
Excerpted from Chapter 18, "Recovery through the Twelve Steps," in William E. Swegan with Glenn F. Chesnut, Ph.D., *The Psychology of Alcoholism*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Alcoholics Anonymous History (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2011).

Recovery through the Twelve Steps

by William E. Swegan

One of the most important things to note about our alcoholism treatment program at Lackland, was that the psychiatric and medical members of the treatment team worked in full collaboration with the Alcoholics Anonymous groups in the vicinity of the base. That was why we were able to obtain such a high success rate. Sister Ignatia ran her program at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron the same way, making full use of the psychiatric staff at the hospital whenever necessary, but bringing the A.A. volunteers directly into the ward, and she also obtained an extremely high success rate.

In the fifty years since those days back in San Antonio, I have never seen a treatment program work very well at all when the principles of the A.A. twelve steps were not introduced to the patients—no signs of significant success in particular when truly rigorous follow-ups were done two, three, and five years after treatment. And the less these programs involved direct participation by Alcoholics Anonymous workers, and had their patients going to A.A. meetings outside the treatment facility, the lower the success rate. In the case of prison A.A. groups, where allowing the prisoners outside the walls is not feasible, the programs that have worked well had committed A.A. members from the surrounding area who came

within the walls to conduct meetings on a regular basis, and gave the inmates regular contact with the outside world and its standards and values.

For those who are not too deeply familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous, the heart of its program centers on the twelve steps. Their application must become continual, because successful membership in A.A. requires a commitment to constant self-improvement and growth. It involves a way of life which is in fact healthy and healing for anyone who applies these principles. The word alcohol itself only shows up in the first half of the first step. All the rest of the steps deal with universal spiritual principles. The basic principles can in fact be applied to a whole host of human problems, ranging from out-of-control overeating to destructive sexual compulsions. Narcotics Anonymous replaces the word “alcohol” in the first step with “our addiction,” Gamblers Anonymous uses “gambling” instead, and other twelve step groups make similar appropriate modifications.

All the twelve step programs have certain similarities, but the principle of “singleness of purpose” means that a group will only succeed if all the members focus on a single core problem which they all share. In A.A. meetings, people talk only about alcoholism; in N.A. groups, the members discuss their addiction to other chemical substances; in meetings of Overeaters Anonymous, people only try to deal with their eating disorders, and so on. It makes no sense to take my broken television set to a washing machine repair shop, and then grow outraged when the people there refuse to try to repair it. And it does not matter that “they both work on electricity.” Repairing television sets is a different kind of job from repairing washing machines, and requires a different kind of tool kit and body of knowledge gained from long experience in repairing those particular items.

The twelve steps lead people through a therapeutic sequence involving (1) insight, (2) surrender, (3) establishing positive goals, (4) introspection, (5) confession, (6) a more complete submission to

the positive power of the healing process, (7) humility, (8) amendment, (9) restitution, (10) reorganization, (11) spirituality, and (12) learning to love others in a fuller and less selfish way. It is not psychotherapy, and in places seems to violate some of the normal principles used by professionals in the mental health field, but in fact it works extremely well in the context of regular attendance at twelve-step meetings and identification with the other group members there. It can produce a total transformation in the way people think and act, which psychologists and psychiatrists often marvel at, because the kinds of positive changes which it produces are the same ones which they too have desired for their patients.

The Twelve Steps

I would like to describe briefly how the twelve steps are carried out in good A.A. and N.A. meetings, to make it clearer how these groups supply necessary parts of the overall treatment program:

1. INSIGHT

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Prior to entry into A.A., most alcoholics were unable to assume the responsibility for their alcoholism. They blamed others for the way their lives had deteriorated. The turning point in the lives of these alcoholics came when they could no longer tolerate their own behavior and became willing to go to any length to seek an answer to the crisis. This insight—into what they had become, and the role alcohol played in that—was essential to recovery.

