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This literature was developed by young members of Narcotics Anonymous who have stayed clean and found a new way of life. Young addicts around the world, speaking many different languages, are getting and staying clean in NA. We are writing this to share our experience in living the NA message that any addict, no matter how young, can stop using drugs, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live.

As young members, most of us didn't come to Narcotics Anonymous looking for a new way of life. We were just tired of the lives we had. We spent a lot of our time feeling angry, lonely, hurt, or scared. Getting high was the only thing that seemed to help, but drugs quickly began to make life even harder. We were tired of the pain and confusion, but we didn't want to consider the idea that drugs were making our problems worse. Regardless of whether or not we thought we were addicts, the idea of giving up drugs was hard to imagine. If we did consider stopping, the idea usually didn't last long.

If this sounds familiar, you might be like us. This pamphlet is our chance to share what we've learned: We weren't too young to be addicts, and we're not too young to get clean. We stopped using and are discovering a new way of life. You may not see young members in the meetings you go to, but if you stay clean and keep coming back, you'll find us.

By Young Addicts, For Young Addicts

When we came to Narcotics Anonymous, we saw how members treated each other. We saw something honest and real. We listened to other addicts share about not having to use drugs anymore. We listened as other addicts talked about walking through fear, about living the NA program, and about being free to have a different kind of life. Other people in our lives seemed to be trying to control us, but NA members simply offered their experience, strength, and hope. They told us that we never had to use again, even if we felt like it. We began to feel like we belonged.

Because we didn't always see other young members in the meetings we went to, we wondered if maybe we were too young to be addicts, or too young to get clean. With support from other members, we stayed clean anyway, and we made connections with people of all ages in Narcotics Anonymous. We may not have used drugs as long, but we've learned that addiction runs much deeper than our drug use. When we first came to NA, it was easier to relate to people with similar backgrounds or people who used the same drugs as us. After getting to know other addicts, we realized that we experience similar thoughts and feelings—no matter how old or young, or where we came from.



Am I Really an Addict?

Before coming to NA, many of us thought our drug use was a normal phase, a natural part of growing up. We may have tried to use our age as an excuse, but it soon became hard to deny that the drugs weren't making life any easier. We could act like we didn't care about things, but deep down we knew that we were making more sacrifices than we wanted to for drugs.

When we found NA, we felt like we might be too young to get clean. We might've thought addiction was just a physical thing, and that addicts had to use certain types of drugs for long periods of time to become addicted. But we heard in meetings that NA describes addiction as affecting us in three main ways: mind, body, and spirit. The problem was less about what the drugs were doing to us and more about how we were using the drugs. The drugs didn't have to be habit-forming or physically addictive for us to develop a problem. Our use of drugs was wrapped up in obsession, compulsion, and self-centeredness. We thought obsessively about drugs and the using lifestyle. We used compulsively when we didn't want to or told ourselves we wouldn't, and we couldn't stop once we started. In total self-centeredness, we sacrificed anything to feel different, even if it meant hurting ourselves and people who love us. Most of the time we were left feeling resentment, anger, and fear.

*When I heard the reading,
"an addict is a man or woman,"
I wondered if I had to be an adult
to hit bottom and get clean.*

We related to members who shared those types of feelings, even if their drug use was very different from ours. We realized that the types of drugs didn't matter. It didn't matter if we only used on weekends or if we used before, after, and during school. We lost control of our drug use and did things we weren't proud of in order to keep using. We ended up feeling alone and ashamed. For addicts, using *any* drug leads us to the same loss of control and feelings of hopelessness.

Just because we're young doesn't mean that addiction is any less deadly for us. We can make a decision to stay clean whenever we're ready. When we hear members share about hitting bottom, we know that our bottom is whenever we stop digging. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using, so anyone who finds NA, young or old, can have a chance for a new way of life.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship teaches us how to tell somebody what's *really* going on with us. We learn how to reveal what goes on inside of us and begin taking suggestions and practicing the Twelve Steps in our lives. The most important quality in a sponsor is that the person is someone we can trust and is an example of what we want in our lives. Working the steps with a sponsor can help us address the ways addiction shows up in our lives even after we're not using drugs. Obsession and compulsion can affect the ways we approach sex, food, money, relationships, video games, the Internet, and countless other areas. Addiction can distort any behavior or feeling to be a replacement for the way we used drugs.

Many of us have also experienced depression, anxiety, rage, self-mutilation, and eating disorders. A sponsor is often the first person we trust enough to talk to about these problems. When we open up, our sponsors can help us look for solutions.

Sex, Drugs, and...

As young members, coming to terms with our sexuality in recovery can be difficult. Our experiences with sex can include anything from our sexual orientation to break-ups, pregnancy, unmanageability, confusion, and shame or guilt about things we've done or things that happened to us. We'll hear lots of opinions and suggestions about sex and relationships in recovery. We may not always listen to what others have to say, but we can make an effort to talk openly with our sponsor and other members we trust. Sometimes our feelings about sex and relationships make drugs start to seem like a solution again. Instead, we share what we're going through and ask for guidance and support. Recovery will help us get through our feelings clean. When we share honestly about ourselves, we're an example for others.

I Was Underage

If our decisions have to be approved by a parent, guardian, or another adult, we may not always be allowed to go to NA meetings or make other changes suggested by the program. One choice we can make for ourselves is to stay clean. It might be a while before we're free to live the way we want to, but we can hold onto our choice of recovery, even when it's tough. When we can make it to meetings, members tell us they believe in us and that we can stay clean if we hold on, ask for help, and take suggestions.



