Openhearted, Not Unguarded

A Resilience Playbook for Recovery Communities

If someone shared this playbook with you: It is for all of us. People share guidance for many reasons: to offer support, invite reflection, or pass along something useful. Take what helps, and ask what they had in mind if you want to.

Recovery depends on connection, trust, and vulnerability. Everyone deserves to feel welcome, respected, and safe participating in our fellowship.

Not everyone will treat others with the care they deserve. Harm can take many forms, from discrimination and unwanted attention to manipulation, harassment, and exploitation.

The Idea: Connection is Protection

To build a resilient web of support, we don't need certainty about everyone we connect with. When our connections extend across people and circles, difficulty in one relationship doesn't threaten our entire social universe. That wider base of support is a personal village. Our people can offer perspective, notice what we might miss, and help us find our footing while we question, work through difficulties, or step away.

Safety isn't only about responding when something goes wrong. Day to day, it's about building the connections, judgment, and resilience that help us navigate relationships. **Resilience isn't about making ourselves invulnerable. It's developing the relationships and capacities that make vulnerability sustainable.**

Four Principles for Resilient Relating in Recovery

A. Build connections. Develop support across more than one person or circle, so you have room to question relationships, work through difficulties, or step back without putting your whole support system at stake.

B. Practice discernment. Notice what is shaping your choices and how you are shaping someone else's. Examine feelings, needs, assumptions, and the influence you have on one another.

C. Respect autonomy. Your needs and boundaries matter, as do other people's. Express your choices, respect others' choices, and exercise your influence with care.

D. Seek support. Draw on others for perspective, help, and connection. Make room for repair when appropriate, and for protection when needed.

These are practices to return to, not steps you have to complete in order. They are for navigating fellowship and personal relationships, not formulas for categorizing others.

Find the practice that fits here. You may need more openness in one relationship and firmer limits in another. Notice what needs attention, try a manageable change, and let experience inform the next choice. Balance is not giving every consideration equal weight or taking the same approach everywhere.

A. Build a Broad Support Network

Build a resilient web, not a collection of perfect people. When most of our support comes from one or two people, or a single circle, questioning a relationship can feel like risking our whole social world. We may feel pressure to convince ourselves everything is fine because the alternative seems too costly.

Connections across people and circles give us other sources of support, people who can notice what we might miss, and somewhere to turn when a relationship becomes difficult. We don't need certainty about everyone or a social world free of awkwardness, disappointment, and imperfection. Making room for imperfect people doesn't require tolerating harmful behavior.

Start small and keep showing up. Say hello, listen, take part, ask questions, and follow up or check in later. Be imperfect. Let trust grow over time. Close friends and casual connections both matter. If you already know people, help others find a way in. Conversation, shared activities, small service tasks, and quiet company can all be ways to participate. An invitation should remain an invitation, not an expectation.

Choose one small action and a moment for it, such as checking in with a fellow member after a meeting. A reminder or a simple plan can help turn an intention into something you actually try.

You don't have to earn your place. Fellowship isn't a reward for being interesting, outgoing, helpful, or further along in recovery. You have worth simply because you're a person. You don't need to prove yourself, have something impressive to share, or be doing well to deserve welcome and connection.

Let yourself be welcomed. If you find yourself wondering, *Why would anyone want to talk to me?*, remember that you don't know the answer for them. But here's one answer: **we all came to fellowship in need, and someone met us there.** We remember what it felt like to be new, uncertain, and grateful that someone wanted to talk with us. And someday, you may be the one greeting a newcomer who can't imagine why *you* would want to talk with *them*, for goodness sake!

And if you aren't met right away, **keep sharing, keep seeking.** You'll be met. Time takes time.

Let relationships grow through experience. Make time for ordinary conversation and shared enjoyment, not only discussions of problems. Let relationships grow at their own pace. Relationships don't follow a fixed formula or schedule. Our capacity for connection can vary, as can how often we reach out or how quickly we respond. Pay attention to reliability, mutual respect, and how people respond when needs, capacities, or preferences vary. Notice which ways of taking part leave room for both you and others. Adjust the pace, depth, or kind of contact as you learn.

Be discerning about who you enroll into your inner life.