Finally recognizing their powerlessness when it came to managing their own affairs was also one of the few revelations of truth these alcoholics had experienced in many years. This was truly a step in the right direction, for the eleven following steps could not be carried out successfully if this first admission was not

unequivocally realized. This deflation of the ego was necessary before the alcoholic could become teachable.

In order to work the twelve step program, drug addicts had to make the same admission about their drug usage, for in their case, whatever drug they were using was certainly destroying their lives: cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, hallucinogens such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), or whatever else it might be. The attitude of “I can handle it” had to be overturned, because an honest observation of the way their lives were continuing to go downhill demonstrated that they were not “handling it” satisfactorily.

2. SURRENDER

Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

The admission that the actual course of our lives is in the hands of some omnipotent power is the basis for real surrender. I cannot fight universal laws and principles and succeed. The basis of these principles is all-powerful, and everything in the universe is subject to them. What is sought here is not making people merely compliant—“I will follow these rules because I am being forced to, in this particular circumstance”—but rather a total surrender emotionally and intellectually to the belief that there is a Higher Power governing this universe.

Some who come into the twelve step program object that if something cannot be touched or felt, it cannot exist. The law of gravity also cannot be touched or felt. But no human being can throw a baseball up into the air so hard that it will float up there in the air and never come spinning back down. As a baseball player, I had to learn how to throw a baseball with the right velocity to make it come down at the right place and the right level, and this required learning to work with the law of gravity instead of thinking I could just ignore that rule of nature. We are surrounded by powers and forces greater than ourselves at all times.

The power we are searching for here cannot be touched or felt directly, but it is a Healing Power which is capable of restoring our sanity, which we can see at work in the lives of those who have already been working the twelve step program. It is the power of truth and honesty itself, but it is also the power of compassion and understanding. If this step is carried out properly, those who work it first begin to incorporate within their internal makeup the positive feeling that they are not alone any more. Fear then begins to subside.

3. POSITIVE GOALS

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

During the active phase of their disease, alcoholics (and drug addicts as well) have a tendency to be engulfed in their own egos. Egocentric people's contempt for anything spiritual makes them seem all-powerful in their own eyes. We could use the word ego—E.G.O.—as an acronym for Easing God Out. When I decide to finally surrender and turn my will over to another, this brings a termination or settling of the controversy in which I had been engaging with the other person. Once this decision is made, not superficially but through a genuine soul-searching process, the battle is beginning to be won. Controversy is one thing that alcoholics and drug addicts do not need.

All is not cured overnight. Each journey starts with the first step, but as people continue on their way, they may still run into road blocks further along in their path. Those who come into the twelve step program need to be warned that just stopping drinking (or drugging) is not the instant solution to all controversy. But as each subsequent obstacle is eventually overcome, each of these victories will provide additional strength in conquering new anxiety-laden situations.

The important thing is to begin the journey. And we must notice the phrase “as we *understood* Him,” which means that if traditional religious language makes no sense to me, I am free to think of this

Healing Power of truth, honesty, compassion, and personal transformation in ways that do make sense to me. Even now, well over fifty years after I first got sober, I do not feel comfortable with heavily religious language, because I still do not *understand* it (even though I gladly allow those in the program who do understand it to talk about their higher power in that way). You will notice that when I first came into the A.A. program, my own spirituality centered around the spirit of helping and caring for others and saving human lives, which I used to replace my old spirit of egocentrism, anger, and selfishness. That simple *decision* (another key word which appears in this step) allowed me to get sober and stay sober, and begin living harmoniously with the universal principles of nature.

4. INTROSPECTION

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

The ability to recognize the real nature of the conflicts we are involved in, with the world and with other people, helps to resolve the problems which the alcoholic had developed in his or her attitudes toward the world. When I see what is really causing the conflicts to occur, this “clears the air” and enables me to start dealing more effectively with the issues which actually need resolving. To keep this inventory up to date, periodic revisions of it should be written as the person progresses in sobriety.

Having made this inventory, the stage is set for an objective assessment of assets and liabilities. The façade we erect in which we blame others for our own personal failings, begins to diminish when we start making an honest appraisal of our own personal deficiencies.

