

Gender-Neutral and Inclusive Language FAQ

Why are we discussing this now?

For some members, the gendered language in some of our literature has been at issue for a long time. Several regions brought a motion that was in the 2020 *CAR* – but because that conference was entirely virtual, and focused on the emergencies at hand, the delegates made decisions on a limited agenda, and this motion (and some others) were not addressed in 2020. It seemed like an issue that deserved more conversation than we could have under the circumstances.

The 2023 World Service Conference approved a motion “To direct the World Board to create a project plan for consideration at the next WSC to investigate changes and/or additional wording to NA literature from gender specific language to gender neutral and inclusive language.”

Here is some background from the World Board’s response to the motion in the 2023 *CAR*:

“The subject of gender specificity/neutrality in NA literature has gained increasing attention and energy in the intervening years since this motion first appeared in the 2020 *CAR*. As the intent explains, ‘This motion will give the conference and the Fellowship the ability to meaningfully discuss changes to our literature to be more inclusive of all our members.’ We support the idea of having a discussion and believe it is the Fellowship’s collective responsibility to look at how our message is perceived. The motion is not asking for a decision about changes to literature; it’s about whether we’re willing to have the conversation, to ‘investigate.’ This idea is included in the *CAR* survey (p. 39).

We have had related discussions in the past, but not since the early 1990s, and much has changed since then. The discussions in the ‘90s were primarily focused on whether to use the word *God* in NA literature, while this motion seeks to open a discussion specifically about gender neutrality. The [trustee bulletin on gender-specific language](#) was written in 1992, when there were fewer than 20,000 NA meetings worldwide and the Basic Text was published in four languages. Now there are more than 76,000 meetings and we publish the Basic Text in 36 languages. Our membership has grown and diversified over the years.

A word about translations: NA’s literature is developed in English, and English-language texts act as the prototype for any translation efforts. Different languages handle gender differently, and local translation committees are familiar with what they need to do to be consistent with the English texts. For these reasons, we anticipate the discussion would focus on English-language literature.”

What did the conference say?

Two other related things happened at the 2023 WSC: the conference voted to change the language in the Vision Statement from “in his or her own language and culture” to “in their own

language and culture.” This was a simple change in part because the Vision Statement is not recovery literature, and is not subject to the same arduous decision-making processes.

The question of making changes in Fellowship-approved literature is more complicated, and in some ways more important. The WSC voted to put the question of changing our literature to accommodate gender-neutral language to the Fellowship through the Issue Discussion Topic process, to give us all the opportunity to consider how we want to address this complicated question.

One of the Issue Discussion Topics (IDT) for the 2023–2026 conference cycle is “Gender-neutral and inclusive language in NA literature.” We have posted the IDT materials on our website. Here is a direct link www.na.org/idt. You are welcome to share these materials with members of your NA community in support of local workshops on the topic.

What language would change?

This conversation is not about changing the stories or references to specific individuals or personal experience. There are many other uses of “his” or “his or her” woven throughout our literature. This phrasing is present in our oldest literature, but not in newer pieces.

There are also places where gendered pronouns refer to a power greater than ourselves. The conversations around the 2020 and 2023 motions seem to focus on how we refer to people, but there have been discussions in our history about the ways we refer to a higher power.

The Fellowship may decide to address one of these issues and not the other; or to update some of the language sooner and some later; or to offer entirely new, creative solutions. We are starting a conversation together, and we don’t know where it will lead. This FAQ will try to answer some of the questions about the process – but specific questions about language or phrases are part of what we will be discussing as a Fellowship. In this conference cycle we are asking all of our members to participate in a process of conversation, listening, and creative action.

How long would it take to make changes in our literature?

In this case, a project plan will be decided on at WSC 2026. That project may result in recommendations in the form of motions for WSC 2029. We invite all members to participate in the process to ensure that our decisions are the best and wisest we can make as a Fellowship.

It is important to remember that we are a worldwide Fellowship, and we make decisions together. Nothing that changes our literature will happen without the opportunity for all of our members to participate in the decision.

The process for making changes to our literature is slow on purpose. Our history has shown us that we benefit more from taking a judicious approach to change than rushing in and having to change things again later. It can be frustrating to those of us who believe a change is important, but it is also important that everyone in our worldwide Fellowship has the opportunity to participate in these decisions.

What if my home group makes a motion to change the language?

A motion has already been made and passed “To direct the World Board to create a project plan for consideration at the next WSC to investigate changes and/or additional wording to NA literature from gender specific language to gender neutral and inclusive language.” More motions won’t speed up the process, and there are probably more effective ways to make the voice of your group heard. Please participate in the Issue Discussion Topics, fill out the online survey (www.na.org/survey), and make clear whether the input is coming from an individual, a group, service body or workshop.

