

# Step Interpretations



***Fifty Chosen Articles:  
Number Forty-Nine.  
On the Menu of AA Agnostica.***

*Four authors interpret each of the 12 Steps. This is a major part of  
[The Little Book: A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps.](#)*

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## **Step 1**

Allen  
Berger

This Step helps us shatter our reliance on a false self, which was fed through lack of self-awareness, poor self-worth, and lack of language, plus denial, and a physical, mental and spiritual compulsion.

Stephanie  
Covington

The first step in recovery is to look inside ourselves. Turning inward is the beginning of becoming more truthful with ourselves. Honesty is essential because addictions thrive on dishonesty: we have become accustomed to hiding from our true feelings and values. (p. 15)

Gabor  
Maté

Step One accepts the full negative impact of the addiction process in one's life. It is a triumph over the human tendency to deny. We recognize that our resolution and strategies... have not liberated us from the addiction process and all its mechanisms that are deeply ingrained in our brains, emotions and behaviours.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

By opening our hearts, admitting our powerlessness over alcohol, drugs, and other people's choices, we are able to remember we are part of the great stream of We. (p. 11)

## Step 2

Allen  
Berger

Hope is an important ingredient in all forms of healing. We are given hope, and humbled further because we won't be able to solve our problem on our own.

Stephanie  
Covington

What can we believe in? Whom can we trust? The problem is that life is more difficult and empty without someone or something to trust and believe in. (p. 27)

Gabor  
Maté

(A higher power) may, but does not necessarily, imply belief in a deity. It means heeding a higher truth than the immediate desires or terrors of the ego. (Dr. Maté provides a fuller understanding of the higher power concept in chapter 34 of his book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*.)

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

We "come to" out of the fog of our deluded, addictive mind, reaching for something more. There, waiting for us, are the ancient practices of meditation and mindfulness. (p. 20)

## Step 3

Allen  
Berger

This Step is about commitment. We need to make a commitment to finding a new and more effective way of living.

Stephanie  
Covington

Of course, simple things aren't always easy. This Step says we turn our will over. When we cling to our will – our fierce determination that things should always go our way – we'll always be in conflict with something. Our wilfulness keeps us pushing against, not flowing with life. (p. 51)

Gabor  
Maté

The word God could have a religious meaning for many people. For many others, it means laying trust in the universal truths and higher values that reside at the spiritual core of human beings, but are feared and resisted by the grasping, anxious, past-conditioned ego.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

We decide to let go of our delusions of control, and instead turn toward three specific spiritual practices. These practices are... taking refuge in awakening (buddha)... in the path of mindfulness, understanding, and love (dharma)... in community (sangha). (p. 30)

## Step 4

Allen  
Berger

The essence of this Step involves increasing our self-awareness, self-honesty, and insight into our behavior.

Stephanie  
Covington

When we carry intense guilt, we can hardly bear the thought of reviewing our past deeds. It may feel too painful to think about how we have hurt others and hurt ourselves. We may question the value of opening old wounds and remembering scenes we'd rather forget. It was a revelation to discover that Step Four wasn't just about

agonizing about my past. Instead, it was about getting to know myself better. (p. 59)

Gabor  
Maté

The idea here is not self-condemnation, but the preparation of a clean slate for a life of sobriety. We search our conscience to identify where and how we have betrayed ourselves or others, not to wallow in guilt but to leave ourselves unburdened in the present and to help clear our path to the future.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

In Step Four we are asked to look at parts of ourselves we are uncomfortable with, the parts that we reject and keep hidden out of fear or shame. (p. 49)

### Step 5

Allen  
Berger

We learn the value of self-disclosure, authenticity, and healthy relationships. This Step also continues to dismantle the false self and false pride and helps develop more humility and authenticity.

Stephanie  
Covington

The Fifth Step offers healing. It shows us how to create a new kind of relationship with people. We make ourselves vulnerable and open, allowing ourselves to be seen for who we really are, maybe for the first time. (p. 93)

Gabor  
Maté

Communicating the information – to ourselves in the form of a journal, or to some other human being – makes our moral self-searching into a concrete reality. Shame for ourselves is replaced by a sense of responsibility. We move from powerlessness to strength.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

When we admit our wrongs and receive the acceptance and kind understanding of another human being in the Fifth Step, we begin the “healing into the depths” of our addictive mind. Taking Step Five can be the start of cultivating loving compassion towards ourselves. (p. 67)

### Step 6

Allen  
Berger

We experience the pain of what we have done to hurt ourselves and others, and we begin to understand and develop insight into our behavioral patterns and the psychological functions of our character defects.

