

Gender-Neutral and Inclusive Language

The topic of gender-inclusive language stems from the fact that some significant populations of still-suffering addicts tell us they do not feel fully accepted or included in Narcotics Anonymous meetings. The question of how to make meetings more welcoming is not a new one. This passage from the 2008 CAR could have been written just as easily today:

“One of the many beautiful aspects of NA is that our program works for any addict, regardless of . . . age, ethnicity, economic status, belief system, and so on. We are the ‘big tent’ fellowship. Our challenge is to communicate that to others. How can we better demonstrate to all of the people in our communities that we are an open and diverse fellowship? And what can we do to help all addicts feel equally comfortable in our rooms?”

The specific issue of gender-neutral language has most recently been on the Fellowship’s radar for two conference cycles. A motion addressing this topic appeared in the 2020 CAR but was not taken up at WSC 2020 due to limitations imposed by the pandemic. In 2023, the WSC passed Motion 14: “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.”

Since then, conference participants have been working together to identify goals and solutions for inclusion in the NAWS Strategic Plan. Objective 7 of the plan is to “Raise the level of consciousness regarding inclusiveness in our diverse Fellowship, and develop tools to support groups in ensuring that all members and potential members feel safe, welcomed, and included at in-person and virtual meetings.” One of the corresponding suggested solutions is “Investigate changes and/or additional wording to NA literature from gender-specific language to gender-neutral and inclusive language.”

Gender-neutral language in NA literature was also selected as an Issue Discussion Topic by the

2023 WSC, and we have had a survey posted throughout the cycle. Over 5,500 NA members took the opportunity to share their perspectives, and it is clear that many have strong feelings about this issue. Of the total respondents, 50% said they believed that changing the wording of NA literature to be gender inclusive would have a positive effect. About 45% did not support changing the literature. It seems apparent that we need more conversation as a Fellowship to build consensus on this issue, a conversation that will continue at WSC 2026. It’s worth noting that we received a lot of input from Russia, where current laws and political pressures have made issues related to gender and identity particularly fraught. In some respects, the responses from Russia may be related to or influenced by a different set of issues than the type of changes we are dealing with related to NA literature. When we set aside Russian responses, the balance shifts to 62% in support of gender-neutral changes to NA literature and 32% against. In a Fellowship as diverse and international as NA, making collective decisions can be challenging. We hope that clarifying the exact nature of the changes being considered and continuing the conversation about the issues will help us build consensus as a Fellowship. The 2026 *Conference Report* will include a compilation of the survey data on this Issue Discussion Topic.

When we talk about gender-neutral language, we are really discussing three separate things: the words we use to describe our members and potential members, the words we use to describe God, and the words of our Steps and Traditions. These three things should not be treated as a single question but addressed individually, as they impact NA’s literature differently and, in the case of the Steps and Traditions, require a different revision process. For WSC 2026 as a starting point, we intend to focus just on the language used to describe our members and potential members. The World Board will offer a project plan on this topic, as directed by Motion 14. This project plan will appear in the Conference

Approval Track (CAT) material to be published in February. While the 2025 Interim WSC determined that initiatives for new or revised recovery literature, service material, or IDTs were to be submitted via the CAR Survey rather than through motions, the project plan called for in Motion 14 does not fit into one of those categories. The motion asks for a project to investigate changes, not to do any immediate revisions; therefore, we are choosing to address it with its own project plan.

What We Mean by Gender-Neutral Language as It Relates to Our Members and Potential Members

Some of the input not in support of making NA literature gender-neutral seemed to reflect some misunderstanding of what gender-neutral language actually means for our literature. A clear example can be seen in the first paragraph of IP #7, *Am I An Addict?*: “Very simply, an addict is a person whose life is controlled by drugs.” This differs from the wording in “Who Is An Addict?” in the Little White Book, commonly read at meetings, which reads, “Very simply, an addict is *a man or woman* whose life is controlled by drugs.”

