

## HINTS FOR VOLUNTEERS ON TELEPHONE DUTY

Thank you for your service. No matter how long you have been doing duty, please don't hesitate to ask questions of the team leader or other volunteers. There's every chance someone who calls you will join us in living sober.

We help carry the AA message to suffering alcoholics in their areas. Our job is to refer, not to Twelfth-Step, so please keep calls reasonably short. Remember, if we prolong the call we can delay help and may block the lines so others can't get through promptly. It can also cost the Fellowship money, since we pay a standard charge for calls that come in by the 0845 route. *A helpful principle is that a call is either heading towards sobriety or it should be ended.*

We don't arrange to meet callers ourselves, for that would deprive other members of the service they have taken on.

**TELEPHONE** Rings and black arrow flashes. No need to press line, just pick up and answer: "Alcoholics Anonymous, may I help you?" Note the time on scrap paper and begin taking details. When dialling out, we do need to press a free line, but don't need to press '9' or anything else.

**TRANSFERRING CALLS** Press **Hold** button, noting flashing line number. Return handset and ask person to pick it up by pressing the flashing line.

**HOLD KEY** When checking information, or seeking advice, we tell the caller we are putting them on **Hold**. Try not to leave them hanging on too long. To get the call back, press the flashing Line, not the Hold key.

**OUTGOING CALLS** Press clear line to get dialling tone and dial number *direct*. We pay for necessary personal calls by putting money in the petty cash box, but making calls on AA service business are free. Please switch off mobile phones and don't use them during the 4-hour duty.

**ETIQUETTE CORNER** Teams can't divvy up calls equally because some are long, some short...but please try to avoid snatching at the phone continuously before fellow-members have had a reasonable share of service.

**ANONYMITY** We don't give out AA members' phone numbers because they may break someone's anonymity (but mainly because they are often out of date). Exceptions are made for International Directory contacts or our own Service Directory contacts. Requests for copies of the London *Where To Find* are directed to local meetings or can be obtained from GSO on Literature Order forms.

Telephone calls to this office fall mainly into four categories:

1. **FROM THE SUFFERING ALCOHOLIC**

- a) We ascertain that he or she has a drinking problem... Is It For Yourself?
- b) We establish whether it's their first call to Alcoholics Anonymous...sometimes first-time callers sound like members because they ask about our meetings. It's so easy to help callers with directions and realise after they've gone that they might have been a newcomer.
- c) If the caller is new, we try to identify briefly, eg, "Yes, I could stop drinking, but I couldn't *stay* stopped."
- d) We note where they are calling from and if it is outside our Twelfth-Stepping area, we give them their local Phone Service number from the front of your Blue Book, asking them to get back in touch if they don't find help.
- e) If they are local, we explain what we do, offering to put them in touch with a member of the Fellowship on a confidential basis, with a view to them being contacted and accompanied to a meeting. We avoid saying "will call on you".
- f) When someone accepts a 12<sup>th</sup> Step call, we obtain name, address, telephone number (if available), age (if possible) and any other information helpful to the 12<sup>th</sup> Stepper, eg, time of last drink, who else lives there, any need for discretion, best time to call... big dog!... and print it on the Yellow Card. (We try not to sound like a quiz show!).
- g) We assure the caller that we can help, that a member of the Fellowship will be in touch with them "as soon as possible" (we don't promise "tonight", if necessary explain that we are not professionals) and that the matter may safely be left with us. Only if asked about specific time of contact do we advise them to get back in touch if they have not heard from anyone within 48 hours. Ask them to leave their phone on, since AAs will not leave messages. We leave it at that – further arrangements can only be made by the 12<sup>th</sup> Steppers. We again offer to send literature and **please** check the phone number.
- h) If the S/A refuses direct help we explain the option of going to a meeting.
- i) We advise those who reject personal contact to arrive early and ask for the Secretary or talk to the Teamaker. Also, give them our website.
- j) We offer literature to all first-time contacts whether they accept a 12<sup>th</sup> Step, or decide to go to a meeting, or have turned down these offers of help.
- k) Some who accept a 12<sup>th</sup> Step may wish to get to a meeting quickly. Suggest a venue and note it on the Yellow Card, so that the 12<sup>th</sup> Stepper can meet up with the newcomer there.

