

Rigorous Honesty and Addiction Recovery (Part Two – Rigorous Honesty and the Steps)



By Richard Clark

I approach addiction with the belief it is a mental illness, and the best recovery results require a psychological twelve steps incorporated within longer term therapy/counselling. Addiction is not a disease, not a mental ‘condition’ of some vague description, and certainly not a collection of character defects requiring God and prayer (and forgiveness is one of the worst things to include in recovery). The psychological steps I present here, when coupled with longer-term counselling, have offered an 80% success rate in my private practise. Recovery is much more effective if all religious speculations are excluded.

In 1984 I was four years into recovery and in close and supportive relationships with a psychotherapist and two AA spiritual advisors. They respected that I was an atheist. I reworded the steps to my atheist satisfaction, and have used them in my work as a sponsor and counsellor since 1985. A secular ‘How It Works’ with these atheist steps is an appendix in my book, *The Addiction Recovery Handbook*. In the 1980s I realized that the nature of honesty changed dramatically as a person progressed through the steps. This is a very basic explanation.

1. *We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable.*

Being honest about active addiction is relatively straight forward and doesn’t need a lot of in-depth psychology or insightful awareness. Honesty seems relatively easy when the crises of self-destruction and chaotic irresponsibility are obvious. Why, then, is it so difficult to admit “I’m an addict,”?

Since 1939 we have been indoctrinated into believing alcoholics are bad characters (‘sinners’ from the Christian Temperance movement, The Oxford Group, and AA). Society has been trained to view morbid

alcoholics, drug addicts, notorious gamblers, and porn/sex addicts as nasty people—sinners in need of forgiveness. It's difficult enough to admit mental illness but to declare you are an addict of some description is the shameful admission of being a very bad person. This is why people so often protect their anonymity—the social and religious persecution of being irresponsibly bad.

2. *Came to believe we could not recover on our own; we needed to seek support and guidance to restore ourselves to health.*

To come to believe you must seek help you have to first, decide to stop hiding the shameful parts of your addiction; and second, admit you are not as independent or smart as you thought. Your shameful/guilty secrets are consequences of illness, not indicators of a nasty character as religious folks would have you believe. This added degree of honesty requires more than admitting you're an addict—it means you also agree to expose shameful parts of your personality.

3. *We decided and were actively committed to getting help, whatever the cost.*

Rigorous honesty increases. You commit to asking someone for help. That's risky. Addicts are full of shameful secrets and distrust, they want to recover alone, and how do they know whoever they might talk to can be trusted? Step Three requires an honest and firm commitment to trust people by exposing your neediness to others. Potential social exposure is dangerous (to more than just addicts).

4. *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

Honesty with themselves about themselves—an 'internal honesty' necessary for progress. Writing down grudges and grievances exposes shame and guilt and makes everything real in black and white on paper. This requires more honest responsibility than in the earlier steps and more willpower to honestly write down how we behaved as addicts. The honesty game changes from an abstract conversation (in Steps One and Two) to evidence written on paper.

5. *Admitted to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

So far, honesty has been difficult but only internal; written down 'for your eyes only' in a confidential document. There have been no witnesses and no social exposure. At Step Five honesty is turned up a few degrees—you must undergo public exposure. Step Five is coming out of the secrecy closet. Yes, only to one person you hope is trustworthy, but it still demands "going public," and a greater trust in the importance of honesty.

6. *We became ready to embrace humility through equality and compassion.*
7. *We embraced humility, as in the principles of accountability, honesty, and equality and were determined to reduce our character defects.*

This is the start of a major turning point. 'Humility' is a taboo subject, partly because it's burdened with debasing religious perceptions of the human condition before God, and partly because most people don't understand addiction as a complex mental illness. Many people, especially atheist/agnostics, try to straddle the chaos: (a) sensing that humility is important to recovery, and something must be done about it, (b) not understanding it at all, and (c) it can't be understood without some self-demeaning reference to religion. God-believers have cornered the humility market.

From *The Addiction Recovery Handbook: Humility requires that the fundamental prerequisite to all interaction be a sincere belief in equality. To interact with anything other than [equality] is evidence of racism, elitism, sexism, assuming privilege, etc., and fails to honor the universal truth of apparent unity that underlies all categorizations of life.*

If you secretly claim special status: 'I'm better than... I've suffered more... I've struggled harder than... My message is more insightful... I'm so twisted that nobody can help me... I get to talk longer than my fair share... My addiction was worse... and so because I'm special, I'm entitled to more privileges than you.' Privileges might mean you secretly expect from others more patience, more acceptance, more sharing time, more gratitude or generosity, no criticism, more kindness. These thoughts are usually emotional arrogance. The big leap: Humility at Steps Six and Seven requires you offer equality to *everyone*. Equality requires an accountability for arrogance and that requires a deeper commitment to honesty.

There's no escape: If you honestly declare, out loud, you are determined to reduce character defects the audience of your life—friends, family, workmates—will notice that you are (or are not) more honest, less judgemental, more punctual, less angry. It's easier to crash around Steps Four and Five and avoid this level of honest responsibility which requires a visible commitment to a 'spiritual way of life' that we talk so much about but do so little.

