

CO-DEPENDENTS ANONYMOUS

Sponsorship:

What's in It for Me?

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SPONSORSHIP: WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Overview

Sponsorship has been a part of the Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) program at the local level from the very beginning, and literature was developed by the Fellowship to reflect CoDA's early experience with sponsorship. Over the years, our collective experience has grown; this handbook is intended to reflect our increased awareness.

This handbook addresses both parts of the sponsorship issue. In Part One of the handbook, we investigate the sponsee's point of view which might sound like this: "I'm doing okay. I go to meetings. Why do I need a sponsor?" Once that question is answered, we often hear, "Okay, you've convinced me—having a sponsor is the next step. Now, what do I look for in a sponsor, and how do I find one?" We discuss these questions in detail; and finally, we address sponsees' responsibilities and rights.

Part Two of the handbook focuses on a continuing concern in CoDA, i.e., a lack of members willing to sponsor others, as well as a lack of sponsors who are actively working the Twelve Steps of Co-Dependents Anonymous. We look at some of the roadblocks to sponsorship and provide solid suggestions aimed at answering the question, "Why aren't more people coming forward as sponsors?" We also address the intrinsic questions members often have that

highlight their fears in making this commitment. Taking it one step further, we look at sponsorship from the sponsor's perspective, answering the question, "Why should I sponsor; what's in it for me?"

Part One:

The Sponsees' Perspective

Introduction

Working with a sponsor is one of the key tools of recovery. In this handbook, we explore issues, possible solutions, and personal benefits gained from participating in sponsorship, both as a sponsee and as a sponsor.

Sponsoring relationships in CoDA are really three-way partnerships comprised of sponsees, sponsors, and a Higher Power. Through listening to other people's sharing, potential sponsees notice that some people have sponsors who help guide them through the Twelve Step process. Often, sponsors demonstrate a positive approach to life no matter what the circumstances. Many of us yearn for that quality of acceptance and inner peace. We realize that the program suggestion of having a sponsor as a guide through the CoDA Steps and Traditions makes sense. We decide to look for a sponsor, but don't know where to start.

Sponsors are typically those members who have consistently been attending and sharing at CoDA meetings. Most are involved in service work in addition

to sponsoring. While there are no requirements for becoming a sponsor, it is strongly suggested that sponsors be conversant with CoDA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, and be actively working with a sponsor.

The third entity that completes the sponsoring relationship is a Higher Power. As sponsors and sponsees, we join together in asking our Higher Power for guidance and for the willingness and courage to embark upon this new phase of recovery from codependence.

Types of Sponsorship

Traditional Sponsorship

Traditional sponsors are companions on the recovery journey who guide sponsees through CoDA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. We model the tools we use in coping with life on life's terms; i.e., writing and journaling, reading CoDA literature, learning about service structure, and meeting protocol.

Temporary Sponsorship

Temporary sponsors serve on an interim basis until permanent sponsors can be found or until it is mutually agreed that the relationship will continue. Temporary sponsorship is useful as a trial period while sponsors and sponsees get to know each other.

Co-sponsorship

When CoDA was first organized, co-sponsorship evolved as a solution to the scarcity of willing sponsors familiar with the CoDA Twelve Steps. In co-sponsorship, two

members commit to help each other work through the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and support each other's recovery. In early recovery, co-sponsorship perhaps seems less risky, but may lead to role confusion and boundary violations. It perpetuates the core belief that many codependents have—that we must give in order to receive. Currently, CoDA has passed the twenty-year mark. Since more members are stepping forward to sponsor, traditional sponsorship is strongly encouraged.

Long Distance Sponsorship

In circumstances where local sponsorship is not available, prospective sponsees may choose a long distance sponsor. In this instance, sponsors communicate with sponsees via email, snail mail, telephone, or other communication technology. To maximize recovery, it is preferable to take advantage of face-to-face sponsorship if available.

Other Supports

Step study groups, writing and discussion groups, meetings, service groups, business meetings, Hospitals and Institution committees, steering committees, and Intergroups are all helpful in our recovery, but they do not take the place of having a sponsor.

Questions potential sponsees ask:

Do we still need a sponsor if we attend plenty of meetings?

Many of us arrive at CoDA with a history of unmanageable or difficult relationships; i.e., family, marital, romantic, work and/

or friendship. Being involved in a sponsor/sponsee relationship provides us with an opportunity to gently discover patterns of behavior that have been creating havoc in our lives, particularly in our ability to relate with others. After becoming aware of what it is about our beliefs and behavior that creates problems in our relationships, we can begin the rewarding, challenging, if often slow, process of change.

Recovery from codependence cannot be done alone. Allowing another person to sponsor us provides us with a safe place to practice being in a relationship. Over time, permitting someone to get to know us through self-disclosure, working the CoDA Steps and Traditions, and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, offers a new perspective about intimacy and trust. As sponsees, we may look forward to the following benefits:

- Learning to focus on our own program.
- Working CoDA's *Twelve Steps* and *Twelve Traditions*.
- Developing a deepening personal relationship with our Higher Power.
- Becoming increasingly more open minded.
- Practicing and implementing new and self-affirming life skills.
- Being able to ask for help and accepting it graciously when offered.
- Taking personal responsibility for our own lives.

- Being in a relationship with a sponsor without becoming enmeshed.

