

# Understanding Anonymity



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

This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature.

*"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, films and other media technologies such as the Internet, 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 digital media, A.A. members are responsible for their own anonymity and that of others. When we post, text, or blog, 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.

### ***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, films and other media technologies such as the Internet 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 electronic communication such as social networking offers fresh vehicles to carry the A.A. message to the public. Modern communication flows in ways that are high-tech, relatively open ended and evolving quickly. Protecting anonymity, is a major concern for A.A. members who are accessing the Internet in ever-growing numbers.

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 1946, Bill W., our co-founder, wrote: “The word ‘anonymous’ has for us an immense spiritual significance. Subtly but powerfully, it reminds us that we are always to place principles before personalities; that we have renounced personal glorification in public; that our movement not only preaches but actually practices a true humility.”

### **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 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 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.

**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 an Internet Web site and a personal page on a social media site. I also belong to an online meeting. At what level should I protect my anonymity on the Internet?

**A.** Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as Web sites featuring text, graphics, audio and video can be considered the same as publishing or broadcasting. Unless password-protected, a Web site requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio and film. 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.



**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 post, text, or blog, 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](http://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, or a Web cast, 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.** I've heard a number of people, inside and outside of A.A., say the 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.** What about making or posting video recordings 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 video recorded in view of the temptation of video recording to place personalities before principles,” and thus encourage the development of a “star” system in A.A. (*As per 1980 General Service Conference resolution*)

### **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 Internet 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 posting, texting, or blogging, 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:

G.S.O.'s A.A. Web site: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

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"The Twelve Traditions Illustrated"

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"A.A. Tradition — How It Developed"

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"Speaking at Non-A.A. Meetings"

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AA Grapevine, October 2010:

Preserving Anonymity in a Networked World.

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A.A. Guidelines on Public Information

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A.A. Guideline on the Internet

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

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Write: General Service Office  
Box 459  
Grand Central Station  
New York, NY 10163