- l) Yellow Card 12<sup>th</sup> Step calls mean there is no need to repeat all the information on your Log Page...but **please** write the name of the Suffering Alcoholic and See Card. In the margin, put the name of the intergroup...and stick a Green Spot against it if the caller is a first-time contact. (Green Spots are used for all S/As calling for the first time, even if they decline help). There's Specimen examples of Yellow Cards and logpages on the Noticeboard.
- m) If they accept literature, we make out a form letter, addressing the S/A by their first name. We give three meetings spread over the week in their postal area or nearby. Address the envelope as clearly as possible. *Try to protect their anonymity by including a surname and thus avoiding drawing attention to them.*
- n) If the caller has been to AA before, we normally direct them to a local meeting. If we feel they would not get back on their own, by all means pass them out for a 12<sup>th</sup> Step call.
- o) Similarly, there will be a minority of callers from outside London too distressed to make another call and in these cases we take their details and try to pass them *asap* to the appropriate Telephone Service in the front of your Blue book.
- p) These decisions are left to your discretion, but the Suffering Alcoholic outside our London area has a better chance of getting early help if they can call their own telephone service. If a Prior Contact can get back to a meeting on their own, that helps free our Twelfth Steppers for first-time contacts.
- q) At no stage do we give anyone medical advice about drink, drugs or any other problem. Leave medication to doctors and refer such callers to NHS Direct.

## **2. FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

We assure them that we can help and thank them for calling. We suggest that they try to get the person with the drinking problem to call us, acknowledging that this is often difficult. We explain that we will not contact the sufferer, since they must accept that they have a problem. We might add that calling an alcoholic who has not directly asked AA for help might turn them against ever contacting us.

This usually leads neatly to the caller's own need for support in trying to cope with someone else's drinking. We refer the caller to Al-Anon at (020) 7403 0888, assuring them that the phones are answered on an equally confidential basis by those who have survived someone else's drinking. Alateen is at this number too.

The Al-Anon/Alateen number is often busy during their office hours (10am-4pm) and people call us back in frustration at not being able to get through. Advise them to try after 4pm, when an Ansafone will direct them to individual Al-Anon members.

We do not send literature directly to the alcoholic at the request of another person but we will send it to the caller to pass on. As well as literature for the alcoholic, we can also send the family or friend the AA booklet *Is There An Alcoholic In Your Life?* – use the A5-size envelopes for Family/Friends (F/F) and smaller envelopes for literature to suffering alcoholics.

If the family or friend says the alcoholic won't contact us but will go with them to a meeting, they can be given Open meetings. Again, if loved ones express an interest in seeing AA for themselves even if the alcoholic is not interested, they can only be given Open meetings. These AA meetings should not be offered willy-nilly to those who are in need of Al-Anon.

### **3. PROFESSIONAL - MEDICAL, EDUCATION, PENAL & CARING AGENCIES**

Those seeking help for someone they are not emotionally involved with are treated as Professionals... in other words, they come across alcoholics in their line of work. We try to put them in touch with our local Intergroup officers by taking their details and assuring them that one of our service Liaison Officers will be in touch. We do not send literature, leaving that to the LO.

Print any name and address with phone number in the log and a staff member or Team Leader with the relevant service experience will pick up the details and relay them to Intergroup or Region. If you want to do this yourself, there is a 2-page guideline in your Yellow binder. Service officers for all 17 London intergroups and both Regions are in a red binder on the centre-table and there is also a national directory for the rest of the country.

In the case of professionals seeking literature for an individual alcoholic, we treat them the same as Family/Friends and mention that a member of the Fellowship will make contact **at the direct personal request** of the alcoholic. We will NOT send AA members nor AA literature to an alcoholic at the request of a third party, even if our refusal upsets them. Our experience is that many alcoholics who do not want help from AA will tell others that they do...and if we contact them on someone else's say-so, we may turn them off ever contacting us. They have to tell us themselves.

Neither do we give professionals any AA contact numbers nor Meeting addresses, because these change all the time. Some professionals are given meeting directories by local members, then they ring us in frustration months later when one of their "clients" ends up drunk because they were sent to a meeting that was no longer there.

Local councils, caring agencies and other bodies who want to keep detailed records of what AA does (and does not do) may call, asking to check our number, since the Data Protection Act legally obliges them to do so. Please do not simply confirm the phone number....take their details and refer them to Imogen or Terry, who keep wide-ranging files of those services and the information they need.

