience suggests that A.A. members:

- Respect the right of other members to maintain their own anonymity at whatever levels they wish.
- Are vigilant not to break their anonymity when texting or posting online, and very careful not to inadvertently break the anonymity of others.
- When speaking as A.A. members at non-A.A. meetings, usually use first names only.
- Maintain personal anonymity in articles and autobiographies.
- Avoid the use of titles such as “A.A. counselor” when employed as professionals in the field of alcoholism (the title “alcoholism counselor” is preferred).
- Use last names within the Fellowship, especially for election of group officers and other service jobs.

For more information on anonymity, the following pamphlets and other materials may be helpful:

GSO’s A.A. website: www.aa.org

“The Twelve Traditions Illustrated”

“A.A. Tradition — How It Developed”

“Speaking at Meetings Outside of A.A.”

AA Grapevine, October 2010: Preserving Anonymity in a Networked World

A.A. Guidelines on Public Information

A.A. Guideline on the Internet

Public Information Workbook, which contains information on how to handle TV, radio, and newspaper interviews

Write: General Service Office

Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

www.aa.org