

What Professionals Need to Know about 12 Step Programs

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INTRODUCTION

This training describes the nuts and bolts Twelve Step programs. We will discuss the types of meetings, the various fellowships and their slogans, steps, and traditions. We will look at how others view AA and the various offshoots of Twelve Step fellowships.

According to Wikipedia, a Twelve Step program is a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action for recovery from addiction, compulsion, or other behavioral problems. Originally proposed by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) as a method of recovery from alcoholism, the Twelve Steps were first published in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in 1939. The AA method was adopted and adapted by other Twelve Step programs such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Overeaters Anonymous (OA), Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA), Cocaine Anonymous (CA), and a myriad of others. Each has kept to AA's practice of addressing a single malady. This singleness of purpose has helped them grow while staying true to their roots.

As summarized by the [American Psychological Association](#), the process involves:

- ★ admitting that one cannot control one's addiction or compulsion;
- ★ recognizing a greater power that can give strength;
- ★ examining past errors with the help of a sponsor (experienced member);
- ★ making amends for these errors;
- ★ learning to live a new life with a new code of behavior;
- ★ helping others that suffer from the same addictions or compulsions.

HISTORY

In 1935 Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith started Alcoholics Anonymous, the first Twelve Step fellowship, in Akron, Ohio. Bill W. and Dr. Bob wisely founded this fellowship on the principle of anonymity "at the level of press, radio and film."

The founders of AA described their methods in the groundbreaking 1939 book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Now in its fourth edition, the “Big Book” as it is affectionately known, has become a cornerstone for the recovery movement. According to Wikipedia 30 million copies have been sold.¹

As AA grew in the 1930s and 1940s, the Twelve Traditions emerged as guiding principles to accompany the Twelve Steps. Notable among the Twelve Traditions was Tradition Five: “Each group has but one primary purpose -- to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” This focus helped AA avoid distractions and political infighting that might have overwhelmed the fledgling organization.

Although there are many different Twelve Step Fellowships, they all share common ground. An examination of their commonalities, and a critique of their good points and bad, follows.

ABSTINENCE BASED

Abstinence is defined differently for different addictions. For chemical addictions, regardless of the person’s drug of choice, abstinence includes not using alcohol and other drugs in any form. Medications can be used with caution, and neither AA nor NA give specific guidelines regarding medications. (We will discuss this further in a later section.)

Fellowships dealing with non-chemical addictions tailor their definitions of abstinence to the substance or activity they see as problematic. Gamblers need never gamble again, and can define abstinence as not gambling. Food addicts cannot define abstinence as not eating. Their definition of abstinence recognizes the need to eat, but to do so in a nonaddictive way.

People in OA define abstinence with the help of a sponsor. Their food plans avoid certain ingredients, most notably sugar and white flour. They eliminate binge foods. Overeaters Anonymous members follow a “301 plan,” which means three meals a day, nothing in between, one day at a time.

Sex and love addicts also develop Sexual Recovery Plans (SRPs) to help them avoid relapse. These plans typically do not include celibacy, but share the following characteristics:

- ▶ A written plan that outlines out-of-bounds behavior
- ▶ Plans are usually contracts with sponsor/clergy and are not changed w/o discussion
- ▶ Made when a person is rational, not when aroused
- ▶ Rarely defined as complete abstinence from sex

Sexual Recovery Plans (SRPs) vary widely depending on the history of the people writing them, but many of them contain some mix of common components:

- ▶ Bottom Line: Things that are absolutely off-limits.
- ▶ Gray Areas: Things the writer may eliminate eventually. These places, thoughts, or behaviors are sometimes considered a “warning zone,” indicating the person is slipping into compulsivity.
- ▶ Top Lines: People, places, and things of recovery. Rewards for not drifting into bottom line behaviors, or replacements for bottom line behaviors.
- ▶ Other: People to Avoid, Triggers, Dangerous Times of Day, Goals

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_books#cite_note-52

TWENTY-FOUR HOUR RULE

No changes are made in the SRP without contacting sponsor or therapist AND without twenty-four hours of thought. This prevents the recovering sex addict from meeting someone and changing their SRP “on the fly” to give themselves permission to have an ill-advised sexual encounter.

GROWTH BASED

Abstinence, however defined, is not enough. If we are to recover, we must become different, recovering people. Alcoholics Anonymous has a slogan “*The man I was will drink again.*” This slogan implies we have to grow out of our addictions, if we are to have any hope of long lasting sobriety.

Growth occurs through working the steps, reading the literature, taking inventory, and surrendering to a Higher Power. There are as many ways of working the steps and taking an inventory as there are AA/NA members. Likewise, there are many ways of defining a Higher Power. What’s important is putting enough effort into growth to become comfortable in recovery.

