

# **Big Book Workbook for OA Members:**

**A Guide for working the Twelve Steps of  
Overeaters Anonymous using the directions found  
in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous**

**respectfully submitted by  
The Big Book Collective for OA**

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Please note: This Workbook has not been approved as Overeaters Anonymous Literature by the World Service Business Conference or by the OA Board of Trustees. It represents the experience, strength, and hope, of a large number of OA members who have recovered from compulsive eating by applying the instructions for working The Twelve Steps found in The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. We do not believe it constitutes “literature” in that it simply represents our own experience. It is the equivalent of talks given by OA members.

We offer it to Overeaters Anonymous in any way it can be useful to help the compulsive eater who still suffers. We have determined to publish this book on a non-profit basis on our own, but it is always available to be published, if desired, by groups, intergroups, or regions, within Overeaters Anonymous, as Local Literature, or by the World Service Business Conference as OA Literature. A PDF version for free reproduction is available. For more information on using this Workbook, please contact [info@oabigbook.info](mailto:info@oabigbook.info).

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## *Introduction*

We are a group of Overeaters Anonymous members who have used the Big Book—the name affectionately given to the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*—to recover from compulsive eating. This Workbook describes our journey to recovery using the directions for working the Twelve Steps found in the Big Book, applying them to our own compulsive eating. It is designed to provide hope to the compulsive eater who still suffers.

Many OA members have collaborated on this Workbook. Earlier drafts of this Workbook have been used to gain the miracle of recovery by many OA members around the world. In writing this final version of this Workbook, we received suggestions from dozens and dozens of OA members, and have incorporated them to make this a truly collaborative and worldwide effort. We thank everyone who has participated.

### *The Big Book:*

The Big Book was first published in 1939, at a time when there were approximately 100 recovered alcoholics who were using what became the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to recover. They were concentrated in Akron and Cleveland in Ohio, and in New York City. The purpose of the Steps is to produce a spiritual awakening—defined in the Big Book as “a personality change sufficient to overcome” an addiction. The purpose of the Big Book was to provide directions for working those Steps which could be used by anyone who did not have a guide to take them through the Steps.

Until the publication of Overeaters Anonymous’s book, *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (the “OA 12&12”), in the early 1990s, the Big Book (along with AA’s own *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (the “AA 12&12”), and collections of OA stories) was the only major piece of literature in Overeaters Anonymous that discussed the Twelve Steps in detail.

Many OAers have no difficulties identifying with the Big Book and using its directions to achieve recovery from compulsive eating. Other OAers, however, have had to deal with some issues to do so.

We have found that the Big Book can be readily applied to compulsive eating. We have found that we can identify with the description of the alcoholic in the book. Although some of its language may be difficult, with some words used differently from the way those words are used today, some simple clarification can overcome that problem.

Although the Big Book reflects its age, and was written by men and discusses men, we have found that, with some clarification and adaptation, we can, no matter our gender, identify with the writers.

While its language might reflect a particular religious vocabulary in its references to spiritual matters, we have found no barrier to our own conception of spirituality. And even though many of the descriptions are of alcoholics who have done bad things to others, whereas many of us have felt that others have done bad things to us, we find

little difficulty in applying the ideas in the Big Book to our situation. This has been true even for those of us who have suffered severe abuse from people similar to those who wrote the Big Book.

*The purpose of this Workbook:*

We hope this Workbook will help OAers overcome any barriers and make the Big Book *our* book. Those of us who have used the Big Book's directions for working the Steps—and we are diverse in our life experiences—have found the Big Book crucial for our recovery.

We have been members of OA for many years. For many of us, our first years in OA were marked by cycles of relapse and recovery, trying to control and enjoy our eating, never remaining abstinent for a long time. When, however, we were introduced to the Big Book as a set of directions for working the Steps, we recovered—many of us a number of years ago. Some of us, on the other hand, found these directions when we first joined and did not suffer relapse. Regardless of whether you read this Workbook as a newcomer or a person who has experienced relapse, we hope that this Workbook will help newcomers to avoid relapse, and will help others who have experienced relapse to recover.

All of us, at some point, experienced a complete surrender. We knew we were licked, defeated. We knew we had no power to overcome our compulsive eating. We used the directions in the Big Book to recover from our addiction. We hope sharing our experience, strength, and hope using the Big Book will help others who seek recovery from their compulsive eating.

*The miracles we have experienced:*

Using the directions found in the Big Book, we have experienced these miracles:

- We have maintained a healthy body weight, even losing or gaining weight when our doctors wanted us to.
- We are not obsessed with food, counting calories, or numbers on the scale.
- We no longer feel tempted to return to the foods we used to binge on, or the eating behaviors (including volume eating, restricting, purging) we used to indulge in.
- We can watch others eat and enjoy our binge foods and not envy them or wish to join in with them, even if they leave some of it on their plates or offer some of it to us.
- We can have those foods in our homes and not want them.
- Our ability to handle life's stresses becomes easier.
- We are generally happier and more serene, with a sense of purpose and a meaning to our lives.

- Put another way, from the Big Book perspective, we have had a personality change which has overcome our compulsive eating addiction.

But what is eating compulsively? We will see from the Big Book perspective that it is an overwhelming addiction that requires working the Twelve Steps to recover from, and that the miracles described above are indeed miraculous to us *precisely because we could not have experienced any of them without the Twelve Steps*. The Twelve Steps gave us a spiritual awakening which solves our problem of compulsive eating.

Because our primary purpose is to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer, our support is always there for people who need to, and *do*, work the Twelve Steps because they have concluded that they are dangerously addicted.

*How this Workbook is organized:*

You will need a copy of the Big Book to use this Workbook. You can get it from various sources, including free online.

Each chapter in this Workbook has specific assignments at the end of the chapter. Most of these assignments are to read specific pages in the Big Book, and the next chapter of this Workbook will comment on what you have read.<sup>1</sup> We *urge* you to treat these assignments as urgent, and to complete them as quickly as you can. You could complete a number of assignments and chapters in a day, if you feel the urgency. We have felt that urgency. We have become convinced that we have a life-or-death addiction.

We also provide summaries for each chapter in a **larger sized type**, so you can decide whether a particular chapter will be of interest to you. As well, the Appendix following this book contains a detailed table of contents that provides summaries of each chapter, which might also help you in your decision.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read Title page (BB iii), Contents (BB v), Preface (BB xi-xii), Foreword to First Edition (BB xiii-xiv), and Foreword to Third Edition (BB xxii).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Our comments and annotations owe almost everything to many AA and OA writers and speakers, most notably Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA and primary writer of The Big Book, the AA 12&12, and the history book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, all of which are OA-Approved literature. This book is written, however, from our own very personal experiences.

<sup>2</sup> All Roman and cardinal numeral references to pages in the Big Book are to the page numbers in the Fourth Edition. References to pages in the Big Book will generally take the form of "BB ##."

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

*Title Page, Preface, Forewords to the First and Third Editions*

A brief introduction to the aims of this book and to the Twelve Steps. Recovery from food addiction is available to the compulsive eater who still suffers.

## *Title Page, Preface, Forewords to the First and Third Editions:*

These short readings establish the context for our entire discussion of the Big Book.

You will note from the Title Page and the *Preface* that the Big Book uses the word *recovered*, rather than *recovering*, to describe alcoholics who have worked the Twelve Steps. This is an important concept: *Recovered* is certain: We are different from what we used to be. *Recovering*, on the other hand, has a tentative and uncertain aspect to it, as if we're not really certain of our recovery.

The *Contents* set out the titles of the chapters and thus the context of our discussion.

The *Preface* says that the purpose of the Big Book is to describe exactly how the writers recovered, proof that it is meant to be a set of directions.

The *Foreword to the Third Edition* tells us that the "Twelve Steps . . . summarize the program." This is also important. The Twelve Steps, which we read at every meeting, are themselves only a summary of the program itself. We will find that the Big Book provides specific instructions for each step, and that these specific instructions are much more detailed, and sometimes contain elements which are not at all found in the summarized step.

### *The history of the Twelve Steps:*

The Twelve Steps were first created when the primary author of the Big Book, Bill Wilson (co-founder, along with Dr. Bob Smith, of Alcoholics Anonymous), was writing the chapter that became Chapter Five, *How It Works* (BB 58-71). Until that time, there were only six Steps, summarized on BB 263:

1. Complete deflation. [Step One]
2. Dependence and guidance from a Higher Power. [Steps Two *and* Eleven]
3. Moral inventory. [Step Four]
4. Confession. [Step Five]
5. Restitution. [Step Nine]
6. Continued work with other alcoholics. [Step Twelve]

When Bill was writing *How It Works*, he felt the need to provide more details in the summary of the Steps. The Big Book was being written for people who had not yet recovered to help guide them through the Steps, and he wanted to make sure that there were no loopholes. Thus the original six steps became twelve.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This history comes from OA-Approved AA Literature. Some AA historians have questioned the accuracy of this information, but we accept it as being accurate at least in spirit.



As we study the Steps, we will find the original six steps—One, Four, Five, Nine, Eleven (includes Two), and Twelve—get the most attention and detail in the Big Book, and the other (added) steps are not emphasized or discussed as much.

We should therefore not expect that each step will take us a long period of time to accomplish. Different steps will require different amounts of effort and time. As a matter of fact, we will see that Steps Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, are all to be done within a matter of days—and for some of us, the same day.

*The basic ideas about the Twelve Steps:*

- **Step One states the problem:** Our own individual powerlessness, hopelessness, and despair. This is discussed in *The Doctor's Opinion*, *Bill's Story*, *There Is a Solution*, and *More About Alcoholism*.
- **Step Two states the solution:** Finding power, hope, and optimism by working the Steps. This is discussed in *Bill's Story*, *There is a Solution*, *More About Alcoholism*, and *We Agnostics*.
- **Step Three is a decision to work the Steps and find a spiritual solution.** This is clarified and interpreted in *How It Works*.
- **Steps Four through Nine produce that spiritual solution within us.** Step Four is explained in *How It Works*. Steps Five through Nine are explained in *Into Action*.
- **Steps Ten through Twelve keep us spiritually fit so that we continue to experience the spiritual solution.** Steps Ten through Twelve lower the turbulence of our emotions, providing us with stability and clarity of thought and action. They keep us sane. We no longer fixate on food. Steps Ten and Eleven are explained in *Into Action*. Step Twelve is explained in *Working With Others* and *A Vision For You*, with some practical advice also contained in *To the Wives*, *The Family Afterward*, and *To Employers*.

In this Workbook, we will begin with a detailed study of the first two Steps, giving them as much emphasis as the Big Book does, so that by the time we reach Step Three, we will be ready, truly ready, to make our decision to work the rest of the Steps. This book will be both a Step Study and a practical Workbook to allow you to work the Steps while studying them. We will see that the Twelve Steps are designed to be completed in the order in which they occur.<sup>1</sup>

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the first two sections of *The Doctor's Opinion* (BB xxv to the top of xxvii).

<sup>1</sup> Some of us have had a sudden spiritual surrender, followed by a sudden spiritual experience. We gave up, we found abstinence quickly, and we worked the Steps and recovered. If you have come to OA with such a sudden sense of surrender, much of the discussion of Steps One and Two may be helpful only for when you sponsor and help those still suffering who may not have had that sudden experience.

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

The Doctor's Opinion, *first two sections:*

The abnormality of the body. Once we start, we can't stop. We get uncontrollable cravings when we indulge in certain foods or eating behaviors. If we are to be freed from our addiction, we *must* think of this as something that cannot be changed or controlled, just like any other physical disability.

## The Doctor's Opinion, *first two sections:*

*The Doctor's Opinion* is in three parts. The first part is a letter of reference from Dr. William Silkworth (BB xxv-xxvi). The second part consists of three paragraphs in larger print written by the writers of the Big Book (BB xxvi-xxvii). This chapter in our Workbook discusses these first two parts. The next chapter discusses the third part (Dr. Silkworth's second letter).<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Silkworth was a pioneer in alcoholism therapy. In his lifetime he ministered to over 50,000 alcoholics, most of whom came through the door of the Towns Hospital in New York City, where he was the consulting neuro-psychiatrist. Until his patient Bill Wilson (the co-founder of AA and the principal writer of the Big Book and other AA literature) recovered using what have now become known as the Twelve Steps, Dr. Silkworth despaired of ever succeeding with helping alcoholics. They would come into his facility, be dried out, but return drunk some months later.

Dr. Silkworth developed a theory about alcoholism which has become the gold standard for most addicts, because it describes their experiences. It explains why, despite every reason to the contrary, they cannot stay away from their addiction.

In many ways his theory is more crucial for the compulsive eater than it is for other addicts, because our whole notion of what to abstain from has to be carefully analyzed, whereas for many other addictions that issue often seems to be simpler and obvious.

### *Dr. Silkworth's first letter:*

The first part of the chapter, the letter of reference, is really quite an outstanding reference. Dr. Silkworth tells us that we can believe absolutely everything the Big Book says. He says that approximately 100 people have "recovered"—again emphasizing the importance of using that word to describe the tremendous change that occurred in these alcoholics. We will see that the change, although described as a spiritual awakening, is in essence a personality change "sufficient"—good enough—to overcome alcoholism.

### *The paragraphs in larger type; the Doctor's theory about addiction:*

The paragraphs in larger type (BB xxvi), written by the Big Book writers, contain extremely important information. They summarize the significance of the second letter written by Dr. Silkworth which follows.

The Big Book says that "we *must* believe" that our bodies are as sick as our minds. Although the Big Book says that the program as a whole is suggested, once we choose to

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Silkworth's second letter discusses the alcoholic's dilemma, what the doctor called at other times "the double whammy." Our discussion of that in the next few chapters of this incorporates suggestions for creating an individual Plan of Eating that provides for abstinence from foods, food ingredients and mixtures, and eating behaviors, that cause what Dr. Silkworth called "the phenomenon of craving."

work the Steps there are a lot of “musts.” The Big Book says we have to believe that our bodies are sickened as well as our minds. That belief is essential to our recovery.

*The “allergy of the body”:*

The authors of the Big Book say that they like the theory of the “allergy of the body” because it explains things they could not otherwise explain.

This concept of the physical problem, especially the idea of the “allergy,” was probably the biggest hurdle for many of us to overcome in the program. It was certainly responsible for many of our relapses.

We wanted to believe what all the diets we have ever been on promised—that once we lost weight (if overeating) or gained weight (if undereating), we could eat anything we wanted, so long as we ate it “in moderation.”

All our experiences, of course, taught us the opposite. Once we lost weight and began to eat the foods we used to binge on, we were able to eat them in moderation only briefly; but soon we were eating them in such excess that we gained all our weight back, and then some. Or we began to indulge again in eating behaviors like restricting (anorexia) or purging through vomiting or laxatives or exercising (bulimia) that we used to manage our weight, and we were so fixated on weight or body issues that we kept returning to these behaviors. Or we began to indulge again in eating behaviors that increased the volume of what we ate to the point that we continued to add weight, even if the foods themselves did not cause us problems. Or there were combinations of some of these.

All of us wanted desperately to believe that somehow we could continue to do what we did before and not revert back to compulsive eating. Once we started again to indulge in certain foods or eating behaviors, however, we couldn’t reasonably predict what would happen next.

Further, while we could understand that the alcoholic could never drink alcohol in any form, that the drug addict could never take narcotic drugs in any form, that the gambler could never gamble in any form, we could not understand how this could apply to food.

If we were overeating, how could we be “allergic” to things we loved to eat? They didn’t give us rashes or diarrhea or hives or constrict our breathing passages. If we were undereating by restricting or purging, how could we be “allergic” to behaviors that caused us grief but that we kept indulging in? “Allergy” didn’t seem to apply to behaviors like that.

To the contrary, even though we might not have enjoyed the after-effects of our eating, those of us who overate felt that our eating gave us enjoyment and often comfort; and those of us who underate got satisfaction from the appearance of our body.

The word “allergy” just didn’t seem to reflect our relationship with food. Moreover, how did our eating behaviors fit in to this notion of a physical allergy?

Ultimately, as we study Dr. Silkworth’s second letter (beginning at BB xxv), and discuss it fully in the next chapter of this Workbook, we will understand the concept.

In 1939, when the Big Book was published, the word “allergy” had a much more general meaning in 1939 than it does these days. These days it refers to specific discomforts or life-threatening reactions, like hives or anaphylactic shock. Back in 1939 it had the general meaning of “an abnormal, or exaggerated, physical reaction to a substance,” however that reaction might show itself. Dr. Silkworth’s concept of the abnormal reaction as being “the phenomenon of craving” will be crucial to our understanding of the alcoholic’s dilemma.

*The value of accepting that our bodies are abnormal:*

Why is it important to accept that our bodies are abnormal?

First, it relieves us of guilt. Our reactions to food, our seemingly insane and extreme compulsive over- or under-eating are not symptoms of moral degeneration or mental instability. Compulsive eating is a disability, the same as any disability—one which we have to learn to live with, but which we should not have to feel guilty about.

We may have the disabilities of needing glasses or a hearing aid, or mobility or speech impairment. We don’t feel guilty that our bodies don’t work as well as other people’s. We accept our disability and take whatever corrective measures are possible.

So we don’t have to feel guilty about being compulsive eaters simply because our bodies are different from those of normal eaters. People who can die if they indulge in certain foods like peanuts or shrimp don’t feel guilty about that; and they certainly don’t continue to indulge in those foods. And they don’t have to join Peanutaholics Anonymous or Shrimpaholics Anonymous.

Second, if we get a particular physical disability (uncontrollable cravings) whenever we indulge in certain food ingredients or behaviors, it becomes obvious that *we must abstain from the things that cause that physical disability*. The importance of abstinence should therefore be just as clear to us as sobriety is to an alcoholic.

Third, it requires us to do an in-depth analysis of exactly what causes our uncontrollable cravings so we can abstain from it. This is what is involved in developing a Plan of Eating which fits the Overeaters Anonymous definition of Abstinence—abstaining from compulsive foods and eating behaviors and working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight.

And fourth, for those of us who are people-pleasers, it provides us with an easy answer when people offer us food that we know we shouldn’t be eating. “No thanks,” we can say, “I found out I’m allergic to that.” Most people will stop insisting that you eat that food. If they ask what happens if you indulge in it, you could explain that it creates such intense cravings in you that, just as the alcoholic experiences with alcohol, you can’t stop eating or indulging in it, and therefore you don’t want to start.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the second letter by Dr. Silkworth (BB xxvii-xxxii, with specific emphasis on what Dr. Silkworth calls “the phenomenon of craving.” Knowing that “phenomenon” means *something that happens for which there’s no explanation*, see whether his description of the alcoholic somehow resonates with you.

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

The Doctor's Opinion, *third section*:

Because of the abnormality of our bodies, we can't stop once we've started. And because of the abnormality of our minds, we can't stop from starting. This is a vicious circle that we cannot get out of by ourselves. More discussion of the uncontrollable cravings. Examples of how these uncontrollable cravings show themselves in compulsive eaters. The deadliness of our compulsive eating addiction.

## The Doctor's Opinion, *third section*:

Dr. Silkworth's two letters show a tremendous humility. Medical science is powerless over the alcoholic. It is from that humility that the Twelve Steps were fashioned.

*The "double whammy":*

Dr. Silkworth's second letter contains a lengthy discussion of the alcoholic's dilemma, what the doctor called at other times "the double whammy."

In a nutshell, Dr. Silkworth describes an addict as being a person who has two abnormal characteristics.

First, that person develops what Dr. Silkworth calls "the phenomenon of craving" when indulging in what that person is addicted to.<sup>1</sup> *Once the addict starts, the addict cannot stop.*

Second, when no longer indulging in the addiction, the addict also has a mental obsession, a thought which overpowers all other thoughts, that they can once more indulge in the addiction because they seek the effect produced by that addiction, what Doctor Silkworth calls a "sense of ease and comfort." *The addict cannot stop from starting.*

The double whammy—the addict's dilemma—is this: *The addict can't stop once the addict has started; and the addict can't stop from starting.* This is a vicious circle from which there is no escape on one's own. We cannot indulge in certain foods or behaviors (we get powerful cravings such that we can't stop). We cannot abstain from those foods or behaviors and remain contented (the obsession overpowers us such that we can't stay stopped).

The Big Book discusses the mental obsession in great detail in later chapters. Dr. Silkworth devotes more space in this second letter to the phenomenon of craving than he does to the mental obsession, but it is there, and it was certainly a major part of his analysis of the addict.

The Big Book devotes one whole chapter to the mental obsession (*More About Alcoholism*), besides discussing it in two other chapters (*Bill's Story* and *There Is a Solution*). So we will discuss the mental obsession when we get to those chapters. We will understand that when we are, as the Doctor puts it, restless, irritable, or discontented, our minds will give us signals to return to that which we know we should be abstaining from.

It is important to point out that this vicious circle—can't stop once started *and* can't stop from starting—is the precise definition used in the Big Book for an addict. It is not an issue of how much or how little one eats, or how frequently that happens. From the Big Book perspective, addiction is the combination of not being able to stop once started, and not being able to stop from starting.

<sup>1</sup> Remember that a "phenomenon" is an occurrence for which there is no explanation.



*The “phenomenon of craving” that is the result of the “allergy of the body:”*

Let’s concentrate on the phenomenon of craving. Dr. Silkworth suggests it is an allergy, which when the Big Book was published in 1939 meant, as we have already discussed, simply an abnormal or exaggerated reaction to a substance. In this case *the abnormal reaction is one of intense uncontrollable cravings.*

For overeaters, the intensity of the cravings means that we are not satisfied even after fully indulging. This distinguishes us from normal eaters, who are satisfied after they fully indulge. Thus our bodies are abnormal: and, as we have seen, the Big Book says we “must” believe that our bodies are abnormal.

For undereaters, the intensity of the cravings means that we are not satisfied even after we indulge in our restricting or purging behaviors. We feel the craving to continue these behaviors even though we know in our minds the harm they cause.

Dr. Silkworth’s description of the many types of alcoholics (BB xxx) makes it clear that the only thing they have in common is that once they start, they can’t stop. That is how he arrived at his theory that the addict’s body is abnormal because it develops uncontrollable cravings. No similarities exist among the various types other than the phenomenon of craving.

The craving that Dr. Silkworth describes is one that cannot be conquered by the will or the conscious mind. It is the equivalent of blinking and breathing. We might be able to keep our eyes open or hold our breath for a period of time, but ultimately our body takes over our will and tells us that we must blink, that we must breathe. That is the kind of craving described by Dr. Silkworth.

We take no position, of course, on medical issues. Any distinction between a particular food that may cause a heightened body response, and a behavior that may cause a deep-seated psychological need, is not really important. The issue is only whether or not you find yourself at times unable to stop indulging in that food or that behavior *even when you’re aware that it is causing you harm.*

Remember that the Twelve Steps have been used to gain recovery from behavior addictions (like gambling, shoplifting, going into debt, co-dependency) as well as substance addictions (alcohol, drugs). Working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous has given recovery to persons whose addictions have spanned the spectrum of addiction to compulsive eating behaviors, ingredients and mixtures of ingredients, as well as specific substances.

You have to decide yourself whether this has ever happened to you. Here are some of our experiences that may help remind you of some similar moments in your life.

- We found ourselves eating without realizing that we were eating.
- We found our hands putting food into our mouth when our minds were saying that we shouldn’t be eating any more—in other words, we were eating uncontrollably.

- We said to ourselves, while eating, that the next bite would be our last, but it wasn't, and we kept on eating.
- We felt compelled to finish everything on our plate, and perhaps everything on other people's plates, even though we knew we were stuffed.
- We ate food that had been thrown into the garbage.
- We ate late at night or in the middle of the night or all night long.
- People told us that what we thought was a normal amount of food on our plate seemed to them to be abnormal—too much or too little.
- Despite having eaten a huge meal and knowing that it had been much too much in itself, we ate more after being offered more to eat.
- We identified with the Doctor's description (BB xxviii) of eating because of being restless, irritable, or discontented, until we could again "experience the sense of ease and comfort which comes at once" by indulging in the food.
- In the same vein, we had an uneasy feeling, taken a bite of something, and suddenly felt as if we have arrived home—otherwise known as the "aaah" effect.
- We indulged in vomiting or excess exercise in order to be able to eat as much as we wanted or to get the effect of a high.
- We hid our eating and eating behaviors, or the evidence of them.
- We stashed or protected our binge food so that others wouldn't get it.
- We adopted extremes of not eating at times or restricting our eating because we were so deathly afraid of eating too much. And sometimes these extremes gave us immense relief or a high feeling.