The People in My Life Kept Using Drugs

When we get clean we may hear other recovering addicts tell us to give up “old playmates, playgrounds, and playthings,” but sometimes we don’t have a choice. We can’t get people out of our lives if we live with them, go to school with them, or are locked up with them. Our friends and family members might use in front of us. This makes it tough to focus on recovery.

We know we never have to use again, but it’s hard to get drugs out of our head if we see them in our lives every day. If we have using thoughts, we reach out to people in NA. If we can’t reach other addicts, we can read NA literature, write in a journal, strive for contact with a Higher Power, or talk to friends or family members who don’t use. We stay clean no matter what. Thoughts of using come and go, but they lose power when we ask for help.

I was really excited about recovery after my first NA meeting. But I still had to go home at night and be around my family. They partied loud and late. I could lock myself in my room, but the sounds and smells still got in.

A Spiritual, Not Religious Program

Our parents or guardians may require us to stay involved with their religion until we’re old enough to choose for ourselves. They may wonder if NA will teach us things that contradict their religious beliefs, or if we’ll be pressured into getting involved in some other religion. We can remember that NA is not in competition or conflict with religion, nor do we have to become religious to stay clean. The Twelve Steps encourage us to get in touch with our own beliefs. We can let our parents know that Narcotics Anonymous does not endorse or oppose any religion. We may simply have to respect our parents’ wishes until we’re able to choose for ourselves.



I Was the Only Young NA Member

Some of us feel a different sort of isolation because we're the only young people in NA where we live. We can get together with members after meetings, but sometimes we just feel like spending time with people our own age. It can be very hard to fight off the feelings of being different or unique when we're the youngest person in the group. We can look for chances to travel to NA events where there might be opportunities to meet other recovering addicts our age. There are young people getting and staying clean all over the world. We can also connect to young NA members in other places through technology and the Internet. Recovery-related online chat groups, email lists, and social networking sites make it possible to stay in touch with members all around the world. These can't replace real-life meeting attendance, but they give us a chance to relate to other young members about our experiences getting clean young.

My first NA convention was a real turning point for me. I met young members from all over. When I went to another convention months later, people who live far away still remembered my name. I knew I was really a part of NA.

When we stay clean, we have the opportunity to be the one young addict who can welcome other young people to our meetings and let them know what we needed to know: that it's okay to be young in NA. We tell them that NA works, even for young people. We are living proof—we are staying clean one day at a time.

Relapse

As young people in recovery, we may have friends in NA who go back to using once they get out of trouble. It hurts to see people leave NA, especially people we've gotten close to. Recovery has done so much for us that we hate to imagine our friends suffering in active addiction. No matter how much we may want to, we

can't make anyone want to stop using. We simply try to be a living example of what recovery has to offer. We share freely what we've been given. Some addicts will not want what we have. We share our hope so they'll know where to find it when they're ready to try something different. We can remember that our literature says, "There may be times when relapse lays the groundwork for complete freedom." We stay close to members with clean time who can relate to the pain and frustration of seeing people come and go. We remember that although we're young, we can stay clean for the rest of our lives by doing it one day at a time. Our literature and experience affirm that "we have never seen a person who lives the Narcotics Anonymous program relapse." For more information about relapse, see Chapter Seven in the Basic Text, *Narcotics Anonymous*, titled "Recovery and Relapse" or the *Recovery and Relapse* informational pamphlet.

Members Helped Me Feel safe in NA

Narcotics Anonymous is not immune to the dangers found in the rest of society. The people we trust in NA can help us avoid getting involved in financial, romantic, or sexual situations with those who may not have our best interests at heart. We build trust with other members by getting to know them slowly. We begin with a sponsor, who can help us get to know other members. We get to know people in public places until we're comfortable with them. If we do find ourselves in uncomfortable situations, we talk to other members we trust—we don't have to keep anything to ourselves. People who care about our well-being will be patient earning our trust and won't pressure us into uncomfortable situations. It doesn't take long at all for us to build a network of close people with whom we feel safe.

Facing Life Events without Drugs

Because we are young, we usually have major life events and milestones ahead of us. Facing events such as graduations, reaching the legal age to drink, birthdays, and other celebrations may seem impossible without using. Our friends and family won't always understand our reasons for staying clean, especially

in situations when it's common to drink alcohol. We ask the people in our lives to support our decisions, and we need to rely on support from our sponsor and friends in recovery in these situations. We can ask NA members to be there with us if we're uncomfortable on our own. They help us remember that we can get through anything clean.

When I first got clean, I wondered how I would celebrate my graduation or my birthdays. What would happen when I could get into bars and buy alcohol? What if I ever got married, would we be able to toast? What would we serve the guests? ▼

More Will Be Revealed...

No matter how old, most people who come to NA have a lot of growing up to do. The core of our disease is self-obsession. That means that all newcomers struggle with the same childishness, regardless of their age. We learn to work a program of recovery alongside our fellow members, helping them when we can and accepting their help when it applies. We may look or feel different from older members, but we're all staying clean just for today. When we open up to other members, we learn that we have a lot more in common than we thought. Narcotics Anonymous makes it possible for addicts of any age to grow up and grow older, clean in recovery. Just for today, we have our whole lives ahead of us. By staying clean, we're free to become who we want to be.