Stephanie  
Covington

In this Step we become willing to be open to change, willing to let go of habits or traits that cause our lives to be unbalanced. We become open to a deeper knowing and a clearer vision. (p. 95)

Gabor  
Maté

We accept that our missteps and our lack of integrity do not represent who we really are and commit to let go of these tendencies as they continue to arise in the future – for they surely will.

Thérèse  
Jacob-Stewart

The Eastern view is that defects of character are rooted in confusion, based on deluded ideas about ourselves and others. Mindfulness practice develops the clarity to cut through our confusion, getting to the root of it. Once we become aware of a delusion, its spell is broken. (p. 79)

### Step 7

Allen  
Berger

We are learning the importance of being vulnerable and asking for help. This is important in attaining more humility.

Stephanie  
Covington

But for all of our awareness, we may still not accept ourselves. Step Seven gives us the opportunity to move from self-awareness to self-acceptance. Acceptance is the key to change. Another paradox I have learned in recovery is that when I accept myself just as I am, I can change. (p. 120)

Gabor  
Maté

Our shortcomings are where we fall short of, and even lose sight of, our true potential. Thus, in giving up the short-term rewards of addictive behaviours, we are choosing a vast enrichment of who we are. Humility is in order in place of pride, that desperate grandiosity of the ego.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

We felt the pain of our defects in Step Six. We find it uncomfortable to be self-absorbed, or bitter, or filled with fear. We don't want to be separated from our true nature any longer; it's painful to veil it in delusion and choke its expression. (p. 100)

### Step 8

Allen  
Berger

The lessons taught in this Step have to do with the fundamentals of healthy communication; delivering our message to the proper person and being as specific as possible.

Stephanie  
Covington

Where is there ongoing bitterness, animosity, fear or hostility in our relationships? Whom do we resent or avoid? But as we continue to work this Step, we realize that "harm" has other meanings as well. We might want to consider relationships that feel unresolved – whether we believe we've harmed someone or not. Is there unfinished business to attend to? (p. 122)

Gabor  
Maté

We are prepared to accept responsibility for each and every sin of commission or omission we have perpetrated on people in our lives.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

Finding Pearls in the Dust-bin: Step Eight invites us to strip off the armor of our denial, to let go of rationalizing, justifying, or blaming others for our actions. (p.115)

### Step 9

Allen  
Berger

We learn to be responsible for our behavior; we learn how to respect others; and we learn that we are as important as others, no more and no less.

Stephanie  
Covington

What does it mean to make amends to another person? It means taking responsibility for your part in a relationship. Responsibility refers to the ability to respond appropriately. When you do, you extend hope for something new to yourself and to another person. (p. 137)

Gabor  
Maté

Step Nine is not about us, but about others. Its purpose is not to make us feel or look good, but to provide restitution where that's appropriate... Our fears of how we will look to others should neither drive this step nor inhibit it.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

Once we have atoned for our wrongs – even if the other person is not inclined to forgive us, even if this person is not willing to own his or her part in the difficulty – we need to let go... We can experience the relief of having no secrets, making no excuses, and holding no pretences. (p. 119)

### Step 10

Allen  
Berger

This Step concerns maintaining our humility, being honest with ourselves, and guarding against false pride.

Stephanie  
Covington

Now we make a daily commitment to continuing observation and reflection – recognizing when we're out of balance or hurting ourselves or others. Our ongoing awareness allows us to meet each day and each relationship with responsibility. (p. 152)

Gabor  
Maté

This is Step Four in action. As human beings, most of us are far away from attaining perfect saintliness in all our behaviours or interactions, and therefore can afford to give up the process of moral self-inventory only when they lower us into the ground.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

Ongoing mindfulness helps us notice the pressure in our chest, the hairs rising on our neck, or the toxic thoughts that precede an emotional hijack. Regular on-the-spot checks – before, during, or after our actions – help us have fewer emotional or relationship messes to clean up. (p. 131)

### Step 11

Allen  
Berger

Maintenance is not enough. We need to continue to grow or we will regress. This Step is about expanding our consciousness and continuing to seek more knowledge about our new way of life.

