



# Steps for Living

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Twelve Steps for All of Us



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# Steps for Living

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## A Path to Serenity

**N**o one understands the principle of “get better or get worse” more profoundly than someone in recovery from an incurable, progressive, potentially fatal condition. Diabetes, asthma, chronic hypertension, and other incurable diseases require sustained changes in behavior and lifestyle to remedy damage and stave off worse effects.

It’s true for the rest of us, too. Even if we don’t have a chronic disease, many of us recognize that we do suffer from “chronic disease:” We want to be serene, happy, and balanced. We keep trying to manage our lives to be happy, successful, loving and loved, and we don’t seem to quite have the knack of pulling it off for any length of time.

We seem to do fine when life sends us what we want, when our hard work “pays off,” when things are going well. But we fail at staying balanced, happy, and serene— because inevitably life sends challenges, our hard work goes unrecognized, and things fall apart.

Everyone gets their share of challenges; tough ones, too. Financial difficulties, family problems, poor (sometimes catastrophically so) decisions, the death of loved ones, struggles with bad habits that impair our well-being. These are the “everyday traumas” of living, and we’re not always well-equipped to deal with them.

Fortunately (or unfortunately?) we live in a world full of generous, knowledgeable individuals who have succeeded where we fail, and who are willing to share all kinds of self-help books, programs, philosophies, methods, and therapies with us.

For every kind of challenge life can throw at us, there are dozens of these systems, ranging from the commonsensical to the scientific to the idealistic. Some are helpful for a particular problem, for a short time. Many inspire us with determination, motivate us for awhile, and then end up on a bookshelf, yet another thing we tried and abandoned.

Why doesn’t anything seem to work very well for very long?

The challenges never stop coming. As soon as we learn to cope with (for example) a failed relationship, we’re handed caregiver responsibilities for an aging parent. No sooner have we come to terms with that, than the job we rely on moves to another city. Or our child is brought home by the police for some offense.

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We can't necessarily change the way life throws challenges at us. But we can change our responses to them. That's not easy. It means sustained changes in how we act, think, maybe even in how we live. A very tall order. In effect, we're talking about a process of lifelong "recovery" from a chronic dis-ease that keeps us vulnerable to stress, throwing us off-balance, and denying us a sense of fulfillment.

One chronic disease, addiction, has produced a groundbreaking, highly effective regimen for this kind of change. By observation, trial and error, and repeated experiments, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous identified twelve steps that have helped millions maintain recovery and live progressively more satisfying lives.

Formulated in an era when understanding of chronic disease processes was less developed- and understanding of mental health was strongly influenced by dominant religious and cultural norms, the Steps' language today may seem quaint. Even off-putting, in an era of religious diversity and wide-ranging self-help ideologies.

But AA has a long track record of helping people maintain recovery, and today's AA is highly diverse. If some AA groups choose to form around common characteristics like gender, sexual orientation, military service, etc., there are thousands more that welcome anyone who simply desires to recover. And it remains effective, in spite of an "instruction manual" published in 1939 and updated very little since.

What is it about the Steps, and their practice, that enables desperately miserable individuals, terminally ill with a disease that distorts thinking and hijacks brain function, to interrupt that disease process? And further, to embark on rewarding, productive, fulfilling lives?

And can we apply it to our own disease? Maybe, with a little re-thinking, the Steps can help us embark on our own rewarding, productive, fulfilling lives.

### Is it for me?

Take a few minutes to ponder this impromptu "quiz":

1. Have you in the past resolved to change the way you live, to be happier, stronger, saner, more relaxed— yet found yourself feeling guilty about (or making excuses for) not having 'stuck with the plan?'

*Most of us practicing Steps for Living have made all kinds of promises and resolutions to ourselves about how we're going to be better people, stop messing up our own lives, etc. Then we started living the Steps, and realized that if we can change just for today, it's enough.*

2. Do people keep offering unwelcome suggestions or opinions on how you should deal with the problems in your life?



*Steps for Living isn't about giving advice to others on solving particular problems. We talk about how our own problems affected us, and how we deal with them.*

3. Have you switched from strategy to strategy, or from distraction to distraction, in an effort to "work around," or avoid dealing with certain life problems?

*We've all done it—moved from town to country, from exercise to nutrition, from religion to philosophy, from hobby to avocation, from job to job, in the belief that each new change of place or external focus might be the key to changing ourselves. Many things helped temporarily, yet none were ever 'enough.'*

4. Do you have a nagging feeling that most other people have a better life than you do, or have figured things out better than you have, and wish you knew their secret?

