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Twelve Steps

Twelve Step programs date back to 1939 and have been surrounded by a lot of controversy. Originally associated with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), 12 step programs have become part the support structure surrounding the treatment of dozens of problems which have been thought to be "addictive" in nature. Most people have heard of at least of a few, all of which seem to end with the word "anonymous." There is Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Over-eaters Anonymous (OA), Gamblers Anonymous ... and many of these add " -aholic" to the name of those struggling with some issue in order to identify those issues as problems. There is Sexoholics Anonymous, Workaholics Anonymous, Rageaholics Anonymous, Chocoholics Anonymous, and so on.

My personal complaint about these twelve step programs is the way they've managed to butcher the English language. This, does not, however, mean that 12 step programs cannot be an effective means by which to accomplish real and substantial change.

I am well aware of the complaints many have about 12 step programs. Often, it is thought to be too religious, requiring a belief in god. Some have considered the groups to be cultish, proposing that "the 12 steps" are the only way. Some object to the idea that "once a _____aholic, always a _____aholic." Still others have focused on the specifics of their problem area rather than the general principles of the 12 steps and have created separatist splits with beliefs (for instance) that alcoholics and drug addicts should not attend the same meetings. Some have taken great issue with the value (or lack thereof) of "admitting they are helpless to control their lives."

The Twelve Steps as Stages of Change

Breaking change down into a series of steps is something that has made change possible since the beginning of time. Whether this has happened in nature or by design, it is the same. By nature, a child is born, is an infant, is a toddler, is a child,

reaches puberty, is an adolescent, is an adult, and so on. By design, a child goes to pre-school, grammar school, high school, maybe college, maybe graduate school, and so on. But even these changes do not happen all at once.

Each stage (or step) is broken down into smaller steps so that they are realistically do-able. A toddler does not get up on his feet one day and play kickball the next. The toddler *pulls* himself to his feet and is supported, wobbling, by a chair leg, a wall, or by his fathers arms. The child takes a step, falls, gets up, tries again, falls again, and for all this failure, each new attempt brings a success. One day a parent may see her child running the length of a soccer field and wonder how this came to be. *This* is how it came to be. In steps and stages.

So it remains when we are adults. The 12 Steps approach to change is only one approach of many, but I, as a therapist endorse it and encourage you to consider whether it might be a good path for you. It is not just for people with addictions per se, and it is certainly not reserved for those with addictions to alcohol and drugs. In the end, it may *not* be the optimal approach to change for you in which case there are many others approaches you may consider.

Below, you will find my own wording of the Twelve Steps along with some very brief explanations and interpretations. You will find that there are a lot of variations which exist. I will try to stick to that which is common to them all and to that which preserves the essence of the 12 Steps as a stage approach to change.

- 1. Decide whether there is something in your life you really want to change.**
Decide whether you can make the change on your own. If you really want to make the change but it seems as if you *can't*, this is usually what we call a "problem." You'll need to a) admit that there is a problem, and b) that you are in over your head. If it's not that important, don't worry about it. If it is a problem but you can fix it, congratulations. Seriously, keep up the good work! If you are in over your head though and the problem is making a serious mess out of your life, you are going to c) need to admit you need some help.
- 2. Decide whether you believe that, even though *you* can't solve your problem right now, *someone* or *something* else *can* help and that this help can make a difference.**
This is the second step, for although a person may achieve the first step, a person

will not pursue their change if they believe that a) help is not available, or b) that *nothing* can help them out of this mess. Pondering this question is very important. It backs up step one. Where there's a way, there's a will.

3. Decide whether you are going to let yourself be helped. Many people ask for help, but then tell the helper what to do. This is sometimes and somewhat appropriate. Clearly you are in a position where even though someone is going to help you, you're going to need to do your part. Sometimes, that part is telling your helper what it is you do, and do not, need help with. Don't forget though, the reason someone may be helpful is because they know some things or can do some things you cannot. It only makes sense that if you need some help, you ask for help, and if you ask for help you accept that help. Sometimes someone or something else can help us in ways not yet imagined.

