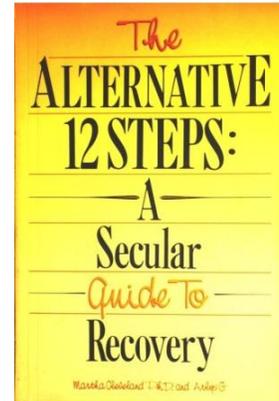


A Program For Living

What Is The 12-Step Way?

The title of this chapter says it all. The 12 Steps are a program for living, a program of action fueled by spiritual energy. Basically the Steps suggest a system of holistic healing – a practical system of action that integrates mind, body and spirit. When our mind, body and spirit are integrated, we approach life with a new attitude that leads to balance and contentment.

We believe the 12-Step program suggests a practical philosophy for each of us – a philosophy of living. We also believe this program needs to be kept separate from any religious implications. In order to work the Steps, what we think about God doesn't matter but what we believe about our own whole self does.



The 12 Steps are a working framework anyone can use to recover from personal turmoil and pain. There are no set concepts or dogma. Each person decides the program's meaning in a unique way. There are no leaders, no right way or wrong way, only our own way. We needn't compare our process or the way we work the program with anyone else's. Each person's interpretation is valid and life-enhancing for that person. And we don't even have to understand how or why it works. We just find that as we apply the Steps, our lives begin to change – and the change is good.

The 12-Step program focuses on self-examination and a connection with spiritual energy. It also encourages us to go beyond theorizing about our condition and to use the Steps as a specific, pragmatic, practical guide for recovery. It's not enough to think and reflect about our problems. As Bill W. said, "The spiritual life is not a theory, we have to live it." In other words, we must think about our situation and then physically, emotionally and spiritually act on it.

Maybe the reason the program is useful to so many different kinds of people is that it pulls together basically contradictory ideas. In order to carry out the Steps, we must make a personal individual choice to connect with spiritual resources greater than we are. We make a controlled, conscious choice to transcend the circumstances of our lives. At the same time, we seek help from a source of spiritual power outside of our own personal control and beyond our everyday consciousness. This contradictory nature of the 12 Steps allows the program to serve anyone, no matter what their religious or philosophical belief system.

How Do We live We 12-Step Way?

Harmful compulsive behaviors or addictions are any thoughts, feelings or actions that mask our emotional pain and that we are unwilling or unable to change. They are the marks of our unhealthy self, our self-destructiveness. For many of us this kind of self-defeating behavior has been our way of coping with life's difficulties. The problem is that self-defeating behavior does just what it says: it defeats our self. Life gets more and more out of control, harder and harder for us to manage. This is where the 12 Steps can help.

We can't eliminate problems from our past, present or future, but the Steps can help us deal with

what has been, what is now and what is to come. When we live as they suggest, we can stop letting pain and problems control us. We can learn to say no to what hurts us and yes to ideas, feelings and actions that help us.

We work the Steps with both our conscious and unconscious minds. We use our conscious minds when we read and study for greater understanding of our problems. We call a friend from the program when we are in trouble. We consciously examine a Step and think about how to apply it to our lives. With commitment and deliberation, we practice our new ways until they are a part of us.

We use our unconscious minds, too. We use them when we meditate, when we are absorbed in creative thought or work, when we dream. New ideas and feelings “come” to us; different solutions to our problems “appear” in our minds. We think about the Steps and our unconscious responds. Our conscious and unconscious energies flow back and forth, feeding on each other, stimulating each other, producing change and growth. Slowly, slowly they lead us to health and serenity.

When we carry out the actions suggested by the 12 Steps, we examine every part of our selves and our lives: our past, present and hopes for the future. We assess our true character and nature. We look at the experiences we've had and how we've reacted to them. We look at how we've played out our roles and we examine our creativity.

Working the Steps means that we examine each part of our selves and we look at the whole picture, too. In a way, each of us is like a kaleidoscope made up of many varied pieces – physical pieces, mental pieces, emotional pieces. All these pieces are in almost constant movement, resting only for a moment to form the unique picture that is us at that single instant in time. Then it changes to a new arrangement as life is lived and the scope is turned.

What Can The Program Do For Us?

The results of living the 12-Step way are wonderful. Here are some of the things that can happen for anyone who commits to the program and works at following it.

We Learn To live Right Here, Right Now.

The Steps teach us not to spend our time living in the past or imagining the future. What was, was; what will be, will be. Our only chance for changing, growing and living well is in the present instant. Right now is the only moment we have to act on our lives. The only moment we have. Living in the here and now produces self-empowerment, which means we learn to change today, not to put it off. And we learn to take whatever we can from the present moment that will strengthen us.

Perhaps we glance up to see the sun shining through new spring leaves against a pale blue sky or look up from the evening TV and notice a full moon shining in through the window. We experience a moment of wonder and happiness at the beauty. This moment, this remembered image and the feeling that goes with it, can be stored in our memory bank to be retrieved and give us a feeling of peace when we are anxious or fearful.

We Learn To Respect Ourselves.

For many of us it's very hard to act on our own needs and feelings instead of blindly responding to the feelings and actions of the people around us.

It's hard to answer the phone and tell a friend, "I'm sorry, but I just can't talk now," when we are tired and there are a million things to do before dinner. It's hard to tell our neighbor we can't help him move this weekend because we're going to stay home and watch the football game.

It's difficult for many of us to respect ourselves enough to answer our own needs first. It doesn't feel right because our self-respect is so low. And even if we want to change our ways, we don't know how. But the Steps teach us. Gradually we learn to take care of our own fatigue before the needs of a friend. Gradually we learn to turn away the requests of another when we need time to ourselves.

We Learn To Detach From Others And Let Them Run Their Own Lives.