Beginners to the program who have a poor record of past behavior and were not good at living harmoniously within the bounds of normal moral and social demands, may be prone at this point to write a fourth step in which they simply defame themselves, and ignore all the strengths of character which they also possess. In

fact, with most people who come into the program, there is a tendency to list negative personality characteristics almost exclusively while overlooking their most positive characteristics. This practice produces an inaccurate inventory.

What people want is to feel good. With alcohol (or drugs) we attempted to produce this feeling artificially, and in the long run we only felt worse about ourselves. The twelve step program is designed to teach us how to act and think so that we will feel good realistically as a consequence. Neglecting positive attributes when writing a fourth step inventory blocks this, because it only further perpetuates guilt feelings. Alcoholics need to work on eliminating or reducing feelings of guilt in order to feel good about themselves again.

5. CONFESSION

**Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human
being the exact nature of our wrongs.**

Great pain is experienced in admitting that a controversy or conflict exists, and it is particularly painful to have to admit to being at fault ourselves. This action however is part of a mental cleansing of these personality defects, and is a positive step toward a more productive life.

It is an arduous task indeed to establish positive communications with another person when I have in fact been feeling guilty about the harm I caused that other person. But defective communications cause continual frustrations, and are the source of continuing conflicts, particularly in the immediate family. It is traumatic for alcoholics to talk over some of the events in which they have been involved with their own families. Some alcoholics seek a “geographical cure” by walking out and fleeing from their families, rather than attempt a positive resolution of the differences which exist in their homes. The hurt done by fleeing becomes more acute, the closer the ties are in the family.

It is an important benefit having a sponsor in A.A. (or N.A. as the case may be) to talk things over with when newcomers are working on restoring positive communications and resolving conflicts within the family. In fact, obtaining a good A.A. or N.A. sponsor is vital to working the program well and rebuilding our lives successfully.

6. SUBMISSION

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Coming to terms with the power of God, as we understand Him, and becoming aware of God's ability to act in our behalf, is an aid to achieving greater honesty and objectivity. Trust in the divine wisdom of God is another step in the process of relinquishing our own selfish attempts to control our own environment totally and absolutely.

7. HUMILITY

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

During the process of their addiction, individuals become more and more self-centered and unwilling to admit their own intellectual limitations. Alcoholics and drug addicts come into treatment convinced that they already know all the answers, and that they know more than the other people around them, whom they look upon as misguided and fools—as stupid people who need to be corrected and brought into line. And if these other people refuse to be “corrected,” alcoholics and drug addicts are convinced that they are fully justified in rebelling against that stupidity.

But one of the major forms of true humility is the willingness to learn. Admitting that one does not have all the answers in fact provides an enormous feeling of new freedom, and dissolves away our pride and arrogance. Humility is not a sign of weakness but a source of great strength.

Furthermore, developing a willingness to start overcoming our own shortcomings is a sign of emotional growth. In this step we become willing to embrace change and positive growth at deeper and deeper levels of our lives.

8. AMENDMENT

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Alcoholics (and drug addicts) have difficulty in facing many of the people they had harmed while they were drinking or using. There is a tendency to try to ignore or avoid any contact with these people, at least at any truly intimate and close level. The longer this condition exists, the more difficult it is to make amends to them. This in turn creates even more subconscious anxiety, that will seldom be resolved until the issue is faced directly.

This list of amends we need to make is based upon what we discovered about ourselves in our fourth step personal inventory. As was stressed earlier, a fourth step inventory that implies that all one's actions in the past have been negative, and that all one's personal characteristics were flawed, has not been fully completed yet. That fourth step list should have contained positive elements of personality as well as negative ones.

You will remember me talking in one of the first chapters about the way I was asked to help out in my father's little grocery store when I was a child. Good business people have a knowledge of their stock, and can only succeed in business by keeping account of those items which sell and need to be continually replenished, as opposed to those which have not been selling and should not be reordered. If no one in the neighborhood wished to buy a particular brand of catsup—if in fact the neighbors said that they had tried it and did not like the way that kind of catsup tasted—then my father did not continue to reorder cases of that brand to stock his shelves. Instead he ordered more of the better-tasting variety which people actually wanted.