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

Here, the dramatic change is by identifying all the amends to be made, that you 'go public' with responsibility, and be scrupulously honest to everyone you harmed. Avoiding this level of honest accountability seems to be standard fare. Don't play around with selfish definitions 'everyone' or 'harm' (physical, spiritual, mental, emotional harm). They mean what they mean.

As I wrote out my Step Eight (over 200 people) and I was anxious about public scrutiny. I knew those people I had to speak with or write to, had each personally experienced my harming them and would know if I was honest, sincere, accurate, or responsible. They would be immediately aware of how sincere or honest I was. That requires an exceptional commitment to honest responsibility.

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

Compare Five and Nine:

Step Five requires being 'completely' honest with one person, a veritable stranger, who promised you confidentiality. They weren't abused or lied to by you. They were neutral in what you needed to talk about. Step Five was a practise run; you were not in 'real-time' danger.

At Step Nine you must be rigorously honest with people who know exactly what happened. They were people who experienced your harmful behaviour first-hand and have lived with and carried the consequences it. They know and will evaluate your sincerity.

Step Nine embodies the change that takes you away from 'half-measures' recovery. Avoidance and dishonesty here result in a lifetime of subtle hiding and avoidance. There is a secret sense of not getting what was promised; wondering what was left undone; not having the experience of psychological courage; always anxiously waiting for something to happen. The necessary public demonstration of honest

responsibility is why Step Nine frequently gets a superficial effort. The speeches about ‘I made amends to my family,’ or ‘I only hurt five people,’ or ‘my amends are my daily sobriety,’ are clearly evidence of callous irresponsibility and fear.

When Steps Four and Five are repeated every year or so that’s a repetitive half-measure. It gets support and admiration in the social politics of recovery. Step Nine’s increased need for honesty and visible courage are why there’s so much negligence and irresponsibility here. Having sincere compassion for oneself and others is the actual experience of the promises, which I hear so much about but see so little evidence of. Step Nine is the real-time experience of what the first eight steps prepared you for.

Maintenance.

10. *Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*
11. *Sought through meditation and quiet reflection on the wisdom of others—to deepen our spiritual awareness through honesty and to embrace [equality] humility, compassion, and responsibility.*
12. *Having had a spiritual awakening (a personality change) as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to addicts and to practice spiritual principles in all our affairs.*

Beyond Step Nine, a person’s commitment to a life of compassion and mental harmony is a private affair. Technically, it is not necessary to admit anything to anyone. Maintenance-step living is an unsupervised life governed by spiritual principles. The five spiritual principles are:

1. Do no harm to self or others—no wilful negligence.
2. Be honest in all circumstances.
3. Live with humility that is built on equality.
4. Be compassionate and generous of spirit.
5. Be responsible—never blame.

A life governed by these principals offers a compassionate mental harmony. It is an issue of psychology not religion. Religious beliefs cannot offer this. Mr. Kaufmann advises: *‘Religious practises, rituals, prayer, religious affirmations [and I add forgiveness] generally involve a suspension of one’s critical faculties—a refusal to be completely honest with oneself,’* (slight editing for this context, from *The Faith of a Heretic*, p.32).

Being a little bit negligent, dishonest, arrogant, callous, slightly irresponsible and blaming (all are addiction symptoms) means always skating in circles of rationalization. Rationalization is an easily kept secret; blame is always near to hand, and relapse sits patiently in the shadows. Addicts are smooth at justifying just about anything and after Step Nine, no one’s looking.

Maintenance Step living separates out the half-measures people. You have complete freedom to not continuously monitor your own attitudes, not seek wise spiritual counsel, or not meditate on non-righteous spiritual literature. You have complete freedom to secretly blame others for any mess you created and wander through life believing you are the quintessential victim. You can convince yourself that yoga, lots of meetings, transcendental meditation, or bullying new people, are substitutes for Step Eleven and Twelve (they aren’t). Maintenance step recovery requires a never-ending, unsupervised, commitment to honest self-discipline. No one knows when you cut corners and slide around the edges of truth or accountability. The Addiction Recovery Thought Police do not exist, and no one is watching you think.

From Mr. Kaufmann's book, *The Faith of the Heretic: 'The unusually honest [person] is their own relentless observer and develops... a keen intellectual conscience.'* (p. 24. I have adapted his observations to the context of this writing.) Rigorous honesty is the toughest never-ending requirement of a keen intellectual conscience for a compassionate lifestyle. It's tough for the first ten years or so, but it does get easier.

Kind regards,
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Richard Clark has been clean and sober since September 1980 and has always been open about his atheism. He became involved in AA because of the compassion of an old-timer who was a devout Christian. Richard is now sober 44 years with no relapses, active in his weekly agnostic meeting, and never conceals his atheism. Professionally, Richard has been a therapist in addictions work since 1985. For several decades he's been committed to the ancient Buddhist stream of Arhat consciousness and been recognized as a Pratyeka-buddha, pre-Theravada practise (and still working at it). He offers private counselling sessions with clients from across Canada. He has written three books and is presently writing a fourth book for addiction counsellors... and plans a fifth book on the psychology of recovery in Buddhism (atheist version). There is more information about him at [Green Room Lectures](#).