Stephanie  
Covington

We can choose whatever practice gives us a sense of inner peace. (p. 173)

Gabor  
Maté

This is not a demand for submission but a suggested path to freedom. Human life, I believe, is balanced on four pillars: physical health, emotional integration, intellectual awareness and spiritual practice. There are no prescriptions for the latter.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

In Step Eleven, we find that making conscious contact with Great Reality deep down within us provides a quiet peace, quenching, at last, our restless yearnings. (p. 143)

## Step 12

Allen  
Berger

We develop a new purpose to our life that is not about us. We discover the importance of being of value to others, and we learn that we need to maintain our integrity in all our affairs.

Stephanie  
Covington

With recovery this can mean that we offer a straightforward explanation of the Twelve Steps, as well as our own personal experience – how we reworked, translated, revised, or otherwise molded the Steps until they were relevant to us. We all have more to offer than the party line and a by-the-book recitation of the Steps. We can share our story any way we like. (p. 188)

Gabor  
Maté

Carrying the message to others means manifesting the principles of integrity, truth, sobriety and compassion in our lives. It may call for providing support and leadership when appropriate and welcome, but does not mean proselytizing on behalf of any program, group or set of beliefs.

Thérèse  
Jacobs-Stewart

Through the Twelve Step program, we cross over to a new way of living. We awaken to freedom from cravings, shallow desires, and clinging to what we cannot change... We can live the way of kindness in the world, in “all our affairs,” and let our true face shine. (p. 164)

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## Conclusion

As we mention in the introduction to *The Little Book*, there are at least as many interpretations of the Steps as there are addicts who “work” them.

To provide a sense of the scope of these interpretations of the Steps, we have highlighted the interpretations of four people.

The first set of interpretations is by Dr. Allen Berger. An internationally recognized expert in the science of recovery, Dr. Berger wrote Hazelden’s popular recovery mainstay, *12 Stupid Things That Mess Up Recovery* (2008); *12 Smart Things to Do When the Booze and Drugs Are Gone* (2010) and *12 Hidden Rewards of Making Amends* (2012). He is widely known for his work on several areas of recovery that include integrating modern psychotherapy with the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, emotional sobriety, and training therapists and counsellors. His most recent book is a must read: [12 Essential Insights for Emotional Sobriety](#).

The next author is Stephanie Covington. Her interpretations of the Steps are derived from her book, [A Woman's Way Through the Twelve Steps](#). Dr. Covington is a pioneer in the field of women's issues, addiction, and recovery. According to Linda R., whose review of Covington's book is on AA Agnostica, "the Steps are presented as tools to help alcoholics understand what their ultimate values are – their inner life – so that they can lead a life that is consistent with those values – their outer life – in their actions and relations with other people in the world around them." Written in 1994, *A Woman's Way* has become a favourite of many women in AA.

Next comes a set by Gabor Maté. Dr. Maté is the author of [In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts](#). Dr. Maté writes at the beginning of the appendix:

*Although I have not been an active participant in Twelve-Step programs, I see great value in the process they prescribe and recognize their effectiveness in helping many people to live in sobriety – or at least in abstinence. As explained in Chapter 32, abstinence is the disciplined avoidance of an addictive substance or behaviour. Sobriety is developing a mind-state focused not on staying away from something bad, but on living a life led by positive values and intentions. It means living in the present moment, neither driven by ghosts of the past nor lulled and tormented by fantasies and fears of the future.*

Finally, we have a set of interpretations by Thérèse Jacobs-Stewart. Her interpretations were culled from her book [Mindfulness and the 12 Steps](#). Ms. Jacobs-Stewart is a counsellor and a woman in recovery. In 2004 she founded the Mind Roads Meditation Center, a home to twelve steps and mindfulness meetings in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Our views on the meaning of some of these Steps tend to evolve over time.

So we often need to return to them.

Indeed, some in recovery do them over and over again.

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