FELLOWSHIP, NOT A TREATMENT FACILITY

Fellowships share mutual support, rather than trying to fix people “*carry the message not the addict.*” Individuals are responsible for pursuing their recovery “*as hard as you chased your addiction.*” Help may come in many forms, but responsibility for recovery never shifts from the individual. Twelve Step meetings are not designed to be dating services, employment centers, legal aid societies, transportation hubs, or medical clinics. The individual who expects more than guidance from AA, NA, and other fellowships is likely to be disappointed. While recovering people seem naturally inclined to supporting one another, the core purpose remains to share their “*experience, strength, and hope.*”

Fortunately, many people have turned their lives around with the help of Twelve Step fellowships. Unfortunately, some of these people start to see the fellowships as the answer to all questions. You need to warn your clients that despite what they may hear at the meetings, working a Twelve Step program will not cure schizophrenia, clinical depression, etc.

SELFISH PROGRAMS

Recovering people do altruistic things for selfish reasons. We help others so we can remain abstinent. Working with a newcomer reminds the oldtimer why he quit in the first place. Helping others, talking about recovery, and even just listening further his spiritual growth.

Whether or not the newcomer gets clean and sober cannot be the main concern of the old-timer. The old-timer must put his recovery first. While this may seem hard hearted, it has worked surprisingly well for many years. After all, what better motivation for helping someone than one’s own survival?

CULTURE

Twelve Step programs often share a common culture, much of which is loosely derived from the original Twelve Step program, AA. Most fellowships share the following:

EXPRESSIONS/SLOGANS

Twelve Step fellowships have their own lexicons. People new to the fellowships may at first be baffled by the way familiar words are used in unfamiliar ways: “don’t take my inventory!” for example. These expressions and slogans offer a shorthand way for people in recovery to communicate key ideas, or deeper concepts without lengthy explanation. (Unfortunately, slogans are sometimes used in harmful, or closed minded ways.) Two examples follow:

Easier, softer, way: Addicts are used to the instant gratification of their addiction. They don’t want to master meditation, learn to deal with depression, or lose weight slowly. So they abandon working a program in search of a quick fix. Quick fixes are called *easier, softer, ways*.

Easier, softer, way is used by traditionalists to dismiss anything other than twelve step programs used to deal with non-medical problems. Antidepressants, Rational Recovery, psychotherapy, can all mistakenly *considered easier, softer, ways*, although psychotherapy is more widely accepted than it used to be.

Cunning, baffling, powerful: Twelve Step programs talk about a daily reprieve from addiction. We must always be on guard against relapse at all times. (The original quote is from the *Alcoholics Anonymous*: “Remember that we deal with alcohol, cunning, baffling, and powerful” (p. 58-59).

There are hundreds of slogans. The most commonly heard include:

Easy Does It

Live and Let Live

Think, think, think

Sick and tired of being sick and tired

One Day at a Time

Time takes time

Don’t pick up the first drink

Sober not somber

AN INCLUSIVE VIEW OF GOD

You do not have to believe in God with a capital “G.” God can be Good Orderly Direction. God can be a “higher power” which is anything greater than oneself, such as the group. There is an implicit notion that at some point you will accept God with a big “G.” (This can be irritating to the people who don’t believe in God.)

STEPS

Like everything else in twelve step programs, the steps are suggested rather than mandated. The idea behind them is that sobriety will not cure one’s character defects. Someone who quits drinking and doesn’t do anything to change is said to be a dry drunk. Dry drunks tend to be miserable, resentful, martyrs who are often encouraged by the people around them to resume their addiction. The steps are a way to move from being a dry drunk to becoming someone who is happy without alcohol and other drugs.

The steps below are from Overeaters Anonymous.² They are adapted from AA’s original Twelve Steps.

²http://www.oa.org/twelve_steps.html

The Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over food — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to compulsive overeaters and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

There are many ways to “work the steps.” A popular way is to write something about each key word in each step. Below is an example of what newcomers might be asked to write about regarding the first step:

We: Who is the we of your addiction?
 Who is the we of your recovery?

Admitted: Who have you told about your addiction and why have you told them?
 Will they help or hinder your recovery?

Powerless: How do you know you are powerless?
 Do you use at inappropriate times?
 Do you use more than you intended?
 Do you use more often than you intended?
 Do you look forward to using, to the detriment of whatever you are doing at the time?
 Has your use caused problems in your life?

Lives: Describe your ideal life and your current life.

Unmanageable: What were the consequences of your use?

What parts of your life become difficult to control or even manage?

The following is an overview of the steps and their core message.

STEP ONE

We admitted we were powerless over [something, drugs, alcohol etc.], that our lives had become unmanageable.

This step introduces us to honest self-evaluation and humility. It contradicts the cherished notion of controlling our use of alcohol and other drugs (AAOD).