Inquiries from the **media** are transferred to John, so are awkward customers – he gets paid to deal with them! Students and others doing projects on AA are referred to GSO. Again, this is covered in detail in the ‘Professionals’ guideline.

#### **4. FROM THE RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC**

We give general information and try to be helpful, although we avoid taking personal calls for individual members. Most AAs readily understand the need to transact business rapidly, although some may need to be directed to a meeting or their sponsor if the lines get busy.

#### **THE INTERNET** [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)

AA’s website is developing all the time. For callers seeking meetings, those who are already online at the above site need to click *Services For Members* and then *National WTF*, then enter the town or London postal area.

If they’re not on the site, a quicker route for them is to log on to [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/meetings](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/meetings) It’s monitored by GSO, so it’s more up-to-date than the national *Where To Find*, but less up-to-date than your Blue Book of local meetings.

Newcomers can be referred to the general site where they will find a multitude of AA literature that will help 12<sup>th</sup> Step them as they wait for the human version or the meeting-time to arrive!

**MEETING CHANGES:** Members often call us with temporary changes to the time, venue, frequency or other details affecting meetings. These should be logged, drawn to the attention of the Team Leader and pinned under the day on the Notice Board; then you stick a Red Spot against the meeting in all of the Volunteers’ books.

**Permanent** changes... group closing down or moving or changing details for the foreseeable...need to be notified to GSO by the group. We can take the details but we cannot inform York on the group’s behalf – they have to do that in writing so that there are no misunderstandings and so that the rest of the Fellowship gets to hear about their group. We can send them a Pink Form if they haven’t got one.

Registrations of new groups are also referred to GSO at 01904 644026 from 9am-5pm Mon-Thu and till 4.30pm on Fridays. Groups themselves have to send the Pink Form to York for GSO Records, or else their details don’t appear anywhere.

It’s the same story with ordering literature, including copies of the *Where To Find*. They need to get a Literature Form at their group and send it off to GSO. Again, we have a supply of forms in the Stationery cupboard, but again it’s their responsibility to fill them in. (You can of course inform folk that they can get a WTF at most meetings.. but check that you are not talking to a first-time caller, who might appreciate the choice of being taken or sent to meetings).

Calls from Recovering Alcoholics have always outnumbered calls from Suffering Alcoholics. A large number of AAs call us on Service business and many others in the Fellowship need legitimate information. But there's no doubt that thousands of calls each year are from those who could get themselves a *Where To Find*. If you can find a friendly way of suggesting they buy one, you'll be helping history! (But no hard line, folks...)

## Outgoing Calls

Apart from urgent personal matters or Telephone Reps chasing team members, outgoing calls are mainly undertaken by Team Leaders in the evening and at weekends when they are passing out Twelfth-Step calls. Please log them as O/C rather than R/A. (It helps us reconcile phone bills).

## Reverse Charge Calls

If a Telephone Operator asks if you will accept the charges (in this country!) say Yes, but obviously keep it brief. The problem is the growing number of mobile-phone callers announcing they are running out of credit and asking to be phoned back. Please take the number and ring back...but only to provide the address of the nearest meeting. If they need more than that, ask them to call back any day between 10am and 10pm.

## Calling the Ansafone callers

Morning volunteers often make O/Cs in following up our Ansafone.

If an Ansafone answers, please say: *"I'm returning the call you made to our services at ----- and we are here till 10pm."*

If someone other than the person recorded on the Ansafone picks up the phone, ask for the caller without identifying yourself and, if pressed, say: *"I'm returning a private call"* and if they persist in trying to identify you, say *"Thank you, I'll call back later"* and hang up. Be civil, they might have every right to be agitated. They will be unable to trace you, since our system automatically blanks out call-identification.

When logging the Ansafone note the number and time of each call. When a Volunteer logs the outgoing call, please include the Ansafone Call Number (eg, Ansa-3, Ansa-7). Team Leaders then cross-ref from the Ansafone list on Page 1 to the outcome on the volunteer's page. All this saves anyone slipping through the net.

## Logging

The rule of thumb is to note the time of the call and start writing on scrap paper. Take maximum information, because the relevant data can be sorted for the log-pages and Yellow Cards. Try to get name, address and phone number. Other useful information is age, marital status, whether any family know of call, time of last drink, general attitude towards recovery. Log it all. Any mention of violence in the home should be recorded. Do we need to be discreet when AA calls back?

