

Escaping the Bog of Self-Loathing

Learning how to love ourselves again

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**Using the Fourth Step to heal our shame,
guilt, co-dependence, and depression**

Hindsfoot  Foundation

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1. The Self-Hate Syndrome

The task of doing the Fourth Step is described in simple fashion in the Big Book: I am asked to list all of the *resentments* and *fears* which cloud my mind, and then determine how my own underlying attitudes toward the world and life have turned them into issues which continue to dog my steps for weeks, months, and years without let.

The word resentment comes from the Latin verb *sentire*, which means to feel something. The *re-* prefix means that I feel it over and over again. Someone does something to me that hurts my feelings, and then I spend literally hours going back to my memory of that event, and rehearsing over and over my original feeling of hurt and outrage, and my desire to “show the other person” or otherwise get even or get revenge. Or I spend hours, practically in tears, trying to figure out words I could say to make the other person see how wrong he or she was, or things I could do to change the other person's behavior. I become locked into a compulsive and obsessive cycle, where every time I rehearse and re-feel that original hurt, my anger, self-pity, feelings of shame and guilt, fear, worry, and anxiety grow worse and worse.

It sounds like the Fourth Step should be relatively simple to carry out, but people almost always come up against some sort of major wall when they come to that point in working the twelve steps.

In the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, in the chapter on the Fourth Step, it explains on page 45 why one cannot give the same

advice to every person who is hitting that psychological wall. That is because there are in fact two basic types of people, who will behave in diametrically opposite manners when confronted with the task of writing out their own moral inventory.

One group of people are so filled with *grandiosity* and *self-righteousness*, that they cannot see any character defects in themselves at all. They live in a world of denial, where they use all sorts of clever ways of alibiing, excusing, justifying, and rationalizing away even their very worst behavior. So some alcoholics believe that all they have to do is stop drinking, and they will start acting like angels. “It was just the alcohol making me do those bad things,” they will insist. “Once I quit drinking, you’ll see, I won’t have a problem with out-of-control anger anymore” (or whatever the behavior is).

And likewise, some Al-Anons believe that once their spouse or family member stops drinking and drugging, that their own continual bossiness, criticizing, complaining, nagging, sulking, or temper tantrums—or whatever their own bad behavior has been—will automatically disappear. “Don’t you understand, it’s the other person who has the problems, not me. Look at the way that person drinks! Look at all the bad and irresponsible things that other person does (which I can catalogue for you in great detail, any time you want)! How can you possibly suggest that I might have problems too?” “If only the other person would treat me better, I would not act the way I do. Do I have resentments? Well of course. But my resentments are *justified resentments!* I can prove to you that the other person was *wrong* and I was *right*, and we’re only talking here about unjustified resentments, aren’t we? Anybody would have been justified in feeling

resentment at some of the things that other person did—hurt feelings at the very least, or feeling terribly disappointed in the other person’s behavior (and letting the other person know that of course).”

But there is a second type of person, who has enormous difficulty in dealing with the Fourth Step because of the exactly opposite underlying problem. On page 45 in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, it talks about what we will refer to here as the *Self-Hate Syndrome* or *Self-Loathing Syndrome*:

“If temperamentally we are on the depressive side, we are apt to be swamped with guilt and self-loathing. We wallow in this messy bog, often getting a misshapen and painful pleasure out of it. As we morbidly pursue this melancholy activity, we may sink to such a point of despair that nothing but oblivion looks possible as a solution. Here, of course, we have lost all perspective This is not a moral inventory at all; it is the very process by which the depressive has so often been led to the bottle and extinction.”

2. Self-Hate & Learning to Love Ourselves

The life-giving process of spiritual transformation

For me the core of this program has been us learning to love ourselves at a level that is deeper than anyone has been encouraged or trained to love himself or herself. I have come to recognize how we torture, punish, torment, and abuse ourselves.

As I work the steps, I have glimpses of spiritual and transformational processes going on but I'm not sure just what it was that I sensed or felt. Sometimes it feels like I am *so close* to a threshold or a breakthrough, but I now believe that there is *no line to cross*—there is only being immersed in the life-giving process of learning to love yourself as God and the others in the program already love you.

When a lesson is repeated it isn't always that you didn't do it right yet: it may be that you are moving on to a deeper level and need to re-assess the topic from a new angle. The life-giving process of spiritual growth is ever new, ever novel, ever creative—but sometimes it is necessary to walk down a path which looks much like one which I have walked down before, just to look at it with fresh eyes and see some details about that road which I never noticed before, or something major and important about the landscape through which that road travels which I was unaware of before.