If you have had similar experiences, it's not significant that they don't happen all the time. Those of us who acknowledge that we get these cravings look back and know that it got progressively worse for us. In the beginning these episodes occurred occasionally, and then became frequent; and, if we didn't take action, these episodes became constant and life-threatening. For all of us the fact is that we could not reasonably predict what was going to happen when we indulged in those things that caused us cravings.

If you have experienced times like these, then try to think of them in the way that Dr. Silkworth describes—as experiences when the body (or some irresistible force inside us) is telling the mind what to do—when we have been unable to control the urge to indulge in the food or the eating behavior. This is what Dr. Silkworth called the "allergy" of the body, the "phenomenon of craving."

As we have said, it really doesn't matter to us whether there is a true medical or biological or genetic or psychological connection. What is absolutely real for us is this sense that we have as little control over these cravings as we do over blinking. And we

recognize that this is not the reality for normal eaters. So we accept the reality of our own abnormal condition as ultimately uncontrollable.

*The deadly nature of our addiction:*

Our addiction is deadly, but not dramatic. Alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, and many other addictions, have appeared to many of us to be much more serious than ours. These other addictions can give rise to sudden life-changing and life-threatening actions. It is hard for many people to take food addiction, however, as being a serious addiction.

Our addiction doesn't seem to have a sudden dangerous effect. Eating an extra helping of ice cream and then going to bed, or vomiting what we've just eaten, seems much less dangerous than getting so drunk or high that we don't realize that we're walking into moving traffic, or gambling away our entire life savings. For most of us, although not all of us (for example, the morbidly obese, the extreme purger or restricter), our compulsive eating does not have the dramatic consequences that other addictions seem to have. We can easily get into the twisted thinking of being able to indulge ourselves every so often without any bad effects.

Food addiction, however, can affect a person in their early years, long before they come into contact with drugs or alcohol or gambling. And since we have had access to our trigger foods so much earlier, and so much easier, it seems to us to be more normal.

It's one of the last socially-acceptable vice, when you come to think of it, and in many countries it is encouraged by food outlets that serve excessive portions, and by many media organizations. We may not have a television programs devoted to smoking or drinking, but we do have many television programs and even some networks devoted to food, or encouraging unrealistic body images. And none of them has the disclaimer: "Please eat responsibly!"

In addition, we also have many different approaches to treating compulsive eating, like diets, treatment centers, surgery, books, magazine articles, devoted both to dealing with excessive food consumption, and to dealing with eating disorders that restrict proper nutrition—bulimia and anorexia. And all of them seem to offer solutions that appear to be simple and easy. Other addictions don't appear to have as much "competition."

Yet compulsive eating, whether overeating or undereating, is deadly, and it is certainly a major, if not in some countries *the* major, cause of major health care costs and preventable deaths.

Both overeating and undereating can create lethargy, isolation, and stress. If we put on too much weight or we don't get proper nutrition, we often can't move very quickly or very much.

The known effects of eating too much and eating too little are deadly—admittedly not usually dramatic and sudden, but rather slow, debilitating, demeaning, and pathetic. We lose parts of our bodies or lose functions of some of our senses. We become prey to horrible diseases. In so many ways our bodies stop functioning properly. We become

more and more dependent on other people to help us live. We are isolated, lonely, and unhappy.

Overeating is associated with certain cancers, heart failure, strokes, high blood pressure, bone failure, and with diabetes which in turn leads to gangrene, blindness, other heart problems and more. Undereating is associated with bone failure, organ failure, and a weakened immune system. Bulimia through vomiting is associated with damage to teeth, increased stomach acid, esophageal problems, and electrolyte imbalance; bulimia through laxatives can have long term effects; bulimia through compulsive exercising can harm our body over the long term.

So many of us have also experienced the long-term emotional effects of our addiction. We felt different from other people. We didn't feel able to participate fully in life. We secretly did things that would humiliate us if others knew. We have felt isolated even among friends and loved ones. These feelings became stronger as our addiction grew in intensity. These feelings were not the cause of our addiction; rather the addiction created these effects, and these feelings created intense mental pain.

This is truly death on the installment plan. Compulsive eating, in all of its forms, is death by a thousand cuts. It becomes, as one Twelve-Stepper put it, a matter of self-induced "body rot."

Addiction is the inability to stop from doing something that you know is harmful to yourself. Now we can understand why we are addicted. From the perspective of the Big Book, the true compulsive eater is one who cannot stop once having started; *and*, as we will discuss in detail below, one who cannot stop from starting.

If we are truly compulsive eaters—whether under- or over-eaters—and if we continue as such, then our futures are dismal. We may not die suddenly or dramatically, but our lives will become increasingly worse. How many of us who are still-suffering compulsive eaters can truly say that we are happy? Our illness is permanent and progressive. Whether or not we are compulsively eating right now, it is ultimately fatal. The illness does not go away. As we age it gets worse, never better. We are pre-programmed to compulsively under- or overeat ourselves to death. Unless interrupted by a spiritual awakening, we are doomed.

In order to live happily, we have to develop a Plan of Eating that gets us abstinent—a Plan that provides for a method by which we abstain from compulsive eating and eating behaviors and work towards and maintain a healthy body weight.

**Assignment** for the next two chapters:

1. Make a list of foods that you can't imagine never eating again for the rest of your life. Are there any items that you want to barter or negotiate or grieve over? Are there foods you are terrified of eating?
2. Make a list of foods that you have gobbled down beyond the point of being full, when you have had no control over the amount that you eat.

3. Make a list of foods that you know deep down you should not be eating. At a grocery store, what aisles have you memorized? At a buffet, what makes you panic or get angry if they're out of it?
4. See if you can find some common ingredients in your lists.
5. Make a list of eating behaviors that are part of your compulsive eating; this can include purging (bulimic behavior), abstaining from eating anything (anorexic behavior), chewing constantly, eating while watching television, feeling a need to clean off the plate even if full, never feeling full, situations where you tend to binge, starve, or overexercise, etc.

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

### *Creating a Plan of Eating*

#### Part 1

How to develop a Plan of Eating which will allow us to abstain from compulsive eating and food behaviors and work towards or maintain a healthy body weight. Discussion of the first three of five key questions to help you develop your individual Plan of Eating.

## *Creating a Plan of Eating, Part 1:*

*The concept of abstinence in Overeaters Anonymous:*

The second-last paragraph on BB xxx is Dr. Silkworth's summary of the one thing that many different kinds of addicts have in common—they can't start indulging in their addiction without developing uncontrollable cravings. He suggests that the only solution for an addict is "entire abstinence."

Once we know that we must abstain entirely, our real problem becomes quite clear. The reality is that *we cannot abstain because our minds keep giving us permission to break our abstinence*. Our problem is not compulsively eating. It is that we are not living sanely when we are NOT compulsively eating. We can't achieve that sanity on our own. Our minds send us back to our addiction. That is why the solution to our problem must come from a source of Power that is greater than we are.

This second-last paragraph is also of utmost importance to Overeaters Anonymous. As our founder, Rozanne, describes in her wonderful history of OA, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, it was hearing this paragraph read at an open AA meeting, two years after the founding of OA, that she realized that OA was missing the equivalent of "sobriety" that AA had. She suggested using the word "abstinence" as OA's version of sobriety. At the time this was controversial, but it was a life-changing moment for OA.

It's easy for the alcoholic, we hear: Alcoholics just don't drink, but we compulsive eaters have to eat. That just isn't true, however. Alcoholics have to drink. They can't, however, drink alcohol in any form. We all have to eat. But *we compulsive eaters can't eat the foods, or indulge in the eating behaviors, that cause us uncontrollable cravings*.

Even though it may be more difficult for us to identify our "alcoholic" foods and eating behaviors, there is no real difference. If we want to be in a position of neutrality with food, the answer is simple—we must first give up all the foods and eating behaviors with which we cannot be neutral. In these cases it is always a matter of keeping the tiger of our binge foods and behaviors in the cage, to use an AA metaphor.

The group conscience of OA as expressed by the World Service Business Conference defines abstinence as "the action of refraining from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight." Dr. Silkworth's description of the physical abnormality, the "allergy," clarifies how we can become abstinent: *We must develop a Plan of Eating which clearly sets out how we will refrain from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors while working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight*.

We can provide our experience on how to work out what you have to abstain from, but we are not qualified to tell you what you should be eating. That is the difference between abstinence achieved through a Plan of Eating, and a food plan or diet.

### *A Plan of Eating:*

It is at this point that the OA program may appear more difficult than many other Twelve-Step programs. In many fellowships, it seems to be obvious what the addict must abstain from—alcohol in any form, perhaps narcotic drugs in any form, gambling in any form, debts in any form, perhaps co-dependence in any form. In our fellowship, however, abstinence requires an honest and careful analysis of what we *as individuals* must abstain from.

Our pamphlet *A New Plan of Eating*, representing the group conscience of OA as approved by the OA World Service Business Conference, makes clear that each person's Plan of Eating must fit that person on an individual basis. Someone else's Plan of Eating might include foods or eating behaviors that cause another person uncontrollable cravings, and vice versa. While sponsors and nutritionists can help us tremendously to "co-create" a Plan of Eating, ultimately that Plan must be specific to each of us. Sponsors should not dictate a Plan of Eating.<sup>1</sup>

So how do we develop a Plan of Eating that is right for us as individuals?<sup>2</sup>

### *The difference between a diet and a Plan of Eating:*

Let's start with some basics. Let's distinguish between a diet and a Plan of Eating.

A diet is a decision as to what, when, and how, we eat. We might, for medical or moral or other reasons, eliminate certain foods from our diets or eat in certain ways. People who have Celiac disease cannot eat gluten. Vegans choose not to eat animal products. Some people might be medically required to eat frequently during the day. People with certain vitamin or mineral deficiencies might have to eat certain foods.

A dietitian might provide someone with a suggested calorie intake. People who undereat might be told to eat more foods than they normally do.

Some people might follow books or theories that argue for health or dieting reasons that they should eat paleo, keto, Mediterranean, blood type, sugar-free, salt-free, refined flour-free, gluten-free, eight times a day, once a day, fast twice a week, Atkins, South Beach, grapefruit, supplements, no-diet eat anything, etc., etc., etc. Many of us are *quite* familiar with many of these!

These are all diets. They do not by themselves deal with abstaining from things that cause us uncontrollable cravings. A diet merely provides the context for developing a Plan of Eating. It is not a Plan of Eating. We have all experimented with many many

<sup>1</sup> We discuss sponsoring in detail in our discussion of Step Twelve, toward the end of this book. We will see that the Big Book's approach is to avoid making a sponsee dependent on a sponsor.

<sup>2</sup> Those of us who had a sudden spiritual experience after years of wandering, knew intuitively what we had to abstain from, and did not have to do the extensive analysis that is described in this and the following chapter. If that is true for you—if it is clear from the outset what you have to abstain from—then the value of what follows might only be that it enhances your ability to help someone else get abstinent, rather than help you get abstinent. Some of us especially emphasize from the very beginning that abstinence must be part of a full surrender to a Power greater than us.



diets. The idea is that they are temporary, whereas a Plan of Eating is our plan for abstinence, our life-long path of eating.

To develop our Plan of Eating, we first determine what our diet will be. What, how, and when, do we think we should be eating in order to be healthy?

Then, within the boundaries of that diet, we work out what has at times created uncontrollable cravings. Abstaining from these things—whether foods, food ingredients, or eating behaviors—will constitute our Plan of Eating.

Our experience is that your Plan of Eating may change. Once you abstain from the more obvious things, you may over time discover new foods, food ingredients, and/or eating behaviors (including volume issues of over- or under-eating), that create uncontrollable cravings. That doesn't mean that you weren't abstinent before; it just means you are discovering new things that you must abstain from.

Our experience is that you should not assume that what other OA people say works for them will work for you. Look at your own history, your own failures to keep in check, and your own instincts. Don't let theories you read in books divert you from relying on your own experience.

To develop our Plan of Eating, we do, however, consult with nutritionists or dietitians, and use our sponsors for feedback, as suggested in *A New Plan of Eating*. We need to make certain that we are eating in a healthy manner *and* abstaining from everything we personally must abstain from. Feedback, we have found, is vital to creating our honest Plan of Eating.

*The questions:*

We hope the assignment from the last chapter got you thinking. Let's deal with each question in turn. We'll take the first three in this chapter, and tackle the next two in the following chapter.

**1. Make a list of foods that you can't imagine not eating again for the rest of your life. Are there any items that you want to barter or negotiate or grieve over? Are there foods you are terrified of eating?**

You might as well face this right off the bat. It is entirely probable that these are your number one binge foods. Only you can make this decision, but if it grieves you to give up a particular food, and if you can't imagine giving up this food forever, then your attachment to it would seem abnormal to normal eaters. And the same might be true for the foods that you are terrified of eating. Our experience is that you should put these foods on your "abstaining list" at least until you have finished Step Nine and received the promise of sanity.

Consider the reasonable sane person who suddenly finds that they are allergic to a food that they used to enjoy eating—say that person has developed an allergy to shrimp or peanuts. That person would say, "Well, I enjoyed it while it lasted, but eating this stuff

now will kill me, so it would be insane to have any more of it.” Or a person might abstain from caffeine because they get headaches. In these cases, there might be regret, but there certainly would be no grieving.

Whenever a “normal” person eats anything at all, their desire for more becomes satisfied at some reasonable period of time; and once this occurs, they naturally lose interest in continuing to eat until their brain tells them they’re hungry again. Not so with the compulsive overeater respecting certain foods, or certain ingredients, or certain eating behaviors like huge volumes or bingeing; and not so with the compulsive undereater with restrictive eating behaviors. Their desire for more does not become satisfied; rather, it becomes even stronger. That is not normal.

Grieving over food that harms us is a mark of how addicted we are. We probably should abstain from this food.

- 2. Make a list of foods that you have gobbled down beyond the point of being full; and**
- 3. Make a list of foods that you know deep down you should not be eating. At a grocery store, what aisles have you memorized? At a buffet, what food makes you panic or get angry if they’re out of it?**

Clearly both of these sets of foods should be on your “abstaining” list as well. If you have had episodes where you haven’t been able to stop, where you’ve stuffed yourself to the gills, or if you know deep down you shouldn’t be eating, then those foods are binge or trigger foods.

Drill down deeper, however, than you might normally. Is it, for instance, the baked potato, the pasta, the bread, or is it the butter or the cheese or the sauce that you put *on* those things? Could you eat the potato or the pasta or the bread without the toppings?

Our plan may change as we work our program, experience cravings that we didn’t get before, and get older. We might discover more foods or some eating behaviors we have to abstain from. We might not be able to eat the same at 50 as at 40. Our portions may have to become smaller. In all cases, we simply must be vigilant and rigorously honest.

The undereaters among you might find these three questions strange. We will deal with the eating behavior of undereating in the next chapter, but we do ask you to consider whether, in the past, you have experienced problems with overeating as well. Perhaps in part your undereating has been your “solution” to an earlier history of overeating.

We’ll deal with the next two questions in the next chapter.

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

### *Creating a Plan of Eating*

#### Part 2

Discussion of the last two questions to help you develop your own Plan of Eating.

## *Creating a Plan of Eating, Part 2:*

*More questions:*

Continuing with our analysis.

### **4. See if you can find some common ingredients in your lists.**

This can be tricky because in OA many people are quick to isolate certain ingredients without doing much thinking about it. Often you will hear people talk about sugar or flour or carbs or gluten and take it for granted that these are ingredients that they should abstain from.

We think that nothing should be taken for granted. Some of us can eat what others can't. As we have pointed out, the group conscience of OA is that each person has to develop their own sense of what they abstain from and how they abstain from it.

While there may be good dietary advice, therefore, in some or all of the things you read or that people tell you, following that advice is different from identifying the triggers that cause uncontrollable cravings.

Many and perhaps a majority of—but not all—OA members identify desserts as binge foods. Desserts are all sweet and will often—but not always (ice cream, custards)—contain flour. Many desserts, however, also contain large amounts of fat, often in the form of butter or cream or even whole milk, or through being deep-fried in batter. Do you see any patterns in your binge foods with combinations of fat with sugar or artificial sweeteners, but also perhaps fat with salt? Do you binge on fast food, which is almost always a combination of high fat (cheeses, deep-frying) and salt, sometimes with some sugar added)?

This is an important analysis to make, because if you gave up only sugar you might be giving up all desserts, but you might not be abstaining from high-fat foods that don't contain sugar, like bacon, cheese, butter, cream (even for your coffee), etc. Remember that the OA definition of abstinence includes “working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight.”

Sugar or artificial sweeteners can be a major factor in a lot of things on their own, however, not just in combination with high-fat foods. Many people would say that while they don't eat a pound of sugar or gobble artificial sweeteners, they could eat huge helpings of icing, sugar cubes, candies made entirely of sugar, or drink huge quantities of sweet drinks, etc. So sugar or artificial sweeteners can be a problem to avoid.

Although some will admit that it's what they put onto breads and pastas, some people do find that things like breads and pastas in and of themselves, without anything added, can also create uncontrollable cravings.

Even then, they still should go deeper: is it all breads, even flat whole-grain breads, or just cake-type of breads? Is it all pastas or only white-flour pastas, or flavored pastas?

These kinds of questions begin the process of figuring out which ingredients or combinations of ingredients might create uncontrollable cravings.

In all cases, look carefully at the ingredients before deciding. One test is found in *The Doctor's Opinion*: does this food give us a sense of ease and comfort? Do we feel immediately at home the moment we take our first bite? We find that it helps very much to review these matters with a person who has recovered within our fellowship, like a sponsor.

So be honest with yourself, identify the foods that truly cause cravings, and don't blindly follow anyone else's Plan of Eating.

**5. Make a list of eating behaviors that are part of your compulsive eating; this can include purging (bulimic behavior), abstaining from eating anything or almost anything (anorexic behavior), chewing constantly, eating while watching television, feeling a need to clean off the plate even if full, never feeling full, etc.**

Eating behaviors should be distinguished from foods or ingredients. Sometimes it is the behavior and not any specific food that can create cravings. When people say that they can binge on anything, they may simply have a long list of binge foods and don't notice that there are a lot of foods they just don't eat and therefore don't binge on. On the other hand, they may indeed have certain eating behaviors that in and of themselves cause uncontrollable cravings.

We cannot emphasize enough the importance of dealing with volume issues—eating too much or too little than your body needs—in addition to specific foods or food ingredients and mixtures. There may be foods that don't cause cravings in themselves, but because of our eating behaviors, we still eat too much, or too little, of those foods. We must therefore separately analyze those eating behaviors that may create volume issues.

We should differentiate between adopting behaviors that support abstinence while recovering, and abstaining from behaviors that create the phenomenon of craving. Behaviors that support abstinence while recovering—such as eating mindfully—might appear to be abstaining from other behaviors—such as eating quickly—but those other behaviors might NOT create the phenomenon of craving in and of themselves.

Are behaviors that create cravings “allergies of the body”? Aren't they really psychological? Our answer is simple: We are not talking science here, but *reality*. These are behaviors that are so ingrained in us that they *create* cravings in us. Who knows how or why it happens? The fact is that it does. We find it necessary to treat them as being cravings that are beyond our control, and that fits the definition of the phenomenon of craving.

There are many kinds of behaviors that might produce the phenomenon of craving. Here's a list of some of them to help you identify yours:

- Restricting what you eat in order not to eat anything (anorexia).

- Eating like a pig, then getting rid of (“purging”) what you’ve eaten using methods such as excess exercise, vomiting, laxatives (bulimia).
- Eating alone, eating while watching television, eating in the company of others, eating out, buying take-out and eating alone, letting other people order at restaurants, choosing restaurants where it’s very difficult to avoid binge foods and ingredients.
- Eating at specific times of the day, such as night time or early mornings, or eating during stressful or celebratory or sad situations.
- Indulging in foods that have specific textures or tastes or smells or chewiness, such as gum, air-popped popcorn without butter, healthy bite-sized snacks reminiscent of potato chips, blended non-fat yogurt and frozen fruit that mimics ice cream, or cake-like breads (look-alike foods).
- Keeping your mouth busy by chewing or sucking all the time, even on non-caloric items like gum or celery.
- Having to eat everything on a plate.
- Bingeing late at night.
- Compulsive exercise.
- Eating while driving, alone in the car, in the dark.
- Trying absolutely everything that is available because you paid for it all.
- Never being aware that you’re full, always feeling that you need more because you simply have no sense of being full.

Most OA Plans of Eating use a combination of setting out both what and when and how you *can’t* eat, and what and when and how you *can* eat. Even those who have a list of abstained-from foods and ingredients often have to deal with over or under-eating volume issues by measuring or restricting or adding, to make certain of proper volume, from a not-too-much or not-too-little standpoint. This effectively allows people to abstain from eating behaviors that cause cravings.

**Assignment:** Based on your own analysis, begin to create a Plan of Eating that allows you to abstain from the foods, ingredients/mixtures of ingredients, and/or eating behaviors, that have caused you at times to eat uncontrollably. If you have access to an OA member with abstinence and recovery in the program, someone who has worked the Twelve Steps and has achieved neutrality with their abstinence, such as a sponsor, we recommend that you ask that person to help you develop it, to give you feedback, and to ask you any necessary tough questions. If you have access to a health care professional who can accept the notion of having to abstain from foods and behaviors that cause uncontrollable cravings, consult with that person as well. Use others to help keep you honest as you develop your Plan.

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

### *Creating a Plan of Eating*

#### Part 3

The final process in creating your own Plan of Eating. Abstain from *everything*—foods, ingredients, behaviors—that you even have a suspicion will cause you uncontrollable cravings.

## *Creating a Plan of Eating, Part 3:*

### *The need to be abstinent while working the Steps:*

You will note that in our discussions we use “to eat uncontrollably” rather than “to eat compulsively.” That is because we want to distinguish between the physical problem of uncontrollable eating, and the mental problem of being unable to control going back to that which we have to abstain from. This is a crucial distinction from the Big Book perspective. The concept of “compulsive” covers both of the physical and the mental, so we have to be careful when we use the word “compulsive.”

To be absolutely clear: *The Big Book* assumes that the alcoholic *WILL* be sober *BEFORE* working the *Twelve Steps*. Other Twelve Step Fellowships seem to assume that one dries out, gets sober, gets clean, gets abstinent, stops the addictive behavior, *before* working the Steps. The Big Book does too. How else can we be rigorously honest while working Steps Four through Nine? How can we be open and willing to look at our own character defects when we are indulging ourselves in our addiction? The Big Book’s approach is that we *must* be abstinent when working the Steps.<sup>1</sup>

### *Different Plans of Eating within OA:*

The various weigh-and-measure Plans of Eating used within our program will often set out what and where and how we *can* eat. Examples of that can be found in our *A New Plan of Eating* pamphlet in Basic Plans #1 and #2, High Carbohydrate Plan, High-Protein Plan, and Very Low Carbohydrate Plan. They also would include individual Plans of Eating worked out with a nutritionist.

In these plans, the kind of food that can be eaten is set out specifically. It is also taken for granted—but perhaps should be made extremely clear and carefully examined—that none of the foods “allowed” is a binge food or contains binge ingredients. The amount

<sup>1</sup>See BB xxvi and xxvii-xxviii, beginning at the bottom of both of those referenced pages.

Steps One and Two are acknowledgment steps, where we accept the deadliness of our addiction (powerlessness) and gain the hope of recovery (power), and develop our Plan of Eating. As we will see, Step Three is the decision step, where we decide, on the basis of our own powerlessness and our willingness to try to find a power greater than ourselves, to work the rest of the Twelve Steps.

At a certain point we must become abstinent and take the actions which give us a spiritual awakening. We all believe that this moment is essential to recovery. For us, there are no loopholes. Implementing your Plan of Eating must precede working the Steps.