How do we find sponsors?

We begin the search for a sponsor in our meetings. Some groups offer a list of CoDA members who are willing to be sponsors. Other groups ask people who are willing to sponsor to identify themselves at some point during the regular course of a meeting. Over a period of time, we listen to people share, spend time with them after meetings, and telephone or email them during the week. In so doing, we get to know other members; and this helps us make a well-informed choice.

We ask the potential sponsor several questions, such as, “Are you currently working the CoDA Twelve Steps and Traditions?” “Do you have a sponsor?” “What is that experience like for you?” We listen carefully to their answers and assess the likelihood of our being able to work together. Once we have selected a potential sponsor, we ask the most difficult question: “Are you available to sponsor me?” In asking, we humble ourselves, rendering ourselves vulnerable. What if the answer is, “No?” It is a possibility. We may hear, “I have too many sponsees right now,” or “I just started a new job. This isn’t a good time.” We trust that a ‘no’ answer is not a personal rejection.

We continue our search. If we find that there are no members willing or able to sponsor, we try another group. If there are currently

no other meetings in our area, we consider alternative meetings, such as telephone meetings or online meetings —listed on *www.coda.org*. Also we consider finding committed CoDA members at state or regional CoDA events or conferences.

What do we look for in sponsors?

Having a CoDA sponsor gives us the chance to participate in and experience a healthier relationship. The best way to pick a sponsor is to remain open to guidance from our Higher Power. A few practical considerations follow:

- We start the process by considering what kind of person we might want as a sponsor. Do we want someone who requires daily contact or would we rather call less frequently?
- Do we look for someone who gives assignments, or do we prefer in-depth discussions; it is common for both to occur.
- Do we check out someone who is familiar but who may not possess those qualities for which we are striving? Ideally, we choose a sponsor who exhibits those characteristics that will allow us to meet our present needs.

In looking for a CoDA sponsor, the following list helps us discern qualities that are currently important to us. We are aware that most practical matters will work themselves out as the relationship progresses and communication grows.

Characteristics of CoDA Sponsors

Place recovery first
Commit in word and action to their own recovery
Have more recovery than we have
Actively work the CoDA Twelve Steps
Know the CoDA Twelve Traditions and apply them in their lives
Guide us through the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions
Exhibit a recovery program we want for ourselves
Are people with whom we identify
Are the same gender as we are
Are not sexually attractive to us
Maintain personal boundaries in a non-aggressive manner
Are emotionally present
Are open minded
Accept themselves and accept us
Are equals and treat us as equals
Listen actively without interrupting

Characteristics of CoDA Sponsors

Share their own thoughts
and feelings with us

Respect our right to confidentiality

Listen with compassion
and understanding without
rescuing or giving advice

Help us identify codependent behavior
in a supportive, non-shaming manner

Accept that we might be working
more than one program

Respect and accept our pace

Provide loving support for us and
encourage us to reach out to others

Communicate clearly and directly

Ask us questions for clarity, not to
control, judge, or manipulate us

Use sponsorship relationship to grow
spiritually, mentally, and emotionally

Walk the talk

Have a sense of humor

Know how to play

What are the sponsees' responsibilities?

- We attend meetings regularly, with and without our sponsors.
- We listen to our sponsors as they communicate with us about group protocol, sharing at meetings, crosstalk, and avoiding pitfalls such as getting into another relationship too soon.
- We contact our sponsors regularly. The telephone is a means of communicating with our sponsors and other members between meetings. To break the cycle of isolation, some sponsors strongly recommend we call others in recovery every day. This practice gives us an alternative means of support when our sponsors are not available and avoids making other people responsible for our well-being.
- We use the tools of the program, such as reading CoDA literature as suggested by our sponsor. This practice can be very helpful in answering many of our questions. Some examples of CoDA literature are: "Tools for Recovery," "The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions Workbook," CoDA's basic text, "Co-Dependents Anonymous," and "In This Moment," CoDA's daily meditation reader.
- We use prayer and meditation, the tools of Step Eleven, to help us build and maintain a healthy relationship with a loving Higher Power. If we are unfamiliar with these practices, we

can ask our sponsors and others in the Fellowship for help.

- We find that journaling and writing help us clarify our thoughts and feelings by writing them down. This process can be especially useful when our sponsors are not immediately available. The results can be read to our sponsors later. This tool can be used with our Fourth Step Inventory and daily Tenth Step check-in.
- We work on The Twelve Steps of Co-Dependents Anonymous with our sponsors. We become familiar with how the Steps work as we integrate them into our lives and observe how our sponsors incorporate these principles into their daily lives.
- We work on the The Twelve Traditions of Co-Dependents Anonymous with our sponsors. We learn to apply them to situations in our lives, not only in our meetings and groups, but also in our home lives, at work, and with friends.
- We observe our sponsors performing service work. Service work includes, but is not limited to, committee work at the different levels of CoDA, answering newcomers' questions, helping out at meetings, or being a group service representative (GSR). Service work spurs new behaviors and creates an opportunity for us to practice CoDA principles.
- We learn how to become sponsors through being sponsored and through

practice. Passing on what has been freely given to us is a direct route to spiritual growth as well as an expression of gratitude. In becoming sponsors ourselves, we perpetuate the practice of sponsorship and carry the message to those who are still suffering.

As sponsees, what are our rights?

