

# The Universal 12 Steps of AA for Atheists & Freethinkers

*by Dennis J. Fitzpatrick*

Freethought holds that individuals should not accept ideas proposed as truth without recourse to knowledge and reason. Thus, freethinkers strive to build their opinions on the basis of facts, scientific inquiry, and logical principles, independent of any logical fallacies or intellectually limiting effects of authority, confirmation bias, cognitive bias, conventional wisdom, popular culture, prejudice, sectarianism, tradition, urban legend, and all other dogmas. Regarding religion, freethinkers hold that there is insufficient evidence to support the existence of supernatural phenomena. *Wikipedia Dictionary*

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addiction —that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that the wisdom of other abstinent members could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to follow a path of recovery.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to let go of our defects of character.
7. Humbly overcame our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and those who had harmed us and became willing to make amends and forgive them all.
9. Made direct amends and forgave 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 and forgave those who harmed us.

11. Sought through meditation to improve our integrity in all areas of our lives.
12. Having had an awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others addicted like us and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

*Commentary:*

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

*Comment:* I suggest that the newcomer write out three ways they know they are powerless over alcohol or drugs. An example would be: “I drink or use to passing out. I don’t know what city I might end up in. I don’t know who I will end up with.” Then I suggest that the newcomer write three ways they know their life is unmanageable which means that they have poor relationships. An example would be: “My financial condition is terrible because of the amount of money I spend on alcohol or drugs. My family and marriage relationships are strained. My relationship with the legal system ended up in an arrest.”

2. Came to believe that the wisdom of other abstinent members could restore us to sanity.

*Comment:* Physical sanity means not taking the first drink or drug. It is even better if I don’t want to take the first drink or drug. Relapse can happen if I want to drink or drug and am using will power to do it. It is much easier if I rely on the power of the group to stay sober when I cannot do it alone.

3. Made a decision to follow a path of recovery.

*Comment:* It is not necessary to believe in a denominational view of God or any view of God. If I believe in the wisdom of the 12 Step group to stay abstinent when I can't, that is enough. Most newcomers are atheists or agnostics. I filter the key parts of my life to a sober point of view: love relationships, financial problems, emotional upsets, health problems and so on.

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

*Comment:* Doing this step separates the tourists from those who are serious about recovery. I suggest that the inventory should be written about the damage in my key relationships: mate, ex mates and girlfriends, children, parents, brothers and sisters, other relatives, work relationships and so on. I teach that the inventory should include a one sentence answer to three questions: the story, the old behavior, and the new behavior.

- *Example of the story:* I was lonely and got drunk or high on drugs.
- *Example of the old behavior:* Whenever I was lonely I used alcohol or drugs to escape.
- *Example of the new behavior:* I overcome my emotional neediness through helping others and relating to my new friends in my 12 Step group.

It should only take a week or two to write this inventory. It is not meant to be an exhaustive autobiographical novel.

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

*Comment:* I read this inventory aloud to a person I trust such as a sponsor or a trusted member of the 12 step group who has done the 12 steps. In the reading of the inventory it will become increasingly clear to me that the exact nature of my wrongs is that I used alcohol, drugs and other to try to survive. The 12 step therapy of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> steps transforms the addict's past from guilt to experience. Instead of feeling weak in dealing with the present, I will find strength. Instead of viewing the future with fear, I will feel hope. My history is transformed from guilt, weakness and fear into experience, strength and hope.

6. Were entirely ready to let go of our defects of character.

*Comment:* In the course of reading my inventory, I notice my patterns of behavior that cause me problems in my relationship with others. I make a prioritized list of my defects. For example I might list raging when I can't get my way, loneliness that leads to self-pity, exaggerating to feel more important and so on.

7. Humbly overcame our shortcomings.

*Comment:* I make a parallel list of my shortcomings. For example I am powerless over my character defect of raging but I can practice the opposite, my lack of patience. I am powerless over loneliness but I can practice being loving to others. I am powerless over exaggerating but I can practice being truthful. To the extent that I continue to overcome my shortcomings in the form of second thoughts, my defects of character, or impulsive first thoughts, will be removed. Eventually my old impulsive first thoughts will be replaced with new healthy first thoughts.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and those who had harmed us and became willing to make amends and forgive them all.

*Comment:* Now I examine my relationships. I list the ones from my inventory that might call for amends. I also list those that I need to forgive. Lack of forgiveness is the engine that drives unresolved anger.

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

*Comment:* I discuss with my step sponsor the amends I should make and those I should not. I don't recommend making sexual amends that would harm present relationships. Also, I do not recommend making some amends that could end up in the court room. Rather, make these amends by donating my time and energy in the Big Brother, Big Sister or like programs.

I make my amends face to face, if possible. If not, then on the phone. The last choice is by mail. I want to make the amend the most direct way possible. I don't worry if my amend is not accepted. I am in charge of my side of the street, not theirs.

