

What is SAL Sponsorship?

(Updated 11/12/23)

For newcomers to recovery, talk of sponsorship can feel overwhelming and confusing.

- What is a sponsor?
- Why would I need to work with one?
- How do I get one?

A sponsor is an individual who has been practicing recovery long enough to have strength, hope, and experience to help newcomers on their pathway of healing. A sponsor's role is to facilitate the recovery of a sponsee by assisting her one-on-one as she learns to surrender, sets boundaries, and works the Steps. The primary function of the sponsor is to point the sponsee back to her Higher Power.

The sponsor does not check up on the sponsee. It is up to the sponsee to find a sponsor, reach out to the sponsor, and take accountability for her own recovery. The sponsor can provide valuable guidance and empathy to the sponsee who is coming out of the darkness of isolation. The sponsor can also provide suggestions to guide the sponsee upon a clear path to work the steps and progress in her recovery. Ultimately, the sponsorship relationship becomes a gift to both the sponsor and the sponsee as they share their journey of recovery.

SAL Sponsorship Requirements (updated from SAL Recovering Individuals & Healing Families, pg. 332)

We encourage SAL members to become a sponsor when they:

- Have at least 6 months sobriety (for recovering addicts)
- Have worked Steps 1-3, and are actively working Steps 4-12
- Are working the 12 Steps with their own sponsor
- Are regularly attending SAL 12-Step meetings
- Practice surrender, striving to live in "positive sobriety"

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Understanding the Sponsorship Relationship

In SAL, we have accepted the truth that we cannot recover in isolation. Sponsorship is one of the most important tools of our program and our healing. But what does a Sponsorship relationship entail? Here are some things to keep in mind when choosing a sponsor and establishing a sponsor/sponsee relationship.

1. Establish a mutual understanding of the relationship

Make sure both parties are clear as to the purpose of the relationship.

- You may want to establish a trial period for the sponsorship relationship. After this time, both parties can decide if they are compatible and want to move forward.
- You may find it helpful to communicate regularly and frequently at the beginning of your sponsorship relationship. Many people find a 30 for 30 practice (where a sponsee will call their sponsor daily for 30 days) helpful to build trust and break the fear of reaching out. Establish clear expectations on when is the best time to make regular contact.
- Establish clear guidelines for working the steps.
- Decide how and when Step Work will be reviewed.
- Establish clear guidelines for your longer-term relationship, check-ins, and surrender phone calls.

2. Qualities of a Sponsee

If you are wanting to work the steps with a sponsor, here are some of the principles you need to be committed to. If you are a sponsor, these are questions that you may want to ask your potential sponsees.

- Fully committed to recovery: Are you willing to go to any length to recover? What sacrifices might be needed to make your recovery the top priority in your life?
- Do you understand your own need for recovery or are you focused primarily on changing or fixing the addict?

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- Are you willing to work the 12 steps to find your own healing and guidance from a Higher Power?
- Are you fully aware of the limitations of a sponsor/human being? A sponsor is not a therapist, a guru, a financial advisor, or God. Sponsors are here to guide you through the Steps and point you back to God.
- Are you committed to keeping this relationship in the bonds of confidentiality? Do you feel safe sharing confidences with your sponsor, and can your sponsor feel safe sharing with you?
- Are you committed to total honesty as you work the steps and take accountability for your recovery? Do you understand that pretending or putting up walls of justification will only limit your ability to recover?
- Do you accept the concept that spirituality is the foundation of recovery? Are you willing to let go of self-reliance and explore a healthy dependence on God?

3. Qualities of a Sponsor

If you are wanting to further your own recovery and deepen your commitment to Step 12, here are some principles that can help you be a great sponsor.

Remember, being a sponsor is not about being perfect. It is about sharing your strength, hope, and experience with women who desperately need it. Sponsorship will give you greater opportunities to build your own trust in your Higher Power, to see Him working through you and in the lives of your sponsees, and it will build your confidence in your inner wisdom as you continue in your recovery.