We must keep this principle in mind while making our list of amends we need to make. To bring about real changes in their lives, people must identify all their behavioral actions, and seek to change those which cause tension. Making amends simply means endeavoring to mend relationships which have been torn and damaged, but to do this effectively, we must also identify the positive things in our personal makeup which we could contribute to human relationships. It is not just a matter of apologizing for past misdeeds, for we must now substitute consistent positive behavioral patterns for all the negative ones we exhibited in the past. Working hard at creating new positive ways of acting is the most important way we mend the fabric of our lives.

9. RESTITUTION

**Made direct amends to such people wherever possible,
except when to do so would injure them or others.**

Rehabilitation means to restore something to its former state of usefulness. In most cases, alcoholics and drug addicts once had some useful characteristics at one time in their lives, and these positive abilities are now in need of restoration. The ability to love and establish friendships with other people was usually present in their lives at some point back in the past. In order to reestablish this ability, it is necessary to make peace now with people whom we once loved, and with whom we were formerly friends, whom we had harmed by our negative behaviors. This is often painful, but is essential to regaining a sense of tranquility.

Newcomers to the twelve step program are at first prone to regard restoration in terms only of material things. If I drove your automobile while I was drunk and dented the fender, then I need to pay for repairing it now. If I borrowed money from you to spend on alcohol (or drugs) and never repaid it, then I need to pay you what I owe you now. This is part of making amends, and must be done wherever necessary, but it is usually not the most important part. Making moral restitution can be traumatic, but is more rewarding

than merely replacing material things. When I make moral restitution, I begin making real spiritual growth, and will quickly start to realize the rewards in my life of the program's Twelve Promises of a new kind of "feeling good."

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.¹

In making amends, I take the first step toward forgiving others, by making restitution for my own part in the confrontation and conflict. In the process, I at least hope that these other people will eventually forgive me. This does not always happen, but that does not matter. Even if my apologies are not accepted, my making the attempt at restitution helps heal the guilt I had been feeling over my past actions.

Self-forgiveness is also essential, and alcoholics (and addicts) must be able to forgive themselves. Our common human desire is to feel good. Having a large burden of guilt to carry does not allow people to feel good.

10. REORGANIZATION

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

The inventory process is not a one-time endeavor. It must be continual, because as we live our lives, our own attitudes and actions, as well as those of the people around us, are in a constant process of change. Life itself is full of changes, so that even years after obtaining sobriety, alcoholics (and drug addicts obviously too) still find themselves encountering new kinds of adversities. In the process of learning to meet them properly, however, they gain the rewards of further spiritual growth. The changes are in fact going to take place anyway. We can never prevent them from taking place; our only choice is to regard them as opportunities to grow and become more flexible, or to be ground down by them.

As we work to adjust to these new challenges, it is important to remember that if we become ensnared again in continual resentment, hate, intolerance, pettiness, envy, and anger, we will fail to adapt successfully. But if we remain constantly on guard against these kinds of emotional unrest, which warn us that we are beginning to walk down the wrong path, it will help ease the pain and frustration of the new adjustments we are going to have to make.

In the beginning of this new way of life, we find ourselves having to think consciously about making these adjustments. We can fail to notice that the resentment or anger has grown too great until we have been acutely miserable for many days. At this point we then have to remind ourselves that this is a sign that we are heading down the road to defeat instead of victory, and we have to begin the work of methodically healing the obsessive, continually repeated thoughts of resentment or anger, so that we can get ourselves out of this losing life-strategy. All this requires a good deal of conscious thought at the beginning. But with maturity and length of time in the program, this process becomes almost automatic. Being continuously flexible and adaptive has become a way of life.