Becoming addicted to toxic people

I often say that my own drug of choice is adrenaline. I can very easily be hooked on crisis—I operate very successfully where others are petrified to the point of inaction. What could possibly give you more chance for crisis than continually being around alcoholics?

But there was more involved than just wanting the adrenaline surge within my own body created by these crisis-prone people.

THERE ARE alcoholics who live on stirring things up and creating a crisis situation wherever they can. I really loved being around these people.

THERE ARE *non-alcoholics* who also act much the same way. I found myself drawn to these people too, although they usually lacked the alcoholic's genius for turning *any kind of ordinary situation at all* into a raging crisis. Let's face it, alcoholics just have special talents here!

BUT THERE ARE also people—some of them alcoholics but perhaps most of them not—who are Toxic People in other kinds of ways. These people are poisoners: when you spend time around them, the poison in them seeps into your own soul and leaves you exhausted afterwards. Their resentment and fear contaminates you and invades your own spirit. Their destructive fantasies and obsessions rub off on you.

Just as the alcoholic is addicted to a chemical substance he or she is allergic to, I am addicted to Toxic People whom I am allergic to. By turning my life over to Toxic People, and having it *centered* on them, eventually I was ground down to having no self and no life. I

lived in a cage of other people's expectations of me. I was waiting to die, waiting for freedom, and turning all the rage and bitterness inward.

What was worse, sometimes this was only *my interpretation* of what I thought their expectations were. You see, I thought I was a great mind reader, and so I would imagine that such-and-such was what they really wanted, so I would throw myself heart and soul into getting exactly that for them. I have shocked the heck out of people by triumphantly producing something totally outrageous which was in fact the last thing in the world they would ever have wanted—and then been bitterly disappointed when they didn't thank me or appreciate me!

Losing the voice of God by trying to “fit in”

How easy it is to fall into the rhythm of our surroundings: a survival tactic. This is a lesson that is global and affects people all around the world—every culture must convince its members to want to fit in, in order for the culture itself to survive. Blend in, develop protective coloration, and then adopt the beliefs and practices that surround us as our own.

As we strive so hard to fit in, to be “Good”—or “Bad” if that is what fitting in means—we learn to ignore our inner voice and do great damage to our hearts. We no longer feel, or cry, or truly rejoice. Laughter and humor turn into surface, intellectual actions.

In the process of frantically trying to everything “right,” I lost myself. I disappeared. Believing lies, lying myself—I lived in a

constant state of passive rage. Just like drugs can injure a body and soul, disillusionment and betrayal can deaden the soul until faith and hope are gone.

The cumulative effect of a lifetime of disappointments can leave us lost, confused, and dulled. Losing faith deadens the spirit, and the most life-threatening drug on the planet is losing faith in yourself. Once this happens, we no longer listen to God's voice in us, even if it is at the screaming stage. It is just like we can eventually come to NOT HEAR the cars going past on the highway, or the planes overhead—we teach ourselves not to hear God's voice in us. We no longer trust any message from within because we are trying so desperately to reconcile the messages from outside, and trying to be “Good,” to “fit in.”

Self-knowledge: hearing the still, small voice of God in the place of stillness and peace deep within

The answer is knowing who we are—what we think, feel, and believe—knowing what we know and listening to what we sense. It's understanding where we have been, where we are, and where we want to go. (Sound familiar?—a lot like the guidelines for giving a lead before an Al-Anon or A.A. group.)

This does not mean *who we THINK we should be*. *And it especially does NOT mean what others want us to be or what they tell us we are!*

You know—if you will be *still* with me, and go into yourself, into the inner realm of stillness and peace—that there is knowledge

there and it will alert you when something is wrong. Remember that feeling? It is God’s voice in you. Your soul tells you something may be dangerous: “this feels bad,” “this is unhealthy.” Sometimes it murmurs to you; sometimes it screams “Get the hell out of here!”

But we must SAY IT to make it REAL

An important factor in the fifth step is learning to speak up, to tell someone else—anyone else—that you really do hurt, that the years of accumulated self-hate have eroded you. Once you make this initial effort to cleanse what you feel are your darkest secrets, it will be easier to continue verbalizing and reasoning things out with others in the program.