The 12 Steps teach us a lot about detachment. When we detach from someone, we separate from them emotionally. We separate with compassion and without anger. It's really just a matter of respect. We learn to respect other people enough to detach from trying to manage their lives or control their feelings. We learn to let others do what they do, think what they think, feel what they feel. We don't interfere by trying to change them, fix up whatever mess they get into or make them feel better or worse.

When our adolescent daughter gets into trouble at school, we express our interest, give her our support and let her repair the situation and take whatever consequences come. Detachment may sound cruel, but really it is respectful because it assumes she is strong enough and smart enough to handle her own affairs. We respect her enough to support her and, at the same time, stay out of her way to let her work out her own problems in her own way. We respect her enough to believe in her.

We Learn To Take Care Of The Child Within Us.

We each carry a child within us, the remnant of the little boy or little girl we once were. Those of us who are compulsive or addictive live with a frightened, angry little person deep in our unconscious minds. This child carries the pain that blocks our road to serenity.

The 12 Steps teach us to find, to know and to heal our inner child. We learn that we have created our present world out of our child's past. Today is not the past, and we no longer have to live by its rules. Today, as adults, we can speak to our inner child. We can choose which of our child's feelings, thoughts and beliefs are relevant and useful in our present life and which we can put away.

We Find A New View Of Reality.

Probably one of the most important benefits the 12-Step program gives us is a clearer view of reality. This doesn't mean we get the benefits without lots of effort on our part. As we live the 12-Step way, we break out of the web of denial, rationalizations, justifications, lies, pretenses and posturings that has created our present world.

Our reality is different when our view of life becomes less clouded and our concept of self becomes stronger. When we see more clearly and feel more confident, our life changes and we experience a reality that feels brighter and more honest. We can say, "The reason I didn't get the supervisor job is that I'm often late and sometimes take more than my hour for lunch. It's not because Judy buttered up the boss and he fell for it. I really wanted that job, and I'm going to have to change some things so I can get the next promotion." No excuses, no rationalizations, no

justifications or pretenses – instead, a clear honesty and forthright purpose.

Our Relationships Change.

Our relationship to ourselves is the most important one. The program teaches us how to honor ourselves, how to become our own best friend. We learn to listen to ourselves, trust ourselves and know we won't ever let ourselves down. We truly believe we must have this kind of self-love and respect before we can have honest relationships with other people.

The program also gives us a structure to help us explore our relationships with others. In the past, even though we may have felt powerless, we often acted in powerful ways that hurt people around us. We controlled people by manipulating them. We yelled or clung or coldly turned away. We loved conditionally, and we alone set the conditions.

The Steps help us discover the pain we have caused and how to make amends for causing it. We learn we cannot control our relationships, we can only control ourselves within them. As a result, we can build respectful relationships. And in respectful relationships everyone gets better and better.

Finally the program teaches us how to work on the relationship between ourselves and our spiritual resources. This relationship provides great power for our healing, and it's a source many of us haven't used very well. The Steps teach us to stop assigning power only to the conscious control of our thinking mind. They encourage us to be open to healing energy from all kinds of internal and external sources. Each of us can find spiritual connections that are uniquely ours. Then we never have to feel alone in the world – our own spiritual supports are always available to us.

The Journey Is Our Own

It seems that once we start to walk the 12-Step path, we are in recovery from self-abuse. Each of us instinctively does what we need to do to heal. Our spirit strengthens our healthy self, and our self-destructive self begins to disappear. But it's slow. It takes time for our changes to work deep into the fabric of our lives.

Real growth may appear as insignificant happenings, tiny things done differently, minute alterations in the way we respond. There is no sudden, dramatic high – we are never magically “healed.” Many of us will make recovery a life-long adventure. We must be patient, generous and loving with ourselves. We must learn to celebrate our small successes. Small changes add up to real healing and growth as we move toward self-acceptance and self-love.

Our addictions and compulsions are negative processes. Some of us suffer from severe addictions to alcohol and drugs, gambling, overeating, undereating or sex. Some of us are controlled by chronic obsession, resentment, anger, anxiety or problem relationships. Whether they threaten our lives or our spirits, any of these processes can act as an insulating cloak around us – a dark, thick shroud that has no openings. We are suffocating in a burial gown we have made for ourselves, and we are blind to new ways that might help us rip open its seams.

Beginning to work a 12-Step program is a way to pick up our own personal seam ripper. With it we can cut a small hole in our shroud. We push first a finger, then a hand, then our whole arm through the opening and become connected with what can heal us. We find hope and strength. We find new ways to make connections with our selves and with our world.

Eventually we will have many holes in the seams of our shroud. They will be big enough to step through, so we move outside and stand in the world with full spiritual vision. We can take our rightful place, a place of peace and respect. We will be truly alive. We will move from resentment to acceptance, from self-pity to gratitude, from fear to trust, from dishonesty to honesty and from confusion to serenity. It's a long, hard trip, but it's a journey anyone can travel.

A statement often read at the opening of 12-Step meetings goes like this: "The 12-Step program is a spiritual program, based on action, coming from love." This means the Steps are based on practical work and action. It also means the energy of love for ourselves, for others and for the connection with countless spiritual resources leads to our ever-expanding spirit. The Steps are not static. Their meaning for us changes as we change. Then we change in relationship to their changed meaning. Its in this interplay between Step and self that emotional and spiritual healing happens, and serenity becomes an active force in our lives.

This is an introductory chapter of the book, [The Alternative 12 Steps: A Secular Guide to Recovery](#), written by Martha Cleveland and Arlys G. It was initially published in 1991 and has been re-published as an ebook by AA Agnostica. Further information about the book is available at [Recovery 101](#).