Share in a general way. You don't have to share everything with anyone, and neither does anyone else. You can describe an interaction in broad terms, how it affected you, and what you're trying to understand without naming people or revealing the surrounding details of your life. That includes particulars about your habits, hobbies, work, home, and relationships. Keep what happened distinct from what you think it means. **Share what matters to understanding the experience, without sharing every circumstance around it.** You can choose when to say more and to whom, particularly when specifics matter to the support you need.

A. Build a Broad Support Network (continued)

Listen, give, and receive. Be curious about the person, not just their problems. Listen to understand, and ask rather than assume what would help. You can ask for what you need, and others can be honest about what they can offer. Offer what you genuinely can, and let others contribute to your life, too. If you tend to help but rarely ask, try one small request. If you tend to seek support without making room for others, practice listening or offering what you can.

Reciprocity doesn't require keeping score or giving equally at every moment. **You don't have to earn care by being useful.** Keep the commitments you freely make, or communicate when they need to change. **Accepting support doesn't create a debt of personal access; offering support doesn't entitle anyone to that access.**

Cultivate both breadth and depth. Close relationships can offer deep trust and understanding, while casual connections and different circles offer perspective, shared experiences, and other places to belong. Both have value. **People aren't interchangeable, and resilience doesn't dictate how we'll feel when relationships change, pause, or end.** Other connections give us somewhere to turn while we navigate uncertainty, changes, or difficulties in a particular relationship. Belonging needn't depend entirely on one relationship.

Remain open without requiring a particular outcome. Relationships can change, end, or develop differently than we hoped without having been failures. We can care, make choices, and continue our lives without needing to control what happens next.

Relationships don't have to be free of misunderstandings or disappointment to remain worthwhile.

Make room for repair, not just harmony. When contact is safe and welcome, a small misunderstanding may call for a small repair: "I interrupted you. I'm sorry. Please finish," or "I think we've misunderstood each other. Can we try again?" You can pause a difficult conversation and, when both people want to continue, agree on how to return to it. When you're open to repair, you can acknowledge an effort to reconnect without pretending everything is resolved.

When all involved are willing to address a hurt or breach of trust, listen to how the others experienced it, acknowledge your actions and their impact, and discuss what would help put things right. Own your part without taking responsibility for what someone else did. Repair may involve clearing up a misunderstanding, respecting a limit, changing an agreement, or handling a similar situation differently. Follow through on what you've agreed, and notice whether it addresses what went wrong. A return to warmth doesn't, by itself, mean the problem has been addressed.

Repair doesn't require continuing the relationship, and healing doesn't require resolving everything together. Mutual repair may not be possible, now or ever. We can still tend to our own side: take responsibility for what is ours, make amends when appropriate, seek support for what has hurt us, and decide how to move forward. We don't have to keep pursuing a shared resolution or put our recovery on hold. Forgiveness, renewed trust, and continued contact are not things an apology entitles us to receive. **Not everything can or will be resolved.**

A difficult or harmful experience with one person needn't become your whole experience of recovery.

B. Practice Discernment

Balance faith with self-reflection. Make room for ordinary trust while letting experience inform it. You cannot have certainty about everything in any relationship. Staying connected across people and circles gives you other perspectives, people who may notice changes you miss, and somewhere to turn when things feel like they're going wrong.

Some of us have learned to see danger everywhere; others have learned to overlook danger, even when it’s right in front of us. We may do some of both in different situations.

Where you’re frequently alarmed, practice distinguishing discomfort from danger. Where you’ve learned to suppress discomfort, practice recognizing when something may be wrong even when everything seems fine.

When trust outruns judgment, practice discernment; when distrust closes the door to connection, make room to participate.

Neither your feelings nor their absence tells the whole story. Notice discomfort, a bodily sensation, a surge of excitement, a recurring interaction, or a gap between what matters to you and how you’re living. These can be reasons to get curious, not verdicts about anyone’s intentions. You can begin with what you feel, what you observe, or what someone helps you notice.

Notice what feels especially rewarding, too. Attention, affection, validation, and belonging can shape our judgment. Something can feel good without being good for us.

Look at what’s happening. Ask yourself: *What happened? What am I assuming it means? What do I need?*

Get to know your own preferences. If “What do I need?” draws a blank, start with smaller questions: What do I like, dislike, miss, or wish there were room for? What would I like to grow toward? You can explore without having a settled answer.

B. Practice Discernment (continued)

When a relationship feels confusing, compelling, or consequential, consider the following four lenses from both perspectives. They are questions to explore, not a test that determines whether someone is good or bad.