If nothing else, *you* need to hear it *out loud*. This is also why we pray to God: God already knows, but the actual words must be spoken to fully ratify it. The fifth step teaches us for the first time to share our concerns with others. This practice will eventually lead to the ability to verbalize our concerns as soon as we hear God’s voice from within.

When something “feels wrong,” SAY SO. Don’t wait to be polite, don’t give yourself time to “get used to the situation”—which means time to start minimizing, explaining the intolerable away, and falling into gross denial. Speak up, and get the hell out of there!

The path of lies and destruction

One of the most harmful paths I have walked down is sexual. Did I think I had some measure of control over the situation, the person?

Was I begging for attention and affection? Was I bartering sex for approval?

I don’t know that there is any one answer, but I do know that I had (already at thirteen) so little self esteem, that I never told after I was raped by the superintendent of the Sunday School. Somehow I believed the man when he told me it was my fault—if I hadn’t looked so nice, he wouldn’t have wanted me. I at thirteen years old, just by dressing the way thirteen year old girls dress when they’re trying to look attractive, was responsible for tempting him, a grown man, beyond all human endurance. I was ashamed and embarrassed—it was me, not him, who had done something WRONG! I loved to ride horses, so I believed him when he told me I hadn’t been a *real* virgin anyway, that I was “damaged goods.” I believed him when he said I wasn’t “worth the effort.”

So now it no longer mattered. I could go through the motions. It seemed to be a big deal to the guys, and I told myself that it wasn’t important to me. But each time took a little bit more of my sense of self. It never felt right to me. I wanted to scream, “NO! I don’t want to do this!” but I never did. Sometimes I would repeat the Lord’s Prayer to myself until it was over. I would smile and pretend that I enjoyed it. Sex had nothing to do with love. Later I rationalized that sex was just something left over from being animal in origin, and it couldn’t be bad or good: it was just something that animals did.

Feeling worthless and being addicted to toxic people is the perfect combination to grow into a soul-sick, lost adult. I tolerated ridiculous situations and felt that I deserved everything that went on: when my fiancée got another girl pregnant, when my first husband

spent all his time and energies on our female housemate, when one of my husbands introduced me to his girlfriend two days after the birth of our son.

I did not scream and get the hell out of there. I felt at some deep level that I deserved this abuse. I stayed, and rationalized. Well, I also ate a lot of doughnuts. If I could become big and ugly, then this painful part of my life would be over. But then the weight I gained was also another reason to hate myself.

Doing the Fourth Step

The Fourth Step is where we start to get reacquainted with who we really are. It is probably the first time in our lives that we get to meet ourselves honestly. The goal here is not only to meet ourselves, but *to become friends, then like, and finally love ourselves.*

This is the most rewarding experience, and it is totally necessary if we are to progress and reap the full rewards of the program. When I look at the ones who have the kind of life energy that I would like to have, they are the ones who have solved the mystery of incorporating this fourth step into their recovery.

What to look for? There are different kinds of things that can be put in a Fourth Step:

LOOK AT what is *right* about ourselves and our values.

LOOK AT the wrongs we have done.

BUT MOST of all *look at self-defeating behavior, and whether or not we love ourselves.*

This is the time to stop being afraid of feelings. Get them out into the light too: anger, fear, pain, rage, resentment, all those things you were told it wasn't nice to feel or express. This is spring cleaning. Have we been victims? Either voluntarily or otherwise? Write it down, bring it to the surface.

Getting ready to write new rules for our lives

Are there repressed feelings from painful memories? Some of the messages we carry into adulthood are not true. They are limiting beliefs that block our ability to live and love freely. We don't need those voices from the past telling us we are lazy, dumb, or fat—or telling us what is acceptable and what isn't. When we dump all this we have cleared the way to make new rules for ourselves that are true. We are ready to take responsibility for our own lives and actions. We are no longer ruled by parents, spouses, teachers, and voices from the past. This is *real detachment.*

Healing relationships—not for newcomers!

Real detachment at the deepest spiritual level takes time to learn. But we have to begin to learn something at least about detachment from the start. I try to help some newer Nonners. One thing that always comes up is their desire to heal their primary relationship. This is the commonest fallacy that Al-Anon has to combat. New ones coming in *think* that they are joining us to heal the alcoholic, or the relationship.

A relationship is interaction between two or more people. New folk aren't *whole people*—they are the walking wounded—they are the remaining shreds of humans. The twelve steps can make them whole, and once they are whole, they are *then* able to be part of a relationship.

