

Tool: Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity is a foundational Tradition, principle, and tool in the COSA program. With anonymity, we humbly leave our ego behind and join others on an equal footing in seeking recovery. Being anonymous allows us to be spiritual beings in COSA rather than individuals with a specific worldly identity. Closely associated with anonymity is the act of keeping confidential who we see in our COSA fellowship. We also protect the privacy of every member by keeping confidential the information that is shared with us. Confidentiality means that we do not share what we have heard with anyone, including our partners, friends, or other COSA members.

Anonymity is an essential component of all COSA activities, and its importance is highlighted in our Traditions. In Tradition Twelve, anonymity is deemed “the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions,” reminding us to “place principles before personalities.” It is imperative that each group and every individual member “guard with special care the anonymity of all Program members,” as stated in Tradition Eleven. Feeling assured that our anonymity and personal information are held in confidence, COSA members feel safe sharing in meetings and with a sponsor, which are necessary components of our recovery.

One of the main reasons people are attracted to COSA is the fact that we can participate anonymously. Newcomers take a significant step toward healing and recovery by attending their first meeting. Meeting scripts include a short explanation regarding anonymity, which provides encouragement and comfort. Newcomers are assured that their anonymity is safeguarded, and that maintaining the confidentiality of all information shared with the group is essential to our program. There is unity in our shared anonymity.

We may have difficulty trusting others because of betrayals in our past. However, as we repeatedly observe COSA members’ collective respect for anonymity and confidentiality, we come to learn that we can trust the members of the COSA program. We can help newcomers grasp the sanctity of this tool by modeling restraint and redirection in conversations, and by not sharing information about others. This commitment fosters trust and creates a safe place for all of us to share our experience, strength, and hope.

Our program focuses on our inner beings, not our personalities. COSA members come from many walks of life, and are diverse in creeds, colors, nationalities, and backgrounds. We welcome all of these traits into the meeting room because they inform our life experiences, but we also leave at the door any preconceived notions about these parts of ourselves or others. We are here to share, to learn the COSA Steps, Traditions, and Concepts, and ultimately to receive the healing gifts of the Promises. We are reminded at each meeting that we are in a safe space, protected by anonymity, and governed by principles that focus on our spirituality, not our personalities. We recognize that all of us have come to this healing circle because we have been affected by compulsive sexual behavior, regardless of the differences in our outside identities and lives.

We maintain a safe space by using first names only. In COSA we are freed of outside "labels," such as those that relate to our careers, status, and finances. We release our desire to be acknowledged by a particular title or role. We cultivate equality, nurturing patience, compassion, and tolerance for all. We focus on respecting each individual's journey, and we rise above the details. By using the tool of Anonymity, we rest assured that our participation will not adversely affect other areas of our lives or those of our partners or families.

Maintaining these boundaries strengthens the group and our response to others. We become less likely to compare, judge, or feel self-righteous, and less likely to feel judged or insecure. We learn to listen to others with love and compassion, without trying to "fix things" or get involved in the details of their personal lives. Being part of a fellowship of equals, we learn that outside labels don't matter because we are all spiritual beings; we all have value; we all come together as equals to share our stories. The power of sharing gives us the reassurance that we are not alone.

Anonymity and confidentiality also extend to other forms of communication and public relations with outside entities. Tradition Eleven is clear that no COSA member may act as a spokesperson on behalf of all of COSA with the press, radio, films, television, and other public media of communication. Because COSA is an anonymous fellowship, no member is authorized to represent the fellowship publicly. COSA as a whole instead puts its collective trust in a Higher Power.

Confidentiality is also crucial between a sponsor and sponsee. There will be times when we need to determine what is private and what is not. Since it can be challenging to navigate anonymity when people are in a web of relationships, sponsors and sponsees communicate about what is appropriate to share when it involves identifying another person. When in doubt, we can decide to keep information to ourselves until a clearer answer emerges. We may eventually come to a solution through studying the Steps, Traditions, or Concepts.

Being accountable for maintaining the anonymity of others strengthens our own personal integrity. We resolutely guard the confidentiality of our COSA fellows. We remain actively aware of the environment surrounding conversations we hold outside of our meeting rooms; our choice of locations for phone calls and video meetings; and how we behave when we happen to come across another COSA member in a public place. We are mindful of the consequences of broken confidentiality and the harm it may cause. We confer with our COSA friends and discuss how best to preserve our mutual anonymity in situations outside of COSA.

While it can be safer to share our stories with people in recovery than with others, we are still human beings who make mistakes or do things without grasping their full impact. We realize that there is no such thing as perfect safety when depending on the behavior of others. If someone inadvertently violates the confidentiality that we expect, we know that safety also comes from our reliance on a Higher Power and our faith that we will be okay no matter what. Bringing such issues to a group conscience at meetings can remind us all of the guiding principle of anonymity and the underlying necessity of confidentiality.

As we strengthen our practice of anonymity in COSA, we may begin to see that we have violated the confidentiality of others in our outside personal or business relationships. Perhaps we have gossiped or shared others' private information, harming both their and our own reputations through these actions. We may be able to make amends, repair our integrity, and earn trust back from those with whom we have broken it. We also seek guidance from our Higher Power about how best to respect another person's feelings, and how to avoid causing additional harm if we approach them about our transgression. It builds character when we practice the principle of anonymity in all areas of our lives. As we do this, our relationships become more trustworthy and intimate.

In COSA, we cultivate a deep understanding of anonymity and confidentiality, and we cherish these values. Practicing anonymity and confidentiality strengthens our recovery, bringing authenticity and integrity to our relationships with others, both in COSA and in the rest of our lives. We are humbled and our appreciation for humanity broadens when we recognize that we are truly all equals. This is made more evident to us as we use the COSA tool of Anonymity.