We admit that we have a problem. The word *we* underscores that the addict³ is no longer alone. He or she admits the insanity of the disease overruns his or her life, creating unmanageable situations that can't be corrected without help.

STEP TWO

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

For the Higher Power to restore sanity, we need to be humble enough in the first step to admit powerlessness. The humble person is then able to accept help that a more inflated ego might reject.

The addicted person who seeks a Higher Power finds the insanity of active addiction is replaced by the sanity of recovery. The recovering person does not have to be convinced of the existence of a supernatural Higher Power, he or she just has to be open-minded enough to seek help.

STEP THREE

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

Healing comes from a relationship with a Higher Power. The choice of a Higher Power is completely up to the individual, but choosing a loving, caring Higher Power is encouraged. Agnostics and atheists may choose a higher purpose.

STEP FOUR

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Some people call the fourth step a blueprint for change. We must consciously define what has to be changed if we wish to heal. We must know what parts of ourselves we wish to keep and which parts we want to get rid of.

The first time we take an inventory, identifying everything we need to know about ourselves may be difficult. As we grow, and more is revealed, we can repeat this step with our sponsor as needed.

³This includes addicts of all stripes: heroin addicts, 'shopaholics' gamblers, sex addicts, and alcoholics. Alcoholics could rightly be termed *ethanol addicts*.

STEP FIVE

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

In this step we share the negative information we have gathered in the fourth step. A popular Twelve Step slogan points out *we are only as sick as our secrets*. This step helps us share our secrets in an appropriate manner. Secrets -- often a by-product of shame -- must come out of hiding if we are to heal.

STEP SIX

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

This step promotes readiness and willingness. (Being ready to have character defects removed and actually having them removed are two completely different things.) This step reminds us that while we are consciously ready to release our shortcomings, we may cling to them out of fear and habit.

STEP SEVEN

Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

Our Higher Power is unlikely to make our shortcomings magically disappear. Life will supply us with opportunities to make changes – reprieves from impulses, and a sense of choice. Hopefully we will respond with the correct behavior. Our Higher Power removes shortcomings, as long as we do the work. Likewise, having a higher purpose will not remove shortcomings. Pursuing a higher purpose is required.

STEP EIGHT

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

This step helps us let go of residual guilt, and promotes honesty and change. Willingness to work this step shows we are ready to start helping ourselves by helping others. It expresses our desire to put the past behind us and start over, acknowledging our mistakes.

There are two very good reasons for putting effort into this step. First, if we do not remember the past we are destined to repeat it. And second, working this step helps us get organized for the ninth step.

We put ourselves on top of the list; if we cannot make amends to ourselves how can we make amends to others?

STEP NINE

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

This step helps us put the past behind us and let go of residual guilt. It is the addicted person's opportunity to take action. Clearing our the wreckage of the past in this way requires courage.

This step is not designed to improve our relationships with all the people we have hurt, although it may. Nor will it always bring forgiveness from them. This step helps recovering people rid themselves of guilt, and increase self-respect.

Self-respect often comes from doing the next right thing, even if we don't feel like doing so. When taking this step, we can't be concerned with what the other person did to us. We must take responsibility for our own actions and reactions.

Truly making amends is more than apologizing. We must make an honest effort to undo whatever damage we have done. If we stole money, then we must return it when we can.

However, we should not make direct amends to the detriment of the other person. For example, if contacting an old flame may damage that person's marriage, we shouldn't make direct amends to them.

STEP 10

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

This is the first of the maintenance steps. Like steps eleven and twelve, this step helps us keep what we have gained from the first nine steps: self-respect, peace of mind, freedom from addiction, etc. In this step we periodically assesses our progress and shortcomings. We admit our mistakes and make amends promptly. This step is crucial if we want to avoid regression.

STEP ELEVEN

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

This step helps us keep and enhance our spiritual condition. It reminds us to practice spiritual disciplines if we wish to remain in remission. Spirituality is a state of mind, but like muscles that atrophy without exercise, spirituality will grow weak without prayer.

STEP TWELVE

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

Bill Wilson discovered helping others was the best way for him to stay sober. If we're smart we learn from others' mistakes, draw strength from their examples, and remind ourselves how far we've come.

We need to find the middle ground between selfishness and co-dependency. The addicted person's helpfulness should be the fruit of spirituality. It should come from a full heart, and not be an effort to merely look good, nor should it be done at the expense of his own well-being.

MEETINGS

Most fellowships share certain types of meetings. These meetings tend to follow a general format, but there are regional differences. For example, in some parts of the country speakers commonly listen to commentary after they finish speaking. In this area, speakers usually use the entire meeting time for his or her “lead.”