In the meantime, put all that on hold. We must be kind and courteous to the other victims who surround us. We must stop radiating any more pain. But until we know and love who we are, we cannot give of this self to another. It is no mystery why the advice is not to make any drastic changes during the first year in the program. Unless the situation is life-threatening, don't end an existing relationship. By the same light it would be foolish to start a new one.

Detachment in *love* if possible, but learning a certain amount of detachment is necessary in the first year. Stop trying to heal, to help, to cover for, and save sick people—in ways which are foolish and will never work anyway. It's time to start allowing my higher power to heal and help and save me for a change, and the Fourth Step will play a necessary role here.

The moral issues of the Fourth Step

Some people start their Fourth Step by writing a general biography of their lives; others do specific biographical accounts of each troublesome area of their lives. You can do a Big Book Fourth Step, where you follow pages 64 through 71, and write down the people you resent and why, and then list all your fears.

It is a moral inventory, so what are *moral* issues? The Big Book talks in chapter five and the first part of chapter six about trying to

play God, being scheming and manipulative, the excessive need to control everyone around me, unwillingness ever to admit when I was wrong, phoniness, trying to be cocky and over-aggressive, and gross, unbounded selfishness.

What are some other moral issues? Not setting boundaries to protect yourself from harm is a moral issue. Not taking care of ourselves is a moral issue. Accepting mistreatment and allowing other people to use us is a moral issue. Not allowing ourselves to have fun and enjoy life is a moral issue. Expecting *perfection* all the time is a moral issue. Self-neglect is a moral issue. *Looking (in the Fourth Step) at the way we treat ourselves is just as valid as looking at the way we treat others.*

It is vital that you work this step in an attitude of self-acceptance, NOT shame. This means that we allow ourselves some mistakes. Mistakes are what we do, not who we are.

If you don't accomplish anything else with the first time through, *work to clearly distinguish the guilt from the shame.*

GUILT is when you feel bad about something you have actually done.

SHAME is feeling bad about *being who are are*. Shame is a cancer of the spirit.

Self-acceptance is loving and caring for who we are—NOW—as is. With our higher power helping us: he loves us, we are his. Growth comes from learning to love ourselves.

3. Step Four and the character defects of self-hatred

Step Four is the first real action step: it carries us up almost like an escalator if entered into with curiosity and enthusiasm. But this step makes many people really uncomfortable. There can be real fear here. When we first start thinking about it, it overwhelms most of us.

It is scary to enter the unknown, to explore uncharted territory. The fourth step is probably the first time in our lives most of us get to meet ourselves. But the goal here is not only to meet ourselves, but to become friends with ourselves—then like, and finally love ourselves. This is the most rewarding experience. And it is totally necessary if we are to progress and reap the full rewards of the program.

This is where the healing begins. Up to now we have preparing for it; we have been clearing the canvas. But when I look at the people who have the life-energy that I would like to have, they are the ones who have solved the mystery of incorporating the fourth step into their recovery.

Part of the problem is, we don't know where to begin or what we are looking for. So where to begin? Where we are. What to look for?

LOOK AT what is right about ourselves and our values.

LOOK AT the wrongs we have done.

BUT MOST of all, look at *self-defeating behavior*, and *whether or not we love ourselves*.

ALSO TAKE a look at *guilt*, all of it—get it into the light where you can deal with it.

Look at everything that bothers you, or has bothered you in the past:

THIS IS the time to stop being afraid of *feelings*. Get them out in the light too. Anger, fear, pain, rage, resentment—all those things you were told it wasn't nice to feel or express. This is spring cleaning.

HAVE WE been *victims*, either voluntarily or otherwise? Write it down, bring it to the surface.

WHAT KIND of *painful memories* have we tried to suppress and push into forgetfulness? What kind of feelings do I feel when I force myself to look back at them?

Some of the messages we carry into adulthood are not true. They are limiting beliefs that block our ability to live and love freely. We don't need voices from the past telling us we are lazy, dumb, or fat; or telling us what is acceptable and what isn't.

WE MUST try to discover what some of these false messages were.

Just as we must learn to practice detachment from other people's behavior here in the present, so we must also learn an even more important kind of detachment: finally cutting ourselves loose from these false and destructive messages from the past. When we finally become able to dump all this, we will have cleared the way to make

new rules for ourselves that are true. We will become ready to take responsibility for our own lives and actions. We will no longer be ruled by parents, spouses, teachers, and voices from the past.