In my heart, usually not face to face, and in my actions I show forgiveness to those who have harmed me. I can choose one-sided forgiveness even though I cannot forget the harm done to me. Sometimes reconciliation is not possible or desirable. I can still forgive others and release them to the restorative justice of the universe. See Step 4 on “Forgiveness” from my *6 Basic Living Skills* to learn how to forgive those I am reluctant to forgive, those who have died and those offenses that still haunt me.

After completing the first nine steps, almost every 12 step member will notice that the desire to drink or use has been removed. This is truly a miracle of recovery. Anyone can stay sober and clean who does not want to drink or use. There is no pill, no advice, no prescription, there is nothing known on the planet that can bring about this change. This is why I believe Scott Peck remarked in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, that he thought the two greatest advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were the discovery of the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein and the 12 Step program.

Also after completing the first nine steps, I recommend that the addicted one add a weekly meeting to their 12 Step schedule at ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics or Dysfunctional Families) or CODA (Codependents Anonymous). It is now time to learn how to improve my relationships by giving up the roles of controller and enabler (see the next chapter).

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it and forgave those who harmed us.

*Comment:* Steps 10, 11, 12 are steps I do daily to keep me abstinent. I do not redo the inventory. Instead I put my energy into helping

others. Step 10 is about daily self-examination. When I am wrong or owe an amend I make it so my slate is clean. When I need to forgive, I do so promptly.

11. Sought through meditation to improve our integrity in all areas of our lives.

*Comment:* Step 11 is about meditation (see Step 5, “Meditation” of my book *6 Basic Living Skills*) which gives me the direction and energy to carry out step 12. Bill Wilson, cofounder of AA, said that the rest of the steps keep us sober but only step 11, meditation, keeps us growing.

12. Having had an awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others addicted like us and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

*Comment:* I practice principles when I carry my message of abstinence to those who are ready to hear it. I must give it away in order to keep it. Every time I help someone stay abstinent I receive double the benefit in return. Attendance at 12 step meetings is important for me to be able to encourage and uplift those who are struggling with their new lives which in turn reinforces my own abstinence.

### Frequently Asked Questions About Addictions

*Question 1: I don't need 12 Step Meetings because I can stop my addictions on my own.*

Answer: Every addicted person is a loner. We need daily (sometimes hourly) emotional support to stay clean. Studies show that only a very few stop the addiction on their own. But they still have emotional problems and

can relapse easily. AA is unique since it offers unconditional love and is relapse oriented. No one is judged for relapsing but is welcomed back like a long lost brother or sister.

*Question 2: I am not an alcoholic or addicted anymore because I have stopped.*

Answer: Stopping is not the problem. Many have stopped 1000 times. Staying stopped is the problem. The addiction is a disease that is lifelong whether I practice it or not. I am a recovering addict or a practicing addict. I need to take steps to see that I stay in remission.

*Question 3: I am not an alcoholic or addict because I don't use every day.*

Answer: Only 5% are daily drinkers or users and 4% of this group are on skid row. 95% of alcoholics are called periodics. They are functioning alcoholics who hold jobs but get high on weekends, or binge drink or get drunk once a year on their birthday or vacation.

*Question 4: All I hear is whining at 12 Step Meetings.*

Answer: Go to better meetings. The best are "12 & 12" meetings that study the 12 Steps and Traditions. Also, Big Book Meetings study the answers to addiction. Men's or Women's Stag meetings are also great. There are also non-smoking meetings.

*Question 5: I wake up depressed every morning.*

Answer: This is not unusual with addictions since dopamine levels have been exhausted. Going to a 12 Step Meetings and getting emotional support to stay clean and sober will overcome these feelings.

*Question 6: Do alcoholics and addicts need counseling in addition to 12 Step meetings?*

Answer: Absolutely. Once the addictive activity has been stopped, in addition to continuing 12 Step meetings, attention must be directed to learning to use the second thought and how to handle conflict or relapse is likely to occur. 12 Step groups are designed to help a person stop their addictive activity. They are not counseling groups although most meetings model better behavior. Every addict has disconnected from relationships and they need the *6 Basic Living Skills* to learn how to reconnect.

*Question 7: Can I become addicted to 12 Step meetings?*

Answer: Yes. It takes years of emotional development for the addictiveness to disappear. Other issues must be addressed. Most likely the addictiveness will transfer to other areas in the beginning. What is better: to become addicted to going to meetings while staying abstinent or practicing one's addicted to drugs or alcohol?

*Question 8: What can I say at parties when I am asked what I want to drink?*

Answer: Don't go to drinking parties unless you have a business or other important reason to be there. It is difficult for the defensive self-centered abstinent one to realize that no one cares what you drink. You could simply order Perrier or any sparkling water with a piece of lemon. Now it is fashionable to be a member of AA.