Most of us characterize this moment as our Steps One, Two, and Three. Some of us characterize this moment as deciding to take action (Step Three) as a result of acknowledging our powerlessness (Step One) and becoming willing to find a power greater than ourselves (Step Two). It is not important, really, to argue about this. *We all agree that recovery is not possible without abstinence.*

You may hear a few OA members talk about working the Steps and then getting abstinent as a result of working the Steps. We urge you not to harbor that very thin hope. We have seen too many of our friends relapse and, worse, die, as a result of trying to work the Steps without being abstinent.



of food eaten is set out specifically, so that there is no guessing about quantity. And the number of meals and snacks is set out specifically, so nothing else is eaten at any other time. Everything is clearly structured, and many in our Fellowship appreciate that structure.

The popular 3-0-1 Plan (3 meals a day, 0 in between, 1 day at a time) also found in *A New Plan of Eating*, is mostly a method of setting out what and where and when we *can't* eat. We avoid the foods, food ingredients/combinations, and eating behaviors, that we know cause the uncontrollable cravings. Here the quantities are referred to as “moderate,” so that there is a need to figure out ways to decide how much to eat, important for both the under- and the over-eater. The frequency is structured—although it could be 4-0-1 or 5-0-1—just as with the weigh-and-measure plans. This deals with eating behaviors which might increase the volume of food (eating all the time, chewing constantly, eating beyond satisfying hunger), or decrease the volume of food ingested (vomiting, excessive exercise, severely restricting intake).

These methods certainly require careful analysis of what foods, food ingredients or combinations of ingredients, and eating behaviors, have caused uncontrollable cravings. Eliminating those identified things from one's eating will certainly eliminate the cravings. Quantity is much more flexible here, and the volume issue has to be taken care of either through eliminating eating behaviors that cause cravings or by weighing and measuring.

Usually, therefore, a combination of these two methods will be adopted. Exactly what will work for you is sometimes a matter of trial-and-error, and of experience. Remember that OA's definition of abstinence includes working towards or maintaining a healthy body weight, so that if you are not at a healthy body weight, whatever Plan of Eating you have must include either gaining or losing weight.

*Developing a Plan of Eating that provides abstinence:*

Note that our OA definition does not say “normal body weight.” The issue of “healthy” is one best discussed with your health professional. We urge you, however, not to use the vagueness of the word “healthy” as an excuse to continue to eat compulsively. Our experience is that the compulsive eater should not make this decision alone because it is too easy to rationalize remaining at an unhealthy body weight. In addition to working with a recovered OA member, like a sponsor, we strongly suggest you consult with a health professional.

Experience has shown that often an initial Plan of Eating based on the first go-around of identifying the foods, ingredients/combinations, and eating behaviors that have, in the past, caused cravings, will have to be modified or made more restrictive as time goes on. If a person has always indulged in ice cream or buttered popcorn, for instance, and eliminates those as part of their Plan of Eating, they may turn, without realizing it, to other kinds of foods that aren't as obvious or which they didn't eat before, but also create uncontrollable cravings. We have to be on a constant lookout, and to be prepared

to abstain from new foods, ingredients, eating behaviors, any time the need arises. There should be no loopholes. Honesty is essential.

The Big Book does not, of course, contain a Plan of Eating or even instructions on how to work out what sobriety means to the individual alcoholic. AA is a one-substance fellowship: its members agree that alcohol in any form creates uncontrollable cravings in them. It may be that an individual member may say that he or she would never get those cravings while drinking gin, and another while drinking vodka, but they all unite in their agreement that they must not drink alcohol in any form.

The same concept may be true for substance-fellowships whose members abstain from all mind-changing drugs, or specific drugs or substances; for behavior fellowships whose members abstain from gambling or debts, as well as many other Twelve Step Fellowships. There are also food addiction fellowships which have specific food plans that each member must adopt; clearly the group conscience of those fellowships led to an agreement on specific substances and/or specific eating behaviors which they hold to be common to them all.

Although we are a Twelve Step Fellowship, and we have a clear definition of what abstinence is, OA is different. We recognize that *a Plan of Eating must be developed for the individual*, and that individuals will have different Plans of Eating from others. There may be many and large overlaps in our Plans of Eating, but it is equally true that in one room there may be two people who do not share the same binge foods or binge eating behaviors. We are an “umbrella” Fellowship, an inclusive Fellowship, for a spectrum of people with compulsive eating addictions.

There’s still more work to be done in addition to adopting your Plan of Eating, The Big Book devotes many pages to persuade us that we have a life-or-death addiction, that by ourselves we are completely powerless. We have already dealt with the issue of the abnormality of the body. It is now time to deal with the issue of the abnormality of the mind.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read *Bill’s Story*, *There Is a Solution* and *More About Alcoholism* (BB 1-43).

Not all readers may identify with *Bill’s Story*, but don’t worry if you don’t. There is much valuable information in it. Because we find it a powerful story, we suggest that you ask yourself a few questions as you read it: Did I overeat or undereat as Bill drank? Did I feel as Bill felt, and thought as he thought? Do I identify with his progressive deterioration?

We expect that you will have little difficulty identifying with the other two Big Book chapters in this assignment.

## **Step One: *Our Problem—Powerlessness***

### *The Mental Obsession:*

The mental obsession: Our mind gives us reasons—often deeply emotional ones that we cling to, and sometimes clearly silly or insane ones that seem at the time to be reasonable—which somehow give us permission to indulge in the foods and behaviors which cause us uncontrollable cravings. We can't stop from starting. If once we have started we also get physical uncontrollable cravings that prevent us from stopping, then we are completely powerless, on our own, over compulsive eating. If we are to get any help, it must come from a source that is more powerful than we are.

## *The Mental Obsession:*

### *Bill's Story:*

Some OAers identify closely with *Bill's Story*. For some, each further descent into alcoholism mirrors their descents into compulsive eating. They identify with the moment that liquor changed from a luxury into a necessity, the use of alcohol as the obviously insane solution to the problems caused by alcohol, and Bill's inability to stop drinking alcohol even when the "kind doctor" (Dr. Silkworth) explains that Bill cannot drink any alcohol at all because his body reacts abnormally. They read that story and understand the depths of despair that Bill felt, his best intentions falling by the wayside, and the fact that knowledge of the dangers of alcohol did not prevent him from continually going back to it.

They understand the hope of a spiritual awakening as the solution to his alcoholism, brought to him by his school-friend. And they see how that slim hope—the need simply to be *willing*—gives him the ability, despite his aversion to religion, to get honest with himself, to get honest with another human being, and to right the wrongs he has done. They see his spiritual experience and that gives them hope. They see the humility of Dr. Silkworth as he tells Bill that he is not crazy, that what he has is better than what he had before. They see Bill's need to carry the message to others.

Some OAers, on the other hand, may have difficulty seeing compulsive eating as similar to alcoholism. They might not identify with a man, or with the high-flying rags-to-riches-to-rags extroverted Bill. We urge you not to be disheartened if you are one of those.

Whether you identify or not with Bill himself, his story is at the center of all Twelve-Step Fellowships: the despair (Step One), the hope (Step Two), the work that is required to overcome the addiction (Steps Three to Nine), and the work that is required to keep in fit spiritual condition (Steps Ten to Twelve).

Bill became the first addict to share with others what his life used to be like (descent into the illness), what happened (spiritual awakening as the result of working the Steps), and what his life became (carrying the message of his recovery in order to help others).

We will return to *Bill's Story* when we get to Step Twelve, but for the purposes of understanding our addiction better, we will concentrate on the next two chapters, *There Is a Solution*, and *More About Alcoholism*.

### *There is a Solution:*

*There is a Solution* (BB 17 to 29) is an introduction to both the problem of addiction (Step One) and the solution (Step Two) of the Twelve Steps. It discusses the allergy plus the obsession, the "double whammy" that was first described by Dr. Silkworth, and then talks about the spiritual solution through the Twelve Steps that gets rid of the obsession.

For the purposes of this Big Book Workbook, *There Is a Solution* contains the following significant points:

- The purpose of the Big Book is to help a still-suffering alcoholic identify with the problem of alcoholism and to provide directions to achieve the spiritual solution to that problem. (BB 17-20)
- An alcoholic is not defined by the amount of alcohol he or she drinks. A moderate drinker *can* be an alcoholic. A heavy drinker *is not necessarily* an alcoholic. What marks a “real alcoholic” is that at some point in their drinking career, they lose control over how much is consumed once they start to drink; and they can’t stop from starting to drink despite the clear need not to drink. In other words, the *real* alcoholic suffers from the allergy *plus* the obsession. (BB 20-22) This clearly applies to the compulsive eater, who is not defined by weight or by excessive behaviors, but by the cravings plus the obsession.
- There will probably never be an answer to why we get the abnormal reaction of cravings. (BB 22) This is an important lesson for us. We are not therapists or doctors or scientists. The cause of our abnormality is not relevant to finding a solution to our addiction.
- The clear solution to the problem of uncontrollable cravings is never to indulge in what causes our uncontrollable cravings. “Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.” The excuses addicts give for starting again may occasionally sound reasonable, but ultimately they prove to be false and the situation always gets worse. (BB 23)
- The *real problem*, therefore, is that we addicts have an obsession, a thought that overpowers all other thoughts, sometimes described as a mental twist—that somehow we can overcome our abnormal physical reaction of cravings. As Dr. Silkworth writes in *The Doctor’s Opinion*, we are restless, irritable, and discontented when we are sober (abstinent). We often see our trigger foods, our restricting, our purging, as an answer to our emotional problems. We are doomed: We cannot remember at times that we have this physical reaction of cravings, even if we are convinced that we have it. Our problem is not that we can’t get abstinent. We’ve been on many diets. It’s that we can’t *keep* abstinent. We are beyond human aid. No amount of thinking can solve the mind problem. (BB 23-4)
- *There is a solution.* This solution has nothing to do with our thinking and will-power. It has *everything* to do with finding a Power outside of our mind, a Power greater than we are, a spiritual Power. This solution requires self-searching, leveling of pride, confession of shortcomings. It has worked for others. And we know that nothing else has worked for us. And we will discover that, to keep living sanely, this solution requires helping others with no expectation of reward.
- This solution is simple: We have had life-changing spiritual awakenings which have changed our attitude toward our lives, those around us, and

the world itself. Working the Twelve Steps will enable us to find a Higher Power. (BB 25)

- There is no compromise position. Either we continue on our path to oblivion with our addiction, or we go on a spiritual journey. (BB 25) Illustration of this in the story of the alcoholic who consulted Dr. Jung. BB 26-28)
- There is nothing in the Twelve Steps that should conflict with religion or with any other kind of faith. (BB 28)

*More About Alcoholism:*

*More About Alcoholism* (BB 30-43) is all about the mental obsession, emphasizing the hopelessness of the addiction if a spiritual solution is not sought. This mental obsession is not the state of mind of the addict while indulging in their addiction; rather, *it is about the state of mind of people who were completely sober, completely informed about their problem, but who were driven by the mental obsession to pick up again.*

The mental obsession condemns us to return to that which causes us uncontrollable cravings—in our case, the foods, ingredients, combinations of ingredients, and/or eating behaviors (including restricting or purging) we have spoken about earlier.

*More About Alcoholism* is a chapter about the thinking that *precedes* the first drink or, in our case, first bite or compulsive behavior. While *Bill's Story* is essentially a story about a drunk who couldn't get sober, this is a chapter about persons who were sober but got drunk, persons who had healthy experiences with sobriety but returned to drinking alcohol.

The chapter begins with a summary of the mental obsession. It describes it as “[t]he idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking.”

“Control” means to indulge just a little. “Enjoy” means to be content with just a little. We compulsive eaters can't control and enjoy our compulsive eating and behaviors. We eaters can't stop from indulging in more. We aren't content in indulging in a little. In our hearts, therefore, we know that this obsession is an illusion, a delusion, and it is clearly insanity. It is not simply denial. It is an idea which overpowers us.

We cannot be fooled in this respect. Once we understand how much this obsession has controlled us, and therefore how lost we are as individuals, then we are at Step One. (BB 30)

We have to accept that it will always get worse, not better. We have to accept that our physical reaction of uncontrollable cravings will never leave us. We have tried all kinds of methods to be able to control our addiction, but we have always found ourselves with uncontrollable cravings that have overpowered us at times. This is a permanent, progressive, and fatal illness. We will never be free of it. (BB 30-31)

*The Big Book tests to see if you are an addict:*

**First test:** Go to a place where they serve your binge food. Have a small portion of it. Then stop. Or try to purge or restrict or weigh yourself or exercise one day, and then stop for a few days. Try this a few times. See what happens. Can you reasonably predict what will happen next? This tests whether you have an *abnormal physical reaction of cravings*. (BB 31-32)

An example of the obsession is the man of thirty who quit drinking for twenty-five years and then retired. He thought his lengthy period of sobriety/abstinence meant that he could drink moderately. But that didn't happen. He died of his alcoholism within four years. (BB 32-33)

The lesson the Big Book tells us to draw from this example is this: "If we are planning to stop drinking, there must be no reservation of any kind, nor any lurking notion that someday we will be immune to alcohol." (BB 33)

The Big Book then encourages young people and women to identify themselves as alcoholics even though they might not have sunk to the same bottom or had the same life experiences as the persons who wrote the book. (BB 33) Given that the Big Book reflects the experiences of the original AA members who were men, this is an attempt to be more inclusive.

**Second test:** try to stop indulging in your binge foods or your eating behaviors for a year. If you are like us, the chances are you won't be able to do it. This tests whether you have the *mental obsession* that keeps sending you back to indulge in what you know you can't indulge in. (BB 34)

Clearly we have to stop indulging in the foods, ingredients and combinations of ingredients, and/or eating behaviors, which cause us uncontrollable cravings. We know we have to do it, because we know from our life experience that once we start indulging we will develop uncontrollable cravings which will overpower our will-power. But somehow we can't stop from starting. This is what baffles us about our addiction. (BB 34)

*What goes on in the mind of the addict:*

The Big Book then provides three examples of persons who have given in to their addictions, three examples of the kind of thinking that an alcoholic goes through repeatedly—what it calls "the desperate experiment of the first drink." (BB 35)

**First example:** Jim, the owner of a car dealership who loses it all to alcohol, finds AA, makes only a beginning, and then relapses again. He was clearly what we would call "white knuckling it," or being a "dry drunk." He was not using the Steps to recover. He describes his relapse.

He was working for the new owner of the same dealership, clearly not happy about it. He went into the country to speak to a prospect for a car. On the way he stopped at what he calls "a roadside place where they have a bar" to eat. He had eaten there many

times before. Note, by the way, that he had been going to a place where he could be tempted—a place with a bar. He ordered a sandwich and a glass of milk. He finished that and decided to order another sandwich and another glass of milk.

Then, as he says, “the thought crossed my mind” suddenly that he could put whiskey into the milk and that couldn’t hurt on a full stomach, and he relapsed into a huge bender.

Jim had a bad day and he went back to drinking, which made his bad day only worse. (BB 35-37)

This is pure insanity, of course. It is not an extreme case, however, because it has happened to all of us. Sometimes we did a bit more thinking than Jim did about what might happen after our first compulsive bite, but we still gave into it. Jim realized it was insane only *after* he woke up from his binge, *not* at the moment he chose to drink.

**The two parallel thoughts:** The Big Book then describes two parallel thought processes. One is the sane thinking that we cannot take that first bite because it will lead to the uncontrollable cravings. The other is a trivial excuse. The trivial excuse always wins.

Sometimes we have deliberately indulged in that first compulsive bite or behavior for reasons which seem justified, such as deeply emotional reasons. It was obvious, however, that we hadn’t given much real thought to the horrible consequences that would always follow. (BB 37)

Whether the excuse is trivial or deeply emotional, it all boils down to one thing: *your mental obsession will find some reason that will persuade you to go back to what you should be abstaining from.* In essence, your mental obsession is the equivalent of the argument of “Come on! Just do it!” It’s an absurd argument, it’s an insane argument, it’s what the Big Book calls a “trivial reason,” but it has *always* been successful.

We addicts get a mental blank spot, a forgetfulness, with respect to returning to our addictive substances and eating behaviors. Somehow it becomes easier for us to return than to keep abstinent. We are delusional. We keep trying to persuade ourselves that *this* time it will be different, even though it is *never* different at all. Our minds will *always* keep us from remembering that we have to abstain.

We don’t drive our car at reckless speeds because we always keep in our minds the consequences of doing so—a speeding ticket, a dangerous accident. Because of the mental blank spot with respect to our addiction, however, we cannot remember, at a crucial moment, that indulging in foods or behaviors that *have* caused us uncontrollable cravings in the past *will again* cause us those cravings and the horrible consequences of indulging. This built-in forgetting, this mental blank spot, aids and abets our illness. This is what kills us.

**Second example:** the jaywalker who—despite experiences of increasing physical danger and harm—continues to jaywalk. Substitute the word “addict” for the jaywalker, and the fit is perfect. This is pure insanity. We continue to indulge in things that we know we are addicted to, and the results are deadly. (BB 37-38) It is important to note that the jaywalker does not act this way in order to self-destruct. He genuinely believes that one



of these days he's going to figure out how to jaywalk safely by using the "power" of his (insane) mind.

But shouldn't self-knowledge work? Surely we now know that we can't have even one drink, or one bite. We're still not that bad—perhaps we rationalize that we don't yet weigh 500, or 70, pounds, or have lost our jobs or our significant others—so this self-knowledge should be sufficient. The Big Book warns us, however, that for the real alcoholic self-knowledge will simply not work. We keep thinking that food is different. (BB 38-39)

**Third example:** Fred, the accountant who felt that self-knowledge was enough because he hadn't sunk to the depths that others had. He went to Washington DC, had a great day with great success, was happy. He walked into the dining room of the hotel, and "the thought came to mind" that he could have a few cocktails. He relapsed into a huge bender. There was no fight. He did not think of the consequences of taking that first drink. After that relapse he became convinced that he needed a spiritual program to solve his problem. (BB 39-43).

This "came to mind" is the same as the sudden thought that Jim had. Circumstances just don't matter. The reasons don't matter. The mind picks a reason that seems to make sense at the time, but never *really* makes sense.

The Big Book concludes that the real alcoholic "at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink. . . . His defense must come from a Higher Power" (43).

*Excuses for returning to that which we must abstain from:*

How many excuses have you had to indulge in foods or eating behaviors (including purging or restricting) that you knew perfectly well were addictive?

How many of those excuses turned out to be reasonable? In our experience, none.

Here's a partial list. See if you can add to it:

- I'm sad, depressed, lonely.
- I have suffered a horrible tragic situation.
- The trauma I suffered years ago continues to traumatize me.
- They made this food especially for me.
- Everyone else is having this food. Why can't I?
- I'm happy and want to celebrate.
- Other people are happy and I want to celebrate with them.
- This binge food is organic/natural/pure.
- Someone parked in my parking spot for the second time this month!
- Even though something like this food is on my list of no-nos, this *specific* food isn't on that list.

- I've been good for six months/three months/one month/one week/one day/five hours/one hour/five minutes. I deserve this!
- I've never had this food before.
- No one's looking.
- I can't sleep so food will help me sleep.
- I exercised for one hour/half-hour/ten minutes/one minute.
- No one will ever love me.
- Good day *or* bad day.
- Happy *or* sad.
- Promotion *or* fired.
- No money *or* lots of money.
- I ate too much so I have to get rid of it.
- Good relationship *or* bad or broken relationship.
- I will start my diet on Monday.
- I need to get thinner in order to feel good about myself, so I won't eat anything.
- I'm fat already. I'll never stop being fat. So I might as well eat.

You will note that many of these excuses appear deeply emotional. Certainly trauma, tragedy, loneliness, depression, or celebration, can create deep human emotional responses that can blot out warning thoughts.

Many of us in OA have suffered great difficulties in our lives. Many of us live and relive traumatic parts of our past in ways that cause us continue to feel pain and anguish. We build up our emotions and find some kind of physical comfort in going to our addictive substances—the foods and eating behaviors that cause us uncontrollable cravings. We think of these emotional responses as the root causes of our addiction. They are our constant “excuse” for returning to that which we should be abstaining from. We never ended up feeling better, of course. We always ended up, in the long run, feeling worse.

Those of us who did overcome great difficulties or traumas (through therapy, for instance) before we joined OA, found, however, that we *still* came up with reasons that somehow seemed just as plausible as the deep-seated emotional ones. Although for many of us food appeared to be the solution for our problem, food in and of itself was not the problem.

When bad things happen, all people feel jealous, angry, frustrated, and fearful at times. For normal people, those feelings are dealt with in simple ways—walking around the block, engaging in a sport, walking around the block, going to the gym, talking to a friend, or perhaps just accepting the reality of the situation.

For many compulsive eaters, however, these same feelings can cause such pain that the brain will say to the compulsive eater, “Eat a cookie.” That is an example of the mental twist; the effect of the cookie—the sense of ease and comfort that comes instantly from eating that cookie—has in the past lowered the level of discomfort quickly. Such relief is, however, always temporary.

If we resist the urge to eat a cookie, eventually the pain of these emotions can become too great to bear, so we eat that cookie in search of relief from the pain of not eating. So it becomes preferable to eat the cookie; and for about ten seconds we feel great, and the brain says, “See, I told you you’d feel great!” But now we have triggered the physical cravings. We end up eating all of the cookies, plus other things. We are ashamed. We have a pall of remorse about us and hopelessness abounds. We end up eating and eating. This is our cycle.

It begs the question. If we cannot always eat a cookie without stopping from eating more (the uncontrollable cravings), and we cannot always stop from starting to eat that first cookie (the obsession, the twist of the mind brought about by the build-up of these emotions), then we are powerless over food, and because of that powerlessness our lives are unmanageable.

*There is hope:*

What if we could find a way to live where these emotions do not build to that level thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion?

The process of bringing the necessary Power into the equation is simply called recovery. We are going to set out on a lifelong set of activities specifically designed not to allow these emotions to build. The Steps will do for us what we could never do for ourselves: lower the level of guilt, shame, fear, anger, frustration, jealousy, etc. When these emotions are lowered, very often the urge to return to binge or indulge is simply not there.

Some of the excuses we give ourselves to go back to the foods or behaviors which cause cravings, including many of those listed above, are simply absurd rationales that bear no link to reality. Whether someone made the food for me or not is an absurd and trivial reason to eat it. Because it’s organic is an absurd and trivial reason to eat ice cream.

However long we may have been abstinent, there’s no excuse for indulging in that which we know we should abstain from and reject our Plan of Eating. Sometimes even when we have not allowed our emotions to build up, our minds have found another reason to go back and lose our abstinence.

In OA we talk about being “emotionally sick.” The Big Book talks about being “mentally sick,” which appears to include emotional reasons, but also includes absurd, insane, or trivial reasons.

Regardless of how we describe our mental condition, there is no question that at certain times our sane mind clicks off, and our insane mind says that we can indulge. In some way, as we have said, our insane mind just says “Come on—have some!” It doesn’t always

give a reason. If pressed, however, *it will find a reason*. That reason may, on its surface, have some deep emotional power. It may, on the other hand, have none. In *all* cases, however, the reason will never be good enough to justify indulging in that which we know we should not indulge in.

*Our minds are wired differently*. That is the common problem in all the dozens and dozens of Twelve Step Fellowships: the mental twist, the insanity, the reasons that appear *at the time* to be good, but *never* are. The difference between each fellowship is only the different physical problem—what creates the phenomenon of cravings, what we are “allergic” to. The mental problem, however, is exactly the same. And the solution to that mental problem, a spiritual awakening, is also exactly the same.

Our experience, therefore, is that if we suffer from the mental obsession as described in the Big Book, the reason doesn’t have to be a good one. It doesn’t have to resemble a deep-seated emotional reason. The reason really doesn’t matter at all. It’s just something the insane mind uses for the split-second required to get us to indulge in that first bite.

Do you understand and accept that you have the double whammy—that once you start compulsively eating you can’t stop, and that you can’t stop from starting?

If your answer is yes, and your cravings are triggered by foods, ingredients, or eating behaviors, then you are suffering from an addiction which—as the combined experience of millions of addicts with dozens of addictions shows—can be solved through the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

If your answer is no, then you are welcome to try every other method that all of us have tried to deal with our compulsive eating. You might be right. If so, some of those methods might work, and you owe it to yourself and to OA to try those methods to see if they work. If you think another method might work, then you have to ask yourself: Why am I in a Twelve Step Fellowship if I don’t need to work the Twelve Steps?