Sponsors are neither authority figures nor our Higher Power. They are not in charge of our recovery. We are, along with our Higher Power. The following rights are not privileges to be earned; they are already ours:

As sponsees, we have the right:

- To say, “no,” especially when feeling unready or unsafe.
- To be treated with dignity, respect, and appreciation.
- To terminate conversations when we feel the need.
- To own our own feelings, thoughts, and opinions, and to express them respectfully.
- To change our minds, make mistakes, and take responsibility for our actions.
- To make our own choices, independent of the wishes of our sponsors.
- To tell our sponsors when we don’t know, don’t understand, or disagree.
- To ask for what we want and need.
- To take care of ourselves, no matter what the circumstances.
- To trust, respect, and love whomever we choose.

SPONSORSHIP: WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Part 2: The sponsors' perspective

Introduction

Many of us in Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) are unsure about our own ability to form healthy relationships. We wonder what we might possibly have to offer another person. The thought of becoming a sponsor may trigger our codependency issues; the ensuing agitation and anxiety may be unnerving. As a result, many of us hesitate to step forward.

Some of the issues especially problematic for codependents are creating and respecting boundaries, making and keeping commitments, making decisions, and speaking the truth when to do so would be uncomfortable. The following questions address these issues in the hope of allaying the fears associated with taking on a sponsorship role. The answers are intended to clarify and explain the sponsorship dilemma for codependents and to answer the question—Sponsorship: what's in it for me?

Why aren't there more CoDA sponsors?

The nature of codependence recovery makes us acutely aware of old patterns of enmeshment with another person. In recovery, we learn to recognize the disease and the discomfort we feel when engaging in behaviors that are habitual and still a part

of our emotional makeup. When someone approaches us and asks if we'll be their temporary sponsor, we may immediately have ambivalent feelings. As codependents, we want to help "fix" other people's lives. We feel flattered at being asked to sponsor and may take pride that our "recovery" is evident to others. Simultaneously, our vulnerabilities surface and we want to avoid the commitment of time and responsibility. We may find ourselves replying, "Thanks for asking, but I'm too busy," or "I'm not ready to be a sponsor," or "I wish I could, but I can't because _____" (fill in the blank).

We remember that we don't have to give an immediate answer or make excuses. Rather than act in haste because we're afraid we might hurt the person's feelings, it is okay to say to a prospective sponsee, "Let me get back to you." This gives us time to pray about it with our Higher Power, to talk over our fears with our own sponsors, and to reach a workable solution.

Why should we sponsor others?

Becoming a sponsor is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves in recovery. The relationship between sponsor and sponsee is a very structured one, one where we can work on our own relationship skills without the complications of romance, family ties, or employment. As sponsors, some of the skills we may develop or strengthen are the ability to be emotionally present, the quality of active listening, the capacity for compassion, the willingness to recognize and release expectations, and the

ability to practice acceptance on a daily basis. In giving feedback to sponsees, we practice the skill of being honest without advising, lecturing, or being verbally abusive.

Many of us have difficulty giving love and support within limits. As codependents, we tend to behave in extremes; we may either try to control the situation or we become a doormat. Sponsorship provides us with an opportunity to find and practice living in the middle. We give loving, caring support within a structured CoDA framework.

In addition to developing our own relationship skills, being a sponsor helps us gain a deeper understanding of the CoDA Twelve Step recovery program. For example, although we may think we understand what it means to accept our powerlessness over others, trying to guide our sponsees through the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions may test our patience. Explaining these concepts and their practicality in our lives to our sponsees may reveal new meanings for ourselves. In order to answer a sponsee's questions, we may find it necessary to spend time studying CoDA literature, praying and meditating for answers, or consulting with our own sponsors. These activities can only help us in our own personal growth and recovery.

Sponsoring another codependent is a critical part of CoDA's spiritual practice. Giving back what we have been given completes the cycle and fulfills the ongoing mission of Step Twelve: "Having had a

spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to other codependents and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”

What is the role of sponsors?

The main quality that sponsors need is a commitment to work the CoDA Twelve Steps of recovery. As sponsors, our role is to guide our sponsees through the Steps, answer questions about the program, and provide support by sharing our own experiences. Often we can help a sponsee by divulging the lessons we have learned from listening to our own sponsors and other sponsors at meetings. We listen to our sponsees as objectively as possible, remembering what it was like for us when we began the sponsorship process. We reflect what we hear back to our sponsees. The feedback we give ultimately refers them to the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and other program tools. For example, if our sponsees are fighting with family members, we might suggest our sponsees look at those people in terms of Step One or the Serenity Prayer—admitting their powerlessness over others and focusing instead on what they can change—themselves.

Although a deep friendship may develop out of the sponsor/sponsee relationship, our role is more that of a trustworthy guide who imparts new ways of looking at situations and behaviors. Even though we may not always agree with our sponsees, we address them respectfully and in private. We are not our sponsees’ therapists,

doctors, bankers, or lawyers, but if it appears that more in-depth help is needed, we suggest seeking professional help.

Who can sponsor?

Almost anyone can sponsor another person. In the beginning, the CoDA Fellowship did not have members with years of experience who could serve as sponsors for its pioneering members. Today, however, the situation has improved as CoDA continues to grow and develop. In general, if we are interested in sponsoring someone, it is recommended that we have been attending meetings and working the Steps ourselves for at least six months. We may not have finished working the Steps, but if we are farther along than our potential sponsees, we have experience to offer. It is strongly recommended that all prospective sponsors have their own sponsors.