You don't have to analyze every interaction. Notice what you may be overlooking, and notice when more analysis is no longer helping. Use these questions when they help you understand something or choose a next step; you can leave some uncertainty unresolved.

Lens	My choices	My effect on others
Freedom	Can I express what I want, disagree, slow down, say no, or change my mind? What makes those choices feel automatic or difficult?	Am I leaving room for the other person to want something different, set the pace, say no, or change their mind? Can they do so without being pressed to reassure me or justify themselves?
Stakes	What would I feel I'd **risk** by saying no? Might I face anger, or lose affection, approval, belonging, or practical support? What makes me expect that consequence?	What might this person feel they risk by disappointing me? How might their attachment, gratitude, admiration, or reliance on me affect what they feel able to choose?
Drives	What old patterns or present needs might be shaping my response? Is attention, reassurance, attraction, or belonging changing what I'm willing to overlook, accept, or do?	Am I seeking any of the following through this interaction: reassurance, self-worth, gratification, or a sense of control? Am I asking for support while respecting the other person's needs and limits? Am I treating their response as something I'm owed?
Influence	How is this connection shaping what I want and expect? Do I understand what the other person wants and is offering, as well as how their attention makes me feel?	What can I anticipate, because of my experience or position, that they may not anticipate? What expectations might my words and actions be creating? Where might the other person's understanding differ from what I actually intend or can offer?

Good intentions don't guarantee a welcome impact, and a welcome response doesn't settle whether we're treating someone with care. Notice not only how a relationship feels in the moment, but how it affects wellbeing, freedom, and connection over time. Consider whether the connection leaves room to question, disagree, maintain other relationships, and choose differently.

B. Practice Discernment (continued)

Treat your answers about another person's experience as possibilities, not facts. Listen to what they tell you, ask where appropriate, and remain willing to revise your understanding.

Notice what you're adding when information is missing. Are you filling gaps with your own hopes, fears, habits, or expectations? An absence of information doesn't, by itself, establish what someone feels or intends.

> **Leave room to revise your story about yourself.**
> For example, does "I'm the one who always helps" make it hard to receive? Does "I can't trust my judgment" hide choices you could practice making? Does "I always know best" leave room to learn? Try a perspective that opens a useful possibility without treating it as the whole truth about you. Let experience change the story, too.

Give yourself time, consider whether boundaries are respected, and seek perspective from people you trust. **You don't have to reject a feeling to examine it, or act on it simply because it feels compelling.**

Not every uncertainty needs an answer. A connection can be meaningful even when its future is unclear. You can honor what you've experienced, remain open to learning more, and make choices without knowing what another person is thinking or what happens next. Uncertainty or disappointment doesn't, by itself, mean there has been a rupture to repair.

C. Respect Autonomy

Autonomy means having room to choose, and preserving that room for others.

Vulnerability isn't an invitation to romantic or sexual attention. Participating in fellowship or accepting support doesn't entitle anyone to your personal information, intimacy, or continued contact.

You can say no, change your mind, or disengage. You don't have to justify declining personal disclosure, intimacy, or contact. Others have that same freedom. Your right to choose remains even when what you want or can offer changes.

Freedom to choose doesn't erase commitments you've freely made. Make room for changing capacity while taking agreements seriously: keep them, or communicate what needs to change. Taking responsibility for an agreement doesn't mean you must stay in an unsafe interaction or offer intimacy, disclosure, or contact as repayment for help.

Your needs matter, and your desires deserve honest attention. Having a need or desire doesn't, by itself, obligate someone else to meet it. You can ask for what you need; a particular person may not accommodate you. **You can respect someone else's limits without deciding that your own needs don't matter.** Look for other ways to meet those needs, including other sources of support, while considering others' wellbeing as well as your own.

C. Respect Autonomy (continued)

Make a different response easier to choose.
Pick a small practice suited to the pattern you want to change. If you agree before knowing what you want, rehearse “Let me think about that.” If you usually dismiss another person’s view, ask a question and listen before answering. Practice while you’re calm, and choose a familiar moment as a reminder to try it.

Let small actions give you evidence of what you’re learning: “I can care and still set a limit,” or “I can listen without having to agree.” A difficult attempt is something to learn from, not a verdict on who you are.