7 Essential Sponsorship Tips

Here are some tips for practicing the Art of Sponsorship:

1. Give the gift of your full attention.

Although it may be tempting to multitask or turn the conversation back to ourselves, try to focus on truly hearing your sponsee for the time you are with them. Perhaps you set a boundary (“I have 10 minutes for this call”),

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but then you give yourself fully. If the conversation sparks thoughts of something we are going through, we can relate it as a way to share our “experience, strength, and hope”, but we must be careful to keep the focus of the conversation on our sponsee and their need to be heard.

2. Cultivate an attitude of respect and empathy.

- As we listen with a true respect for the desire our sponsee has to find recovery and risk the vulnerability of reaching out and being seen, we will create a place of safety where we both can learn and grow and connect to our own deep, inner wisdom.
- Our job is to see our sponsee as they really are, a child of God struggling to learn and grow and become, and free themselves from the shackles of the trauma and self-doubt they have experienced. When we see them in this light, rather than with judgment or criticism, we will increase our capacity to see ourselves this way, and we will enjoy a deeper love and connection with others.
- Listening with love becomes part of our spiritual practice.

3. Question instead of Lecture.

- Clarifying questions can help show that we are really listening and can also allow our sponsees to discover their own truth, which is the most satisfying and transformative learning experience. Offering questions or re-phrasing can look like: “What I hear you saying is...” or “Tell me more about that” or “How did that make you feel?” or “What is the essence of what you are trying to say?”

4. Focus on Feelings.

- A huge part of recovery is becoming aware of emotions and allowing those emotions to be felt. Sponsors can help sponsees identify what they are feeling, and give much-needed validation that whatever they are feeling is okay, and is part of the process. If sponsees become stuck in certain emotions, giving assignments involving step work, journaling, self-care, surrender phone calls, or qualified therapy can also be helpful.

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5. Embrace stillness.

- For many in recovery, busy schedules and checklists have been used to numb emotions or create a sense of control in chaos. We can feel an intense need for speed, in our words, in our lives, in our reactions. Recovery opens a totally new way of living to us: a world where we do not need to fill the space with words or errands to distract us or give us a sense of worth. Practice stillness in your own life and in your interactions with your sponsee. Take time to breathe and sit in silence before automatically responding with words or advice. Invite your sponsee to take a deep breath with you, to sit in silence, and to try to feel God there. Encourage your sponsee to find and connect with her own inner wisdom. This is often found in stillness.

6. Speak truth with love.

- As a sponsor, we are in a trusted position in the life of our sponsee. We must speak the truth, and sometimes this can be difficult. We focus on our own recovery and boundaries at this point, and hold ourselves accountable to be true to the expectations and commitments we have made. We confront problems as promptly as possible, and address issues with specifics. We fulfill our responsibility to hold our sponsees accountable to their commitments and to the principles of recovery. If our sponsorship relationship becomes stuck, we may ask, “How can we move forward in this situation?” We take responsibility for our own attitudes and behaviors, and self-check that we are not trying to fix, analyze, or rescue our sponsees. We practice love and boundaries and find fulfillment in our fellowship as we work our recovery one day at a time.

7. Always point your Sponsee back to her Higher Power

- Although it can be tempting to give advice as a sponsor, or seek advice as a sponsee, we must always remember that our Higher Power is the only One who can give us the answers we need and the peace we seek. While learning from others’ strength, hope, and experience can be informative and validating, only our Higher Power knows the unique pathway that will bring each individual to peace and healing. Our efforts are best spent helping our sponsee to determine

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how to put God at her center, facilitate accountability for working her own recovery, and encourage her progress as she works the Steps.

Sample Sponsorship Check-in

If you are wondering what a check-in might look like, here are some sample questions you might consider using as you check in with your sponsees:

1. Self-care Questions:

- What type of spiritual dailies are you doing? (prayer, study, journaling, meditation)
- Are you choosing to surrender your negative thoughts and feelings as they come?
- What are your interactions with others like?
- Are you setting/holding healthy boundaries?
- Are you being accountable for positive v negative self-talk?
- Did you do anything fun today?
- Are you caring for your physical body by eating well, resting enough, and getting exercise?
- Did you take time to relax today?

2. Are you “living as if” today? Are your thoughts/feelings/attitudes today in line with the Step 3 prayer?

3. Are you feeling overwhelmed with a character defect today? How can you work Step 7 to bring this defect to a different light? What strengths might God be creating space for as he brings this defect to your awareness? Do you believe He can replace the defect with strength? Will you ask Him to?