If you accept that those other methods don’t work, however, then you have the problem we have. You are a compulsive eater. We have found a solution to that problem. It is a spiritual solution that will provide you with the miracle of being able to stop *before* starting and thus be contentedly abstinent. And we are privileged to be with you every Step of the way.

That is Step One. You have accepted that on your own you cannot escape from your own version of compulsive eating. And you have worked out what you must abstain from. We will now discuss the solution described in Step Two.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read *We Agnostics* (BB 44-57), and Appendix II *Spiritual Experience* (BB 567).

## **Step Two: *Our Solution—A Power Greater than Us***

We can find a source more powerful than we are, one that can overcome the mental obsession that gives us permission to indulge in our addiction. That source becomes available through working the Twelve Steps and connecting us with what we deeply believe in. We all believe in something. For some of us, it is a God of some kind, or a Spirit of the Universe. For others it is strong human values. The Steps unblock the passageway between our deepest beliefs and our thoughts and actions, That becomes the source of power that can overcome the mental obsession. The Twelve Steps have worked for millions of addicts, whether deeply religious or ardently atheist or somewhere in between. The Steps can work for you. Nothing is lost, and real recovery is possible, by working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

## Step Two:

### *The Double Whammy and powerlessness:*

In our last chapter we challenged you to decide whether you suffered from the double whammy that Dr. Silkworth described: (1) at times, you can't stop once you've started (the abnormality or "allergy" of the body—the uncontrollable cravings), and, (2) at times, you can't stop from starting again (the mental obsession that gives you absurd reasons to return to that which causes your cravings). That is how the Big Book describes the "real" addict. We remember that the Preface to the First Edition (BB xiii) refers to "a seemingly hopeless condition of mind and body." This is the Big Book's perspective on our addiction.

If you have that problem, the experience of countless number of addicts with many addictions, including compulsive eating, has shown that the Twelve Steps will give you freedom from starting again. They will clear your mind and give you sanity. Our journey through the rest of the Big Book will show you not only why your mind sends you back to that which you have tried to abstain from, but also how to find a Power that *will* clear your mind.

If you could clear your mind yourself, you wouldn't need the Twelve Steps. To get your mind cleared, it is obvious that you have to find a Power greater than you are. To be willing to find that Power, which is Step Two, requires the sense of hopelessness and surrender of Step One.

We experienced that complete surrender by being persuaded of the hopelessness of the combination of mind and body described in the early chapters of the Big Book, which are discussed in detail in the preceding chapters of this Workbook. The gradual awakening of our spiritual consciousness required analysis and thinking. We had to see how our experiences resembled the picture of the alcoholic described in the Big Book. Then we had to figure out how to become abstinent using that picture, and then we had to work the Steps. By the time we finished Step Nine, we had the sense that we had found a Power greater than us. The Big Book calls that gradual understanding of Power "a spiritual awakening."<sup>1</sup>

### *The "God issue" for agnostics and atheists:*

Because the Twelve Steps and the Big Book use the word "God" to describe a Higher Power, and despite the words "as we understood Him" in Steps Three and Ten, many

<sup>1</sup> Some of us, on the other hand, having admitted complete defeat, have immediately turned to a Power greater than us, which the Big Book calls "sudden spiritual experiences." Out of the depths of despair those who have experienced this sudden experience have surrendered ourselves to a Higher Power, and found hope in that Higher Power; and that hope has propelled us to work the Steps to keep what we have found. If you have experienced that sudden spiritual release, then your reasons for reading this chapter will help you understand how to carry your own message of recovery to persons who have not experienced that sudden spiritual release.

prospective Twelve-Step members shy away from what they perceive as an attempt to make them religious. This is not the case.

Although often using religious words, the Big Book has a direct message to persons who have no belief in any kind of deity: *Recovery is available to them.*

An atheist is a person who is certain that there is no kind of deity. An agnostic is a person who does not believe in a deity, but doesn't *know* that there is no deity. Both of these persons do not believe in the concept of a deity that can answer prayers and make changes in the physical world.

*Why believers should also read We Agnostics:*

The chapter *We Agnostics* is not only for agnostics and atheists, however. It deserves to be read by everyone, even deeply religious or faith-full people. There are two good reasons for this.

The first is that Step Twelve requires us to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer, not simply those who believe what we believe. *We Agnostics* contains important tools that allow all of us, religious or not, to carry the message to atheists and agnostics, as well as to believers in a wide spectrum of faiths.

The second reason is that toward the end of the chapter we get an answer to a question that has troubled many who have great faith: "If I have so much faith in God, why am I not relieved of my food compulsion?" Many religious people need to understand why their deeply-held beliefs are not enough to give them sanity, and *We Agnostics* answers that question.

*Spiritual experience and spiritual awakening:*

Let's start, not with *We Agnostics*, but with Appendix II on *Spiritual Experience*.

Although it wasn't the intention of the Big Book to describe the spiritual changes created by the Twelve Steps as immediate, sudden, and overwhelmingly powerful, that was certainly the impression given by the various personal stories found in the Big Book, from *Bill's Story* to the story in *We Agnostics* on BB 56 to the stories in the back of the first edition of the book.<sup>1</sup>

Some of us have had exactly those same experiences. They are sudden, unexpected, powerful, revelations that arise out of a sense of complete defeat and despair. Those of us who have had them treasure the feeling of Power that surged into us at the moment we surrendered ourselves to a Power greater than ourselves. The majority of us, however, have not experienced that.

<sup>1</sup> The changes from the first edition to the current fourth edition of the Big Book consist mainly in the stories at the back of the Big Book rather than the text that ends on BB 164. The stories now reflect a much broader group of experiences than the original first edition did.

*Bill's Story* itself says that most spiritual experiences happen gradually, but that they were sudden with him (BB 14). Many of the stories in the first printing of the Big Book, however, described the sudden appearance of a God in their lives, the tumbling to their knees, the voices in their heads. When the first printing of the Big Book was printed, many AA members were evidently concerned because they had not had that kind of sudden spiritual experience, even though they no longer felt the obsession to return to alcohol.

So the Appendix on *Spiritual Experience* was added in the second printing of the Big Book in 1941, and Step Twelve was changed from “a spiritual experience” to “a spiritual awakening,” in order to assure the reader that *most of the spiritual changes that occur as the result of working the Steps are gradual learning experiences.*<sup>1</sup>

Appendix II defines a spiritual experience or awakening as “the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism.” This is worded much differently than the description of finding God, or even finding a Power greater than ourselves. From the perspective of Appendix II, *all that is required for a spiritual awakening is a personality change that brings about recovery.* We will see how that translates into hope for an atheist or agnostic. Note that it says “bring about”—we will keep that personality change *only if* we continue to work the Steps.

*What if we believe in God but don't believe God will help us?:*

For many, the idea that God (or a Higher Power personal to them) will help them with their food and their life is often quite difficult to accept. Some of us have already asked God to help us, and it seemed to many of us that we didn't get the help we thought we deserved. This was a difficult stumbling block for us. We felt that our God ignored our pleas.

In Overeaters Anonymous we found, however, that we could avoid this issue entirely, that we could look at it in an entirely different way, and shine light on the hope that we too could recover in the same way described in the Big Book.

We start with the admission that on our own willpower we could not recover. That is Step One. Then we become willing to believe that the Steps will enable us to find a Higher Power that *will* restore us to sanity. That is Step Two. This is true regardless of whether we already believe in a Higher Power, or the Higher Power we believe in has not helped us in the past, or we don't believe in a deity of any kind. We *will* find some kind of Power that will restore us to sanity. Many of us also have to ask ourselves, “Who am I to say there is no Power greater than myself?” That is the truth discovered by millions of addicts with dozens of addictions who have worked the Twelve Steps.

For some, the idea of being “insane” may be difficult to relate to. If we think of insanity as the inability to distinguish the true from the false, however, then it clearly applies to

<sup>1</sup> Note that the Appendix talks about these experiences happening within “a few months.” Even for the slower “awakening,” It's not a matter of years, but a matter of “months.”



us. We continue to be subjected to the mental obsessions which give us absurd reasons to indulge in what we should be abstaining from. That is insanity for us.

*The chapter We Agnostics:*

*We Agnostics* begins with a simple test (BB 44), basically summarizing the chapters preceding this one, for whether one is an addict. If you want to stop the addiction but find that you can't quit entirely (the mental obsession that condemns us to keep going back to what we have to abstain from), or if when you are indulging in the addiction but can't control the amount (the abnormal physical cravings that condemn us to keep indulging in what we have to abstain from), then you are probably an addict. We can't stop from starting (mental obsession), and we can't stop once we have started (physical craving).

The next section (BB 44-48) deals with the dilemma of the person who does not believe in the traditional concept of a God. On the one hand, we individually have no power over our addiction, and therefore to overcome our addiction we need to find a Power that is greater than we are. On the other hand, if we don't believe in a traditional, or any, concept of a God, how do we find this Power?

The Big Book makes clear that its whole purpose "is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself which will solve your problem." (BB 45) In other words, *the Twelve Steps will enable us to find a Power which will give us a solution to our addiction*. If we work the Twelve Steps to the best of our ability—with rigorous honesty and while abstinent—we *will* have a personality change sufficient to overcome our compulsive eating. We remember how Dr. Jung (BB 27) described how a spiritual awakening replaces our old motivations and attitudes with new ideas, attitudes, and emotions.

The Big Book assures us that those of us who do not believe in a traditional concept of a God need not be concerned. There are two main reasons given for that:

- All we need is a willingness to find a Power that will solve our problem. We don't need to believe in anything in order to work the Steps. Being *willing* to work the Steps is all that is required. The Big Book guarantees us that going on this journey will enable us to find a Power greater than ourselves which will restore us to sanity. We don't have to believe in anything before we start the journey; we'll find it at the end. Only complete rejection of the mere possibility of finding that Power can stand in our way.

- The kind of Power greater than ourselves which will solve our problem can be our own conception and doesn't have to be the traditional concept of a God. You can substitute your own conception for any of the words used in the Big Book to describe a Power greater than yourself.

Ultimately the issue comes down to this (BB 47): *Do we now believe that we can find a Power greater than ourselves, or are we willing to believe that there can be such a Power?* If we can answer yes to either of these two choices, then we can go on to work the Steps.

Are we so self-important that we think we can solve our own problems? If we could have done this on our own, we would have. So we don't have to believe. We have to be *willing* to believe. Nothing in the Big Book says that we *must* believe. It says that we must be *willing* to believe.

We should not confuse Step Two with Step Eleven. We do not need a definitive idea of a God or a Higher Power at Step Two. We only need the "flimsy reed" (BB 28) of willingness to begin our journey through the Twelve Steps. The guarantee of the Big Book is that by the time we reach Step Eleven we will have a deeper connection with a Power greater than ourselves.

This is a very simple approach, and one which anyone who does not believe in a traditional concept of a God can accept. After all, the experience of so many addicts over the years and throughout the world, who have found relief from their many addictions through the Twelve Steps, should give us the hope that the Twelve Steps can also help us find some kind of Power to relieve us of our addiction. What have we got to lose?—except a few pounds, if we're heavier than we ought to be, and/or a way of life that is not working for us.

*Why even agnostics and atheists should be willing to believe in some kind of Higher Power:*

The Big Book then provides us with three reasons for being willing to believe in a Power greater than ourselves. Each of these presents a persuasive reason.

**First reason:** *A theory that is grounded in facts is worth believing in. (BB 48-51)*

This is a fundamental scientific principle. A scientific theory that accounts for verifiable facts is worth accepting as true. We believe in the existence of molecules and atoms even though we have never seen them, because their composition and combinations explain the many facts of our lives based on physics and chemistry. We buy the latest marvel of technology and use it, even if we don't know how it works or what all of its features are. We are willing to trust the inventions of others.

The theory of the Big Book is that people who are real addicts (can't stop once started, can't stop from starting) can work the Twelve Steps and find a Power that relieves them of their addiction. The fact is that this has happened to countless addicts around the world. Clearly that is a theory worth believing in.

**The second reason:** *Progress occurs when innovators don't accept established wisdom and think outside the box. (BB 51-53)*

Why shouldn't this willingness to change our point of view be applied to our own dilemma, our double whammy? Clearly our own current existence as addicts isn't working for us. Why don't we try something new and different? A broken brain cannot fix a broken brain. If we could have done it ourselves, we would have done it when we were very young, or we could do it right now. We couldn't; and we can't. Others once like us did that, however, and solved their problem. We are therefore faced with a clear choice: either we accept the possibility of finding a Power greater than ours, or we continue to be crushed. Why not try what these recovered addicts are offering?

On BB 52 the Big Book mentions eight "bedevilmments"—difficulties that we suffer when we live in and with our addiction. They constitute the "proof," in a sense, that trying to do it on our own doesn't work, because we experience these problems. Therefore we should be trying something different. We will return to the bedevilmments when we discuss Step Ten later in this Workbook.

**The third reason:** *We who don't believe in a traditional concept of God do believe in some things which we cannot justify logically, but which are fundamental to who we are and how we live (BB 53-55).*

Not only do we believe in logic and reason, but even if we don't believe in a deity, we believe in basic human values like love and a sense of truth or right and wrong. Moreover, we find that these values, and not logical reasoning, are really the basic motivators of our lives. The Big Book points out that we can also worship people and sentiment and money, also not part of logical reasoning. So we do believe in some things even if we don't believe in a traditional concept of a God.

This third reason is a very powerful reason to use on an agnostic or atheist. Any atheist or agnostic who is passionate about the issue as to whether a traditional concept of a God exists must admit that their passion comes from a belief that truth is important. But why is truth important? There is no logical justification for that. So there is a belief in *a concept of a value*, and that belief cannot be justified by logic.

*The Steps unblock the passageway between what we deeply believe and how we think and act:*

BB 55 contains the nub of what the journey through the Steps is all about: Deep down within us, whether true believer in a specific kind of God, or atheist, or believer in some universal spirit, is the fundamental idea of our deepest beliefs. You can think of this as "our higher selves"—that which separates us from the animal kingdom.

As human beings we have beliefs—those beliefs closest to our hearts. For some that is a specific God of a specific religion. For others it may be a broader concept of a universal spirit. For atheists and agnostics it may be more abstract values like truth, love, beauty, justice. But for all of us, *those deepest beliefs are fundamental to our existence*. They form our core. We can't logically justify them. *They represent who we are, or at the minimum who we want to be.*

The Big Book points out, however, that for us these fundamental beliefs are blocked off by calamity (bad things happening), pomp (a sense of self-importance), or worship of other things (people's opinions, money, prestige); but they *are* there, deep down in our hearts. To find these things we have to "search fearlessly" (the wording of Step Four: "a searching and fearless moral inventory"), but they are there.

Thus *We Agnostics* contains a message both for the agnostic and atheist as well as for the believer.

- Deep down you do believe in something, whether you acknowledge it or not.
- Your problem is that you are blocked off from what you deeply believe in.
- The result is that *you are not living and thinking and acting according to what you deeply believe in.*

Some of us have grown up with a certain kind of deity with which we are not comfortable. It is difficult for us, however, to consider another kind of deity. Many of us have, however, done so, if the deity we grew up with does not reflect our deepest values.

For some, contemplating those characteristics that they *did not* want in a Higher Power is a good place to begin. Some grow up believing that their original deity is judgmental, so many have to have a Higher Power that is non-judgmental. Some grow up believing that their deity will eventually abandon them, so they attribute the characteristic of loyalty to their Higher Power. Or they grow up believing their deity as angry and punishing, and attribute the characteristic of love and compassion to their Higher Power.

God "as we understood Him" means that we are not limited to believing in any particular faith. That may be a start, but it is clear as well that we can believe in any Power we choose, with whatever traits we choose, and we can change it as our lives change. One Big Book commentator has said that a God *beyond* our understanding is preferable, because if we understood that God, that God wouldn't be big enough.

For many of us, the only things we need to know about a Higher Power are these two central facts: 1. There is some kind of a Higher Power/deepest values/God. 2. And we are *not* that Higher Power.

Some of us, therefore, have chosen a new kind of deity to believe, a God concerned about us, a God who is loyal and compassionate and understanding, a God who asks us to focus on the present moment.

We have found it helpful to describe the kind of deity we are looking for. Over time we may change our conception of our deity. We find that we grow and adapt, as all living things do. We might need a different deity now than we might have needed years ago.

*The purpose of the Twelve Steps:*

The purpose of the Steps becomes clear: Whether you believe in a specific kind of a God or not, you are blocked off from what you believe in. *The purpose of the Steps is to unblock the pipeline between what you deeply believe in (in your heart) and how you think and act (in your head).*

Once the Steps unblock that pipeline, you *will* have a spiritual awakening that will give you sanity—a sense of perspective, a sense of direction, a sense of serenity. This spiritual awakening *will* lower the level of any guilt or shame or anger that you may feel, so that your emotions will not be used as an excuse to return to that which you have abstained from. It *will* give you the sanity to recognize that any excuse, whether emotional or not, is not a good excuse.

For some it will be a sudden transformation, perhaps a feeling that a specific kind of God is speaking directly to you. For some it will be a gradual feeling that you are living according to your own personal deep beliefs. For some it will be lowering the level of emotions, of feeling guilt or shame or anger, so that emotions will give an excuse to return to compulsive eating. This transformation comes in many forms, because we are all unique.

One fact is clear: However it happens, if you are honestly abstinent and work Steps Four through Nine to the best of your ability, you *will* experience a personality change “sufficient”—good enough—to overcome your compulsive eating. It is the spiritual awakening as *the* result of the Twelve Steps promised by Step Twelve.

All you have to do is to be *willing* to explore the Steps. Take the journey on blind faith, knowing that millions of addicts have recovered using these Steps. You will find nothing inconsistent with your deepest beliefs, because ultimately the purpose of the Steps is to help you live and think and act *according* to your deepest beliefs. The bottom line: *If your way worked you would not be a compulsive eater. So try another way.*

You have accepted the *problem*: You are powerless over your compulsive eating. That was Step One.

Now your willingness has allowed you to accept the *solution*: You *can* find a Power that will relieve you of your compulsive eating. That is Step Two.

You are now ready to work the Steps which will relieve you of your compulsive eating, one day at a time, for the rest of your life. That will be Steps Three to Twelve.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the beginning of *How It Works* (BB 58-60).

## **Step Three: *Our Decision***

### *(a) The Beginning of Action*

Step One has shown us that we cannot recover on our own—that we *need* to find a Power greater than we are. Step Two has shown us that we *can* find a Power greater than we are if we work the Steps.

In order to work the Steps, we must abstain from all those foods, ingredients, and behaviors, which have tended to cause uncontrollable cravings in us. Only then can we be rigorously honest enough to work the Steps that will remove our mental obsession, and thus free us from the temptation of returning to that which we have abstained from.

## The Beginning of Action:

*The moment of making our decision:*

We are almost ready to take action—to work Steps Four through Nine—that *will* bring us recovery from compulsive eating. This recovery will be the removal, on a day-to-day basis, of the mental obsession that up to now has condemned us to return to foods, ingredients and mixtures, and behaviors, that have caused uncontrollable cravings.

Before we do, however, the Big Book wants to prepare us for the journey that will relieve us of our compulsive eating.

We will take this and the next chapter to discuss Step Three.

*We are powerless:*

We have studied *The Doctor's Opinion*, *Bill's Story*, *There Is a Solution*, *More About Alcoholism*, and *We Agnostics*—all of which have discussed Steps One and Two in great detail.

We have experienced the truth that our current condition is hopeless. We have recognized our powerlessness because we have identified certain foods, food ingredients/combinations, and/or eating behaviors, which have caused us to experience uncontrollable cravings. We have also acknowledged that our minds will find excuses—whether absurd, insane, trivial, or deeply emotional—to indulge in those things, even if we know that indulging in them will cause us to experience uncontrollable cravings. This was our Step One—we can't stop once we've started, and we can't stop from starting.

Step One reads: “We admitted we were powerless over food—that our lives had become unmanageable.” As written, the phrase “that our lives had become unmanageable” is clearly related to the powerlessness over food. It isn't “*and* that our lives had become unmanageable.”

Certainly, the unmanageability of our food makes our lives unmanageable, and certainly many of us feel that our lives themselves are unmanageable, but the discussion of Step One in these many chapters of the Big Book makes clear that for Step One we don't have to acknowledge that our *entire* life is unmanageable—only that as a minimum, in relation to our compulsive eating, it's unmanageable. *We cannot manage our sobriety.*

We can also look at unmanageability as the inability to manage our restlessness, irritability, and discontentedness—that we will always feel those feelings and translate them into excuses, no matter how insane they may be, to seek that sense of ease and comfort that comes with indulging in that which we know creates the phenomenon of craving. We search for a Power greater than ours, but for us addicts our compulsive eating has become that power. The powerlessness we identify in Step One can persuade us that the pain of where we are has to overcome the pain that has led us to compulsive eating.

### *Gaining power:*

We have seen through these chapters as well that there is a solution to our hopelessness. This solution requires finding a Power greater than we are which will keep our minds sane—that will stop persuading us to indulge in the things we know we can't indulge in. This Power can be found through the Twelve Steps. It is open to anyone who is willing to seek it, regardless of that person's individual beliefs. This was our Step Two—we can find sanity through a spiritual journey.

Steps One and Two are identification and direction, powerlessness and power, hopelessness and hope—in short, problem and solution. From the Big Book perspective, we don't take these Steps. We acknowledge that they both apply to us.

The Big Book's discussion of Steps One and Two are very important. More space is devoted to these two Steps than to Steps Four through Twelve. The five chapters we've just read deal with Steps One and Two — literally half of the pages of directions found in the Big Book. Only three chapters (*How It Works*, *Into Action*, and *Working With Others*) deal specifically with Steps Four through Twelve. This shows that the Big Book wants us to make certain that we truly accept Steps One and Two.

Either we accept Steps One and Two or we don't. If we don't, then why are we in Overeaters Anonymous? If we think we aren't powerless, or if we think that the solution does not require us to work the Twelve Steps, then what are we doing in a fellowship whose sole purpose is to help those who identify with our problem and want to seek our solution? If we think that all we need is a diet and a support group, then there are much better examples of that in the many for-profit and non-profit organizations dealing with weight-loss or eating disorders.

Overeaters Anonymous is for those who admit they are completely powerless and need the Twelve Steps to find Power. We say that with certainty, because Tradition Five tells us that the primary purpose of every OA group is to carry its message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer.

### *Are we ready?:*

The opening pages of *How It Works* make important preliminary points:

- The Steps work for anyone who has the capacity to be rigorously honest and will not work for anyone who does not have that capacity.
- For us there is no softer easier way.
- We can't hold on to our old ideas.
- We have to let go of what we've tried in the past and try something new.
- We have to be completely committed to this spiritual journey.
- The Steps are a complete program for recovery.
- Doing only some of the Steps won't work.



- Doing the Steps out of order won't work.
- The hope of the Steps keeps us going.
- We have to keep growing on our spiritual journey.

The idea of being “rigorously honest” is important. We have to be honest about our own condition, about being different from other people. If we think that we are like other people and can ultimately handle our compulsive eating ourselves, we will never recover. We also have to be honest in our journey through the Steps, as we uncover our defects of character and work to have them removed.

These preliminary points are key. We cannot understand them and follow them while we are indulging in the foods, ingredients, and eating behaviors, which cause us uncontrollable cravings. It just doesn't work.

The Big Book provides a simple test for whether we are ready (BB 60). They are often called the “ABCs.” Are we willing to acknowledge that:

- (a) we are addicts and can't manage our own lives?
- (b) no human Power can relieve us of our addiction?
- (c) a Power greater than ourselves can relieve us of our addiction if we seek a spiritual awakening?

If you can accept these ABCs, then you're ready to begin your journey.

*The need to be abstinent while working the Steps:*

As we have said, the Big Book makes it clear that we *must* be abstinent to work the Steps. It takes sobriety (in OA's case, abstinence) for granted. “Of course,” Dr. Silkworth says, “an alcoholic ought to be freed from his physical craving for liquor . . . .” (BB xxvii).