Invite without insisting. You can reach out or invite someone to join you without requiring a particular response. Respecting someone’s choices doesn’t mean suppressing your own wishes. It means learning where your wishes align and respecting where they don’t. You can be open to connection that respects boundaries without putting your needs on hold.

When someone declines, accept the answer rather than pressing for explanations or reconsideration. You can honor your own disappointment without assuming what their decision means about you.

Mind your influence. Differences in experience, confidence, recovery, or social standing can give us considerable influence over others. Notice how influence works in this particular relationship, in both directions. Those differences alone aren't the whole story.

You can’t ultimately control another person or their feelings, but you are responsible for how you use your influence. **Greater influence calls for greater care, not greater authority over someone else’s choices.**

Be honest about what you want and can offer. Don’t cultivate expectations you don’t intend to honor; clarify misunderstandings when you notice them.

Set limits without using them as leverage. Say what you can and cannot offer, and let the other person choose with that understanding. Don’t use their reliance on your support or approval to obtain intimacy, reassurance, or compliance.

Give people time to decide, welcome questions and outside perspectives, and leave room for their other relationships. When your attention isn’t wanted, step back rather than escalating it. Be willing to change course, including when the attention you are receiving feels good.

Keep the choice, not a new rule. For example, practicing “no” may help if you always agree; it needn’t become refusing by default. As the choice becomes more available, ease off the deliberate push. Keep or adapt practices that still help, and let go of those that no longer fit.

D. Reach Out and Speak Up

A resilient web gives us somewhere to turn. People we trust can help us see what we might miss and find our footing. **Seek support without surrendering your judgment; offer support without taking over someone else's.**

Whether something feels wrong or you simply want another perspective, talk it over with someone you trust: a friend, sponsor, group trusted servant, or appropriate professional. You can talk about how someone is treating you, how you are treating them, or a pattern developing between you. You don't need to be certain that anyone has done something wrong before seeking support. You can ask someone to help you notice a pattern, rehearse a response, or think through what happened after you tried it.

You don't have to determine someone's motives before deciding to pause, decline, seek support, or leave.

Sometimes the next step is setting a boundary, sometimes it's disengaging, sometimes it's working through discomfort, sometimes it's attempting repair, and sometimes it's asking for help addressing harmful behavior.

Notice what changes when you try something different. What did you expect, what happened, and what effect did it have on you and others? Did it make room for more honest choices, care, and connection? Discomfort and relief may both be part of the process. With time and support, you can repeat what helps, change course, or reevaluate. And you don't have to keep exposing yourself to harm to find out whether a practice helps.

Support can help you decide whether repair is appropriate; you don't have to attempt it before seeking protection.

If someone crosses your boundaries, you are not alone, and you are not to blame for their behavior. You deserve support even if you didn't recognize the problem, found it hard to say no, or are still unsure what happened.

D. Reach Out and Speak Up (continued)

Responding to Concerns with Care

If you notice behavior that concerns you, even when you're not directly involved, you can seek perspective or speak with a trusted servant. You don't need to establish someone's intentions or prove wrongdoing before raising a concern.

How we respond to concerns matters not only for safety, but for everyone's opportunity to recover.

Observe behavior without taking someone else's inventory. Describe what you saw or heard and what concerns you. Distinguish observations from interpretations, and name what remains uncertain rather than diagnosing character defects or assigning motives. **Address harmful behavior without judging character.**

Offer a mirror, not a verdict. When appropriate, we can privately reflect what we've observed, listen to the other person's perspective, and invite them to consider the effects of their behavior. We can't work someone else's program, but sometimes a compassionate reflection helps someone recognize a pattern and choose differently. We don't have to convince them, correct them, or take responsibility for what they do with that perspective. We can also be willing to hear what others notice about us.

Seek help, not an audience. Raising a concern can be an act of care. Ask yourself: *Am I seeking perspective, offering support, or protecting someone, or am I recruiting people to take sides?* **When concerns become gossip or judgments about someone's character, we risk isolating people from the very community where they're trying to heal and grow.** Share relevant concerns with care and discretion, involving people who can offer support or help address them.

Discretion isn't silence. Protect privacy but don't conceal harm. The balance is to address harmful behavior without unnecessarily jeopardizing anyone's dignity or opportunity to recover. Share what is needed to seek support or protection without unnecessarily exposing personal details. Sometimes that means a private conversation; sometimes it means involving trusted servants or taking protective action. Nobody is obligated to confront someone who has harmed them, and protecting others may require speaking more widely when appropriate.

