Etiquette in Groups

No doubt about it, early recovery can be a stressful time. The same goes for the early days when we’re freeing ourselves from an abusive relationship or healing from past trauma. Our relationships with others — whether in support groups, a rehab program, a shelter, or any close living quarters — can be either a source of support or a source of additional stress. We can make things easier on both ourselves and others if we observe a few basic courtesies:

• Focus on our own issues. We avoid taking the “inventory” of others in the group or telling them what to do.

• Remember why we’re here. In-house group sessions and community support group meetings are not a place to vent about a personal conflict with another individual in the group. We need to focus on our own recovery and safety — “principles before personalities.”

• Respect other people’s experiences. When someone is sharing, we focus on what we can identify with or agree with, rather than focusing on our differences. “Identify, don’t compare.”

• Respect other people’s ideas and beliefs. We have a right to our own religious beliefs, political views and philosophies. We do not have a right to force these beliefs and ideas on others, nor do others have a right to force their views on us.

• Avoid letting another person’s behavior affect our progress. If someone else wants to have a Bad Attitude Day, we can resolve to let their attitudes be “their stuff” and understand that they may be experiencing a great deal of stress.

• Welcome newcomers. We can remember how we felt when we attended our first meeting or group session, or first came into a new program.

• Help other people feel like they “belong,” rather than finding reasons to exclude them. We may remember how we felt about those snotty junior high school cliques that seemed to exclude us. We avoid inflicting this kind of pain on others.

• No 13th Stepping! (For people in 12 Step groups, 13th Stepping is the practice of using meetings to initiate romantic relationships with someone else in the group.) Meetings and group sessions are not a dating service, and “hitting on” people is not fair to those who are attending groups to work on their issues. This applies whether we are a woman or a man, gay or straight. (Note: if you are the target of a 13th Stepper, keep in mind that healthy 12 Step groups consider this behavior unethical. Feel free to speak up about it. You do not have to put up with it.)

• Avoid gossip. Avoid gossip. Avoid gossip.

• Be considerate of the needs and feelings of others in the group. The Golden Rule applies here. If we treat others the way we want to be treated, we can go a long way toward avoiding needless conflict.