

## Talking About Drugs in AA

“I can’t relate to drugs; they’re not part of my story.”  
“Don’t talk about drugs – this is *Alcoholics Anonymous*.”  
“It waters it down.”  
“What about our singleness of purpose?”  
“There are a million meetings for people with *other* problems. Let them go there.”

### Background

Many AA groups choose to read the “Blue Card” at the start of their meetings, which includes the text:

In keeping with our singleness of purpose and our Third Tradition which states that “The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking,” we ask that all who participate confine their discussion to their problems with alcohol.

Because this card was issued by GSO, it has the whiff of authority to it. But GSO is neither a governing body nor an arbiter of the traditions. It simply provides service to AA’s fellowship as a whole.

Obviously, every AA group is free to make its own rules. However, I strenuously object to the notion that Traditions Three or Five suggest, encourage, or justify any kind of restriction on the speech of members.

### “In keeping with our Third Tradition”

The traditions were written and refined with great care to be as clear as possible. Therefore, if a certain interpretation is not immediately apparent – if it must be *wrested* out of a tradition – we can be sure that reading was not intended.

Therefore, if a tradition were meant to censor the speech of members, it would clearly state something like: “No member shall call themselves anything other than an alcoholic, nor shall they talk about any drug other than alcohol.” Instead, the short form of **Tradition Three** reads “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.” The long form of **Tradition Three** states:

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. Group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.

As you can see, Tradition Three says *nothing* about how people identify themselves, or what they talk about, in meetings. Tradition Three is about membership, not speech, and it flings the door open as widely as possible. It clearly states that the membership should include “all who suffer from alcoholism” and shouldn’t depend on “conformity.”

Has your group decided that its responsibility, individually or as a whole, is to judge the validity or quality of other member’s alcoholism? Or to ferret out those who aren’t deemed “real” alcoholics and to discourage them from attendance or participation? *That* would seem a fairly grave break with Tradition Three – for what is membership if not the right of attendance and participation?

If you still feel that people shouldn’t be allowed to share about certain things, read the chapter on Tradition

Three in *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*. It gives a strong warning to groups that would create rules to exclude or confine would-be AA members.

### “In keeping with our singleness of purpose”

The phrase “singleness of purpose” is frequently invoked to suggest that AA members should not discuss drugs, or the vaguely-defined “problems other than alcohol.”

This might be valid if there were a tradition that said “Every AA group’s primary purpose is to *talk about alcohol*.” However, there is no such tradition. The long form of **Tradition Five** states:

Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose – that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

The chapter on Tradition Five in *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions* lists a number of possible diversions from AA’s “singleness of purpose”:

“Now,” concludes the old timer, “suppose I’d been obliged to talk to this man on religious grounds? Suppose my answer had to be that A.A. needed a lot of money; that A.A. went in for education, hospital, and rehabilitation? Suppose I’d suggested that I’d take a hand in his domestic and business affairs? Where would we have wound up? No place, of course.”

*Those* are departures from carrying the message.

(Some people will claim that the clause “...to the alcoholic who still suffers” gives them license to exclude “non-alcoholics” from attendance or participation (i.e., membership). But remember that the only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking – NOT another member’s evaluation or confirmation of that desire.)

Tradition Five does leave room to discuss what, exactly, your group’s message is. At most of the groups I attend, the implicit message is something like this: **“Welcome to our fellowship. AA’s 12 steps are the only path we know to a sober life. You are welcome to our experience, our strength, and our hope.”**

That message is carried in an infinite variety of ways. When a speaker talks about something I don’t relate to, like (for example) obsessive knitting, I can still get fussy. But often, I’ll hear three other alcoholics share in response: “Man, I’m so glad you talked about obsessive knitting!”

AA never promised me 100% identification at all times. Everyone’s experience can help somebody. I try to remember what my sponsor told me long ago: sometimes the message is not for me. And demanding that the message be delivered a certain way – so that I can get what *I* think I need – is alcoholic self-will, plain and simple.

In conclusion: any group can create rules to censor the expression of its members. But it should not hide behind any of AA’s Traditions to do so. To those who would silence or even turn away those seeking recovery, I beg you to remember:

“When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there, and for that: I am responsible.”