4. What emotions are you feeling right now?

5. What do you need to surrender?

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6. What have you learned about yourself since we last spoke?
7. What can you do right now to help you shift from pain to peace?
8. What coping mechanisms do you feel you have to be very careful to not slip back into?
9. What step are you working on? What have your experiences been with this step?
10. What commitment will you make for our next check-in?

Frequently Asked Questions About Sponsorship

Q: Why do I need a sponsor?

A: Nobody can effectively work the program alone. “To recover, I had to begin coming out of isolation and connect with people.” (The White Book, p 163)

A sponsor is someone you can turn to who has made a commitment to listen to you, respect your need for confidentiality, and can offer a different perspective on your situation without bias and with love. A sponsor will help you navigate the steps of the program giving suggestions from his or her own experience.

Q: How do I choose a sponsor?

A: Take some time and turn to your Higher Power for this. Talk to people and notice how you feel when talking to them. Ask someone you feel comfortable with (some groups may have an “available sponsor” list). Perhaps it’s someone whose shares resonate with you. Be aware that there will never be ‘a perfect sponsor’ and it’s not uncommon for people to switch sponsors while working the program.

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Q: It's hard for me to call someone. What if I am bothering my sponsor?

A: A sponsor will have boundaries about his or her communication with sponsees. He or she likely won't answer if they can't talk. Learning to be vulnerable and reach out is part of the program and will be helpful to your healing. It takes courage to take this step each time, but a sponsor is a safe person. Try to remember that the call you make is not about your sponsor, it's about you and your trust in your Higher Power and the program in your life.

Q: What kinds of things would I call my sponsor about?

A: When you need help knowing how to work the SAL or S-Anon 12 step program.

When you need someone to listen to or help you through the surrender process.

When you are in a crisis situation with your emotions and need help seeing things from a recovery perspective.

When you are triggered and need help knowing how to move through the emotions associated with the trigger.

When you have questions about your recovery.

Q: My sponsor is basically a stranger. How do I build trust with my sponsor?

A: Be honest and vulnerable with your sponsor and trust will develop quickly. You will see trust grow as your Higher Power guides you through your sponsor. Try what the sponsor suggests but be aware that your recovery will look different than your sponsor's recovery.

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Q: How often is it okay to call my sponsor? Should I have a regular check-in time?

A: This (like most things) will vary and depend on the sponsor. The sponsor will let you know how best to communicate with him or her. If you feel you would like more contact with your sponsor, work something out that works for both of you.

Q: Is my sponsor the only person I should be talking to?

A: It is suggested that you have a network of support people who are also working recovery. A sponsor will not always be available when you need to talk to someone.

Q: How does a sponsor help me work the steps?

A: A sponsor will point you to working the steps and help you be aware of the problem of using him or her as a crutch for emotional help without working the steps. The sponsor will help you be accountable for your own recovery goals. He or she will tell you how they work the steps and you can use their input for your own work.

Q: Am I ready to be a sponsor?

A: Becoming a sponsor is a personal decision, but if you have met the SAL requirements for sponsorship, it is time for you to consider it seriously. These minimum requirements include:

- having completed Steps 1-3 and actively working Step 4,
- having regularly attended at least 6 months of SAL meetings,
- and that you have been working with your own SAL sponsor for at least 6 months.

Ideally, if you have completed Steps 1-5, you will be much better prepared to become a sponsor. You have strength, hope, and experience that others are truly in need of. Few of us really feel “totally ready” to be a sponsor.

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Remember that you need not be perfect to be a sponsor. Being a sponsor is an important part of working the steps. Sponsors have found that being a sponsor helps them with their own recovery and healing.

Q: I have a problem with a sponsee, what should I do?

A: Sponsors will have their own boundaries surrounding sponsorship. Discuss boundaries with your own sponsor for ideas. It may be a simple boundary issue, but it may also be that this sponsoring relationship has become unhealthy and a change in sponsor is needed.

For more information on sponsorship please refer to the SAL Recovering Individuals, Healing Families Book, pages 266-281 & 331-336