

**Working the Twelve Steps of NA
... without the 'God part'**

**'Get to the Point' group
of Narcotics Anonymous
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About half of the Twelve Steps seem to be about God. If I don't believe in God, does this mean they won't work for me? Does this mean that NA can't help me to stop using drugs, lose the desire to use and find a new way to live?

These are the kinds of questions that many addicts have asked when first coming to NA. Our experience has confirmed that NA does work and that the 'God part' of the Twelve Steps is really just optional. It works for some addicts, but it doesn't for others. The important thing is that we addicts need each other to heal from our disease and this is what happens in Narcotics Anonymous, regardless of our particular philosophical, ideological or religious beliefs – or lack of belief. In one way or another, we have all been where you have been.

Spiritual principles?

What does it mean when we say that this is a spiritual, not religious program? Despite its traditional association with religion, the term 'spirituality' refers broadly to any inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of who they really are; or the 'deepest values and meanings by which people live' (Wikipedia). This becomes even clearer when our literature refers to 'spiritual principles' such as honesty, open-mindedness and willingness. These are practical, human values, not mystical concepts or religious dogmas that are dependent upon any particular belief system.

Our active addiction leaves us 'spiritually bankrupt'. We have lost our way on that inner path we began in childhood towards developing our own personal values and goals. The Twelve Steps are a method that addicts have discovered to first understand

who we really are, to accept ourselves, and then to heal from the damage our disease has wrought. We can receive the help we need and learn that we can best do this by helping others.

The steps are not a formula that we can simply follow like assembly instructions from Ikea. The parts we have to put together are not all the same! The steps are a set of suggested guidelines that we each have to individually work, with the help of a sponsor and other recovering addicts. We discover how to apply these steps to ourselves with our own particular life experiences, personalities, values and beliefs. We learn by identifying with our similarities rather than by comparing our differences. We grow by striving for progress, not perfection, learning from our mistakes rather than by playing the role of victim of them.

A little history on the Steps

Did you know that in the late 1930's, the original pioneers of the Twelve Steps included a number of atheists? Jim B. authored the Third Tradition ('the only requirement for membership') and argued for the complete removal of 'God' from the 'Big Book,' *Alcoholics Anonymous*, when it was first being written.

A compromise was eventually reached with the Christian members when step 2 was reworded from 'God' to 'a Power greater than ourselves,' and 'God' was replaced by 'God as we understood Him' in steps 3 and 11. Finally, the 12 steps themselves were presented as '*suggested* as a Program of Recovery,' rather than as an obligation. As Bill W. described it, 'this was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or *lack of belief*.'¹

Our Basic Text explains: 'The Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous, as adapted from AA, are the basis of our recovery program. We have only broadened their perspective. We follow the same path with a single exception; our identification as addicts is all-inclusive with respect to any mood-changing, mind-altering substance ... our problem is not a specific substance, it is a disease called addiction.'²

In 1992, the NA World Service Conference was presented with a motion proposing that the word 'God' be replaced by 'higher power' and that non-gender language be applied to 'higher power' in all NA literature.³ This was put on the back burner and, as far as we know, it is still simmering there. In the meantime, those of us who do not necessarily believe in a deity can still benefit from the wealth of practical experience that is embodied in the Twelve Steps of NA, by identifying what works for us, and leaving aside what doesn't.

The Twelve Steps are tools that we are each free to explore, interpret and adapt to our own recoveries. They are not some kind of sacred text frozen in time. As the principal author of the Twelve Steps Bill W. put it: 'We must remember that AA's Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them as they stand is not at all a requirement for membership among us. This liberty has made AA available to thousands who never would have tried at all, had we insisted on the Twelve Steps just as written.'⁴

Working the Steps

Understanding requires the conscious participation of the individual, an act of finding out. We don't just read about or talk about the steps, we have to *work* them. This means that we need

to examine our own experience, our own characters, our own behaviour and apply to ourselves what we learn at meetings and in the literature. We can get advice and help, but we have to do the actual work ourselves. Many of us work the steps by writing down our reflections and discoveries in a step journal. We experiment, and seek what works for us. We discover that the simple principles embodied in the steps are accessible to all addicts, regardless of our individual beliefs.

We suggest that the steps be worked with the guidance of a sponsor, a more experienced member we trust who may or may not share our personal beliefs, but who is non-judgemental and accepting of ours. We also study and use the books, *Narcotics Anonymous* (Basic Text), *It Works: How and Why* and *The NA Step Working Guides*. These provide a wealth of practical experience by recovering addicts. The occasional 'God part' need not get in the way of recovery for the atheist or agnostic addict.