Questions Potential Sponsors Ask

Isn't it codependent to want to run someone else's life?

Yes. However, as effective sponsors, we do not “run” our sponsees’ lives. Instead, we share knowledge of the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, offer suggestions, act as role models, and provide support. Practicing restraint in our relationships with sponsees can be extremely useful. We become role models for setting limits and boundaries as we demonstrate how to care about another person without doing for them what they are capable of doing them-

selves. Accepting sponsees for exactly whom they are and where they are in their lives without judgment is a test of our own recovery and a sign of our progress.

Do we have to have a sponsor in order to be a sponsor?

It is strongly recommended. The CoDA program is based on keeping the focus on our own lives and our relationship with a Higher Power. As sponsors, we help our sponsees wend their way through the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions and teach them through sharing our own experiences. We will be more effective sponsors if we are working on our own issues with our sponsors. Sponsors carry the message by living the program and leading by example.

What if we're uncomfortable with commitment?

The answer to that question is, "It depends." Even in the face of discomfort, are we willing to try something new to aid our spiritual growth? The main quality that sponsors need is commitment—a commitment to working the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions in our own lives and a commitment of time to be available and emotionally present to another person.

Whether or not we end up sponsoring someone has more to do with us, than with the other person. There may be initial discomfort as we consider taking time out of a busy schedule to be available to our sponsees. If we are able to be open and honest with ourselves and with our own

sponsor, we may find the decision easier to make. Following the suggestions of the CoDA program demonstrates a willingness to work through our fears and embrace the inherent changes in our lives. What a great opportunity to practice Step Three.

How much time will sponsoring take up?

How much time are we willing to set aside? That is how much time sponsoring takes. The time commitment depends on discussions between our sponsees and ourselves. Together, we decide what works best for us both. Some of us find it useful to have a set time of the week when we meet with our sponsees for one or two hours—perhaps before or after a meeting we both attend. Others may do short check-in calls more often. Sometimes, we may go several weeks without hearing from our sponsees, although if this goes on for too long, we might question whether or not they are really interested in working with a sponsor.

As sponsors, we often ask a new sponsee to make a conscious effort to call us every day for a set period of time (one month, two months, etc.) even if it's just to leave a message, checking in. However, schedules may not allow for this. Over time, sponsors and sponsees together discover what works best. As in all relationships, taking it day-by-day is a good method to follow.

Can we sponsor if we haven't worked all Twelve Steps?

Yes, we have a lot to offer long before we reach Step Twelve, especially if we have a

sponsor. If we have been attending meetings regularly and are working the Steps in our own lives, we may well be ready to share our experiences with others. This is an appropriate topic to discuss with our own sponsors.

Is it okay to be a temporary sponsor?

As with everything in recovery, we sponsor one day at a time. One way to become comfortable with being a sponsor is to investigate temporary sponsorship. Often the time period for such an arrangement is left open-ended. We might want to commit to becoming sponsors for a couple of months and then re-evaluate the relationship. We are not surprised to report that some sponsees are still working with their “temporary” sponsors five or six years later.

How do we set initial boundaries with our sponsees?

Sponsorship requires a commitment to be in a relationship. At the beginning of working together, we come together, as sponsees and sponsors, to develop and put in place healthy boundaries. The process allows both of us, sponsor and sponsee, to make our needs known, set guidelines, and discuss our expectations. Adjustments may be made later on. When we maintain these practices, we allow mutual growth and development to flourish within the relationship.

Examples follow:

- As sponsors, how often do we expect to hear from our sponsees?

- What are the best times for our sponsees to call?
- When our sponsees leave messages, how soon can they expect a return phone call?
- How long are calls to be between our sponsees and ourselves?
- How long is a face-to-face meeting expected to last?
- How often should we re-evaluate the relationship to assess the viability and progress of the relationship?

What if we give poor advice?

Sponsors don't give advice. As sponsors, we share our experiences and direct our sponsees to the appropriate recovery tools of CoDA. These might include reading CoDA literature, writing an exercise in the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions Workbook, keeping a daily journal, attending a meeting, calling our sponsors, or praying to our Higher Power.

What if we say something that angers our sponsees?

If our sponsees tell us they are angry with us, we listen and take responsibility for our actions. We make amends, if appropriate. As sponsors, our words are not meant to hurt. Sometimes sponsees will get angry about our feedback because it strikes close to home on behaviors they are not yet ready to admit or change. Our job as sponsors is simply to keep reminding our sponsees of the Steps, suggesting which Steps might be

helpful to review. We remember to take nothing personally and allow others the same courtesy.

If our sponsees don't call us, should we call them?

Not necessarily. We refer back to our agreement about phone calls when we began our sponsoring relationship. That was the time to address expectations about who was to call whom, how often, and for how long. However, if sponsees have been calling regularly and the silence is unusual, it is appropriate to call to see if they are okay.

What if we hate sponsoring?