11. SPIRITUALITY

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The right kind of prayer and meditation brings true humility. The ability to relate to a Higher Power does not make one appear weaker in the eyes of others, but is a great source of real strength. Active alcoholics (and drug addicts) often fall into an adversary relationship with this Higher Power, which prevents them from having faith in any kind of spiritual concepts. *It seems easier for alcoholics and addicts to fight God than to fight their illness.* What is more, they usually fail to recognize that they even have an illness and assume its nonexistence, which makes it doubly impossible to combat the real source of their unhappiness and misery.

Faith and trust in oneself is also essential to progress in the program. Because they have had so many past failures, and no longer trust themselves either, there is a reluctance to believe that coming to any kind of trust in a Higher Power will produce any kind of valid help. Many alcoholics feel programmed for failure, and I believe that with drug addicts this is often even more severe. Many are unwilling to try any kind of real change in their way of dealing with life, because of the failures that resulted from their own previous attempts at self-administered rehabilitation.

12. LOVE

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

This step is not only the one which perpetuates the twelve step program and keeps it growing and spreading, it also provides the opportunity for a new kind of happy and pleasant experience. Alcoholics (and drug addicts also) find that there is no greater

reward than to not only get their own house in order, but also to be able to share the joy of their recovery with others.

There is in addition a hidden personal therapeutic benefit from sharing our recovery with people who are still drinking or drugging themselves to ruin and destruction. When we see others using the same excuses and rationalizations which we ourselves used to use, we see even more clearly how hollow and empty our own attempts were to justify our excessive drinking (or our use of obviously destructive narcotics and other drugs). It is marvelous how powerfully our own thoughts of ever drinking or using again are obliterated by working with others who have brought themselves to the brink of total destruction with these substances. It brings the message home to us in a way that nothing else can.

“Practicing these principles in all our affairs” is not easy for alcoholics and addicts. Negative thoughts and actions were so prevalent in our lives back in the past, that we sometimes have to work hard now at maintaining a positive attitude toward our affairs. Nevertheless, length of time in A.A. or N.A. and the regular application of the positive principles contained in the twelve steps is an assurance that our sobriety and peace of mind will continue. As the basic A.A. text puts it, “rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path,” which means living by these twelve principles, and learning to practice them on a daily basis.

It is a good way of life, and a psychologically healthy way of life. Countless people who had been spreading paths of destruction through the world have learned how to be positively contributing members of society through practicing these principles. Any number of men and women who had been quietly miserable inside their own heads to the point of total desperation, and even afflicted by serious suicidal thoughts on many occasions, have found a new peace and new happiness by following this route. All over the world—for numerous local twelve step groups now rescue lives all over the globe—we can see the living proof right before our eyes. These are not mere theories, they are established facts.

There should be rewards experienced for abstinence. Few will give up the use of alcohol if the result is to continue to feel more miserable even than when they drank. But if the alternative to drinking is eventually far more rewarding, those who were once compulsive drinkers will in most instances remain sober. A.A. provides that more pleasurable alternative, if alcoholics are willing to work through the twelve steps. Quality sobriety can end up becoming as addictive in its own way as drinking, so that there are any number of dedicated people in Alcoholics Anonymous who literally eat, sleep, and work the program twenty-four hours a day. But to become “addicted” (if we can use that word slightly inappropriately) to feeling good, finding real satisfaction in performing our jobs well, helping other people in genuinely useful ways, and feeling an authentic sense of self-worth, leads to the healthiest of all kinds of human life.

Although I only know the N.A. program “from the outside,” once we got to the Vietnam war period (1963 to 1975 and afterwards) I had drug addicts as well as alcoholics in the treatment programs I ran, and addicts achieve exactly the same positive way of life through their involvement in N.A.

NOTES

¹ From the A.A. Big Book: *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. (2001), 83-84. “Before we are half way through” refers to carrying out the ninth step. As we work progressively through the steps, it is at this point that the greatest promises begin to be fulfilled: the stage where we begin to seriously amend our lives, make restitution for the harm we did in the past, and rehabilitate ourselves so that our positive personality characteristics will re-emerge.