The following suggestions may also prove useful:

Step One

We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable.

We often call this the step of surrendering. We need to be honest in examining ourselves and accept the reality of our addiction, that we have made a mess of our lives. We now have to get real. Addiction is a progressive, incurable and fatal disease that affects us physically, mentally and spiritually. We give up trying to find a way to successfully use drugs. Abstinence, staying clean, becomes our priority, 'no matter what.'

Step Two

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

Many of us understand this as simply: *we realized that we need help.* We develop the open-mindedness to recognize that we can get this help from already recovering addicts in the rooms. We allow ourselves to have the hope and faith (or trust) that we too can learn how they do it. 'The therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel,' 'I can't, we can.'

Step Three

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

Having become more open-minded about getting help, we now act by seeking out and accepting this help. In other words, *we made a decision to stop trying to control everything ourselves and to trust the collective wisdom of other recovering addicts.* Willingness is the principle involved in making this commitment to our recovery, a commitment to working our personal NA program.

Step Four

We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

What will likely bother us the most about this step is the word 'moral.' It suggests the religious concept of 'sin.' Try: *We made a searching and fearless inventory of our strengths and weaknesses.* Active addiction has deeply affected our reasoning and emotional patterns. We need to take a realistic stock of where we are before we can heal our self-destructive thinking, feelings and behaviour. Self-examination, courage, honesty and self-acceptance are the principles we apply.

The booklet *Working Step Four in Narcotics Anonymous* is also a useful guide with this step.

Step Five

We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Once again, the God part is entirely optional. But it is crucial that we share what we wrote in our Fourth Step with another person. We need to come clean in order to start letting go of our secrets, guilt and shame. The 'exact nature of our wrongs' is not simply a description of events we are not proud of. It is identifying why we acted this way. We developed many of our negative behaviours as a misguided strategy to protect ourselves, to survive. Courage and trust, as well as honesty, are needed to work this step.

Step Six

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

Having identified the weaknesses in our characters that lead us to keep repeating the same mistakes, *we clearly recognized that we need to change these patterns.* Willingness, determination and trust that change is possible are all helpful principles here.

Step Seven

We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

For those of us who do not believe that a god can intervene to 'remove our shortcomings,' we have to begin the process of letting go of our negative behaviours and replacing them with constructive ones. We build on our positive qualities and try to improve our shortcomings. Practice doesn't always make perfect, but it can result in progress. Humility and persistence are the principles we apply.

Step Eight

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

Step Nine

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

Steps Eight and Nine should be universally applicable as originally written, and they are already well elaborated in NA literature. We correct as much damage from our pasts as we can, so that we leave this baggage behind us and live with a clean slate. Courage and trust are the principles we use to do this.

Step Ten

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

Again, this formulation is very straight forward. If the term 'wrong' sounds moralistic to you, try: *We continued to monitor ourselves, to acknowledge our successes and to promptly correct our lapses and errors.* This is a process of honest and humble self-examination that works best when practised on a daily basis.

Step Eleven

We 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.

Cutting through the religious references in this step's wording, it simply means that we now move on with our lives by acting consciously on our renewed values and goals. Of course, praying is optional. Meditation is a useful method to still the mind from distractions that any of us can use to reflect on, clarify and improve our judgement in doing this.

It might be helpful to read this step as: *We sought through meditation to improve our understanding of ourselves and our program of recovery.* Self-examination, honesty and humility are useful principles here.

Step Twelve

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

If you are still uncomfortable with the words 'spiritual awakening', this can be simply understood as '*Having developed a deeper wisdom as a result of these steps...*'

'We can only keep what we have by giving it away.' Practising Step Twelve enables us not only to express our gratitude for what was freely shared with us by other addicts, but by passing on our experience, strength and hope to the addict who still suffers, to maintain and strengthen our own recovery. We can achieve the freedom to never have to use again, but we also need to remember where we came from.

The steps are not simply a process that we complete once and then become 'recovered.' Our addiction is only in remission, just for today. We learn that the steps are an on-going guide to our recovery as we continue to learn to live life on life's terms, without the use of drugs.

Notes

- 1) *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 1957, pages 166-167.
- 2) *Narcotics Anonymous* (Basic Text), 2008, Introduction, page xxv.
- 3) World Service Board of Trustees Bulletin 19: <https://www.na.org/?ID=bulletins-bull19>
- 4) *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 1957, page 81.

INSERT STORY HERE: 'Atheists Recover Too'

'Atheists Recover Too' from *Narcotics Anonymous*, pages 274-277.

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