Being abstinent includes the real acknowledgments that constitute Steps One and Two. How can we be truly honest with ourselves about these ABCs if we are still indulging in foods, food ingredients and mixtures, and/or eating behaviors (including purging or restricting), which feed on our addictions?

If you are not abstinent and plan to go through the Steps anyway, what is your plan? To be abstinent at the end of the Steps? Isn't planning to be abstinent the definition of *powerfulness*—the exact opposite of *powerlessness*? And if so, why continue if you don't accept Step One? Perhaps you are hoping by doing the other work in the Steps, you will be somehow be rewarded by the prize of abstinence? Our experience shows this is not the case.

Working the Steps without being abstinent will *not* result in a spiritual awakening. This has been demonstrated tragically by some of our friends who did not make the journey with us and died from our addiction. We urge you not to be persuaded by someone who says, “I didn't get abstinent until after I worked the Steps.” While that may describe some people's sense of their experiences, for the vast majority of us in OA, and for *all*

of us who are collaborating on this book, *continuing to eat compulsively makes it impossible to be sufficiently honest to work the Twelve Steps.*

From the Big Book perspective, therefore, you *must* be abstinent before you begin to take the actions necessary to work the Steps. This is the beginning of your journey. It is the combination of Step One (problem, despair), Step Two (solution, hope), and Step Three (decision to act). Are you ready?

If you're not abstinent now, then we strongly suggest you review what the Big Book says about Steps One and Two, and get abstinent by adopting your Plan of Eating. From the Big Book perspective, that is the only way that you will be truly ready to go on with the rest of the Twelve Steps. Certainly it can be difficult to do this. There may be withdrawal symptoms or triggering situations. It will often require determination and vigilance. This is, however, what Steps One and Two are all about.

In addition, think about strategies for dealing with day-to-day temptations. Will you find someone—a sponsor or a fellow OA member (a phone buddy)—to phone in the morning and set out your food for the day, or to phone before you yield to temptation? Will you attend OA meetings, focus on a home group? Will you build up a network that can help you keep abstinent while you work through to Step Nine? Will you read literature or use any of the other Tools of Recovery before you yield to temptation? Perhaps you'll commit to drinking a glass of water and waiting 20 minutes before you yield to temptation? Perhaps you'll get rid of everything in your residence that will tempt you and, until you finish Step Nine, not attend any events which will tempt you. Start to work this out in your mind, and discuss this with an experienced member of OA, if available.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read pages 60 to 63.

## **Step Three: *Making Our Decision***

Step Three involves understanding: (a) that our basic problem is that we want to control our life and the lives of others around us, and (b) that our failure to do so has created resentments and frustrations and emotional upheavals to the point that we cannot think clearly enough to avoid the temptation of returning to that which we have abstained from.

We must make a decision to go forward with the Steps in order to clear our minds, become sane, and thus be free from the temptation.

The Step Three Prayer is a moment in time when we acknowledge that we have made that decision to go forward. The proof that we have taken Step Three is that we have started on our Step Four.

## Step Three:

A thorough understanding of pages 60 to 63 will prepare us for the journey of Steps Four through Nine.

The Big Book starts by setting up the context for the meaning and practice of Step Three. First, it discusses the meaning of Step Three. Then it discusses how to do Step Three. (The latter part—taking Step Three—is simple: We say the prayer on page 63. This simply signifies that we have made a decision go on with Steps Four through Twelve.)

The meaning of Step Three is this:

- We want to be in charge of life.
- Life does not go our way.
- The frustration we feel clouds our mind such that we keep returning to our addiction.
- The solution is to stop wanting to be in charge of life and to trust that the guidance we receive from our conception of a Higher Power—our God or our deepest values—will provide us with a life that gives us sanity. Sanity will keep us from returning to our addiction.

Step Three is therefore a recognition that a life run on self-power or self-will is a disaster. The Step Three prayer is simply an acknowledgement of that. The Big Book does not place emphasis on the prayer. Instead it emphasizes how self-will fails us in order to prepare us to make our decision to work the Steps.

*Step Three is a decision to take action and not an action in itself:*

According to the Big Book, in order to do Step Three we say the Step Three prayer (BB 63), preferably with another person whom we trust. *This is a matter of minutes, not days or weeks or months.* We don't have to use the exact words, but the sense has to be there. That's all we have to do. Step Three is simply a prayer that reflects a decision to pursue a spiritual solution. The Big Book promises that some kind of effect will be felt, and that it might be a powerful one, but it doesn't have to be.

From the Big Book perspective, the proof of having taken Step Three will be that you have a paper and pen in your hand and are working Step Four. If Step Three were a huge step, requiring a long time, and provided relief from our compulsive eating, then why would we have to work Steps Four through Twelve?

After saying the Step Three prayer, some OAers have waited before they do Step Four. They wait because they think that the promises of the whole program found on the top of page 63 are the promises of Step Three. They wait to experience freedom from the

bondage of food, a sense of having their Higher Power direct them, a sense of having their will and life turned over to their Higher Power.

And of course they don't experience that, because (at least from the Big Book perspective) it is Steps Four through Nine that provide the spiritual awakening which relieves us of our compulsive eating. If they stop at Step Three to wait for those promises, they will eventually relapse, because their minds will find some excuses, whether emotional or absurd or trivial, to persuade them at some point that they should return to what they have abstained from.

The belief that Step Three brings relief and a sense of spirituality can lead to relapse. Believing this confuses a decision with action. We can decide to travel somewhere, but unless we follow through with some action, we won't *go* anywhere. A decision is simply a decision. It must be followed by action. The Big Book will make that abundantly clear on BB 63 to 64, where it uses the words "launch" and "strenuous" to describe the action that must be taken.

For the moment, then, let's take for granted that Step Three is only a decision, and we mark that decision by saying the Step Three prayer found on BB 63. Step Three is basically an agreement to work the rest of the Steps for your entire life.

In a way, we could end this chapter right here. It is important, however, to go back to the Big Book's analysis of the *meaning* of Step Three (BB 60 to 63) because this analysis will be essential as you work the rest of the Steps.

Step Three talks about deciding to turn our *will* and our *life* over to our Higher Power. Before making that decision, we have to understand what that means. The Big Book first discusses *will* (BB 60-62), and then discusses *life* (last paragraph on BB 62, first paragraph on BB 63).

*We have to turn our will over—our need to be in charge:*

The Big Book's discussion of *will* has subtleties which are important to many compulsive eaters.

First, the overview. Here is our basic problem:

- We want life to go our way.
- But it doesn't go our way.
- Our frustration that life doesn't go our way dominates our thinking to the point that we give in to our addiction.
- And giving in to our addiction will kill us.
- In order to live, therefore, we have to give up wanting life to go our way and acting in such a way to try to force life to go our way.

The Big Book's analogy is that we are actors in a show, but we really want to be the writer, the director, the choreographer. We deeply feel that life would be better if it went our way.

*We have to turn our will over—our intentions are irrelevant:*

The Big Book points out that our intentions may be quite good. Our wish to have life go our way may relate to wanting life to be better for other people—our friends and relatives, people who suffer in this world, or for not wanting to have suffered terrible traumas that no one should have experienced.

Or our intentions may be solely directed to ourselves. We may want money, prestige, power, love on our terms.

Or there may be a combination of intentions. We may want our children to do well for their own sake, but also so they won't be a burden on us. We may want people not to suffer so that they won't suffer, but also so that we won't feel guilty for enjoying ourselves.

The point is not what our intentions are. The point is that, *no matter what our intentions are, we want to be in charge of everything*. And although we may not realize it, it is clear to many other people that that is the case, and they will often assert their own will.

Many of us in OA have a picture of ourselves of being selfless, loving, compassionate, people, whose only interest is serving others and helping them—that our only motives are to have other people do well. As a matter of fact, many of us think we do too much of this, are too dependent on others, think too much of others, and some of us could easily be called people-pleasers whose motivation might be to get people to like us so they'll do as we think they should. As it is often said, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We think that we are the judge of right and wrong, good and bad, and when others don't behave, we freak out.

The Big Book doesn't make any distinctions between good intentions or bad intentions, however. It simply points out that our problem is that we want life to go our way. It points out, for example, that sometimes our reaction to having life *not* go our way is to be more gracious than angry.

This can be overlooked as we read the Big Book. The stories of the alcoholics in the Big Book are generally stories of people who looked out for their own good at the expense of others. There are few, if any, stories of the long-suffering victim, the traumatized and abused spouse or child, the person who only looked out for the good of others at the sacrifice of their own comfort and convenience. So it is easy to think of the Big Book as generally talking about self-will as falling within the dictionary definition of “selfish”—wanting things our way for our own fulfillment.

A careful reading of the Big Book shows, however, that that is not the case. Our problem, the Big Book says, is this: *No matter what our intentions are (good, bad, or a mixture), we want life to go our way; it doesn't go our way; and that is killing us*. We are self-willed, self-consumed, self-absorbed. No matter our intentions, we are focused on what we want out of life.

One note on a sentence on BB 62: “Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.” This could be read as blaming the victim of a sexual assault or of childhood abuse. Of course it can’t be possible that the Big Book would stand for a proposition like that.

Perhaps there is another way of looking at this. If we have suffered a horrible trauma in the past, and if that trauma is still killing us, still living in our minds, then clearly we have made a decision based on self to *continue* to be hurt, by living in the past and not the present. We want the impossible: we want the past *not* to have occurred. In that way we have, in effect, made a decision that continues to place us in a position to be hurt.

Similarly, on BB 103 the Big Book says that our problems were of our own making. This does not mean that we have been responsible for creating the circumstances which have caused our problems. Those of us who have suffered abuse, been betrayed by those we trusted or loved, or have endured difficult medical or other problems, did not “create” those problems. If we continue, however, to fight against the *reality* of the situation we find ourselves in, then we create the problems that result from our inability to accept reality.

So we have to give up our will. We have to quit playing God. It doesn’t work.

*We have to turn our life over:*

Then the Big Book discusses, at the bottom of BB 62, turning our *life* over to our Higher Power. That is the only solution to live without playing God. We have to be directed by our Higher Power and not try to be the Higher Power. We have seen from *We Agnostics* that this means that we have to remove the blockage between our deepest values, our Higher Power, our God, and our thinking and action.

*The promises of having turned our will and our life over:*

The top of BB 63 provides the promises of of having one’s will and life turned over to the care of our Higher Power. They are the promises of a spiritual awakening.

Some might be tempted to think that these are the promises of Step Three. If that were the case, of course, then no one would ever need to go on with the rest of the Steps. The bottom of BB 63 provides the only real promise of Step Three: we will have “an effect, sometimes a very great one” when we do Step Three.

We have arrived at a truly significant moment in our life.

We have accepted that we have a condition of the mind and body that makes us completely powerless over our compulsive eating: once we start, we cannot stop; and we cannot stop from starting.

We have developed *and adopted* an individualized Plan of Eating that allows us to abstain from the foods, and/or the ingredients and mixtures of ingredients, and/or the eating behaviors, that have caused us uncontrollable cravings.

We are willing to find a Power greater than ourselves which will restore us to the sanity that will stop us from starting.

We are indeed at a turning point. We are ready to take Step Three.

*Doing Step Three:*

Well, how do we *do* Step Three? The action is quite simple: We say the Step Three prayer, preferably with someone else who is meaningful to us. Then we *immediately* begin to work on Step Four.

We have to be abstinent to say the Step Three prayer. This is a moment for rigorous honesty, and we cannot be honest if we are lying to ourselves about the reality of our condition.

Step Three is a brilliant prayer. We don't have to use the exact wording, but the idea is important. If you feel comfortable with the prayer set out on page 63, say it, preferably with someone you trust, like a sponsor.

For the atheist or agnostic, here's a version of the prayer that might feel more comfortable:

*I offer myself to my deepest values (love, justice, truth, beauty, for instance), to build upon my deepest values, and to have my life lived according to my deepest values. I would like to be relieved of the bondage of my self so that I can live my life according to my deepest values. I would like my difficulties to be removed so that victory over my difficulties can bear witness to those I would help of the power and love and way of life of my deepest values.*

Note that the Step Three Prayer is the first time that we are told (aside from the example in *Bill's Story*) that all the efforts we are putting into these Steps are designed to benefit others, not ourselves. We will find that the basic solution for our wish to be in charge of the world is not to think of ourselves, but to think of others. Rather than wasting time inside our own minds thinking about what might have been or what should be, we are required to spend time thinking of others.

Where Step One means the death of our compulsive eating as a higher power, Step Three means the death of our self (our self-will) as a higher power. As Bill says in *Bill's Story* (page 14): "Simple but not easy. A price had to be paid. It meant the destruction of self-centeredness."

So find someone to say the Step Three prayer with. Say it, or something like it, out loud. Mean it. It is the beginning of your journey to recovery.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read from the bottom of page 63 to the second-last paragraph on page 64 (ending with "its common manifestations").



## Step Four: The Beginning of Our Inventory

### *Overview of Step Four:*

Although there are many ways of doing Step Four, the Big Book sets out certain fundamental ideas about Step Four that we *all* agree on, and that apply to any method of working Step Four. *Some* of these ideas are:

- Start to work on Step Four *immediately after saying the Step Three Prayer*. The fulfillment of Step Three is taking the necessary Steps (Four through Nine) which will turn our lives and will over to our Higher Power.
- For us OAers, some of the terms used by the Big Book in Step Four need some clarification, and some of the most important are:
  - In the beginning we work on “Resentments,” and we are to list People, Institutions, and Principles, that we resent. In that connection:
    - *Resentments* include not only anger, but can include regret, frustration, sadness, self-pity—anything that you think about, that occupies space in your mind, that lives rent-free in your mind. *Principles* are facts that we wish were not true, which can include things about ourselves and things about the world and the future.
  - When we finish our Resentments, we are told to look for where we were Selfish, Dishonest, Self-Seeking, and Frightened. In that connection:
    - *Selfish* from the Big Book perspective doesn’t mean only what it means in the dictionary. Selfish can mean “wanting my way even if my motives are purely good.” In other words, the word *selfish* in the Big Book really means *self-willed*. *Dishonesty* is not only lying, cheating, or stealing, but includes lying to one’s self about reality, and also not telling the truth when the truth should be told.
    - *Self-Seeking* can include issues relating to self-esteem (looking to other people to define how we feel about ourselves) and our thinking (that the world should revolve around us).
- *However you work Step Four, do it quickly.*

## Step Four Overview:

*It's time to take the action that will result in our turning our will and life over to our Higher Power/deepest values:*

We are finally going to take action. We haven't really acted up to now. We have only:

- acknowledged that we are powerless, that we are desperate, that we have a deadly addiction—that once we start, we can't stop, and that we can't stop from starting. (Step One)
- derived hope from the experience of millions of recovered addicts, including thousands of compulsive eaters who used to be like us, and are no longer like us thanks to the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous—that they have been transformed into people who *can* stop from starting. (Step Two)
- figured out what foods, food ingredients/combinations, and/or eating behaviors, we must abstain from, and worked out a Plan of Eating which provides us with the method of abstaining. *And we adopted that Plan of Eating.* (Became abstinent)
- understood that our problem is that we want to be in charge of life, and that not only must we give up trying to be in charge, but we must also find a way of being directed in our life through a Power greater than ourselves. (Understood that we had to give up our self-will. and our wish to be in charge of life.)
- acknowledged what life is like when we live according to our self-will.
- made a decision that we will pursue the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous in order to be directed in our life by our deepest values, or our Higher Power. (Step Three)

These are all important, but it's now finally time actually to *do* something. We are going to identify and be rid of our character defects. We will begin the inventory process in Step Four, and finish it in Step Nine. By doing that we will receive the spiritual awakening that we have seen in others who have recovered. The removal of our character defects through being willing to make amends to all those we have harmed, *and* making the amends we can make, removes the blockage between what we most deeply believe (in our heart) and how we think and act (in our head) is removed, and we now have access to our deepest values, our Higher Power.

*Suggestion for developing three plans:*

We have emphasized that we need a Plan of Eating to be abstinent.

Some of us suggest that it is also time to think about two other “plans,” which we have partly discussed earlier:

- **A *plan* as to how long it will take you to finish Step Nine.**

Between the time we abstain and the time we finish Step Nine, we are in a race with our mental obsession. Will we succumb to the reasons (insane, absurd, emotional) our addictive minds give us to return to that which we abstain from, or will we reach Step Nine before that happens?

By the time you finish Step Nine, of course, you won't want to return to the things you abstain from, so it's only a matter of white-knuckling it until then. Realistically, you could finish Step Nine within weeks of beginning Step Four. You will find that Steps Five, Six, Seven, and Eight, can all be done within days of each other. The longest step, practically, will be Step Four, and that need not take a long time. We cannot urge you enough to work these Steps as quickly as you can, to make them a priority. We have seen too many people relapse because they take the Steps using a method which takes a long time.

Creating a timeline for finishing Step Nine gives us a sense of how long we have to hold on to our abstinence before we achieve that awakening. It's comforting to think that you only have to be abstinent for a few weeks or a few months, after which you will be sane and therefore abstinent. That's much more attainable than to think that you will have to be abstinent for the rest of your life.

- **A *plan* to deal with day-to-day temptations which you will almost certainly be facing before you finish Step Nine.**

Here's where you work out strategies, as we have already mentioned, like phoning someone every day with your planned food, drinking a glass of water and waiting twenty minutes before you eat anything you're tempted to eat, using the Tools of Recovery (A Plan of Eating, Sponsorship, Meetings, Telephone, Writing, Literature, Action Plan, Anonymity, Service)—doing *anything* before breaking your abstinence. This is like a Recovery Intensive Care Unit Plan.

*The need to take immediate action after we have made our decision:*

The assignment for this chapter was short, but each sentence you were assigned to read contains important information.

The first paragraph (bottom of 63, top of 64) tells us that we have to take action with energy and vitality. Our "decision"—from now on, when the Big Book uses that word, it means Step Three—may have been important, but it has little effect unless we *at once* start to face and be rid of the things that block us from our Higher Power.

We will find that this means Steps Four through Nine. In Steps Four through Six we face the things that block us; in Steps Seven through Nine we become rid of the things that

block us. Many of us have deeply-buried shame and self-loathing. No baby is born with that. We picked it up somewhere along the way.

The whole reason for Steps Four through Nine is to allow us to clean the slate and to start a new life based on the Twelve Steps. We begin to accept and even like our authentic selves, which gives us self-respect; and people who respect themselves don't do self-destructive things like compulsive eating. It is a process to *uncover* what's been bothering us, *discover* patterns of behavior, and *discard* destructive thoughts and behaviors.

After Step Nine gives us recovery, we immediately begin to work Steps Ten through Twelve to keep us in fit spiritual condition.

The Big Book says that we must act *at once*. So much for anyone who says that we shouldn't start Step Four without being sober/abstinent for six months or eight months or a year. Once we make our decision in Step Three, the Big Book says that we have to follow that decision immediately with *the action that is needed to follow through* with the decision. This is common sense. If we delay, our minds will find a way to persuade us to go back to the things we abstain from.

*The Big Book's view of a searching and fearless moral inventory:*

The Big Book describes a "commercial," or business, inventory. This kind of inventory lists the good and the bad, the saleable and the unsaleable, what's in stock and what needs to be ordered. It is a very broad kind of inventory. The Big Book says that "one object" of a commercial inventory is to identify ("face") what is damaged or can't be sold (Steps Four through Six) and *then* to get rid of them without regret (Steps Seven through Nine).

It is therefore only that one object of a commercial inventory—to identify and to get rid of—that the Big Book says that we do. It's not the *whole* "commercial" inventory. It is only the one part of the commercial inventory which identifies and gets rid of the damaged and unsalable items in our makeup. From the Big Book perspective, we do not list our assets. Our job is *to identify our defects of character*.

The amazing fact about the Big Book's approach to Step Four, however, is that while working Step Four not only will we discover our defects of character, but we will also begin to receive a vision of how we can live properly *without* those defects of character.

To do this, the Big Book says that we "first" look for the flaws in our make-up. This will be Step Four, followed by Steps Five and Six.<sup>1</sup>

If you've been abstinent, have reviewed the Big Book's discussion of Steps One and Two, and have said the Step Three prayer, you're ready to begin this spiritual journey.

<sup>1</sup> Although the Big Book doesn't provide a reference to the "second" or "next" thing we do, we will find that this will be Steps Seven, Eight, and Nine, by which our defects of character will ultimately be removed, some quickly, some gradually.

*Although there are many ways of doing Step Four, there are certain basic principles:*

There are many ways of doing Step Four. When the Big Book was published, there were many ways of doing a self-assessment, ranging from a three-hour meeting with AA's co-founder, Dr. Bob, in which Steps Four, Five, Six, Seven, and Eight were all completed in about three hours (see BB 262), to other methods incorporating principles from religious and spiritual groups.

Here are some fundamental principles derived from the Big Book respecting Step Four, no matter how one works it:

*Step Four should be tackled right after taking Step Three, with no delays whatsoever.* The Big Book makes this clear.

- Using the Big Book instructions for Step Four should take a relatively short time.
- Steps Four and Five are designed to isolate your character defects. Steps Six and Seven are done extremely quickly, moments after Step Five, as very short stops on your way to having your character defects removed, and Step Eight can be done at the same time. Working Steps Eight and Nine WILL remove the blockage to your higher power, and thus remove the manifestations of your character defects, one day at a time.
- Step Four requires writing on paper (or in these technological times, on a tablet or computer).
- Step Four does *not* require you to write a novel-length biography of your life. (Some of us have tried this and suffered the harmful consequences of reliving trauma or taking too long to finish Step Four.)
- Step Four begins with a listing of your resentments about people, institutions, and principles, and continues with reviewing fears and conduct issues.
  - Resentments not only include *people* with whom you are angry, but ALL people, institutions, and principles, that are living rent-free in your mind, whether you have anger about them or not. If you dwell on them, re-create them in your mind, or can't stop thinking about them at times, then they are resentments.
    - *People* can include people who have done you harm, who have done harm to others, and whom you have done harm to. People does not, however, include persons who no longer constantly live in your mind.
    - *Institutions* are collections of people who have acted in concert with each other and whose names you do not know.
    - *Principles* are facts or beliefs which you wish were not true, about yourself, or about life. Under principles we can list things *about* ourselves and also about the world which bother us. These principles can range, for example, from "The world is too full of hypocrisy/pain/evil" to "I will always be alone."

- You will find, as you work Step Four, that you have four major character defects: Selfishness (or Self-Will), Dishonesty, Self-Seeking, and Fear. As you work Step Four, you will begin to understand how to live free of ALL of these character defects.
  - *Selfishness* (or Self-Will) of course includes what the dictionary would call selfish—doing things to benefit you. It also includes, however, as we have discussed, your wish to have things go the way you think they should be going, regardless of whether your motives are entirely praiseworthy or not. That is why we also use the term “self-will.”
  - *Dishonesty* includes not only lying, cheating, and stealing—the normal meaning of the term—but also includes lying to yourself about reality, and not telling the truth when the truth should be told.
  - *Self-seeking* includes our using people to define who we are and how we feel about ourselves—in other words, “seeking our [sense of] selves” in other people; rather we should be defining ourselves according to how well we live in harmony with what we most deeply believe in (our deepest values or Higher Power). Self-seeking also includes having an inflated sense of ourselves, a sense of privilege or knowing better than other people how things should be.
- Many of us urge our spouses to make an appointment for Step Five even before they begin Step Four, so that they impose a deadline on themselves.
- Do not anticipate Step Five when you write your Step Four. Step Four is for you to look at, and Step Five is for someone else to hear. If you worry about Step Five, you may consciously or unconsciously censor yourself. The Steps are in order, and you should not anticipate one step before finishing a previous step.
- All of us use the basic elements of the Big Book directions for Step Four, some of us with a few variations. We all agree, however, that what follows here in this Workbook are indeed the directions for working Step Four the Big Book way.

*The overview of the Big Book approach to an inventory:*

Here is the overview of pages 64 to 71—the Big Book’s instructions for doing Step Four.