- ☆ Closed meetings are only for those who have that particular addiction. e.g. closed AA meetings are only available to those “who have a desire to stop drinking.”
- ☆ Open meetings can be attended by anyone who is interested, but guests are asked to observe anonymity.
- ☆ Speaker meetings, which are sometimes called *lead* meetings, can be open or closed.
- ☆ Some Study meetings review the literature pertaining to that addiction.
- ☆ Special meetings are held for subgroups of a fellowship, such as gay meetings, women’s meetings, etc.

QUIZ

Which of the following is an actually AA special meeting:

- A. Stage Left, a special meeting for actors.
- B. Birds of a Feather, whose meetings are held mostly near major airports for recovering pilots.
- C. Veto Power, group of politicians trying to maintain sobriety.
- D. No Freudian Slips, which is comprised of psychiatrists and psychologists.

NEGATIVES

HOSTILITY TOWARD MEDICATIONS

An anti-medication undercurrent is one of the biggest pitfalls to sending someone to Twelve Step meetings. Many people were prescribed meds they no longer needed once they got clean and sober. These people often tell others how working the steps eliminated their need for pills. Others will label medications an *easier, softer, way*, or will get nasty about meds, saying *a drug is a drug is a drug*. and you are not clean while taking medications.

Fortunately, most programs are becoming more accepting of mental illness and medications, especially antidepressants. Benzodiazapines remain a sore subject, and rightly so. You need to obtain two pamphlets, *The AA member: Medication and Other Drugs*, and *Bill W’s Three Talks to Medical Societies*. They explain that sometimes people need help outside of twelve step programs. They also point out that nobody in AA is to play doctor. Other fellowships have similar texts.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE REGARDING MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness being misunderstood is a common problem. The original Twelve Step program cautioned against resentment and self-pity, citing them as bridges back to addiction. People in Twelve Step programs can mistake mental illness for “wallowing in self-pity.”

The addiction rate among people with a mental illness is astronomical. Often their mental illness goes untreated. Take away their favorite substance, pump them full of coffee, and put them in a room, and sometimes bad things happen.

BENEFITS

SPONSORSHIP

Sponsors are mentors who help people learn to recover. Often they share similar experiences with newcomers who are relieved to find someone who understands them. Sponsors take people to meetings and confront them when they are not “working a good program.” A good sponsor can greatly enhance someone’s recovery from addiction.

SUPPORT

People in recovery can go anywhere in the country and meet people with whom they have something in common. They can call 24/7 hotlines. There are numerous recovery bulletin boards and chat rooms on the internet. Most fellowships are more accepting of eccentricity compared to the general public.

SOCIALIZATION

Before most meetings, there is an informal meeting where small groups of people drink coffee and socialize. Many people connect with others during these meetings before the meeting. There are also often gatherings after meetings.

Slogans Exercise

Do T N \neq T
D C Y I 2 O P O
D E N I A m L
D P U T 1st D
D Q 5 M B T M H
E D It
F T 1st
Go T M, R T B B
H A L T
If Y D W Y A D, Y W G W Y A G
J 4 T
K C B, It W If Y W I
K I S S
L O n L T
L & L L
M M M It
1 D A A \oplus
O Is 2 M, A T I N E
P P & T
P B 4 P
S A T O f B S A T
There I N P S B A D C M It W
T T Th
T T \oplus
T T S Pa
T 12 S Pr
Under E S T I A S

Answer Key

Do T N ↗ T: Do The Next Right Thing
D C Y I 2 O P O: Don't Compare Your Insides to Other People's Outsides
D E N I Am L: Don't Even Notice I Am Lying
D P U T 1st D: Don't Pick Up The First Drink (or Drug)
D Q 5 M B T M H: Don't Quit Five Minutes Before The Miracle Happens
E D It: Easy Does It
F T 1 st : First Things First
Go T M, R T B B: Go To Meetings, Read The Big Book
H A L T: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired
If Y D W Y A D, Y W G W Y A G: If You Do What You Always Do, You Will Get What You Always Got
J 4 T: Just For Today
K C B, It W If Y W I: Keep Coming Back, It Works If You Work It
K I S S: Keep It Simple Stupid
L On L T: Life On Life's Terms
L & L L: Live And Let Live
M M M It: Meeting Makers Make It
1 D A A ⌚: One Day At A Time
O Is 2 M, A T I N E: One Is Too Many, A Thousand Is Never Enough
P P & T: People, Places, And Things
P B 4 P: Principles Before Personalities
S A T Of B S A T: Sick And Tired Of Being Sick And Tired
There I N P S B A D C M It W: There Is No Problem So Bad A Drink Cannot Make It Worse
T T Th: Think, Think, Think
T T ⌚: Time Takes Time
T T S Pa: This Too Shall Pass
T 12 S Pr: The Twelve Step Program
Under E S T I A S: Under Every Skirt There Is A Slip