If we discover that sponsorship is not for us, there are steps we can take. We confer with our own sponsors before making any rash decisions. We might ask ourselves these questions:

- Did we give the relationship enough time?
- Is the problem with our sponsee, or with the sponsorship process in general?
- If we are being triggered by our sponsees, is it because they remind us of someone else?
- Do we find that our sponsees' behaviors, attitudes, or ways of thinking are bringing up feelings from our past?
- Are we judging our ability as a sponsor on our sponsee's success or reactions?

- On what are our expectations based? What more might this reaction be telling us about ourselves?

If our answers to these and other questions still leave us wanting to end the relationship, read on.

How do we end a sponsorship relationship?

Directly, honestly, and gently. Here are some suggestions that have worked for some of us in this situation. We meet with our sponsees in person and use “I” statements to express our thoughts and feelings; i.e., “I feel that this relationship is not working for me; I am not able to continue.” We are honest and patient with our sponsees who may have been taken by surprise. We give sponsees a chance to respond. If there is a possibility of rekindling the relationship in the future, we let that be known. However, if we are certain about not wanting to continue sponsoring, we clearly communicate this message to our sponsee.

We consider this a learning experience for us both. This is another example of having to work through our fears in order to grow and change in the CoDA program.

Successful Sponsors

While not a “how to” list, the following behaviors have been found to be effective by many sponsors. As successful sponsors, we:

- Ask our Higher Power for strength and guidance in the relationship.

- Continue to work our program by practicing CoDA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.
- Offer listening and understanding without judgment.
- Admit we don't know all the answers; ask for help when we need it.
- Use "I" statements.
- Encourage our sponsees to discover their own inner strength.
- Avoid being overprotective, controlling, manipulative, or too firm.
- Encourage and model a working relationship with a Higher Power.
- Practice compassion, kindness, patience, and acceptance not only with our sponsees, but also with ourselves.
- Exercise caution when dealing with delicate matters; know when to seek help.
- Focus on the CoDA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions for solutions to sponsees' issues.
- Ask for clarification rather than assume we know what is going on.
- Give without expecting something in return...no strings attached.
- Encourage sponsees to become involved with CoDA fellowship activities.

Sponsorship Stories:

Growth Through Sponsorship

I'm lucky. I've had the same sponsor for almost nineteen years. During my first year in CoDA, the person I asked was too busy and said, "No." I felt okay about that. I knew she was sponsoring many people. I didn't ask anyone else for quite some time because I didn't feel drawn to do so. I just kept on attending a weekly Step-study group. After another year in recovery, I was feeling a barrage of emotions. I turned to binge eating to "cope" with the awareness brought on by the work I was doing in CoDA. I was feeling a pronounced need for a sponsor.

At that point in our Fellowship, co-sponsorship was prevalent. However, I knew that was not right for me. I specifically said to the person I wanted as a sponsor that I was not interested in co-sponsoring. I wanted the focus to be on me for once in my life. I trusted the suggestions of the program, and I was ready to follow them. I believed that having a sponsor was important. I no longer wanted to have to depend upon myself to figure out how everything was supposed to work—recovery, my life, the Steps, Traditions, etc. The prospective sponsor had been in CoDA for four years, while I was at the two year point. We had begun to be friends. In order to keep the relationship purely about working the Steps and learning about the Traditions, we decided to curtail our social activities. This felt right to me.

There were not a lot of people in the Fellowship who were focusing on the Steps and Traditions. Sponsoring was sometimes simply listening to and sharing with a sponsee. Although I was learning from being in a Step study, the true force of the Steps was becoming more clear through working with a sponsor.

I called my sponsor often and talked about myself, which was a miraculous change in behavior for me. I had always been the one who listened. In being sponsored, I felt supported. I felt certain about working with this person. I see now that I was actually listening to my Higher Power even though back then, I would have thought otherwise.

Talking about what was happening to me, determining what I was feeling, and realizing how powerless I was, helped me to begin to see how the Steps could provide guidance. The sponsor gave me suggestions. For example, to begin to work Step One, she suggested that I write all of the repeated messages I remembered from my childhood years, verbal and otherwise. I also wrote out what I had learned in CoDA so far about codependency and the many ways it had played out in my life. Then, after reading to her what I had written, we would discuss my answers. Often her suggestions were difficult for me to take. For instance, I resisted speaking about my parents because I felt disloyal. Also, I had always blamed myself for the problems I experienced growing up—I was “worthless at the core,” “lazy,” and usually “wrong.” In working Step Two, I struggled. I didn’t

have any insight into what I thought of a Higher Power. It took me a long time to even scratch that surface.

While slowly integrating the Steps, and simultaneously being listened to without being corrected or challenged, I was healing. I could be more and more open to reviewing my history, seeing my current behavior clearly, and looking forward to the potency and hope the Steps and Traditions held. I have learned to make connections between feelings that arise in the present that trigger my woundedness and my experiences as a little girl. I have “gotten my history straight.” While it is important for me to remember that looking back was crucial in bringing me the willingness to let my Higher Power keep healing me, I look back much less frequently.

My sponsor directs me toward a specific Step or Tradition. This reminds me that it is my Higher Power who works out my life situation. My part is to be willing — to be healed, to grow up and take responsibility for my own life, and to stop being overly concerned with the lives of others. My part is also to write, call, listen, and do service. Hardest of all for me is to be open to feeling Higher Power’s love for me so I can grow in love for my own self. I feel and believe in that love—not every minute, but often. My sponsor generously prompts me to remember that I am loved and loving.