The difference between “a man or woman” and “a person” may seem insignificant, and for

many of us, it is exactly that: difference without distinction. Yet for some addicts, it makes all the difference. Gender-neutral language smooths the path for identification in ways most members may not even notice. In fact, many are unaware that new NA literature has been written to be more gender neutral since 2012, with the publication of *Living Clean*.

At the 2023 WSC, the conference made the decision to revise A Vision for NA Service, changing the phrase “his or her own language and culture” to read “their own language and culture.” The motion (Motion #5) was met with consensus approval. The vision statement gets to the heart of what this discussion is all about: *Every* addict in the world has the chance to experience our message.

Revising Our Text, Expanding Our Tent

For some members, the idea of altering our Basic Text raises concerns that NA might lose some of its time-honored strength. They worry about setting a precedent of revising literature any time someone dislikes how it is phrased. The prevailing view of those who gave input that they opposed changing the language was essentially “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

However, while the language of NA may not be “broken,” the simple truth is that it isn’t working for everyone. At NAWs, we hear more and more from members who feel excluded by the gendered language in our literature—especially the group readings, which are many addicts’ first exposure to what NA is all about. What’s more, a survey of members cannot capture the voice of the most vital population: suffering addicts who went to their first NA meeting, felt they didn’t belong, and never came back. The [2024 Membership Survey](#) indicates that members perceive their first NA meeting as very important. When asked what influenced them to stay in NA, 83% of *Membership Survey* respondents reported identification as a key component. We cannot discount those potential members who are missing from the conversation.

Looking at our history, we find that the Basic Text has been revised before for this exact reason: to

Did you know that any Fellowship-approved literature can be read at an NA meeting?

Instead of the conventional reading cards, some groups have shared other (*unaltered*) excerpts from NA texts that happen to be gender neutral. We have collected these ideas for other groups that wish to make their group readings more inclusive. Find them here na.org/gender or email yours to wb@na.org.

expand the circle of addicts who feel welcome as members. The original chapter “How It Works” stated that “the only way to keep from getting or continuing a habit is not to take that first fix, pill, or drink.” As our Fellowship evolved and grew, some addicts spoke up. They didn’t relate to “that first fix, pill, or drink” because their using took some other form. It was clear that more inclusive language was needed to welcome more addicts into our Fellowship. The 1986 World Service Conference passed a motion to revise the Basic Text language to read, “The only way to keep from returning to active addiction is not to take that first drug.”

With this simple change, the sentence carries as much weight as it ever did. Nothing was lost, while for those who could not identify with the specific words “fix, pill, or drink,” a sense of acceptance and belonging was gained. A majority of survey respondents seem to believe that changing “a society of men and

women” to “a society of people” and so forth could have the same effect.

Regardless Of

As we mature in our recovery, we learn to focus on our similarities, not our differences. But newcomers can have a tendency to home in on the differences, often viewing themselves as “terminally unique.” It is the spiritual principle of unity that guides us as we discuss the implications of altering our older literature to be more inclusive. Inclusive language doesn’t divide; rather, the opposite: We are a society of people. Our primary purpose is to carry the message to the addict who still suffers. Regardless of our personal beliefs, we all wish to make addicts everywhere feel welcome. Our common welfare should come first. The question of exactly what that looks like in action has sparked impassioned and thought-provoking discussions in workshops around the world.

Discussion Question

At WSC 2026, conference participants will spend time discussing this issue. To help inform the discussion, please spend some time at your CAR workshop discussing this question, and provide us with your feedback by 1 April 2026 at na.org/surveys.

For the purposes of these questions, we intend to focus on gender-neutral language in NA literature as described in the CAR essay—changes in the language that describes people (members and potential members), not language that describes a Higher Power. These changes in wording—from “men and women” to “people,” for instance—don’t change the meaning of the message in our literature; they allow more people to identify with it. Issues of the wording of our Steps and Traditions are for a future discussion.

Given that we all want to provide a safe, welcoming, inclusive Fellowship where everyone can recover (regardless of . . .), are we willing to explore these types of changes in our literature in order to carry the message more effectively? If not, why not?