Your input, together with all the Fellowship input to the survey, will help to shape the objectives and the process for the project that emerges from this discussion. That project plan will be decided on at WSC 2026 with possible recommendations in the form of motions for WSC 2029.

What about possible changes to the Steps and Traditions? How would that work?

Changing the Steps and Traditions requires a group tally process that is described on page 45 of [A Guide to World Services in NA](#). Three-quarters of the groups around the world who register to be part of the tally must respond, and three-quarters of those who respond must vote yes in order for any motion to be included in the *CAR*.

Why is it so difficult and why does it take so long?

NA literature expresses the collective conscience of members and groups around the world in more than 140 countries speaking almost 100 languages. It takes a long time to gather a conscience in a Fellowship as large and diverse as we are. Even when issues feel immediate and urgent, we don’t make quick decisions about NA recovery literature.

What can I do in the meantime?

Please keep coming back and participate in the process!

Change takes time in NA, and sometimes the changes we desperately want don’t happen, or take longer than we think they should. That doesn’t mean we should give up on the program. No matter who we are and what we believe, NA has enough cultural diversity that each of us can find a home here, somewhere we feel safe, valued, and heard. Technology has opened doors to connect, go to meetings, and find NA peers around the corner or around the world. And we know that it’s precisely the fact that we don’t all think the same way that makes NA as rich and inclusive as it is. We can honor the conscience of the Fellowship and our own integrity at the same time. Sharing honestly about our identification with the program – and our differences – can open the door for other members who might struggle with some dissonance. We can love each other, and Narcotics Anonymous, even when change comes more slowly than we think it should.

Can my group change the readings to be gender neutral?

The Group Booklet offers this guidance:

"What kinds of literature should we use?"

NA World Services produces a number of different kinds of publications. However, only NA-approved literature is appropriate for reading in Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Selections from NA-approved books and pamphlets are usually read at the beginning of an NA meeting, and some meetings use them as the core of their format. NA-approved literature represents the widest range of recovery in Narcotics Anonymous."

NA-approved recovery literature is approved by the collective conscience of the NA groups as expressed at the World Service Conference (WSC). That conscience is an expression of the highest authority in Narcotics Anonymous, and our Second Tradition teaches us to defer to that conscience even when it's uncomfortable.

We don't change the words in NA literature individually, because that would affect NA as a whole – but creative action in a group can allow us to carry the NA message in a way that will be most in alignment with the conscience of that group.

The NA Fellowship has not provided NA groups the ability to unilaterally change NA recovery literature. But it is very much within the scope of group autonomy to choose which literature is read in a meeting: the reading cards are a convenience, not a requirement. Many groups choose readings from elsewhere in the Basic Text or other NA literature that does not use gendered language.

But what if we have members who feel really alienated by some of the gendered terms?

Some groups choose alternative sections of NA literature to read rather than the readings that are on the reading cards. This can be a gender-neutral way to have readings that explain NA to newcomers. Groups are also welcome to add statements to their format that make it clear everyone is welcome regardless of...

Most importantly—the atmosphere of recovery in a meeting is more than just the readings. In every group, members can create an atmosphere of inclusion, love, and harmony for all. Within the bounds of our Traditions, there is room for a great deal of creative action. When we practice our principles in a spirit of love and unity, when we put our primary purpose first and value each other's contributions – including our fears, doubts, and reservations—we can recover together and support each other even when we don't agree. In two different places, our Basic Text reminds us that “we come to an understanding of the program for ourselves.” We can make room for each of us to come to our own understanding even when our shared language is challenging. For many of us, honoring that difference may be our first experience of coming to our own understanding.

Why can't I as an individual member just say “God as we understood God” when I do the readings?

When we share our experience, strength, and hope, we do that from our own point of view. NA encourages us to speak our own truth as honestly and clearly as we can. But when we read the literature the NA Fellowship has written and approved together, it is important that we allow it to speak in its own voice, as well. That expression of unity keeps our message the same from group to group, meeting to meeting—wherever we are in the world. After all, if every reader

changed the readings “just a little,” we might soon find it difficult to recognize our message at all. We honor the collective conscience of NA when we read our literature as it is currently written, and participate together to ensure that it reflects our shared experience over time.

In the past, some of the changes that have happened in our literature were the result of many of us hearing the difference between what we read and what our experience had become. Reading the literature “as written” is how we ensure the clarity of our message – and also how we come to know as a Fellowship that it’s time for something to change. Reading as written and continuing to participate in this conversation, even when it’s long, is part of how we practice “trusting the process.”

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