TWO ALTERNATE FORMATS

THE SHORT TABULAR LIST FORMAT: The example of a fourth step given in the Big Book, on page 65, sets up a simple table listing the people towards whom we had resentments, together with very brief statements about why we resented them, and how we thought our lives had been affected by them. It tells us on page 68 to do a similar list on our fears.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FORMAT: Many people find it helps them if they give much more detailed accounts of what happened, amounting to little autobiographical sketches of what happened at certain key points in their lives. Some people write down these accounts in chronological order, in effect writing down the story of the key points of their lives in the actual sequence in which these things happened. Other people break their lives down into different areas of concern, then put each of the relevant accounts in its appropriate area. Typical areas of concern might be headed “Parents,” “Marriage,” “Jobs,” or other useful categories along that line.

Looking for the moral issues

Since this is a moral inventory of myself, what are some moral issues?

NOT SETTING BOUNDARIES to protect yourself from harm is a moral issue.

ACCEPTING MISTREATMENT is a moral issue.

NOT TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF is a moral issue.

NOT ALLOWING YOURSELF TO HAVE FUN AND ENJOY LIFE is a moral issue.

Other kinds of SELF-NEGLECT are moral issues.

EXPECTING PERFECTION is a moral issue.

All of these are *moral issues* which are just as valid and just as important as issues like lying and stealing.

Loving self-acceptance

If is vital that we work this step in an attitude of loving *self-acceptance*: we allow ourselves to make some mistakes, without feeling ashamed about this, or feeling like failures. Mistakes are what we do, not who we are. Self-acceptance is loving and caring for who are—here right NOW—just as is.

We do this by the help of our higher power. Our higher power loves us, and we are his. Real growth comes from learning to love ourselves in the open, accepting way that he loves us.

AN INVENTORY CHECK LIST

Here are some possible inventory items to look for in doing a fourth step:

BEING A RESCUER: I continually find myself picking up emotionally sick and needy people. I convince myself that, by “the power of my love” or wisdom or experience, I will be able to “save” these people and enable them to get well.

CARETAKING: When other people create problems by failing to act responsibly, I feel an enormous (and totally inappropriate) personal guilt, and feel that I myself must step in and “fix” things so everything will work.

CONTROLLING: I spend enormous time trying to improve someone else’s manners, behavior, manner of dressing, housekeeping methods, way of driving a car, and so on, and put pressure on them to do things like writing thank-you notes and that sort of thing.

TRYING TO SUPPRESS ALL MY FEELINGS: If I start to feel anger or enormous grief, I simply squash it down. If certain memories make me feel guilt or shame, I try to push these memories totally out of my conscious awareness. If I start to feel joy or pleasure, I squash that down too—“I don’t deserve to feel good this way,” or “something will just happen to ruin it, like it always does.”

DEALING WITH MY FEELINGS IN INAPPROPRIATE WAYS: I get angry and then scream and throw glasses and dinner plates. When one person or situation makes me angry, I take out my anger on someone

else. If I am upset by something that happened at work, even with relatively small things, I come home and nag and complain and criticize and start silly arguments. When things get too much, I huddle in bed and pull the covers over my head, and refuse to leave my bed. Sometimes my anger, resentment, and frustration make me close in on myself, so that I walk around all stiff and polite, but refusing to show my normal warmth and affection for long periods of time.

Being dependent on others in an unhealthy way and **REFUSING TO TAKE EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR MYSELF.** It is always someone else who must do something to make me feel happy and satisfied. I refuse to accept the fact that it is not that other person’s responsibility to remove any grief or pain I may be suffering. Or perhaps, if the other person seems to feel any kind of unhappiness at all over anything, I cannot be happy myself. I become a prisoner to the other person’s fluctuating moods and feelings.

MANIPULATING OTHER PEOPLE in covert and underhanded ways to get things from them.

NOT TAKING FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR MYSELF: “I’ll spend as much as I want for anything I want to”—and then leave you to figure out how to pay for it. “I couldn’t possibly leave this relationship, even though it is totally sick”—then I would have to earn my own living.

WORRYING ABOUT THINGS to the point where I am totally miserable. Worrying minor things to death.

CONSTANTLY CONDEMNING MYSELF or my own efforts, feeling like I can't do "it" well enough.

NOT LIKING OR LOVING MYSELF, a very low sense of self-worth.