We start off with *Resentments*. We will list them, identify why they bother us, realize how much they affect us (to the point of the insanity of addiction), and then be able to see our defects of character in relation to them. We will identify only four character defects, but they are extensive and deep, and broad enough to encompass all our other defects.

One of those character defects is *Fear*, and we will list our fears and begin to outgrow them—right at Step Four. We don’t live a fearless life, but we will ultimately outgrow our fears.

The three other character defects are *Selfish* (Self-Willed), *Dishonest*, and *Self-seeking*, and we will learn from our mistakes in past difficult and complex (“sex conduct”) relationships how we could have lived unselfishly/without self-will, honestly, and considerately.

Using the Big Book instructions for working Step Four will not only identify our character defects—it will also begin to show us how to live without them, even before we go on to Step Five.

*We urge you not to delay.* It is possible to do a deep and powerful Step Four within a week—IF you consider, as we do, that we are embarked on a life-or-death journey. As a matter of fact, the hours you might spend on Step Four done the Big Book way could be fewer than six or eight, and possibly as few as three or four. Some of us prefer to have our sponsees do it all in one sitting, and some of us suggest spacing it out. But we all agree it should not take a long time.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read from the last paragraph on page 64 to the bottom of the chart on page 65, and follow the directions in each chapter in this Workbook, chapter-by-chapter.

## Column One—Our Resentments:

We are finally doing something. We are embarking on our spiritual journey. We made our decision by saying the Step Three Prayer. We now have to follow through with our decision.

The Big Book says we begin with “resentments.” Let’s talk about what the word resentment means. Its Latin roots are *re*, meaning again, and *sentire*, meaning to feel. From its Latin roots, resentment means *to feel again*. A resentment is something we feel again and again, that lives rent-free in our minds. It is something we keep returning to, something that bothers us. In many ways it is “The past hasn’t gone my way.” It is the what-ifs and the if-onlys that keep on running through our minds.

*Resentments include everything that is living rent-free in our minds, not just things we are angry about:*

A resentment is the end result of our self-will that is described on pages 60 to 63 of the Big Book—our wish to be in charge of life, whether our motivations are good or bad. We want to be in charge of life, and life just doesn’t go our way. So we resent it.

The Big Book was written by gutter-drunk alcoholics. Their reactions to the fact that life didn’t go their way was apparently anger; the Big Book does use that concept occasionally in describing resentment. For some of us, anger is a “go-to” emotion, often seen as “stronger” than feeling hurt. Many people with anger need to strip the upper layer away to get to the hurt and fear that underlies it.

Many of us in OA, however, see anger as a secondary emotion, masking emotions such as hurt or fear. Our reaction to life’s not going our way is not anger. We have learned not to be angry, and certainly not to show anger. Our reactions to things that don’t go our way can range from frustration to self-pity to despair to sadness and even shame or guilt; and sometimes turning our anger or these other emotions inward leads to major depression. Many of us are afraid of anger.

All of us understand the feeling that life is not going our way. For many of us in OA it is important to think of a resentment as anything that troubles us, no matter how we would describe our feelings about that. Observe your thoughts over a day and see what takes up the time in your head. Those are your resentments.

Many of us love our resentments. The pay-off to a resentment is that you don’t have to take responsibility for your own life. Compulsive eaters are often able to do four things very naturally: We often lie to ourselves and to others; we assign blame; we keep score; and we fight battles against people who don’t know that we are fighting them.

Our lies lead us to relive our memory of an incident; but—unlike a recording of a TV show—our memory changes the incident. The other person’s role becomes worse, and our role becomes more innocent. So we blame others and don’t take responsibility for the actions we have taken. And in our head we keep score. We have a tally sheet, and



others don't come up to our standards. They're not doing for us what we feel we are owed. We measure people's affections, their loyalty, or whether they stick to *our* script. Obviously many of our actions are not motivated from the goodness of our heart if we keep score. We fight battles against dead people, and against institutions or people who don't care about us or aren't even aware of us. In many cases, we are the only people involved in the war. No one is battling us but ourselves. But our imaginary battles are killing us.

*The Big Book's method of dealing with resentments:*

The Big Book provides us with clear instructions for dealing with resentments. We have to do some writing. The Big Book's instructions for Step Four use a column format, as opposed to a free narrative, and you will probably use a number of pages.

For resentments there will be four columns. Please note that the three columns illustrated on BB 65 are only a beginning of what we write. The most important part of what we write—the fourth column—is not illustrated.

We suggest you take a letter size or legal size paper and put it on its side (landscape mode). Divide it into four columns of unequal length. Because you'll be doing more writing there, the second and fourth columns will be approximately twice as large as the first and third column. You don't need to measure, but if you want to, of course you will. There's no magic correct way. Some people use a pen, whereas others might use a computer, for this process. Whatever method is used, it is important to have a document in some form of writing.

The Big Book says, "We listed people, institutions or principles with whom we were angry." We strongly suggest that you think of "that we resented" rather than "with whom we were angry."

*Column One: Name your resentments:*

So in column one write down, with lots of space between them (because columns two and four will require more space), every person who is living rent-free in your mind, whether it's someone you have wronged or someone who has wronged you or others, whether it's someone you know or someone you don't know (such as someone in the news who did something that bothers you, or who parked over the line in a parking spot), whether the wrong was trivial or traumatic. The criterion is not whether the issue is significant, but *whether these people occupy your thinking at times*.

It may be that you no longer think about certain things—that time or therapy or some life-changing event occurred so that something that had deeply hurt you no longer does. Don't put that down. It's what's on your mind now, not what "should" be on your mind.

This process of Step Four is the beginning of letting all this go.

We highly recommend that you do NOT put yourself on the list. When we come to "principles," you will have an opportunity to include things about yourself that bother

you. Our reason for this suggestion is that the Big Book does not ever suggest that you make amends to yourself; and putting yourself down as a resentment, rather than things about yourself that bother you as resentments, encourages the notion of making amends to yourself. You will make the greatest amends possible to yourself when you recover and are transformed into the best possible version of you that you can be.

Then write down, with lots of space between them (more space for columns two and four), institutions that bother you. An institution is a collection of people not all of whose names you know. It doesn't have to be a legally-created institution. It could be a group of people who do the same kinds of things—people who don't care about the things you care about, people who post ignorant or vile things on social media, for example. Again, the criterion is whether these institutions occupy your thinking at times.

Then write down, with lots of space (because of columns two and four) between them, "principles" that bother you. A principle is a thing you think is probably true and that you wish were not true. It could be things about you, things that bother you about you. It could be things about life in general. Again, the criterion is whether these "principles" occupy your thinking at times.

You may or may not have all three of these categories as resentments. We urge you not to create "principles" if you have no such things going on in your mind. *Write down only what is taking up space in your head now.*

Here are some examples:

PEOPLE (you would usually write down the name, but we're using descriptors):

- X. (the person who traumatized me as a child)
- A. (my ex-spouse/girlfriend/boyfriend whom I hurt)
- Y. (my former significant other who hurt me)
- B. (my current significant other)
- The person in the store who coughed in my face today
- F. (my father/my mother)
- C. (my child/niece/nephew)
- Z. (a specific politician)
- The person whose store I stole from
- P. (a specific talk show host)
- D. (my friend)
- E. (my friend)
- F. (my ex-friend)

- People who commit evil in this world
- God

INSTITUTIONS:

- The justice system
- The school I went to
- All the people who post garbage on social media
- Talk shows in general
- The media
- People who take up two parking spaces

PRINCIPLES:

- The coming crisis in our society
- Life sucks and then you die
- No one loves me
- People are suffering terribly in this world
- I will never reach a healthy body weight
- I will always be lonely
- I've been sober in AA for 30 years, and I now have to be in this wishy-washy fellowship?

You will note that some of these “resentments” are not what we would normally call resentments. When we list people we have hurt, we don’t resent them in the normal sense. But if our hurting them continues to be in our minds, living rent-free, then it is a resentment for the purposes of Step Four. It is something we wish were not true. We would love not to have hurt people, for example. So we write that down as well. The Big Book points out that for some resentments we will have remorse, and not anger.

**Assignment:** Use as many pieces of paper as you need in order to put down all the people, institutions, and principles, you are keeping in your mind, in column one. Write them out, sleep on it, and in the morning see if any more come to mind. Try to be complete, but don’t go overboard. Don’t put things down just because you think you *should* list them. Make sure that they are things that are living in your mind right now, not things you dealt with in the past.

*Keep going. Don’t pause. Once you have written down your resentments, go immediately to the next set of directions.*

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Column 1                                 |  |  |  |
| Person who traumatized me as a child     |  |  |  |
| Parent who didn't show me love           |  |  |  |
| Person whose store I stole from          |  |  |  |
| My ex-love                               |  |  |  |
| The media                                |  |  |  |
| I'll always be alone                     |  |  |  |
| I will never reach a healthy body weight |  |  |  |

## Column Two: Why We Have our Resentments

*Column Two: Why do you have each resentment?:*

Now that you have your list of resentments, it's time to tackle column two. The Big Book provides a sample of what this can look like. Beside each resentment, you place in brief summary point descriptions showing why that resentment is on your mind. There may be one description or there may be twenty points. Make sure that it's complete, but again, don't go overboard. This is for venting, not for story-telling.

We suggest you use bullet points or dashes or stars, rather than sentences, to separate the different thoughts within each resentment. We are on a fact-finding mission, not writing a novel. The question is why that resentment is on your list, and that can be answered briefly in point form.

Note that the Big Book's examples show very brief summaries of what are certainly lengthy stories. Mr. Brown's attention to the person's wife, telling his wife of his mistress, perhaps getting his job at the office—these are all involved and complex stories. But the Big Book is clearly suggesting brief summaries of the essence of *why* the resentment is on

your list—not your justification, but the *reason*, for your resentment.

The Big Book doesn't ask you to relive the hurts and pains of the past. Your job is to write down *why* they are on your resentment list, not what happened. Our examples should help you in that regard. *We urge you not to write the details of wrongs that were done to you.* There is absolutely no reason to relive traumatic harms.

Note that there is overlap of stories—attention to wife overlaps with telling wife of the mistress—and that is fine too. The same issue might have different perspectives.

Our suggestion for doing Step Five will be that you do NOT share *all* the details of this column with the person you're doing Step Five with. This means that the specifics of what you write will be for your eyes only; therefore, if *you* can understand it, don't be concerned about what you write down. Your Step Four is for you to look at. Your Step Five is to share with someone else.

Using some of the examples from our last chapter, here are some examples of how one might fill out column two:

*The person who traumatized me as a child:*

- changed my life forever
- hurt me physically
- hurt me mentally
- made it almost impossible for me to be intimate with anyone
- killed my love of life

*My ex whom I hurt:*

- I broke it off without explanation
- I used that person to bolster my own self-esteem
- I broke it off because I was afraid of getting too involved
- I did things that cause me shame today

*The person who coughed in my face today:*

- could have given me an illness
- was inconsiderate of me and others
- probably doesn't care at all about anyone

*My father/mother:*

- created dysfunction in the family
- expected me to be the care-giver
- took away my childhood
- took away my self-esteem

- I am still doing things for them that I don't want to do

*The person whose store I stole from:*

- didn't catch me
- was always nice to me
- I feel guilty
- I kept on stealing

*People who do evil in this world:*

- responsible for the suffering and death of thousands, if not millions
- got or are getting away with it
- could happen again

*God:*

- has abandoned me
- has taken away loved ones from me
- will not pay attention to my problem of compulsive eating

*The school I went to:*

- created boring classes which I couldn't stand
- failed me
- if I hadn't failed I would have been much happier

*Life sucks and then you die:*

- I'll never be happy
- Other people will never be happy
- What's the point of living if we only die?

*No one loves me:*

- I'm not capable of loving anyone
- I'm not capable of being loved
- I am afraid of a relationship
- I am so lonely

*I've been sober in AA for 30 years, and now I have to be in this wishy-washy fellowship?*

- everyone's too nice
- we keep holding hands

- where's the toughness?
- no one is abstinent.
- why aren't the Twelve Steps of AA helping me deal with my eating?

Note that we are moving from the people, institutions, and principles occupying your thoughts, to the *reasons* they are occupying your thoughts. This is an important part of the journey. Up to now what has been in your mind is a conglomeration of feelings about particular people, institutions, and principles. Now you're beginning to figure out, for each one of these, the specific reasons for those feelings.

The examples in the Big Book should give you a sense that what you write down should be current, and not past-related. In other words, write down what occurs to you in your mind *now*, not what may have occurred to you years ago. Don't overthink what you write. This is only the beginning of the journey, and there's no need to dwell on it.

We hope you get the picture, because now it's time for you to do this. As you do this, remember how important it is to keep abstinent so that your mind can be clear. This can be a tricky time for you. You may be reawakening some feelings that have remained relatively dormant. Watch yourself carefully. Keep to your Strategic Plan for keeping abstinent and avoiding temptation. Work this Step as quickly and as hard as you can. You will find that by the time you reach the end of Step Four, you will be receiving a sense of guidance and direction, even though you have more of a journey to go through. So work Step Four hard and fast.

**Assignment:** Beside each person, institution, and principle which you've written in column one, write in point form as many brief notations as you need to explain why that person, institution, and principle, is bothering you.

*Keep going. Don't pause. When you finish the instructions in this chapter, go immediately to the next chapter.*



| Column 1                                 | Column 2  |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| Person who traumatized me as a child     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-hurt me physically and emotionally</li> <li>-can't show love</li> <li>-took away my childhood</li> <li>-don't trust people</li> <li>-gave me shame and guilt</li> </ul> |  |  |
| Parent who didn't show me love           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-missed out on what my friends had</li> <li>-don't know how to parent my children</li> <li>-I don't feel love for them</li> </ul>  |  |  |
| Person whose store I stole from          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-they trusted me and were nice to me</li> <li>-I stole because it was easy</li> <li>-I am deeply ashamed</li> </ul>  |  |  |
| My ex-love                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-used me</li> <li>-I couldn't change them</li> <li>-betrayed my love</li> <li>-made me afraid of relationships</li> </ul>  |  |  |
| The media                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-manipulate people</li> <li>-cause fear and ignorance</li> </ul>   |  |  |
| I'll always be alone                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I'm so lonely</li> <li>-I want to have a companion in life</li> <li>-I'll never be lovable</li> </ul>   |  |  |
| I will never reach a healthy body weight | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I worry about my health</li> <li>-I want to be attractive</li> <li>-I can't stand being addicted</li> </ul>   |  |  |

## Column Three: How Our Resentments Affect Us

*Column Three: How does each reason in column two affect significant parts of your life?:*

You are now ready to fill out column three, which is a little difficult to describe.

Imagine that this column is vertically divided into six very narrow columns, just wide enough to be able to place a check-mark (or a tick) in one. Each of these narrow columns has a topic taken from the bottom of BB 64 and the top of BB 65.

- *Self-esteem*—how we feel about ourselves. This includes feelings about not being attractive, not being good enough, feeling alone.
- *Security/Pocketbooks*—how safe we feel, including not only financial security (“pocketbooks” is an old-fashioned word for something you hold your money in), but also general feelings of personal safety.
- *Ambitions*—what we want out of life— our present and our future. This area is almost always affected, because if we resent something, it is because things are not going according to what we want.
- *Personal Relations*—how we relate with others, whether close or not so close.
- *Sex Relations*—how we relate when we are attracted to others, and/or others are attracted to us. (When the Big Book was written, sex relations was a much broader concept than simply physical intimacy.)
- Was *Fear* involved?

You will see examples given under “Affects my:” in the middle of BB 65. You don’t have to use the six narrow columns, of course, so long as you are able to write down which aspects of yourself have been affected by each of the points in column two. You could use shortcuts—SE for self-esteem, SEC for security/pocketbooks, A for ambitions, PR for personal relations, SR for sex relations, F for fear. If you have been unable to find *any* of these concepts affected, then maybe what you have written down in column 2 does not reflect the actual resentment you feel. Our experience is that there is always at least one, if not more, of these areas that are affected by each one of the points written down in column 2.

Let’s go to some examples:

*The person who traumatized me as a child:*

- changed my life forever: *Affects self-esteem, security, ambitions, personal relations, sex relations, and fear is involved.*
- hurt me physically: *Affects all of these as well.*
- hurt me mentally: *Affects all of these as well.*
- made it almost impossible for me to be intimate with anyone: *Affects all of these as well.*

- killed my love of life: *Affects all of these as well.*

Major traumas can, of course, affect all of these topics. But that isn't necessarily true for each of the resentments we may have. Below are some more examples from our previous list. Note that what is written in this example may not be what you might write about a similar situation. Each person has to write down their own reactions.

*The person who coughed in my face today:*

- could have given me an illness: *Affects security, ambitions, and fear is involved.*
- was inconsiderate of me and others: *Affects self-esteem, ambitions, and personal relations.*
- probably doesn't care at all about anyone: *Affects ambitions.*

*The person whose store I stole from:*

- didn't catch me: *Affects self-esteem, ambitions, personal relations.*
- was always nice to me: *Affects self-esteem, ambitions, personal relations.*
- I feel guilty: *Affects self-esteem, security, personal relations, and fear is involved.*
- I kept on stealing: *Affects self-esteem, security, and fear is involved.*

*I've been sober in AA for 30 years, and now I have to be in this wishy-washy fellowship?*

- everyone's too nice: *Affects ambitions and personal relations.*
- we keep holding hands: *Affects ambitions and personal relations.*
- where's the toughness?: *Affects ambitions.*
- No one is abstinent here: *Affects ambitions, and fear is involved.*
- why aren't the Twelve Steps of AA helping me deal with my eating?: *Fear is involved.*

Many of us find it better to deal with each of these six parts separately. In other words, check to see if Self-Esteem is affected by each of the points under each of your resentments, and put a check-mark (or tick) whenever it does. Then do the same for Security (Pocketbooks). Then do the same for Ambitions, etc. There's no requirement to do so, but it concentrates your mind on one issue at a time.

There are no right answers. And it doesn't matter if today you wouldn't check "Security" on one point, but tomorrow you would. The whole point of this exercise will become clearer in the next chapter. You will graphically see how your resentments cloud your mind, making it impossible to think clearly, thus allowing your mind to persuade you to indulge in the things you know you can't indulge in without developing uncontrollable cravings. Your resentments have caused the mental obsession discussed in Step One. You will understand why it is essential that you deal with your resentments. Our experience is that you will be able to deal with those resentments if you identify your own defects of character (Steps Four through Six) and then rid yourself of them (Steps Seven through Nine).

**Assignment:** Beside each point in column two, indicate by a check-mark (or tick) or abbreviation whether that particular point affects your Self-Esteem, Security (Pocketbooks), Ambitions, Personal Relations, Sex Relations, and whether fear is involved.

**Big Book Assignment:** *Then read pages 65 to 66.*

*Keep going. Don't pause. Once you have finished the directions in this chapter, go immediately to the next.*

| Column 1                                 | Column 2  | Column 3                                      |  |
|--|---|---|--|
| Person who traumatized me as a child     | -hurt me physically and emotionally<br>-can't show love<br>-took away my childhood<br>-don't trust people<br>-gave me shame and guilt | SE SEC A PR<br>SR F for each of these         |  |
| Parent who didn't show me love           | -missed out on what my friends had<br>-don't know how to parent my children<br>-I don't feel love for them                            | SE A PR<br>SE A PR F<br>SE A PR F             |  |
| Person whose store I stole from          | -they trusted me and were nice to me<br>-I stole because it was easy<br><br>-I am deeply ashamed                                      | SE A PR F<br>SE SEC A PR F<br>SE SEC A PR F   |  |
| My ex-love                               | -used me<br>-I couldn't change them<br>-betrayed my love<br>-made me afraid of relationships  | SE A PR SR<br>F for each of these             |  |
| The media                                | -manipulate people<br>-cause fear and ignorance   | SEC A F for each of these                     |  |
| I'll always be alone                     | -I'm so lonely<br>-I want to have a companion in life<br>-I'll never be lovable   | SE SEC A PR<br>SR F for each of these         |  |
| I will never reach a healthy body weight | -I worry about my health<br>-I want to be attractive<br>-I can't stand being addicted   | SE SEC A F<br>SE A F PR<br>SR F<br>SE SEC A F |  |

*Column three:*

*SE= Self-esteem | SEC=Security, both personal and financial | A=Ambitions | PR=Personal relationships | SR=Sex Relationships | F=Fear is involved.*

## **Our Resentments Are Killing Us:**

*Our resentments dominate us and have the power to kill us:*

We are now getting closer to an understanding. The purpose of all these check-marks is to show you how other people and the world are controlling your life. The more you fight against it, the more you lose. Everything that is important to you—how you feel about yourself (self-esteem), how safe you feel (security), what you want out of life (ambitions), how you relate to people (personal relations), how you are intimate with people (sex relations), how anxious you feel (fear)—is affected by the resentments that you have and why they are in your mind. Your mind is confused, befogged, mixed-up. As a result you can't think your way clear to saying “no” to someone who offers you some cake or a french fry, or to restricting or purging. No wonder you have no protection against the first bite!

The Big Book points out that anyone who feels deep resentment wastes their time and experiences some futility and unhappiness. But for addicts, these feelings can kill, because we are shutting ourselves off from what we believe in—whether those are our deep religious beliefs or our deep spiritual beliefs or our deep moral values. And when we shut ourselves off, our minds give us permission to indulge in those things we know we must abstain from, and the vicious circle kicks in: we can't stop once we've started, and we can't stop from starting.

Some of us remember writing diaries when we were younger, about those we hated, why we hated them, and how that made us feel—the equivalents of columns one, two, and three. But that was as far as we went. All this did was get us more invested in our resentments, fears and sex conduct. The Big Book warns us that if we simply stay in these first three columns, we will conclude that others were wrong, and that will be as far as most of us will get. The usual outcome was that the people continued to wrong us and we stayed sore, as the Big Book says.

So we have to be free of what the Big Book calls anger or what we have been urging you to think of in a broader sense as frustration, self-pity, sadness—any kind of reaction you may have to things not going your way. The Big Book says that this kind of reaction is “the dubious luxury of normal men,” but for addicts it's poison. The more we are frustrated by all the things that bother us, the more our minds are clouded, and the more likely our minds will give us absurd reasons to indulge in that from which we should be abstaining.

When we indulge in that which we should be abstaining from, we end up compulsively eating; and when we compulsively eat, we are once more on that slow but steady journey to our death by a thousand cuts.

But this list, the Big Book says, holds the key to the future. We are dominated by the world. We are being killed by our reaction to others and to the world. We have to deal with this domination and get rid of it, or we are doomed.

How do we do this? The Big Book has the answers!

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the bottom of BB 66 to the first full paragraph of BB 67, and at least BB 552, from the story *Freedom from Bondage*, but you may find it helpful to read the entire story.

*Keep going. Don't pause. Once you have finished the directions in this chapter, go immediately to the next.*

## How To Deal with Our Deep Resentments:

*How do we deal with our resentments toward those who have hurt us or others?*

Very shortly we will be working out what our defects of character are. The Big Book is very specific on this issue. Before we do this, however, we have to deal with the resentments we have written down in column one and analyzed in columns two (why we have the resentment) and three (the effects of each of the reasons on how we feel).

Some of those frustrations will not involve people who have hurt us or others. They may be things we have done to others or facts over which we know we have no control. We can go directly from these kinds of resentments in column one to the character defects we exhibit in relation to them in column four. We will discuss column four in the next chapter of this Workbook.

The chances are, however, that for most of us there are people whose actions have been hurtful to us or to others to such an extent that our resentments continue, despite our acknowledgment that those resentments are hurting us—ultimately persuading us to indulge in what we have to abstain from. How do we get rid of these resentments?

They can be very deep. They can be about people who have traumatized us deeply, who have committed horrible sexual or physical or emotional assaults against us or against others.

Some resentments may not be as deep, but they can still stand in the way of our being able to identify our own defects of character. They may be long-standing resentments against people who betrayed our trust, who have taken too much time out of our lives, perhaps addicts who we feel have failed us, perhaps friends who use us, perhaps politicians who do things that cause us great concern, perhaps people who are “getting away” with things they should be punished for, or who have things that we want, or people who exhibit vengeful, angry, or intolerant attitudes to others.