After about eight years, our relationship morphed into co-sponsorship. We are very close friends. Without the commitment,

truthfulness, and loving concern of my sponsor, I might not have been able to be as honest with myself about my life, nor have had the continuing courage to keep working in recovery. Even though I was resistant to the concept of a Higher Power, being encouraged again and again to turn in that direction helped me to become more open.

Sponsoring others has been a learning experience for me. Early in recovery, I sponsored before I had a sponsor myself. CoDA doesn't recommend that, but I didn't know any better at the time. I had sponsored two or three sponsees by the time I had been in CoDA about a year.

The fashion in which I sponsor has changed through the years. In the beginning, I didn't concentrate so specifically and deeply upon the Steps and Traditions as I have learned to do from my sponsor. CoDA had a few pamphlets, and my sponsees and I would read them together. I would share with them that I was attending several meetings weekly and that I was doing service work. I don't remember worrying about what to do. There was a general sense that we were all learning together.

My experiences varied. Often I was asked to sponsor and then never saw the person again. Or someone would work with me for a while and then disappear. One time I was asked to sponsor, then the person disappeared and returned six months later. I was even fired. I was surprised. I felt a little sad as I had enjoyed working with that

person. Happily though, I had enough recovery to not take it personally. Presently, there are women with whom I have been working for several years.

Once I was being sponsored, I could see that there was another way. In those relationships where I sponsored others, I began to pass on what my sponsor was doing with me. A big part of the sponsorship process is listening to the other person talk and even cry, without rescuing or giving advice. Over time, I have learned that I don't have to have solutions for sponsees' problems. I say what I've done in similar circumstances, make suggestions, share my knowledge of the Steps and Traditions, and keep talking about Higher Power. I have learned to be okay with sponsees being angry with me and with them loving me—maybe that one's even harder for me. I am still growing and struggle with complete self-acceptance.

Sponsoring continues to deepen my understanding of the Steps and Traditions. It keeps reacquainting me with the sometimes elusive fact that I am powerless over others. It teaches me about myself, my triggers, and my insecurities. It helps me to see my own spiritual growth. Sponsoring another person helps to keep me honest about my shortcomings. It is an immense privilege to be invited into the lives of others in the CoDA program. I am grateful for the joy I receive as a committed sponsee and sponsor.

My Sponsoring Journey

My relationship with sponsoring began in another Fellowship. A woman strode across the room with her hand outstretched to welcome me and asked if I had a sponsor. I had barely stammered, “No,” when she offered to be my sponsor—at least temporarily—to get me started through the Steps. Even with my judgments about her imperfections, that relationship lasted a couple of years, through my Fifth Step, until she moved. Although I learned a lot with her and am grateful, I did not rush into another sponsoring relationship. I had found CoDA and joined a Step study group.

For seven years, I continued to work both programs, regularly attending several meetings a week with and without sponsors. I completed three different Step study groups, did service in meetings and worked on regional conference committees. I attended conferences and retreats, and participated with the Fellowship making calls, and taking calls.

During that time—seven years—NO ONE ASKED ME TO SPONSOR THEM. I know that when I came into CoDA, I was hurt, angry, overcommitted, judgmental, feeling and acting “better than” when I wasn’t feeling like scum, controlling, and, did I mention people-pleasing? I was grieving my mother’s recent death, dealing with my husband’s terminal illness and subsequent death, our empty nest, as well as the

childhood and life I had wanted but hadn't had. Perhaps God was doing for me what I could not do for myself.

Eventually, I became aware of something beginning to change. People began talking with me about the possibility of sponsoring. These talks didn't go very far, and I was fine with that. I was happy with my life in recovery—my work, my new single life that included travel and play, grandchildren, and many recovery buddies and activities.

As the discussions got longer, I began suggesting these potential sponsees make a list of qualities they thought they wanted in a sponsor. I met with them to discuss their list, and talk about my abilities and limitations.

What to do next? After seven years in program, I did know that advice was not part of a sponsoring relationship; sharing experience was. So what had been my experience? I realized I had had many new and varied experiences in recovery, steadily working two programs, with and without sponsors. I had attended workshops, engaged in therapy, read many books on recovery, spirituality, psychology, and religions. However I was able to come up with only five things I had done consistently, albeit imperfectly, from the beginning of my recovery:

1. I had attended several meetings a week.

2. At least one of those meetings I had attended had been a focused book study or Step/Tradition study.
3. I have always held a service commitment at one or more of those meetings.
4. I made three calls to program people a day.
5. I wrote an inventory whenever I was having difficulty.

This is what I ask new sponsees to write down. It has been my experience when having difficulty, that if I do more of at least one thing on that list than I currently do, my situation and/or my perspective changes for the better.

I refer to that list when I am tempted to give advice.

I believe I have two other continuing responsibilities as a sponsor: to guide people through the CoDA *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions Workbook* and to continue living my life in a way that is good for me and respectful of them. I also tell those I sponsor that what we do together is sponsorship training.

I have a sponsor. I don't ask people to do what I am not willing to do. I think it is important to have back up if I run into problems, just as I am willing to back up my sponsees who are sponsoring others. I set boundaries and commitments in my

sponsoring relationships. I tell my sponsees I do not call them; instead, I respond to their calls. I do make exceptions. If I notice a change in an established contact pattern, I might call to see what I can learn.