*Realizing that no one else's "secret" will work for us is a moment of liberation, and the Steps help us "figure it out" for ourselves a little more with each day of practice.*

5. Do you catch yourself thinking that "nobody can be happy in such a messed-up world," and identifying all the ways your life would improve if things around you just changed for the better?

*Sure, it's a messed-up world, but changing something we can change—our own thinking—not only improves our lives, it helps us see and contribute to positive changes in the world around us.*

6. Has your inability to deal with problems in your life damaged important relationships, or interfered with forming new ones?

*Dealing with shame, self-hatred, unrealistic expectations of ourselves, we come to understand and value healthy relationships—and become a better family member, friend, partner, community member.*

7. Do you suspect you are "your own worst enemy" when it comes to achieving the goals you set for yourself?

*We've struggled with shame and resentment that we can't seem to deal with the problem(s) that burden us 'once and for all.' Relinquishing our attempts to control the uncontrollable opens new paths to sanity.*

8. Have you been advised by health professionals that reducing chronic stress or anxiety may be important to your health?

*Easier said than done, right? But while we can't control things that trigger stress or anxiety, the Steps help us understand and avoid some triggers, and change how we respond to those we can't avoid, robbing them of much of their power to damage our health.*

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9. Have others attempted to interfere in your life on the grounds that you're not doing a good job managing your problems?

*"If one person tells you you're being a horse's ass, laugh it off. If two people tell you, count your legs. If three people tell you, buy a saddle." The old saying adds humor to a difficult realization: Sometimes others see clearly what we've been avoiding, or denying.*

There's no "right" or "wrong" answers to this quiz-- no key, no magic number of yes or no answers. These are all things that we have struggled with, and that we've found help for in the Steps for Living.

Steps for Living is free of charge. It's for anyone who wants to give it a try.

What have you got to lose?

### **Spirituality ≠ Religion**

Many of us find great help and comfort in religious beliefs. But many of us also have troubled relationships with religion in our past or present. And some of us simply don't believe in a deity and are weary of and/or annoyed at attempts to make us change that.

Thus, any program that has strong spiritual foundations is already operating in a minefield of assumptions about what "spiritual" does mean, or should mean. And whether it's for us.

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous has a whole chapter called "We Agnostics," that addresses the issue of whether any particular religion or religious belief is intrinsic to the AA program. It makes the point clearly that for any kind of believer at all, the program offers no conflict to their particular doctrine or beliefs. And for the many non-denominational agnostics who choose to define deity on their own terms, it works just fine.

Pretty good, for 1936. But what about those of us who simply don't believe in a deity at all, or who have a definite bias against anything irrational? Can a program based on spiritual growth and practice work for us, too?

In (re)formulating the Steps for Living, we take the approach that while spiritual insight and growth are foundations of the program's effectiveness, "spiritual" is an aspect of human nature that is not based only in religious faith or even in belief in a deity. Nonbelievers experience wonder, hope, aspiration for experiences and awareness. And believers in a deity have no monopoly on commitment to principles of human development, individually and in communities.

So when we refer to a 'higher power,' to the ability of spiritual growth to bring meaning to our lives, and similar concepts, we leave these definitions up to each individual. The most concrete-minded rationalist will acknowledge that there are things more powerful than we individual humans. Our universe is full of imponderable factors

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that influence the shape of our lives, and whether it is chaos theory or theology, finding ways to coexist with unknowns requires some leaps of faith.

For most of us, the challenges and stress we struggle with don't impair many types of thinking at all. Various cognitive skills still work fine for us. We might be excellent at maths, or able to do a complex historical analysis, or write program code, or design gardens, or discover why a car engine isn't performing.

Other types of thinking— often thought processes that deal with uncertainties like the future, relationships, choices, wants and fears— these are vulnerable to stress, and can become distorted over time. Maybe it's because of the type of thinking that gets distorted, that it helps to ground ongoing recovery on spiritual foundations.

### Steps for Living

**Step One:** Recognize that trying to control life's uncontrollable circumstances is futile, and that the harder we try, the more miserable we become.

**Step Two:** Have faith that good, orderly direction exists outside of ourselves, and can help us change.

**Step Three:** Accept good orderly direction as a Higher Power for accomplishing change, rather than relying exclusively on our own judgment.