We have seen, by looking at the third column, how these kinds of resentments, whether traumatizing or not, affect our day-to-day lives; how our self-esteem, our sense of safety, what we want out of life, our personal relations, our sex relations, are all deeply affected or wounded; how we are full of fear in relation to them. We have seen how these feelings cloud our minds, how they help send us back to what we should be abstaining from.

Yes, it is easy to accept this in the brain. But what about the heart? How do we deal with these wounds to our hearts? Unless we deal with them, we won’t be able to identify our own character defects in relation to them.



There is therefore no question that we have to deal with those who have harmed us and others. In the fourth column of the resentment papers, we are going to be listing our own defects of character, but the Big Book says we do this only *after* we have put aside the wrongs that others have done to us. How can we put aside the wrongs that others have done?

For the most traumatic harms, this is truly a deep and difficult and potentially dangerous issue. Many of us have sought help through therapy; and perhaps more of us should do that. Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, believed in it and used it. We have to remember that nothing that happened to us in the past should be able to hurt us in the present.

We cannot comment on the overall issue of trauma. Our subject is solely how to work the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous using the Big Book directions. Many of us who have suffered trauma have used the Big Book directions to deal with that trauma. Those of us who have had deep-standing resentments not associated with trauma have used the Big Book directions to deal with those resentments. It is worthwhile exploring those directions.

*Two possible barriers to dealing with those who have hurt us or others:*

Let's first deal with two potential barriers that should *not* be barriers.

*"I will never apologize to that horrible person.":* Many people will block dealing with these issues because they can't imagine ever apologizing to those people in Step Nine. They read "made amends" as requiring an apology, so they say, "I'll never apologize to that so-and-so."

- As we will see when we discuss amends, that is not necessarily true. Some OAers who were subjected to sexual abuse, for example, made amends to their abusers by reporting their abusers to the police.
  - The Steps are meant to be taken in order. We are simply not at Steps Eight and Nine. It is counter-productive to anticipate.

*"I can never forgive that horrible person.":* Many people will block dealing with these issues because they can't ever imagine forgiving those people. What they've read or heard about the Steps leads them to think that forgiveness is necessary to work the Steps.

- The Big Book does not use the word "forgive" in this connection at all. In a later chapter, it speaks of being forgiven by others, but nowhere does the Big Book speak of having to forgive anyone.
  - Within Twelve Step literature, two meanings of "forgive" can be seen.
    - On the one hand, the original concept of the word (and how the word was probably understood when the Big Book was written) is *to waive or forego a debt that is owed.*

- On the other, the word has also taken on the meaning of *no longer having that person live rent-free in your mind*. As the saying goes, “Forgiveness is abandoning hope of a different past.”

The latter meaning has great significance within the Twelve Steps; the former does not, however. Yes, people who have harmed us or others should not be living rent-free in our minds, and we have to do everything possible to get them out of our minds, because our resentments against them are killing us. We will shortly discuss the Big Book’s methods for dealing with that issue.

On the other hand, if a person who has harmed us or others shows no remorse or any inclination to change, why should we feel it necessary to forgive them the debt they owe us or others? The Big Book neither suggests nor requires us to do this. As a matter of fact, forgiving the debt of someone who owes us or others (whether financially or morally or otherwise) may enable that person to continue to do harm to others, including ourselves. Of course, if it is important to us personally that we do it, or if our religion tells us we should, we will strive to do that.

With those two potential barriers out of the way, let us look at how the Big Book suggests we deal with people who have harmed us or others.

*Two Big Book methods of dealing with resentments about people who have hurt us or others:*

The Big Book provides two methods of dealing with deep-seated resentments about people who have hurt us or others, whether traumatically or not.

1. *The Simple Approach:* The first is found in the paragraph beginning right at the bottom of BB 66.

We look at these people as being spiritually sick. We are asked to imagine a friend who is physically sick and has exhibited symptoms that were hurtful. We can imagine a friend, for instance, with a brain tumor that causes aberrant behavior, a friend suffering from a brain disorder who blurts out hurtful things, a friend who suffers constant severe pain and occasionally bursts out into frustrated anger or overwhelming self-pity. We can even imagine a young child telling us that they hate us. We can imagine friends who are in the midst of difficult emotional upheavals, or experiencing difficult financial problems. We must admit that we have done the same on occasions.

For those friends, and for that child, we would show tolerance, pity, and patience. We would excuse their behavior. We would know their history, we would have sympathy for their situation, we would weigh their “misconduct” against our entire relationship with them. We might feel sad that they have said or done the things they did, but ultimately we would happily (cheerfully) treat them as whole human beings who are suffering in

some way and who still deserve our friendship or love. We have sometimes done that for ourselves and expected others to do it for us.

The Big Book doesn't ask us to *cheerfully* treat those who have hurt us with tolerance, pity, and patience—only to treat anyone who has harmed us with the *same kind of* tolerance, pity, and patience that we would cheerfully grant someone we liked or loved. Just as we have been spiritually sick, so are they.

We have often heard that “Hurt people hurt people,” and there is little doubt that people who have hurt others have been hurt themselves, have had difficult or even horrendous childhoods, have disabilities that cause them not to understand the whole picture, have no contact with any spirituality. The more they harm others, the more their own capacity to be the best kind of person is harmed. Hurting others puts more nails into their coffin, as it were.

The Big Book thus provides the wording of a prayer on page 67: “X is a sick person. God, I ask you to help me show X the same tolerance, pity, and patience, that I would cheerfully grant a sick friend.” For the atheist or agnostic, a workable version of this prayer could be: “X is a sick person. I want to be true to my core values and treat X with the same tolerance, pity, and patience, that I would cheerfully grant a sick friend.”

This may in and of itself help us deal with many people who have harmed us or others.

The Big Book provides us with a further prayer: “This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him? God save me from being angry. Thy will be done.” This points out that our real problem is our reaction to a situation rather than the actual situation. If we focus on our reaction, then it might allow us to see that we will be okay no matter how others behave.

2. *For more complex issues:* On the other hand, there may be some person or persons living in your mind that this simple prayer does not work for. The harms they did may be overwhelmingly horrible. To treat them as one would treat a sick friend seems just impossible.

For that situation the Big Book provides, on page 552, a method which has worked for hundreds and thousands of people.

It is to pray every day for the person you resent to have everything you wish for in life. The example of what you pray for in the story is for health and wealth and happiness. But by this time in our own spiritual development, we suggest that what you wish for in life might be a little deeper than that. We urge you to think hard about what you *really* wish for in life. Our guess is that it will be something like: serenity, sanity, a sense of usefulness, the ability to love and to be loved, and/or a deep connection with your deepest values/Higher Power. In other words, you want a sense of wholeness.

If you pray for the person you deeply resent to have those important spiritual values, in our experience it will not take you long to realize that the person has nothing of what you really want out of life. If that person has harmed you or others and has shown no

remorse, then that person cannot possibly be truly serene in a spiritual sense, truly sane, be at all useful (and is probably destructive), cannot love or be loved, and has no connection with your deepest values. That person is pitiful. Even though what that person has done might be awful and evil and horrendous, in doing those things that person has become less than human, has lost all that could possibly give them any real and true connection with others or with the deep values (Higher Power, God) that you cherish.

It is out of that simple analysis that Twelve Step fellows have found a true pity for that other person. It does not require forgiveness of debts owed. It involves a sense of deep sadness that that person has, in a profound sense, given up membership in the human community. What that person did is a horrible demonstration of who they were and have become. Although that person's actions are not forgotten, they should not be accorded the dignity of taking up space in your mind.

**Assignment:**

If you have persons who have hurt you or others, try the Resentment Prayer on page 67 on those persons. If that prayer has not removed them from occupying your mind rent-free, then consider the instructions on BB 552. Think about what you *really* want out of life, especially given that you have made a decision to turn your will and your life over to the care of your deepest values, whether that means a specific God or deep moral convictions. Then—even mechanically and against your instincts—pray for each of those persons to have what you want out of life. Do it every day for two weeks, if necessary. Do it until you realize that they have or had nothing of what you want out of life.

**Big Book Assignment:** Then read the middle paragraph on page 67 of the Big Book, beginning with "Referring to our list again." This will mark our transition to the fourth column.

*Keep going. Don't pause. Once you have finished the directions in this chapter, go immediately to the next.*

## Column Four: Our Four Character Defects

*We have arrived at the point of being able to identify our character defects:*

We are now at the point that we can identify our own defects of character. Let us review how we arrived at this point:

We accepted that our problem was that because we wanted life to go our way and it didn't go our way, we were so frustrated/angry/saddened/isolated/self-pitying that we were literally eating (or not-eating) ourselves to death. We had to find a way to give up wanting life to go our way and we had to find a way to be directed by our deepest values. This was the significance of the discussion on BB 60 to 63.

We then decided to pursue a journey to find a way to be directed by our deepest values. This was our Step Three (BB 63).

We began that journey by working on Step Four,

As part of the Step Four part of our journey we first listed all the things that were going on in our mind. In the first column we listed people, institutions, and principles, that bothered us—whether they're things that hurt us or others or whether we have hurt others, or whether they are just living rent-free in our minds. In the second column we then set out beside each of those why it was on our list, what (sometimes many) reasons we had for thinking about those things all the time. After that, in the third column, we set out whether each of those reasons affect how we feel about ourselves, how safe and secure we feel, whether what we want out of life has been frustrated, whether it affects our personal or our sex relations, and whether fear is involved.

After filling out these three columns, we then realized how the resentments that we listed in the first column are truly killing us. In thinking about these things, our minds have been clouded, and we are easily persuaded by our minds to indulge in those foods, food ingredients/combinations, and/or eating behaviors, which we know we can't indulge in without getting uncontrollable cravings. We have to rid ourselves of thinking about those resentments all the time.

With those people who hurt us or others, we tried two methods of dealing with our reactions to that hurt. One was a simple understanding of how spiritually sick those people are and a prayer that we be able to treat them as we would a sick friend, with tolerance, pity, and patience. The other was a more powerful analysis of what we wanted out of life, a prayer that they have that, and a realization—often coming quickly and powerfully—that they had or have *nothing* that we want out of life, and in fact had or have the reverse of what we want. We were able to see them as the sick people they were or are.

*We have four character defects that pattern our life:*

Now that we can put those who have harmed us out of our minds, we are finally able to look at our own defects of character. The Big Book lists only four of them, but they are very very broad defects which encompass many other undesirable traits.

What is wonderful about the Big Book's approach to these defects is that the next two parts of Step Four (Fear and Sex Conduct) will allow us to see how we can live a life *without* those same character defects, so that by the time we reach Step Six, we will indeed be entirely willing that these character defects be removed from us. As the Big Book says, we are now looking at the wrongs others have done from an entirely different angle: our part.

The Big Book talks about putting out of our minds the wrongs that others have done, so it is helpful to fold each piece of paper so that column one is right across from column four, with columns two and three out of sight, or at least to blank out columns two and three

Here are the four character defects with an explanation of each:

***Selfish (Self-Willed):*** This word has a special broad meaning in the Big Book. It means wanting your way even with the best of intentions and motives. We discussed that in the chapter concerning BB pages 60 to 62 (beginning page 62 in this Workbook). The dictionary definition makes being selfish a bad thing, with bad motives, whereas the Big Book's definition is much broader. It is not selfish, for example, according to the dictionary definition, to wish something bad hadn't happen to you or someone else. Nothing bad *should* happen to you or to anyone else, and that wish is entirely reasonable. From the Big Book definition, however, it is "selfish" solely because you want life to be different from the way it is. If this use of the word Selfish is too troubling to you, don't use it. Use "*Self-Will,*" because that is certainly what the Big Book is talking about.

***Dishonest:*** Of course the first kind of dishonesty includes lying, cheating, and stealing, which is described in the stories in the Big Book.

But there are more subtle forms of dishonesty which we urge you to look at from an OA perspective.

A second kind of dishonesty is lying to ourselves about reality. This is especially important when we look at being hurt by others. Our Self-Will (Selfishness) wants the past not to have occurred. Our dishonesty is living in a dream world in which the past didn't happen. We thus lie to ourselves about reality. We see the world the way we wish it were rather than the way it is.

A third kind of dishonesty is not telling the truth when the truth should be told. Many of us are people-pleasers. We don't speak up when we should. Many of us have been pushed around, and some of us have been abused sexually, physically, and/or emotionally; and we have remained silent, sometimes processing it internally, perhaps telling someone about it once, but keeping it from our loved ones, or not standing up

for what is right. Not telling the truth when the truth should be told is an important part of dishonesty for many members of OA.

**Self-seeking:** We will see how this word becomes “Inconsiderate” in the Sex Conduct part of Step Four. Self-seeking is thinking about ourselves rather than about the other person. Self-seeking is looking for other people or our actions to tell us how good or bad we are, “seeking” for our sense of “self” in other people. Self-seeking is thinking that we deserve more than we get. Self-seeking is feelings of inadequacy, being unattractive, being inferior.

**Frightened** We are full of fears, fears of losing something we have, fears of not getting what we want, fears of being found out, fears of not being enough—able enough, good enough, happy enough.

Here are some examples based on the column one examples from earlier chapters:

*The person who traumatized me as a child:*

**Selfish/Self-Willed:** I want it never to have happened. I want to have had a normal childhood. I want to be able to be intimate with people, to trust people, not to feel worthless, not to feel humiliated, not to feel ashamed. I want the person to be severely punished for what was done to me.

**Dishonest:** What happened to me happened many years ago. I cannot change the past. The shame and humiliation and the worthlessness have become more significant to me than my relationship with my Higher Power. I should not be feeling guilt or shame, because that is lying to myself about my part in it. I was *not at all* responsible for what was done for me. I have never told the people I love of the harm that was done to me in order to explain some of the behaviors I have exhibited toward them. When I reached an age where I might have been believed, I did not report the matter to the proper authorities.

**Self-seeking/Inconsiderate:** I deserve a better life. What happened to me as a child has defined how I feel about myself. My identification as a victim has made me inconsiderate of other people’s feelings.

**Frightened:** That I’ll never feel good about myself. That relationships will always scare and paralyze me. That this will haunt me for the rest of my life. That the person will do harm to others.

*The person whose store I stole from:*

**Selfish/Self-Willed:** I thought I deserved what I took. I don’t want it to have occurred.

**Dishonest:** I have never apologized. I have never made restitution. I have been judgmental with other dishonest people, but somehow find a way to excuse my own actions.

**Self-seeking/Inconsiderate:** What I did has defined how I feel about myself. I did not think about that person at all, but only about what I needed.

**Frightened:** Of apologizing and making restitution. Of being found out.

*No one loves me:*

**Selfish/Self-Willed:** I want to be loved. I'm lonely. I want an intimate relationship with someone.

**Dishonest:** I have cut myself off from intimacy. People have wanted to love me, but I have run away from them.

**Self-seeking/Inconsiderate:** Somehow I think that I deserve to be loved without giving love to anyone.

**Frightened:** That I will always be lonely.

We are in a process of uncovering, discovering, and discarding. We are discovering patterns of our behavior, patterns of how our defects of character have shown up in our lives. And we will learn how to discard them.

**Assignment:** Fill out column four for each of your resentments. Do your best to see where all four of these defects occur with each resentment. You will begin to see patterns and might find yourself repeating the same words for many resentments; if that happens, feel free to use "ditto" or refer to earlier resentments to save time. Don't worry if you can't find anything to say about some of these four defects for some resentments. Step Five can help you there. After you've done that, read about fear from the bottom of page 63 to the bottom of page 64 in the Big Book.

*Keep going. Don't pause. Once you have finished the directions in this chapter, go immediately to the next.*



| Column 1                             | (Column 2 folded over or blanked out) | (Column 3 folded over or blanked out) | Column 4<br>Where had we been Selfish/self-willed (S), Dishonest (D), Self-seeking (SS), Frightened (F)  |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Person who traumatized me as a child |                                       |                                       | <p>S: I want it never to have happened. I want to have had a different childhood. I want to be able to love and be loved. I don't want to feel shame and guilt.</p> <p>D: It happened years ago. I am no longer the person it happened to. I have not told my loved ones of what happened to me.</p> <p>SS: I didn't deserve to have this happen to me. If it hadn't happened to me I would feel better about myself. I get into hurtful relationships because of my shame and guilt.</p> <p>F: of people, relationships, that I will never have good relationships.</p> |
| Parent who didn't show me love       |                                       |                                       | <p>S: I want to have had a model childhood with loving and caring parents.</p> <p>D: My parent was incapable of being loving and caring given their own childhood. They did the best they could, even if it was not at all good.</p> <p>SS: I feel less of a person because I missed out as a child.</p> <p>F: That I will always feel as if I missed out, that I will be a terrible parent,.</p>  |
| Person whose store I stole from      |                                       |                                       | <p>S: I don't want to face them. I wish I hadn't done that.</p> <p>D: It happened and it was wrong. I was a child who was suffering a lot of difficult issues.</p> <p>SS: I feel terrible about what I did.</p> <p>F: of the consequences of confessing.</p>   |

|                      |  |  |
|----------------------|--|--|
| My ex-love           |  | <p>S: I wanted them to love me. I wanted to have a lifelong companion.</p> <p>D: They were incapable of loving me or anyone. They used me for their own purposes. It happened years ago.</p> <p>SS: I feel so unloved.</p> <p>F: That I will always be lonely.</p>   |
| The media            |  | <p>S: Don't want them to do what they're doing.</p> <p>D: I have no control over what they do. I'm not doing enough to change what I can.</p> <p>SS: If I were in charge, everything would be better.</p> <p>F: of fear and ignorance</p>  |
| I'll always be alone |  | <p>S: Don't want to be alone.</p> <p>D: I am afraid of other people and don't have good judgment in personal relationships.</p> <p>SS: I feel shame and guilt because I have used other people to define how I feel about myself, instead of judging myself by my relationship with my deepest values/Higher Power</p> <p>F: of always being lonely.</p> |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>I will never reach a healthy body weight</p> |  | <p>S: Want to be attractive so I won't be lonely. Want to be healthy.</p> <p>D: I have not done anything to get healthy in the past. I am now working the Twelve Steps while abstinent, and should acknowledge that to myself as a positive fact.</p> <p>SS: Part of me wants to be healthy so I will attract people who will make me feel better about myself.</p> <p>F: That I will never reach a healthy body weight.</p> |
|---|--|--|

## Fears: Analyzing Our Fears

We are now going to deal with *all* the fears that we have, including those we identified through our resentments (through columns three and four). The Big Book promises that after this part of Step Four, we will at once “commence” to *outgrow* our fears. This is an amazing promise: Even before we do Step Five, we will *begin* to have outgrown our fears. And the Big Book delivers on that promise.

We will deal with this in two chapters.

The instructions from the Big Book are relatively clear, and certainly simple.

You’ll need five columns. Column one has to be only wide enough to write down your specific fears. Columns two and five will need space. Columns three and four are quite narrow, requiring only check-marks.

In *column one* write down your fears. If you have put in a check-mark in that part of column three of the resentment form “Is any Fear involved,” or filled out “Frightened” in column four of the resentment form, then the person, institution, or principle, in column one relating to those fears should be written down in column one.

In column four of the resentment form you might discover one kind of fear for different resentments. You could write down that fear rather than writing down the individual resentments. For instance, you might discover that you have the same fear of being alone that has arisen from resentments relating to a number of past relationships. It would be good to write that fear down by itself.

There may also be some fears that don’t form resentments because you don’t think of them all the time. Many of us are afraid of death, dementia, poverty, debilitating diseases, the death of a loved one, our grandchildren’s future, or have certain fears of places (closed-in places, heights) or actions (public speaking, flying). These are fears we would write down as well even though they might not be taking a lot of room in our mind and therefore weren’t on our resentment list.

After listing your fears in column one, go to column two. Using bullet points, briefly describe why you have that specific fear. In some cases you will be repeating what you’ve written down under “Frightened” in column four of the Resentment form; in others you’ll be writing down new reasons. Don’t write a long story—just indicate in brief point form the various reasons you have that particular fear.

Some examples:

Person who traumatized me as a child:

- fear of other people
- fear of intimacy
- fear of judgment by others

- fear of telling anyone about what happened
- fear that this will be with me for the rest of my life
- fear that I will lash out in anger at the slightest provocation.

Person I stole from as a child:

- fear of guilt lasting my entire life
- stigma of thief
- fear of humiliation of making amends

My children:

- that they won't do well in school
- that they'll engage in dangerous behavior
- that they won't learn from my mistakes
- that they will die before me
- that they will not be happy

Death::

- what happens afterward to me?
- what happens afterward to people I love?
- leaving loved ones
- the effect on loved ones
- the process of the ordeal of dying (debilitation, dementia, pain)

*Column three* is simple: put a check-mark (tick) if you were relying on your finite self to deal with the fear and if relying on your finite self didn't work. Of course you *will* put a check-mark down there, because relying on your finite self to deal with the fear hasn't worked—you still have the fear. If you relied instead on your deepest values or your Higher Power, you would get better direction for dealing with the fear.

*Column four* is a simple prayer from the Big Book: "God [or My deepest values], please remove my fear of \_\_\_\_\_, and direct my attention to what you have me be." Note that it is *be* and not *do*. This will be important. Sometimes you need do nothing at all in relation to a fear.

Column five will require some thought, and we'll discuss this in the next chapter of this Workbook.

**Assignment:** For each fear listed in column one, write down what you think your Higher Power, your deepest values, would have you *be* in relation to that fear. We suggest that you start each answer with “a person who . . . .” In other words, you would be saying something like, “My Higher Power would have me be a person who . . . .” This will focus you on the kind of person you have to be, as opposed to the kind of actions you might think you have to take. Assuming our Higher Power has removed the fear, how would we behave, or act, or feel, if we were living according to our deepest values, our God?

*Keep going. Don't pause. Once you have finished the directions in this chapter, go immediately to the next.*

| Column 1                               | Column 2  | 3 | 4 |
|--|---|---|---|
| Person who traumatized me              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–my life will always be full of fear</li> <li>–my life will always be full of shame and guilt</li> <li>–I will never trust anyone</li> </ul> | X | X |
| Store I stole from                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–facing up to my actions</li> <li>–people who like me will no longer like me when they find out</li> </ul>                                   | X | X |
| I'll always be alone                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–no companion for the rest of my life</li> <li>–no one to love me</li> <li>–no one for me to love</li> </ul>                                 | X | X |
| I'll never reach a healthy body weight | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–not be attractive</li> <li>–die earlier and painfully</li> <li>–not be able to engage in normal activities</li> </ul>                       | X | X |
| Death                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>–what happens afterward</li> <li>–the process of dying</li> </ul>  | X | X |

*Column 1: Who or what causes my fear?*

*Column 2: Why do I feel that fear?*

*Column 3: Relied on myself and it didn't work*

*Column 4: Said the Fear Prayer*

## Fears: Outgrowing Our Fears

*What would my Higher Power have me be in relation to each of my fears?:*

This has probably not been the easiest assignment to complete. Sometimes it is very hard to figure out the kind of person your Higher Power would have you be.

First, for atheists and agnostics the idea that a “Higher Power” would somehow be conscious enough to have a desire for you to be a particular kind of person is very hard. Those of us who are atheists or agnostics have a hard-enough time dealing with the “God” issue. We discussed that issue when we studied *We Agnostics*. We suggested that the atheist or the agnostic think of their deepest or highest values, the things they think are more important than they are, as their Higher Power—values like Love, Truth, Justice, Beauty, Joy, Unity, Harmony.

In that context, for example, what our Higher Power “would have us be” can be translated as: “Given that I deeply value Love and Truth, what kind of person can I be, in relation to this fear, that brings me closer to living Love and Truth?” Perhaps that will help.

Second, it is sometimes difficult to figure this out. Do not be concerned if for some or even many of your fears you cannot figure out what your Higher Power would have you be. That is something you can discuss with the person you do Step Five with.

Here are some samples, however, that might be of some assistance:

*Person who traumatized me as a child:*

- A person who will not let the person who harmed me rule my life, a person who will be careful and prudent but will not run away from trusting persons or from intimacy, a person who can be honest with others about past traumas.

*Person I stole from as a child:*

- A person who will make amends honestly, be willing to change and to become a better person, relying on my relationship with my God/deepest values rather than what other people think of me.