Staying connected to recovery doesn't require staying in a relationship or meeting that harms you. If one person cannot offer the support you need, you can approach someone else.

You don't have to navigate difficult experiences alone. Reach out. Connection is part of recovery.

Practical Digital Safety

Choose how to manage contact. You can mute, block, change privacy settings, or report unwanted messages without proving wrongdoing. Blocking is an option, not a requirement. If it doesn't feel safe in your situation, consider other options or seek support. Blocking may not prevent contact in shared groups.

Watch for scams online. Be cautious of cryptocurrency or investment links shared in group chats or sent privately. The FTC documents scams in which people cultivate seemingly genuine friendships or romantic connections before asking for money, often for an emergency, sometimes with detailed payment instructions. Scammers may keep someone emotionally engaged in the hope that financial help will come later. **FTC examples:** crypto scams in community groups and money requests from new online friends.

Financial requests. Tradition Seven concerns financial self-support by the fellowship; we can also apply its spiritual principle personally. **A request for financial help doesn't mean someone is dishonest, and a genuine need doesn't create an obligation to give.** You can choose not to give or lend money to other members. **You can decline without investigating their story or questioning their character, even when you trust them and have the means to help.** Nor are you obligated to continue giving your time, attention, or emotional support. You can suggest appropriate resources, set a boundary, or step away without assuming responsibility for their situation.

Pause, verify, and speak up. An account bearing a familiar name can be impersonated or compromised. Avoid investment links. Don't share passwords or login codes. Check unexpected requests using a separate, trusted way to reach the person. If suspicious links or financial pitches appear in a group, alert a trusted servant without assuming who is responsible or why.

Safety Card

MA’s Safety Card complements these principles with guidance for recognizing safety concerns, seeking support, and helping groups maintain safe, welcoming meetings.

MA Safety Card: https://MA12.org/safetycard

The Larger Purpose: Weaving a Web That Holds Us

We can’t guarantee how others will behave, and we don’t have to know everything about anyone to participate wholeheartedly in recovery. We can cultivate a web of relationships that gives us perspective when we’re uncertain, support when we’re struggling, and room to make choices when relationships change.

We don’t need perfect people or perfect certainty to build a resilient fellowship.

We build that resilience together through the connections we cultivate, the judgment we practice, the choices we respect, and the support we offer. Progress may mean noticing a pattern sooner, recovering your footing more readily, or finding a choice you couldn’t see before, not getting every interaction right.

Guided by Traditions Three and Five, our goal isn’t to judge who’s worthy of recovery. It’s to foster a community where everyone has the opportunity to pursue it, even when some of us are still sick and suffering.

Everyone deserves a chance at recovery. Everyone deserves to feel safe seeking it.

Help Improve This Playbook

Advice that helps one person can reinforce another person's difficulties. Some of us need encouragement to trust; others need to question more. Some need help asserting boundaries; others need help respecting them. Some need to recognize that they deserve care; others need to recognize that their needs don't obligate anyone else.

These aren't fixed categories of people. Across different relationships and moments, we may experience harm, cause harm without recognizing it, or knowingly take advantage of others. This playbook seeks to help us recognize and change harmful patterns, as well as develop resilience when we're on the receiving end. What helps in one part of your life may not fit another. A perspective that once helped may need to change as you change.

That creates a challenge: **how do we offer guidance that serves people with very different, sometimes opposite needs, without prescribing the same response for everyone?**

The guidance attempts to encourage autonomy alongside responsibility, and trust alongside discernment. The mission is to help people develop resilience without making them responsible for mistreatment, and use understanding of harmful behavior to support change and protection rather than excuse harm.

Your feedback can help us find where the guidance succeeds or falls short. Where does it serve you, and where does it misserve you? Is anything difficult to understand or put into practice? Does a passage reinforce an unhelpful pattern, excuse harm, or leave out a response that would help?

Please share what helped, what didn't, and what might make the guidance more useful. You can speak in general terms; you don't need to disclose personal details.

Feedback on this playbook: amalgam-mustard4k@icloud.com

An independent, member-created resource for navigating relationships in recovery. Not an official publication of Marijuana Anonymous or any other 12-step fellowship.