State whether S/A, R/A, F/F, PRO, O/C or Other. F/F for family or friend, PRO for Health, Employment, Penal and those who work with alcoholics... O/C for Outgoing Calls... and Other for media, students, enquiries about AA as an organisation, callers chasing OA, NA etc and those who remain silent or are cut off before it's clear what they want.

Please do not throw the scrap paper away – we keep it for four days. It particularly helps the dayshift if weekend teams can ensure that their notes are kept. Log every incoming and outgoing call, PRINTING names and addresses. [Please leave a line-space between every call.](#)

The **Intergroup For 12<sup>th</sup> Step** column on the right of the Log Page is for positive 12<sup>th</sup> Step outcome....green spot and intergroup if the first-time contact is to be passed out... intergroup only if prior contact is to be passed out....and green spot only if it's first-time contact who doesn't want a 12<sup>th</sup> Step call. (It's more complicated to describe than to do!)

**GREEN SPOTS** are only for first-time contacts to AA, whether they want help or not. Green Spots are not used even if it was only a single call ten years ago. They are not used either for family or friends.

It's a good policy on 12<sup>th</sup> Step calls and Literature to *write down whether offers have been refused*, because then everyone knows that the offers have been made; eg... "Refused 12<sup>th</sup> Step call, accepted meetings information but did not want any Literature sent." This helps answer distraught relatives who have been lied to by active alcoholics. One American woman handed over a \$2,000 'AA entry fee' to her vanishing husband... (Please don't try this at home).

## Information

AA directories, Telephone Dialling Codes, A-Zs and additional information on USA, Canada and other foreign meetings can be found on the shelves beneath the wall-maps, along with supplies of literature for the Suffering Alcoholic and F/F.

At the front of your Blue Book are up-to-date lists of Other AA Telephone Services. Use these rather than the National Where To Find, which is chiefly helpful for European English-Speaking AA and meetings in the rest of the UK.

The list of *Nuisance Callers* in your Yellow binder refers to constant callers who have had many offers of help. They know where our meetings are.

Also in the Yellow binders are several help pages, lists of 12-Step organisations and useful agencies. AA co-operates with these and has no affiliation to any of them. We do have a “special relationship” with Al-Anon. With everyone else, we simply pass on the information with courtesy and without comment. We don’t recommend other agencies – it only leads to the complication later of... “But AA **told** me!”

Remember that the ideas and attitudes conveyed to the outside world need to represent the Fellowship as a whole and not the individual concepts of any one of us, no matter how well-meaning. AA will survive so long as our members on the front lines don’t try to counsel callers. Veteran volunteers say that thinking in terms of ‘We’ and not ‘I’ helps on all calls (and in life too!)

Please read the Notice Boards. There you will find a list of all London intergroup meetings and admin officers, to help GSRs, treasurers and others who are involved in AA Service duties. On the main Notice Board are lists of Foreign Language Speakers and meetings that are baby-friendly, gay-friendly, etc.

## **Red Spots**

These indicate that a meeting has changed temporarily – details can be found under the appropriate day on the Notice Board. If we are given any information, we write it out and pin it up, remembering to alert the Team Leader, so that the meeting-books can be adjusted and staff made aware of the need to amend the computer list.

## **Literature**

With the form letter of three meetings to all first-timers who accept literature, we enclose a copy of *Who, Me?* and *A Newcomer Asks*. Family and others emotionally involved with the drinker are sent the same pamphlets and *Is There An Alcoholic In Your Life?* along with a Complimentary Slip, but are not sent a list of AA meetings.

Please remember to write the first name of the addressee on the form letter. Try to ensure names and addresses are full and legible, including postcodes.

## **Medical Problems**

AA has no opinion on outside issues. This saves lives.

Sometimes callers or their family or carers give us details of medical symptoms with which we are tempted to identify – and to share back our experiences of GPs, alcoholic wards and the like. We cannot give medical advice and sometimes our sharing of our own medical experiences can be mistaken for the giving of advice.

*What about DTs, shakes and bad hangovers, drying-out, treatment facilities, medical problems?*

The best suggestion we can make in these circumstances is to give the number of **NHS Direct (0845 4647)**, which gives confidential and practical advice regarding symptoms the person may be experiencing at the time. The nurse advisors do not diagnose by phone, but they do assess current symptoms and offer appropriate advice on what to do next.