4. Stop lying to yourself. Stop the B.S. It's not doing you any good. Sit down. Be quiet. Be humble. Be truthful with yourself. It's okay. You may have thought step number one was where things started, but *this* is where it starts. This is where you get your second wind. This where you get your juice.

5. Okay, you stopped lying to yourself, but part of this was accomplished by simply not talking or thinking about certain things. Some people say the truths you don't admit to are "lies of omission." Are there parts of the story you aren't including? What is the rest of the story? Step five involves admitting the exact nature of the things you have done wrong. The things you feel guilty or ashamed about. Whether your guilt is real or imagined, you must admit to yourself in your deepest heart and, as well, to at least one other real person the harm and suffering you have caused to others - *all* of it. If you are truly interested in taking charge of your life, you cannot put so much energy into protecting secrets or living in fear that they will be discovered. Out with it!

6. Decide whether you are going to let yourself be changed. You asked for it and here it is. You have done your work and you have allowed yourself to be helped. When you decided the first time that you really wanted change - that it was

important to you, that your life was a mess, and you were in over your head, did you really want the change you were asking for?

7. Ask again.

8. Get ready to set out. Make a list of all persons you have ever harmed and be prepared yourself to make it up to them. As fear lingers, hurt lingers. Hurt can be soothed and fear can fade.

9. You do not live alone in this world. You can hurt other people. You can help other people. Others can hurt you. Others can help you. In this ninth step, make it real. If you have ever lacked power, this is where your power lies. Go *directly* to all those you have harmed and make it up to them. Other people live in fear and sorrow and in bitterness. No matter how you may have contributed to this in the past, you can make an important difference now - a real difference - a direct difference.

10. Next time, don't wait so long. Work steps one through ten. Repeat. Repeat again. Repeat again.

11. Through prayer, meditation, quietude, deep reflection and humble honesty ... by repeating these 12 steps and by whatever means work best, do not lose ground. There is still much that you don't know. Seek your highest and deepest being. Let every problem arise with a solution, every hurt with a healing hand. Be at peace with yourself. Be happy and serene.

12. When someone asks you what your life's about, tell them.

The original 12 steps as written for Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939 are as follows:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—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 alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

To find a Twelve Step program in Portland:

Try the Alano Club at www.portlandalano.org or call 211 and tell them what you're looking for. Don't forget, your therapist can be a good resource for you too. 211 is a national number which helps people in their community to find resources. It is like 911 or 411 but it is a non-emergency number for all sorts of social services including 12 Step programs and support groups which are not related to Twelve Step Programs.

It's not about the booze.

Nevertheless, 12 Step programs tend to focus on specific addictions and this may be okay. These attachments called "addictions" often present themselves in specific forms initially. In Alcoholics Anonymous, there is a stage of change which is identified as a false change and this, they call a "dry drunk." This means an alcoholic is abstaining from alcohol, but is still living in a manner characterized by addiction. It is when someone has taken a detour into this stage, that people in 12 Step programs see that, well, it's not about the booze, or the food, or the gambling. It is about something else.

12 Step programs, as they are known, exist in every city and every neighborhood. They tend to be support groups without professional leaders or permanent leaders of any sort. Nevertheless, they are usually fairly structured. Individuals are usually encouraged to seek out a personal "sponsor" who acts as a mentor and oftentimes, a friend.

The original 12 Steps were for those dependent upon alcohol for their well being. The original text can be found at the bottom of this page.

Those interested in participating in 12 Step groups are often advised to "shop around" until they find one which feels right for them. So much have people done this that beyond the identified addictions, groups are subdivided by a number of criteria. There may be groups for men, groups for women, groups for teens, groups for business professionals, and some groups identify themselves by the time of day they meet.

As I may have stated before, I do not believe "addictions" to be something special. According to my Buddhist-based views, nearly all problems in life are caused by addictions. Buddhists call this "attachment," and although others may not use buddhist terminology, these Buddhist views can be found embedded deeply in most current psychologies and theories on human suffering.

Something simple and central to most Twelve Step programs is something called the Serenity Prayer. I have often told people that if I could sum of the best of psychotherapy in just a few words, this would be it.

The Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the strength to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

12 Step meetings are often concluded with the words:

"Keep coming back. It works."