

# STEPWISE RECOVERY

## Difficult Conversations Guide

A Resource for Sponsors and Recovery Mentors

*Sponsorship is not counselling or therapy. It is one person sharing their experience with another. This guide offers frameworks for navigating challenging conversations with compassion, honesty, and appropriate boundaries.*

*This resource is produced by Stepwise Recovery and is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or representative of Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, or any Twelve Step fellowship. The Twelve Steps are paraphrased. All trademarks belong to their respective owners.*

### Guiding Principles

- You are sharing your experience, not giving professional advice
- Your sponsee's recovery is their responsibility, not yours
- Honesty delivered with compassion is more helpful than comfortable silence
- You cannot want recovery more than the person you are sponsoring
- Know when to refer — some situations require professional help
- Look after your own recovery first; you cannot pour from an empty cup

### Scenario 1: Suspecting a Relapse

Your sponsee's behaviour has changed. They are missing meetings, avoiding your calls, or their stories are not adding up. You suspect they may be using again.

#### Approach

Address it directly but without accusation. Create a safe space for honesty. Remember that shame drives secrecy, and your sponsee may be terrified of your reaction.

Try Saying	Try to Avoid
"I've noticed some changes and I'm concerned. Can we talk honestly about how things are going?"	"Are you using again?" (confrontational, may trigger denial)
"Whatever is happening, I'm not here to judge you. I've been through my own struggles."	"After everything you've worked for..." (shaming)

"If you have used, that doesn't mean recovery is over. It means we need to look at what's happening."	"You need to get to a meeting right now" (demanding, removes autonomy)
---	--

*If they disclose a relapse, help them make a plan: contact their GP or treatment provider, increase meeting attendance, and consider whether their current recovery programme needs adjusting.*

## Scenario 2: Resistance to Step Work

Your sponsee has stalled. They are attending meetings but avoiding the work — not writing their inventory, not calling, not following suggestions. They may be stuck in fear.

### Approach

Explore the resistance with curiosity rather than frustration. Fear and avoidance are often signs that the sponsee is close to something important.

Try Saying	Try to Avoid
"What feels difficult about this Step right now?"	"You need to do this or I can't sponsor you" (ultimatum)
"When I was at this stage, I was terrified too. That's normal."	"Everyone else manages to do this" (comparison)
"Would it help if we broke this into smaller pieces?"	"You're not really trying" (judgement)

## Scenario 3: Concerning Mental Health

Your sponsee discloses symptoms that sound like depression, anxiety, trauma, or another mental health condition. They may be self-medicating with behaviour or struggling to function.

### Approach

Listen, validate, and refer. You are not a therapist, and attempting to treat mental health conditions is beyond the scope of sponsorship.

Try Saying	Try to Avoid
"Thank you for telling me. That sounds really difficult."	"Just work the Steps and you'll feel better" (dismissive of clinical needs)
"Have you spoken to your GP or a counsellor about this?"	"Medication is just another drug" (dangerous and incorrect)
"Recovery and mental health support can work together — they're not either/or."	"I'm sure it's not that bad" (minimising)

**If your sponsee expresses thoughts of self-harm or suicide, this is a crisis.** Encourage them to contact Samaritans (116 123) or attend A&E immediately. Stay with them if possible. This is not a sponsorship issue — it is a safety issue.

## Scenario 4: Unhealthy Relationships

Your sponsee is in a relationship that seems damaging — perhaps controlling, codependent, or with someone who is actively using. They are asking for your advice.

### Approach

Share your experience, ask questions that help them think clearly, but respect their autonomy. You cannot make their decisions for them.

Try Saying	Try to Avoid
"How does this relationship affect your recovery?"	"You need to leave them" (directive, removes agency)
"What do you think a healthy version of this would look like?"	"They're bad for you" (judgemental of someone you may not know)
"In my experience, early recovery and new relationships can be tricky. Here's what I found..."	"No relationships in the first year — those are the rules" (rigid)

## Scenario 5: Ending a Sponsorship

Sometimes a sponsorship relationship needs to end — because of a mismatch, because the sponsee is not engaging, or because your own circumstances have changed.

### Approach

Be honest, compassionate, and practical. Offer to help them find another sponsor. Frame it as a positive step, not a rejection.

Try Saying	Try to Avoid
"I've been thinking about our work together, and I think you might benefit from a different perspective."	Ghosting or becoming unavailable (avoidant, harmful)
"My own situation has changed, and I want to make sure you have the support you deserve."	"I give up on you" (abandonment language)
"This isn't about anything you've done wrong — it's about finding the best fit for your recovery."	"You're not ready for recovery" (judgemental and potentially devastating)

## Looking After Yourself

Sponsoring others is a privilege, but it can also be emotionally demanding. Make sure you:

- Maintain your own recovery practices
- Speak to your own sponsor about challenges
- Set clear boundaries around availability
- Recognise when a situation is beyond your experience
- Take time to recharge — you cannot help anyone if you are depleted

*The most important thing you can offer your sponsee is your own recovery. By staying well, showing up honestly, and being willing to have the hard conversations, you are carrying the message in the most powerful way possible.*

## UK Crisis Support

**Samaritans:** 116 123 (24/7, free from any phone)  
**FRANK Drug Helpline:** 0300 123 6600  
**Narcotics Anonymous UK:** 0300 999 1212  
**SHOUT Crisis Text Line:** Text SHOUT to 85258