USING TOTAL DENIAL as a regular coping tool. Obeying the family Silence Rule—if we all talk and pretend as though such-and-such is not happening, then the problem doesn't really exist. "It doesn't do any good to brood over it. The best thing to do is just to go on as though it never happened, and push it out of my mind." Minimalization is a variant of denial: people who have been hideously abused tend to protest that "it wasn't really that bad."

FEELING VICTIMIZED. Someone else is treating me with gross physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, yet I have difficulty acknowledging that I am being victimized. Someone else is taking advantage of me in ways which are gross and completely unfair, and yet I cannot make myself say anything about it.

NOT SETTING BOUNDARIES. This means not truly having a healthy sense of selfhood. Boundaries can be physical: this is my workshop, my own bedroom, my sewing basket, my private diary. But some of the most important boundaries are psychological and emotional: another family member who constantly tells me I am too fat; a mother who calls her grown, married daughter throughout the day, and goes into a panic if the daughter goes grocery shopping without telling her where she has gone; a parent who dumps his or her depressions and fears on a child, who is forced to hold the parent's

hand while all this is going on, and console the parent, and internalize the parent's fear and terror.

NOT BEING ABLE TO SAY "NO" when I need or want to say "no."

NOT TRUSTING MY OWN FEELINGS AND INSTINCTS: what the other person is saying and doing "feels" to me like something angry, dishonest, manipulative, phony, or what have you, but when the other person grows very angry and tells me that what I am intuiting is wrong, I back off and believe the other person instead of my own gut instincts.

NOT TRUSTING GOD. This is a big one.

FEELING "UNSAFE" IN SITUATIONS: I feel threatened and feel as though I am walking around on eggshells when I am with certain people, or in certain kinds of situations, but I either accept this as normal or blame myself for feeling that way.

LACK OF EMOTIONAL INTIMACY AND CLOSENESS in relationships, no real communication going on. I am afraid to ever talk about any painful emotions I might be feeling, afraid to disclose that I am grief-stricken about something that happened, afraid to tell the other person what I actually need and want. I pretend to like things I cannot stand. But be careful here: sometimes two people are communicating quite clearly, it is just that the two people want very different and incompatible things. Sometimes the real issue here is learning how to compromise in a healthy way, take turns, and so on.

SEXUAL BEHAVIORS: I find myself driven to engage in sexual behaviors which I feel remorse and disgust about afterwards. Or I engage in some kind of sexual practice because another person quasi-bullies me into it, and pretend that this is what I also want and like, because I am afraid not to. If I feel as though my partner is in effect “raping” me against my will on certain occasions, there is something bad going on here too.

FEELING GUILT, whether for some valid reason or on some irrational grounds. If the guilt is totally *valid*—if I did the deed, and it is clear that it was a bad and wrong thing to have done—then I need to look at this one way. But *toxic* guilt means feeling guilty about something in a situation I did not create or control, where someone else is dumping his own sense of guilt on me, or because I have some wildly inappropriate feeling of being personally responsible for literally anything and everything that ever goes wrong. When I use the word “guilt,” this means I feel an inner sense of remorse and responsibility for something specific that happened.

FEELING A CONSTANT SENSE OF SHAME: the word “shame” refers to a kind of *generalized feeling* that I myself am a basically bad or worthless person. “Shame” also refers to feeling ashamed or embarrassed about anyone else ever finding out something I have done, or who I am—in this case, while guilt refers to an inner disgust with myself, shame refers to my horror at “what other people would think” if they learn about it.

THINKING OBSESSIVELY about something: the thoughts keep on circling around in my head, and I cannot think about other things, or enjoy simply being at peace with myself.

STAYING STUCK OR TRAPPED in relationships. The classical example is the wife who is being beaten more and more savagely, but still refuses to save herself and leave.

NOT BEING ABLE to summon up the gumption to actually say or ask for what I want or need. I remain locked in a passive role where I just sit and wait and hope that someday the other person will spontaneously offer me something I want or need. I never ask myself how the other person could discover that I want or need this. Or perhaps I convince myself that, if I asked, I would be scolded or shamed, and told that I couldn’t have it, and that I would be forced to obey that person when he said “no.”

DISHONESTY (including lying about what I am feeling).

NOT FEELING LIKE I have a life of my own.

HOLDING EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS which, if I am honest with myself, are unreasonable.