I give my sponsees permission to hold me accountable for our agreements. While I'd like to expect the same from them, in respect for Tradition Three, I try to have no expectations. Their recovery journey is theirs, and mine is mine. My goal is to respond to their level of willingness and to deal with my own disappointments..

I ask my sponsees to tell me if they decide to leave our relationship, knowing they probably will not. Instead, I say, "If I don't see or hear from you for thirty days, I will move you from my 'sponsee' circle to my 'buddy' circle with no hard feelings." If later they wish to begin working with me again, we can have a new discussion. I do this hoping they will not feel the need to avoid meetings they think I might attend.

The most important commitment I make with each sponsee, for my personal growth and for our relationship, is that I will not leave the relationship, no matter what they do or say...no matter what I feel. I hope sponsees can learn to feel safe enough to risk new behaviors. Through personal inventory, I discovered that I had a pattern of leaving relationships emotionally, if not physically, and blamed the other person. I've also chosen others who would leave me—even sponsors. I want to break those patterns. I want to practice new ways of

getting into and being in a relationship. This commitment is a personal reminder of Step One.

What other relationship lessons have I received from this service of sponsoring?

I have learned sponsees got along without me before they met me, and they can get along without me now, breaking another deeply-rooted belief. In these relationships I am not mother, banker, rescuer, entertainer, driver, or innkeeper. I get to practice saying, “No,” to some requests and keep my opinions and judgments to myself. I sometimes want more for a person than they want for themselves. I get constant reminders that the tools and principles that work for me also work for others—Traditions One through Twelve: “Our common welfare” to “principles before personalities.” I don’t have to run when I become uncomfortable in a relationship. I can state my feelings, describe what isn’t working for me, listen to others’ perspectives, and look for my part in the situation—the part I can change.

I’ve come to see I don’t have to do this journey alone, that I can’t do it alone, and I don’t have to do it perfectly. When I say “Yes,” I give my Higher Power an opportunity to work in my life. It has been through my willingness to risk saying, “Yes,” to sponsoring that I am shown again and again that the principles of this program do work if we work them, and if we let them.

Personal Sponsorship Experiences ***(*from previous CoDA sponsorship literature)***

***Finding a Sponsor; Being a Sponsor**

When I decided to write something on sponsorship, I asked myself, how would a healthy person find a sponsor? That question brought up others, like, why would a healthy person want to be a sponsor? Or, how would I know what a healthy person would do?

In looking back at how I found my sponsor and how I became a sponsor to others, I see areas of commonality. We related to each other. We shared some issues.

When asking someone to be my sponsor, I experienced fear. A negative response would have meant, “No, you’re not worth my time.” I know this would not be what the person meant, but old tapes play loud and I’m hearing impaired. A more accurate interpretation would be, “No, you deserve more time than I have to give.” I haven’t heard either statement yet, because I feel I’ve been guided by my Higher Power. Things really do work for the best.

Being a sponsor has been a real learning experience. I don’t have to be perfect. I don’t have to be in control; I can’t be in control. There have been many times when the person I’m sponsoring has come to me with a problem and he solves it himself. People in recovery often know more than they think, and verbalizing concerns helps them to clarify and identify feelings.

One more thing, I've learned to avoid people in recovery who think they have all the answers. Before I give anyone that impression, I'm going to quit writing.

***Changing Sponsors, Changing Sponsees**

I had been in the program for a little over a year, working with my sponsor. When I finished my Fifth Step with her, she told me that I was ready to sponsor someone else. Not too long after that, someone asked me. I was delighted. She seemed bright, fun, and eager to work the Steps and to address her codependence.

We met at a restaurant to discuss our expectations of one another, and everything seemed fine. I never mentioned any boundaries I might have. It just never occurred to me. She had been in another Twelve Step program for over three years and I thought this was going to be easy. She knew all about the Steps (I thought) and I knew all about codependence (I thought). After about a month, I began to dread her calls. I would screen them on my caller ID and then feel guilty for not taking the call. In spite of all this, I listened to her ruminate about her boyfriend for at least one hour a day. The laundry list about what he did to her rarely changed.

I thought that being a good sponsor meant "being there," and it seemed to me, in my ignorance that "being there" meant listening to her for as long as she wanted to talk. My resentment built and so did my feelings of guilt and shame. To make

matters worse, I made suggestions that she ignored. I wanted my friends in the program to think well of me so I never discussed my feelings about her. It was my little codependent secret. Then I hit bottom. I just couldn't take it for one more day. I called my own sponsor and shared my shame, guilt, and resentment; I offered my belief that I was unfit to sponsor anyone. She assured me that I had the right to manage my time as I saw fit, just as the person I was sponsoring had the right to want whatever time she thought she needed. She suggested that, as sponsor and sponsee, we were just mismatched.

And then she told me something I have never forgotten. She said that if I was sponsoring someone to whom I listened with resentment, I was being dishonest and selfish. "There is someone out there who is just waiting to sponsor a person who likes to share long telephone conversations. By not letting this woman go, you might be depriving these people of finding each other." I did resign as her sponsor saying I was simply inadequate to work with her. It was hard for me to admit that. I felt a lot of shame. But it was the truth. I didn't have what it took to be at her beck and call via the telephone.