## **Treatment Centres and Detox Programmes**

GPs/family doctors will also advise on medical problems and some GPs may offer a detox programme or be able to access local treatment centres for the person.

**NHS Direct (0845 4647)** will advise on how to manage medical problems, give information about medical conditions and the location of treatment centres/agencies, which the person can access.

If a caller names a specific treatment centre, we give the requested information from the A3 laminated sheet on the back-shelves, but we do not recommend any centre.

**Callers who threaten suicide** are offered The Samaritans number (it's on all phones). Return the call to our primary purpose and get off the line asap – our remit as recovering alcoholics only goes as far as helping those who have been given the gift of desperation *to stop drinking*.

**Deaf alcoholics** use a free phone service called **Type Talk** - there is a full explanation of the system in your Yellow book. It's a complex procedure dealing with the Type Talk operator (or even with the professional carers responsible for the deaf alcoholic). With only a handful of such calls per year volunteers might prefer to refer the call to Imogen or other staff member. Please mention our Deaf & Hard of Hearing professionally-'signed' AA group which meets in Victoria on Tuesdays.

**Minors** The Child Protection Act effectively prevents us from Twelfth-Stepping children without the knowledge of another adult. We do receive calls for help from suffering alcoholics under the age of 18 and we try to involve a responsible adult known to them; a big sister, a social worker or anyone they trust. We can then offer them AA contact, either 12<sup>th</sup> Steppers (a male and a female AA) or an OPEN meeting. Be aware that if you are arranging a 12<sup>th</sup> Step call for a minor that either the male or female AA must have undergone a formal police-screening check. We can offer ANYONE an Open meeting of AA.

We get more calls from children and teenagers suffering from *someone else's* drinking. We refer them to Alateen via the Al-Anon number. There are also helpful organisations listed in your Yellow binder, eg, Childline, NSPCC, and the National Association for the Children of Alcoholics.

## **Good Practices**

Beware making promises AA cannot fulfil.

Remember that you will be regarded (and perhaps quoted) as speaking on behalf of AA, so try to think 'We' instead of 'I' on every call and you will best protect our Fellowship through our Traditions.

Media callers are referred to the Office Manager.

We give information on other agencies without opinion.  
We don't give marital, financial or any other advice.

### **Believe the Recovering Alcoholic before the Suffering Alcoholic.**

Most of those complaining they haven't had their promised contact turn out to have been out, out of it, on voicemail or are being untruthful (remember your own last days on the booze?) Meanwhile, our 12<sup>th</sup> Steppers have tried to call them 20 times! So please don't log "No one contacted him". Write instead "Says no contact has been made."

Once a 12<sup>th</sup> Step call has been passed out of this office, it becomes the business of the Intergroup or a neighbouring Phone Service (Mind Your Own Business!)

Try not to be abusive to abusive callers. If we find someone upsetting, we tell them we are getting someone else to help them and pass the call to the Team Leader or another volunteer.

Team Leaders are in charge and responsible for the stability of the team and for the standard of telephone service AA provides.

There are no emergencies. A calm and peaceful atmosphere is required. We need not be sombre, but we are dealing with a serious illness.

### **Fire Safety**

Smoking is not allowed and anyone who has a fly puff in the toilets is endangering the whole Telephone Service – the landlord would be within his rights to evict us if he smelled the fumes in the morning (staff come across this). It is possible to take turns at having a smoke-break outside of the building. Please go outside even if others are sitting on the stairs (survival by example!).

**Team members should familiarise themselves with the Fire Evacuation Procedure, which is filed in your Yellow binder.**

In case of emergency, outside staff hours, the Team Leader assumes the role of Fire Marshall outlined in the evacuation procedure.

## **Calls For Help – Summary**

### **Ask the suffering alcoholic:**

- Is it for yourself?
- Have you called AA before?
- Where are you calling from?
- Then suggest contact — [AA member](#), or [AA meeting if phone contact is declined](#))

### **Try to get:**

- Name
- Phone number
- Address
- When home? — if no phone, advise stay in tonight/tomorrow
- Anybody else in the house?
- Drink today?

**BE PATIENT... BE FIRM... BE QUICK... BE PLEASANT  
DON'T ARGUE... DON'T ADVISE... DON'T PROMISE... DON'T SELL**

Offer literature, [check phone number](#), advise call back if no one gets in touch within 48 hours.

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**Thank you for being here... however long since that last drink, Telephone Service will improve our sobriety!**