**Step Four:** Look carefully at our actions and choices, and identify the flaws of character they reveal.

**Step Five:** Extend trust to share what we learn about ourselves, and accept feedback based in good orderly direction.

**Step Six:** Accept the need for change and become ready to transform our attitudes and choices.

**Step Seven:** Humbly embrace transformation based on the good orderly direction of our Higher Power.

**Step Eight:** Identify others harmed by our actions and choices, and become willing to make amends.

**Step Nine:** Make amends directly to those we have harmed, except where doing so may cause more harm.

**Step Ten:** Watch for harmful trends in our attitudes and thinking, and promptly admit to our mistakes.



**Step Eleven:** Continue learning from daily practice, self-examination, and attention to the Higher Power of good orderly direction.

**Step Twelve:** Carry the message about the power of this program, not just to assist others seeking aid, but to help us stay on the path and practice these principles in all our affairs.

## Making it a Program

**T**he Steps for Living are a blueprint for mental and spiritual health that extend far beyond their origin as tools for maintaining abstinence from an addictive substance. These principles offer hope to anyone coping with chaos or misery— whether because of a chronic brain disorder, or a pattern of self-defeat based on co-dependency, bad choice-making, or chronic unhappiness with how we live and how the world treats us.

It is only a blueprint. It has to be implemented to work.

There, too, we can learn from the successes of AA. The principles that make practicing the Steps into a program are simple:

### **Daily practice of study, self-education, and self-diagnosis**

Using the Steps, helpful literature, insights from others, on a daily basis take time to review the principles of this commitment to health, and apply them to ourselves. Using meditation, reading, journaling, prayer, or whatever other solitary practice(s) work for us, continue to build our understanding, insight, and depth of commitment to this program.

### **Sponsorship**

Or mentorship, if you prefer. The essence of sponsorship is guidance through these Steps, by someone who is willing to share their experience with the program. A sponsor also reinforces our commitment to practice through being 'accountable' to someone else in the program. In time, we'll make the same commitment to help someone else.

### **Mutual support**

Ideally, this happens when a few of us who have made the commitment to transforming our lives with this tool can get together regularly, and discuss our struggles and accomplishments in living the program. In person is best, of course, but online or in a conference call or any way we can share will be a powerful source of strength in sticking to this blueprint and making progress.

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### Carrying the message

This doesn't mean proselytize or urge the program on anyone and everyone. It doesn't mean wear the program on your sleeve or make a parade of it. But when we encounter another struggling, suffering person, wrapped and trapped in their own misery, we can reach out to them. We can share our experience with these Steps, with this program, and offer them the information needed to connect with us. By helping them, we help ourselves.

### Steps for Living Program Principles

One of the most important things the founders of AA did to ensure that it would not be distorted or used for purposes other than mutual help in recovery was to set out some principles for the program. They wanted to keep the simple practices simple, and prevent them from being commercialized, co-opted by charismatic leaders, or discredited by controversy and overreaching.

Although called "Traditions," the principles that emerged were initially based less on universally-practiced and accepted norms, than on hard lessons about leadership and the relationship of temporal authority to spiritual power.

As of this writing, there are no "Steps for Living" groups meeting regularly, that we know of. In the hopes that those who find help and comfort in this program will reach out and share in accordance with Step 12, and that groups will form and organizational principles will be useful, we have similarly adapted the Traditions into these Program Principles.

- 10.** Our common well-being is our priority: Personal progress in recovery depends on the strength of the program.
- 11.** For our common purpose the ultimate authority is our Higher Power as we conceive it. Leaders in the program are but trusted servants, they do not govern.
- 12.** The only requirement for inclusion is the desire to live and grow in recovery via Steps for Living.
- 13.** Each Steps for Living group should be autonomous except in matters that concern another group or the program as a whole.
- 14.** Each Steps for Living group has but one purpose: To carry this message of recovery to those still suffering.
- 15.** Steps for Living will not endorse, affiliate, finance, or allow the use of its name for any related program or enterprise; issues of prestige, money, etc. can only distract from our purpose.
- 16.** Steps for Living groups must be self-supporting, declining outside sponsorship, contributions, or monetary support of any kind.
- 17.** Steps for Living work remains forever non-professional, but



## MAKING IT A PROGRAM

individual groups or the Program may purchase services or employ individuals to provide administrative assistance.

- 18.** Steps for Living is neither organized nor incorporated, but may create service committees responsible to those served by the Program.
- 19.** Steps for Living has no opinion on outside issues, and will make no statements or permit any activities that may involve us in public or professional controversy.
- 20.** Our work is based on attraction, not promotion; we should maintain functional anonymity at the level of media attention and public policy.
- 21.** Our Program is based on the principles and practices, not on individuals' work; the "functional anonymity" we require is to preserve the subordination of personal aims and advantage to the benefits of the Program for all.