HOLDING EXPECTATIONS OF MYSELF which, if I am honest with myself, are unreasonable. Beware of the tyranny of “shoulds” and “oughts” and “alls” and “nevers.” I find myself saying, “But of course I have to do this—*all* good people *should* act this way.” “Oh, but good people *never* fail to do this.” Using tyrant words like should, ought, always, and never does not make something

reasonable in fact, or pragmatically possible to do in a twenty-four hour day. And whose voice in my head is really saying “should” and “ought”?

PERFECTIONISM.

GETTING INTO DIFFICULTIES BY BEING RIGID OR INFLEXIBLE.

PLAYING THE MARTYR.

FEAR OR PARALYSIS when forced to solve problems.

INABILITY TO FORM FRIENDSHIPS, or withdrawing from any kind of relationships that start becoming too close.

ADDITIONAL INVENTORY ITEMS

And here are some other things to consider when I am searching for the root causes of my inner misery:

The way to heal myself is **to learn to love myself**.

God gives me **unconditional love** and **accepts** me just as I am. I must learn to love myself in the same way that God already loves me.

One reason for my anxiety while I am working on my fourth step, is **fear of self**. I am deathly afraid of what I will discover if I look honestly at myself. I am afraid that I will discover someone who is childishly petty, simply selfish, and totally irresponsible. I am afraid I will discover that “it *was* all my fault” in a way which will be totally unbearable. Or perhaps I fear that the anger buried deep within me

is so great that I would unleash a monster if I ever removed the lid I use to cover it. Or there is something else I am afraid I might discover, which would reveal me as a depraved and disgusting degenerate and pervert. And yet God loves me and accepts me *just as I am right now*—perhaps I have something worthwhile to learn here after all!

Humility means asking for help in all areas of my life, and realizing that everything is always under the control of God’s plan for me. Humility means realizing that, if God is in charge, then I need never worry again about being strong or competent or in control. How could any conceivable situation be more under control than to have God totally in control of it? Humility means recognizing that, as long as I continue turning to God, the answer I need will eventually be revealed—or better put, it is not an answer I need (because an answer is only an answer to something asked). It is a *solution* which is to be sought. Humility means being grateful when God provides the solution, from whatever source he supplies it.

A character defect is any of my existing life-patterns which hinder my own personal **connection to my higher power**.

The underlying character defect is often apt to be self-hate, feeling less than, always feeling different, and never having a feeling of belonging. As a result, I am especially sensitive to the universal existential anxiety of rejection and abandonment (every human being feels this to a certain extent, but my own life has made me especially sensitized to it). I continue to stick around with people

in situations which make me very uncomfortable at a deep, gut level, because I am afraid that if I left, those people wouldn't love me any more. I develop an over-sensitivity to other people's feelings and moods, reacting to "what might possibly happen," because I am so afraid of being rejected and abandoned. I will sign away the house to finance one of my spouse's hair-brained business schemes, in a kind of passive acceptance of what I can see in advance is guaranteed financial doom, because I am so afraid he might leave me if I did not. I am convinced that **I am not worthy on my own.**

I become frozen up with a feeling of being **hopelessly overwhelmed.** Say the house is a mess, because my spouse and children have gotten everything dirty and left their messes and clutter everywhere. The job of cleaning it up is so massive, that I just stare at it, too frozen to begin even trying to tidy it all up. So nothing gets done at all, the house just gets in worse and worse shape, and the messier it gets, the more tormented I am by resentment, guilt, shame, and a host of other painful emotions, and the more frozen I become. I need to learn to think in terms of one day at a time, and one step at a time.

Many people, when they first come into the twelve-step program, believe that they never feel fear. Partly this is because **their feelings have become so numbed and deadened** that they cannot really feel any emotions any more. They actually cannot consciously feel fear, anger, or grief any longer—they have sometimes become so numb they no longer even want to die—but they also can no longer feel happiness or joy.

Looking for a feeling of control over my life in ultimately self-destructive ways: I have no control over my spouse, but for a few minutes I can have a feeling of control when I'm shopping and putting my purchases on charge cards with wild abandon. Buying a dozen doughnuts and eating them all at one sitting can give me a sense of (for a moment) being able to at least control one thing that will give me a kind of happiness. If I am a workaholic, perhaps I feel in control as long as I am at work, but not at home, so I work long hours of overtime to avoid having to go home.

With some of these attempts to gain control, I find myself driven to do it over and over again, but each time, as soon as I have finished doing it, I hate myself. Yet I remain locked in this addictive cycle of binge and remorse.