***Recovery In Action**

I've got to be honest; I find sponsorship one of the hardest parts of the CoDA recovery process for me. To make myself available to sponsor another human being feels overwhelming to me at times. Taking a closer look at why this is so for me, revealed

a startling truth about myself. Sponsorship is recovery in action. I have a problem with action. Yes, at times it seems my lessons take forever to figure out; but sooner or later, I have to get my feet wet. Why is it so difficult for me to take action where sponsorship is concerned?

In the process of discovering the paradox of sponsorship, I learned sponsoring another human being requires a new attitude about how I perceive myself. Yeah, sponsoring someone is really all about ME. It's not so much what I am doing for someone else, but what I am or am not doing for myself. I didn't understand this until I risked being someone's sponsor. My Higher Power has a real sense of humor in this regard. You see, I was asked to be someone's sponsor while going through the line at the church cafeteria where a noon CoDA group meets for lunch. So, between deciding on the chicken and broccoli or bar-b-que, my life changed forever.

Sponsorship is about being willing to put myself in a position to receive. It's about giving myself permission to receive. This new attitude shows that I believe myself to be worthy to receive good and loving gifts in this life. Sponsoring someone else is my recovery in action. When I avail myself of sponsorship, I am affirming to myself that I truly believe I deserve to receive the healing gifts of recovery.

- Every opportunity to give a sponsee positive affirmations reminds me that my old, negative tapes are not true.

- Every opportunity I have to listen to a sponsee's pain teaches me to detach and shows me I'm not alone in my pain.
- Every time I share what I've learned, because someone before me was willing to share with me, I'm grateful.
- Every time I set a boundary with a sponsee, I learn to take responsibility for my needs, my recovery.
- Every opportunity to work Steps One, Two, or Three with a sponsee helps me recommit to awareness, acceptance, and action in partnership with my Higher Power.
- Every time I suggest to a sponsee to "Let Go and Let God," I remind myself I can trust my Higher Power's presence in my life.
- Every time I suggest to a sponsee to take it "one day at a time," I accept that it's okay to be where I am today and to trust in the process.
- Every Twelve Step recovery skill I use to facilitate a sponsee's recovery is exactly what I need to be saying and doing for my self. Sharing in a Twelve Step sponsorship relationship strengthens my recovery.

I have to give it away in order to receive it. And today, I choose to receive the many gifts of sponsorship. I'm accepting that it's okay to be where I am today and to trust in the process.

***Sponsorship is a Two-Way Street**

As I develop my relationship with my Higher Power, with myself, and with my sponsor, I slowly come to feel and to believe there is hope for my life. Sponsorship offers the gifts of nurturing and guidance that I did not have as a child. And when I offer to sponsor a newcomer, I, in turn, experience the gifts of opening myself to another in recovery as we work together.

As a sponsee, I need the benefit of the experience and caring of another person who has already worked the Steps. I need someone to point the way, to tell me what it was like for her when she first came into the program, to encourage me when the going gets rough and the process just doesn't seem to work. I need someone to tell me that she persevered and actually felt better because of the process.

As a sponsor myself, I need to share what I have learned. As the program says, in order to keep what I have received, I must be willing to give it away. I need to be open and vulnerable to another person who is striving along the same path as I am.

Sponsorship is not about having all the answers. Sponsorship is about humility and the willingness to learn from another person's experience. This is true whether I am a sponsor or the person being sponsored. Sponsorship is about integrity, about offering my honesty, generosity, and good will. Sponsorship is about partnership. The gifts flow both ways. As I live my Twelve Step program and continue

to work the Steps in my daily life, my need for “partnerships-in-the-spirit” increases. I believe that I will always need a sponsor and that I will always want to sponsor other people. I will always have something new to offer.

I believe that flexibility is important in the sponsorship partnership. I have lived with rigid people and rigid rules and expectations most of my life. In order to progress into health, I need a person aware of her humanity and willing to honor my humanity, in such a way as to allow for trial-and-error in the working of the Steps. I need someone to talk with, instead of someone who will tell me what to do about my life. I need to respect that it is okay and natural for a person to be confused and not have all the answers.

Sponsorship offers me perhaps the first real relationship in which I can practice boundaries. I want to learn how to recognize, set, and maintain my own limits. And I want to honor and not transgress the boundaries of the other. All of this takes practice. And, as I have needs and limits and I act on them, both my partner and I will have a chance to work on these new skills.

Sponsorship is a two-way street of commitment, hard work, sharing, vulnerability, integrity, flexibility, and boundary settings. It is perhaps the most valuable friendship I have ever known. As in all friendships, sponsorship involves risk. “Will she understand me?” “Will she criticize me and make

fun of me?" "If I really tell her who I am, will she turn her back on me?" "If I set boundaries, will she be offended?" "If I say, 'No,' will she be hurt?" "Can I do the best I can, and then 'Let-go-and-let-God?'"

Sponsorship is certainly worth the risk. I expect to be in recovery all the rest of my life. So I cherish the opportunities that these close relationships offer me. Sponsorship is a facet of my spiritual program. It reminds me of my humanity and the potential for the divine.

Sponsoring another CoDA member

Promises to provide us with an

Oppportunity for self-reflection and personal growth as we

Nurture, nudge, and support another person with the

Spiritual guidance of a Higher Power,

Offering both participants a

Relationship based on mutual respect and caring.

[illegible]