Anorexics may feel a sense of regaining control over themselves and their lives when they feel the pangs of hunger, but resolutely use their willpower to avoid giving in to these pangs—the sense of "being back in control" may be brief and fleeting, but they feel so out of control everywhere else that they cannot stop doing it.

I may need to learn how to **detach with love** from people whom I have been Caretaking.

If I have problems with being judgmental of others, or have difficulty detaching with love, the simplest way of stating the fundamental solution to my misery is: **Mind your own business.**

BECOMING POSITIVE INSTEAD OF REACTIVE

The twelve-step program is not just about identifying my own character defects. That is still just being *reactive*. More than anything else, the program is about learning how to start moving my life into positive directions. It is about learning how to will the positive will instead of the negative will. So I can make the greatest progress by setting myself positive things to work on:

I DECIDE THAT I am a good enough person to deserve to be surrounded by beauty and cleanliness. If the house needs cleaning, I do it as an gesture of love towards *me*, not for someone else. If my clothes are old and shabby and worn-out, and I already have the money to buy a thing or two for myself, I do this as a present for myself and because I love myself.

I DECIDE THAT I am a good enough person to have a healthy body: If I need glasses to see properly, I go get myself some decent eyeglasses. If my teeth need worked on, I go to a good dentist.

IF I AM OBSESSED with worry about my financial situation, I learn to act prudently where I can, and take the wisest steps I know how (one day at a time, and not asking for instant solutions), but past that point, I also learn to trust God to supply my absolute needs, and then *I stop all the worrying*.

But all these are details. What I need to learn above all is God's unconditional love for me. I need to learn to love myself as much as God loves me, and I need to learn to turn *all* my life and will over to the care of the good and loving God. Past that point: enjoy, be grateful, take care of myself lovingly, and just do the next right thing.

4. Forgive everyone— including myself

Relationships

When I tell you that *you must take care of yourself BEFORE you can deal with relationships*, I may not be clear enough. So here are some thoughts.

The only person you will have to be with your entire life is YOU. Even “till death do us part” leaves you with you. The most important and long-lasting relationship you will have is *you with you!*

What kind of person do you most enjoy being with? Someone who is joyful, competent, interesting, self-assured? Then that is what you need to become.

If you aren't content being in your own company, if you feel there must be someone there for you to wait on, in order for you to feel complete, then something is lacking. Do you feel that you are

only worthy to occupy this earth if you are a servant to others? Is that really your goal in life?

What do you really want? Think of people whom you most admire: what characteristics come to mind? List these. Turn them into affirmations *about yourself* to read through every morning when you get up. What you find attractive in others are the qualities you most want them to notice in you.

If you admire people who are kind, then affirm this trait in yourself by repeating to yourself that you are a kind person. If you admire those who are self-assured, your affirmation might be: “I am capable of handling anything. God has given me a good mind, so that I can reason out solutions.”

STOP WASTING your precious days focusing on others.

RATHER THAN obsessing on past hurts and possible future hurts—
obsess on changes that you are about to make in your life.

Your higher power will provide everything you need. Trust your higher power. Trust that he has given you all the tools to be who you really want to be.

Forgive Everyone

We are the ones who suffer when we hold on to past grievances.

You are a slave to these memories. They are only thoughts, and thoughts can be changed. You will continue to drag this weight with you until you forgive everyone who has ever harmed you.

Letting go of the ones who have hurt you is giving up the identity “Victim.” You need to stop seeing yourself as a victim. The poor little child who was harmed needs to grow up now and be a capable, happy adult.

Maybe you are afraid to become an adult. Maybe it feels safer to keep on being a wounded child. But you can go on with your life now. God has provided safe passage for you.

Every time you re-think the anger, you are suffering all over again. Only now, you are doing it *voluntarily*. You *choose* to re-live the pain. Let it go. Forgive everyone who ever harmed you.

Can you respect someone who would keep hurting themselves unnecessarily? Stopping my acts of self-harm is an important step toward the self-esteem that we all need in order to go on and find happiness.

What I need to do is simple to describe but very difficult to do: Turn toward everyone around me and say these simple words to each person: “I forgive you.” Then (in my mind) turn toward everyone from my past, even those who are long gone, and say the same words to them: “I forgive you.” Then say a closely similar phrase—only one word different—that works even greater miracles yet, to the one whom I sometimes hate the most: “I forgive *myself*.”

And when I speak those words, if I say them quietly and gently but with real conviction, I will find myself walking into the healing light. Forgiveness is the answer to all my spiritual problems today.