*My children:*

- A parent who does their best to be honest, loving, compassionate, and direct, modeling resilience and tolerance, letting them grow up to be mature adults who can make their own decisions and learn from their own mistakes.



*Death:*

- A person who will take care of themselves, a person who will live for each moment and not dwell on the future, a person who will leave a lasting and happy memory in the minds of those who love them, a person who loves unconditionally, a person who enjoys life on life's terms.

Naturally you will develop your own responses to any fears you may have that may or may not be similar to these examples.

The amazing thing about doing this is the fulfillment of the Big Book's promise on BB 68 (second last paragraph): "At once, we commence [begin] to outgrow fear." The word "commence" is important. It's not going to happen for all our fears at the same time. What is important is that *at once we begin* to outgrow fears. We *begin* to fear less.

Outgrowing fear means that we reach some maturity in relation to that fear. Instead of the irrational paralyzing fear that we have been experiencing, we begin to realize that being the kind of person defined by our relationship with our deepest values (our Higher Power) means that we take on our fears and develop strategies in relation to them. As adults, we take responsibility for the fears that we feel. We no longer hide beneath the bedclothes afraid of what might be under the bed; we shine a light under the bed and face whatever might (or might not) be there.

The fulfillment of the Fear Prayer is in a sense the other side of the Serenity Prayer. We learn to accept what we can't change, and figure out what in ourselves we can change to be able to handle the issues we can have an effect on.

*The next stage of Step Four—the sex conduct inventory:*

We will be moving quickly toward the end of our inventory. The next list we will be making deals with what the Big Book calls "sex conduct." It is important to remember, however, that the word "sex" had a broader meaning in 1939 than it does now. Today, sex seems to be understood as the purely physical actions revolving around intimacy. In 1939 sex had the broader meaning of "relationships among people where physical attraction is involved." It did not necessarily refer to physical intimacy; it could have been used to refer to flirtation, fantasizing, hurtful gossiping, dating, rejection.

We will only be dealing with people you have hurt, *not* people who have hurt you. We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

**Assignment:** Continue to work out what your Higher Power would have you be in relation to each of your fears, and write down what you can. Then read from the bottom of page 68 to the end of the paragraph on page 70 "when to yield would mean heartache." *Keep going. Don't pause. Once you have finished the directions in this chapter, go immediately to the next.*

| Column 1                               | Column 2  | 3 | 4 | Column 5   |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| Person who traumatized me              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—my life will always be full of fear</li> <li>—my life will always be full of shame and guilt</li> <li>—I will never trust anyone</li> </ul> | X | X | —a person who lives life on life’s terms, who accepts that they cannot change the past, who is honest about the past, who doesn’t let the past rule the present, who works on trust, who is able to risk rejection for the sake of love, |
| Store I stole from                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—facing up to my actions</li> <li>—people who like me will no longer like me when they find out</li> </ul>                                   | X | X | —a person who takes responsibility for what they did regardless of the consequences.   |
| I’ll always be alone                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—no companion for the rest of my life</li> <li>—no one to love me</li> <li>—no one for me to love</li> </ul>                                 | X | X | —a person who takes prudent risks of rejection in order to be able to be open to love, who works on their relationship with their deepest values/Higher Power in order to be a whole and therefore lovable and loving person.            |
| I’ll never reach a healthy body weight | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—not be attractive</li> <li>—die earlier and painfully</li> <li>—not be able to engage in normal activities</li> </ul>                       | X | X | —a person who remains abstinent and works toward a healthy body weight, and works the Twelve Steps of OA to gain spiritual fulfillment.  |
| Death                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—what happens afterward</li> <li>—the process of dying</li> </ul>  | X | X | —a person who keeps as healthy as they can, and who leaves a legacy of good memories.  |

*Column 1: Who or what causes my fear?*

*Column 2: Why do I feel that fear?*

*Column 3: Relied on myself and it didn’t work*

*Column 4: Said the Fear Prayer*

*Column 5: What would my Higher Power have me be in relation to this fear?*

## Sex (Complex Relationships) Conduct: We Outgrow Our Three Other Character Defects

*We learn to live without our three other character defects:*

On BB 69 the Big Book devotes one paragraph to the past (“We reviewed . . .”) and one paragraph to the future (“In this way we tried to shape . . .”). Our inventory will be based on the past, and the directions will be taken from that first paragraph. Our future (or perhaps present) relationships will develop as we recover.

Of the four character defects identified in the resentment form (selfish/self-willed, dishonest, self-seeking, fear), we have already dealt with, and begun to outgrow, our fears.

We are now going to deal with the other three character defects of Selfish (Self-Willed), Dishonest, and Self-Seeking.<sup>1</sup> We will discover from our past relationships how we can live a future life Unselfishly, Honestly, and Considerately. We will do this using difficult or complex relationships in which we are motivated at least in part by our bodies or by deep emotional instincts, not by our minds.

This is one of the greatest features of the Big Book’s instructions for doing Step Four: not only do we find out our defects of character, but we also—even before going through Steps Five through Nine—begin to see how we can live a full and fulfilling life in their absence. This will make Steps Six and Seven relatively easy to do, and motivate us to do Steps Eight and Nine quickly and powerfully.

Take another piece of paper, letterhead or legal size and put it sideways (landscape mode). You’ll separate it into four columns. The first and third are relatively narrow, and the second and fourth are relatively large.

As we have said, “sex” in 1939 referred not only to physical intimacy but also to relationships in which there was some attraction, whether they resulted in intimacy or not; so sexual conduct can include things like flirting, fantasies, dating, rejection of people attracted to us, as well as long-term attraction kind of relationships.

In effect, these are relationships where the body is talking as well as the mind—where there have been sexual instincts at play. The sexual instincts make it more difficult for the mind to think clearly, thus creating a complex relationship.

This section of Step Four is only about sex conduct where we have harmed others, not where others have harmed us. Those us who have suffered traumatic treatment have not harmed those who harmed us, but we may have done harm to other persons as a result

<sup>1</sup> The Big Book uses “inconsiderate” here, rather than “self-seeking.” They are really two sides of the same coin. To be self-seeking is to think of and about yourself more than to think of others, whether it is what you can get out of a relationship or how that other person defines how you think about yourself. In all cases you are thinking not of the other person, but of yourself. So in being self-seeking you are being inconsiderate. You are not *considering* the other person.

of the harms that we suffered, by virtue of complete rejection or inability to achieve true intimacy in a relationship, or by not telling them the truth about our past suffering which might help them understand us better.

For some of us, the trauma we have experienced has prevented us from forming any relationships where the sex instinct has been involved. In that situation, and for some of us *in that situation only*, we might use this part of Step Four to deal with relationships which are complex because we have deep instinctive reactions to the other people which has made it more difficult for our minds to think clearly. Some of us, for example, would put down parents or siblings or longstanding friends.<sup>1</sup>

The instructions are relatively simple, but they go to the heart of the other three defects of character which we identified in the resentment part of Step Four

In the first column, leaving plenty of space for filling out columns two and four, write down a list of all persons you have hurt deeply in relationships involving attraction as a result of being Selfish/Self-willed, Dishonest, and Self-Seeking/Inconsiderate. These will be people you have probably already listed on your resentment list, but there may possibly be some people you haven't thought of for a long time but that, as a result of the analysis you have done of your resentments, you realize you have also hurt.

Don't list people with whom you've had reasonable relationships in which you did not harm them. Especially don't list people who harmed you in relationships *unless*—as may happen in some isolated and exceptional cases—in working through your resentments you have reached some understanding that even though they harmed you, you may also have harmed them.

At this stage of your journey to recovery you will probably recognize that you have hurt some of these people by:

- not telling them the truth when the truth should have been told (dishonesty)
- not telling others the truth when the truth should have been told (dishonesty)
- withholding your trust or your intimacy (selfish/self-willed)
- fantasizing about them, and thus objectifying them, even to the point of excluding real relationships (self-seeking/inconsiderate)
- giving them power over how you feel or felt about yourself (self-seeking/inconsiderate)

<sup>1</sup> We will see in our discussion of Step Ten, where Steps Four through Nine are done in the context of recovery, that we do recommend that the Sex Conduct part of Step Four be used to deal with any complex instinctive relationships. We think that a person doing Step Four for the first time, however, should deal in the Sex Conduct part of Step Four solely with relationships where the sex instinct has been involved, and only in rare circumstances deal with complex instinctive relationships.

- treating them badly because you had been treated badly by others (selfish/self-willed)
- withholding affection (selfish/self-willed)
- smothering by giving too much affection (selfish/self-willed)

These are relatively subtle aspects of relationships which, perhaps, the original AAers who participated in the writing of the Big Book did not anticipate, but which are so important for many compulsive eaters who are on a journey to recovery.

It shouldn't take you long to make such a list. Write down everyone you can think of, especially those who were on your resentment list, sleep on it, and then see if anyone else comes to mind.

In column two you will write where you have been Selfish/Self-willed, Dishonest, and Self-seeking/Inconsiderate for each person. For those who were already on your resentment form, these three points have probably already been written down, but there are also examples of those areas above. You may think they need some modification and/or additions, but it will be pretty obvious to you how that works out. For those who were not on your list, you will probably find it relatively easy to fill this out.

In column three you will indicate whether in this relationship you aroused jealousy, suspicion, and/or bitterness. You may or may not have, but it's important to ask yourself that question. (You can just write "j," "s," and/or "b," in that column.

In column four you will answer this two-part question: "Where was I at fault; and what should I have done instead?"

It is in answering these questions that you will realize—judging from our experience—that you should either have ended a relationship earlier than you did end it, or invested more into it than you did (*Selfless*), should have thought more about the other person than yourself and not used them to define how you felt about yourself (*Considerate*), and been more honest about the relationship (*Honest*). You can now learn from your own mistakes for future relationships. You can also understand the nature of the harm that you did, and make it easier to understand what kind of amends could be made for those harms.

**Assignment:** Read BB 70 to 71 and consider whether "you have swallowed and digested some big chunks of truth about yourself." Then, if you haven't already done so, think about who might be a suitable person with whom to share your inventory in Step Five.

*Keep going. Don't pause.*

| Column 1                          | Column 2  | Column 3 | Column 4   |
|-----------------------------------|---|----------|--|
| My ex-love                        | <p>S: I wanted to change them. I wanted them to love me.</p> <p>D: I used them and they used me. It was a doomed relationships. I cheated on them.</p> <p>I: I used them for my own purposes, to make me feel better about myself</p>   | J<br>S   | I should never have entered into the relationship, but once having entered into it, I should have left it at the earliest possible time, recognizing that it was a hurtful relationship. I should never have used others to define myself. |
| My current partner                | <p>S: I want them to change. I want them to show me more affection.</p> <p>D: They show me affection in their own way. I do not show them affection. I withhold my feelings because of my fear of being rejected.</p> <p>I: Sometimes I use them to make me feel better about myself.</p> | B        | I put my needs ahead of theirs. I should think more of their needs. I should invest more into the relationship. I should concentrate on what I love about them. I should be honest with them about my own needs as well.                   |
| People whose attention I rejected | <p>S: I didn't want their attention.</p> <p>D: I didn't want their attention because I was afraid of being hurt.</p> <p>I: I flirted with some of them.</p>   |          | I should have been less fearful and explored relationships with others. I should not have flirted with people when I knew I would not have a relationship with them.   |

*Column 1: Whom did I hurt?*

*Column 2: Where was I Selfish/Self-willed (S), Dishonest (D), Inconsiderate/Self-Seeking (I)?*

*Column 3: Did I arouse Jealousy (J), Suspicion (S), Bitterness (B)?*

*Column 4: Where was I wrong, and what should I have done instead?*

*Moving quickly from Step Four to Step Five*

Have you had a relapse? Here are suggestions to deal with that.

## *An Interlude on Abstinence and Relapse:*

Working on Step Four can be a difficult thing for some people to do. As you write down why some people or principles are on your list, you might reawaken some feelings. It is therefore a good idea to do this Step relatively quickly, trying to be thorough but not perfect or obsessive. Deal with things that are on your mind, follow the instructions, and don't try to analyze it too much.

There is always the possibility of relapse. It's important to follow your Plan of Eating, thus keeping abstinent, while you work Steps Four through Nine. As we have suggested earlier, have faith that the experience of millions of addicts with dozens of addictions, including the addiction of compulsive eating, can come true for you: *By the time you finish Step Nine, your Plan of Eating will be something you will instinctively want to follow, and you won't be tempted to return to anything you have abstained from.* So keeping abstinent until that time should be your goal. *You should do anything you can to keep abstinent.*

Sometimes, however, there can be relapses, and while relapses are not part of recovery, and should be avoided, they can happen. If you have not relapsed, then this chapter might be of value to you when you sponsor someone.

Relapses can often trigger feelings of guilt and failure. We can be ashamed to admit that we have relapsed. Our experience, however, has shown us that a relapse can be used as a wake-up call to push us into working the Twelve Steps with a deeper commitment to gain recovery, and greater insight that can help us keep abstinent while we are working the Steps.

The moment you relapse, or at least the moment that you're able to do so, meet with someone with experience in the program, like a sponsor, and review what happened.

From the Big Book perspective, there are only two causes of a relapse:

### **1. You might not be abstaining from everything that causes you uncontrollable cravings.**

Your body might still be feeling uncontrollable cravings because your Plan of Eating has not eliminated everything that causes you uncontrollable cravings. In other words, you may be succumbing to the physical "allergy"—those physical cravings that come when you indulge in certain foods, food ingredients/combinations, and/or eating behaviors (including purging or restricting). If you have relapsed, you owe yourself a careful analysis of your Plan of Eating, using someone with some experience as a sounding board.

Here are some examples which may or may not apply to your specific Plan of Eating: Perhaps you've been allowing yourself some small comfort food (cream instead of no-fat milk in your coffee; or a smoothie made with whole milk? One cookie a day? Some butter on your vegetables? Artificial sweetener to give you that sweetness? Gum chewing to keep your mouth busy)? Perhaps you haven't eliminated certain behaviors that can cause you uncontrollable cravings? On the other hand, perhaps you are not getting



enough food because you are severely and dangerously restricting your intake, and your body just needs more.

Think these issues through. You should err on the side of abstaining from anything that is questionable.

## **2. You might not have done all that you *must* do to keep from the mental obsession.**

Your mind may have persuaded you to go back (the “mental obsession”) because you haven’t been devoting yourself to finishing your Step work. Have you put things off, not wanted to continue Step Four because you were reminded of something difficult, or began to anticipate making amends? Have you made some wrong decisions somewhere that led you into tempting situations? Has your strategy for keeping from temptation not covered some situations? Review the many decisions you made that led you to the relapse: for each decision ask yourself what you could have done to avoid that relapse. Analyze your mistakes and learn from them.

*The only mistake you can make is not to learn from your mistake.* What did you do wrong, and what can you do to prevent yourself from repeating those actions? Those are the pertinent questions. Guilt, shame, remorse, or sense of failure, have no place in this process. They stand in the way of recovery. After all, the Steps are all about transforming us into people who live according to what they believe in by working out our mistakes and making up for them. If you have relapsed, this is an opportunity to do that very thing. And your experience of relapse, together with the work you will be doing to learn from your mistake, will be able to help another compulsive eater who still suffers.

The Big Book has no rules in this regard. It doesn’t say that you should study Steps One and Two in detail again, or commit to a certain number of days of abstinence before you get back to Step Four. Of *course* you have to review Steps One and Two again. Of *course* you have to get abstinent before you work the Steps. There is no rule, however, that you have to *repeat* exactly what you did the first time. Sometimes the first relapse will give you a sense of purpose and direction that you should capitalize on. From a Big Book perspective, *action is the key*. Pick yourself up, review Steps One and Two, get abstinent for a few days, say the Step Three prayer with someone, and work your Step Four with greater resolve.

But be sure to put down your relapse, and anything else that you resent *now*, as new resentments. You’ve got a slightly messier house to clean. We urge you not to fall into the “frequent relapse” trap. Those who have lost their abstinence and regained it—even while working a program of rigorous honesty—may have had the subconscious thought that they could do it again and again. This is the exact opposite of Step One. This is making your binge foods an option. Our experience is that if it’s not an option, it’s not a problem.

If you have relapsed, you have had to re-examine your errors in order not to repeat them. You're ready to move forward again after you reviewed your Steps One to Three and have been abstinent for a reasonable time, which can be a few days in most cases. We suggest you get objective feedback from your sponsor or a recovered OAer, if available, to make sure you're at that point.

If it's been a long time since you made your first list of resentments, you should certainly go over the list to see if some of them have gone away. And whether it's been a long time or a short time, you certainly should add to your list of resentments things relating to your relapse, like

- I had a relapse
- I don't know if I'll ever recover
- It was going so well and then I screwed up
- I have to start all over again
- etc.

Look at what you've done and ask yourself whether it deals with your "grosser" defects of character—meaning the big ones, the obvious ones, the ones clearly standing in your way (see BB 71). *We have found that it is dangerous to delay.* If you have dealt with the big problems of your life, you have identified your patterns in your four character defects. That's enough. The next Steps are crucial. Don't delay.

Notice how the Big Book says on BB 71 that your self-will has created something which blocks you off from your Higher Power. Clearly you have to remove the blocks. These blocks are your defects of character. They stand in the way of you and your Higher Power. Our old ideas, our feelings of having suffered calamities, of wanting to be in charge, of worship of other things, have been identified. Let's keep going on with the journey. Working Steps Four through Nine *will* remove these defects.

*There must be no delay. You have to go right on to Step Five.* Step Four is probably the most time-consuming of the first nine Steps, but no matter how you do it, it should not take more than a few weeks. Then, if you follow the suggestions of this study, Step Five won't take you much longer than a few hours. And you will complete Steps Six, Seven, and Eight, right after completing Step Five. So it's important to go forward.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read BB 72 to 75.

## **Step Five: Sharing Our Character Defects**

The Big Book's directions for doing Step Five. Focus on *your* character defects, not other peoples' character defects. Ask the person you do Step Five with to provide you with feedback in understanding your character defects. Use the checklist found in the Big Book to determine whether you have completed Step Five.

## Step Five: Sharing Our Character Defects

At this point consider whether in the process of doing Step Four you may have identified, brought to the surface, or even encountered, new resentments and/or new fears. Perhaps something happened in your life or in the lives of others since you made your first list of resentments, or your first list of fears, that has created new fears or resentments. If that is the case, add them to your list of resentments and see what fears have arisen as a result; or add them directly to your list of fears and see what your Higher Power would have you be in relation to that.

Do *not*, however, use this suggestion as an excuse to delay your Step Five. Step Four is only the beginning of your inventory, and you must go ahead as quickly as you can.

We are now at Step Five. The Big Book spends much of BB 72 to 73 explaining why we need to do a Step Five, much of BB 74 telling us the kind of person we need to do a Step Five with, and then a few lines about how to do a Step Five. The last two paragraphs on BB 75 contain (a) Step Five promises, which we will be using as a checklist to see if perhaps you need to do some more work on Step Four, and (b) a reminder that after sharing our Step Four with another human being we still have to share with our Higher Power.

### *Why we must do Step Five:*

Why do we need to do a Step Five? The Big Book gives one reason only: If we don't, we'll go back to our addiction, and to go back to our addiction is to continue our journey to death. We need to do Step Five because it requires humility and honesty, and we cannot be humble and honest without sharing with another human being. We have found it a spiritually fulfilling experience. Many of us choose to do Step Five with one person because of the unique quality of sharing our entire story once.

Here are some more reasons for doing a Step Five, based on our experience.

- Confession is good for the soul. We feel cleansed doing a Step Five.
- We will find that we are essentially no different from the person who is hearing our Step Five. That person will be able to share their own Selfishness/Self-will, Dishonesty, Self-seeking/Inconsiderateness, and Fears. There is a comfort in knowing that we are not unique or even unusual.
- If we ask for it, and our recommendation is that you do, we can get some sense of objectivity and feedback to make sure that we haven't left anything out. We can't be objective about our own life. A solitary self-appraisal, the Big Book reminds is, is not sufficient.
- Step Five marks a pivot point from the old you to the new you. You are in the process of ridding yourself of the baggage of the past in order to

embark on the new life you have started. There will be major clean-up in Steps Eight and Nine, but Step Five will be able to confirm your character defects, and you will be changing even before you get to the amends.

*With whom do we do a Step Five?:*

The Big Book was written when AA was centered in New York, Akron, and Cleveland, and nowhere else. Naturally a person reading the Big Book who didn't live in those areas would have to find someone other than an AAer to do Step Five with. The Big Book provides some suggestions for doing that. On BB 96, however, the Big Book, when speaking of sponsoring another person, explains that we can offer to hear our sponsee's "story"—meaning Step Five.

On the bottom of BB 74 and the top of BB 75, the Big Book provides the criteria for such a person: the ability to keep a confidence, full understanding and approval of what we're doing, and not trying to change our "plan"—meaning our decision to work the Steps.

Many OAers will choose their OA sponsor or another person within OA to do their Step Five with, or at least someone with Twelve-Step experience. Some will, however, choose a member of their own specific religion, a therapist, perhaps someone who has a protected legal privilege and can be told confidential things. There is no right or wrong here. The person should in all cases, however, be informed yet uninvolved—not someone on your resentment or fears or complex relationship lists.

*Suggestions for doing Step Five:*

The Big Book does not provide specific instructions for how to do Step Five. Basically, it says that we tell the person what we're about to do, why we're doing it, and explain that this is life-and-death for us. *Then* we "go to it, illuminating every twist of character, every dark cranny of the past" (75).

If you've done Step Four the Big Book way, we suggest that the following is a workable way of doing this part of Step Five.

Take your resentment pages, and read across the page, so that you identify each person, institution, or principle in column one, give an extremely brief summary of column two if necessary to explain who that person is, and then read column four. Some of us have our sponsees read column three as well. In either case, concentrate on column four—where you have been Selfish/Self-Willed, Dishonest, Self-Seeking (or Inconsiderate), and Frightened, in relation to the person, institution, and principle in column one. It is certainly important that you not rehash the past in great detail in order to avoid reliving the resentments. This is especially true if the second column deals with traumatic events in your life.

- Ask for help if you haven't been able to identify, for each of the persons, institutions, and principles, where *all* your four character defects arose. Perhaps the person can help you fill in some blanks.
- Some of us encourage the person giving the Step Five to say something like "The next three people are the same as the one I just read to you, so I won't repeat myself." Some of us think it's important, however, to repeat the process for each person.
- Take the fear pages, tell the person that in all cases you were relying on your finite self and it didn't work, and that you said the Fear Prayer, and then read columns one (the fear), two (why you have the fear), and five (your idea for the answer to the fear prayer). If you haven't been able to, ask that person to help you figure out what your Higher Power would have you be in relation to each of the fears (column five).
- Take the sex conduct pages and read all the columns. If you haven't already done so, ask that person to help you figure out what you should have done instead.
- If you have used another method of doing Step Four, we do strongly suggest, when you share your Step Five with another person, that you not dwell on the harms that have been done to you, but on your own defects of character. This is *your* inventory, not anyone else's. You may have been dealt with very badly, but the goal of Steps Four, Five, and Six, is to identify your own defects, not those of others.

*The test for whether we have completed Step Five:*

However you have done Step Five, ask yourself four questions, arising out of the guaranteed promises found on BB 75:

- Am I delighted?
- Can I look the world in the eye?
- Can I be alone at perfect peace and ease?
- Have my fears fallen from me?

These are practical questions. You are not being asked if you are walking on clouds. The basic question is whether you feel a fundamental shift in your attitude toward your life, a sense of freedom, of change.

Do you feel great (*delighted*)? Do you realize that you are no better but also no worse than anyone else (*look the world in the eye*). Are you capable of being alone without crazy thoughts living rent-free in your mind (*at perfect peace and ease*)? Have your fears been transformed into giving you a sense of what you should be in relation to them (*fallen from you*)?

If you cannot answer “yes” to all of these questions, even after some reflection time (minutes; hours; certainly no more than a day!), then the chances are you missed something in Step Four.

Don’t worry about it. It’s just a matter of looking into yourself to see if any resentments or fears or sex conduct/complex relationships issues may have arisen between the time you did your Step Four and the time you did your Step Five.

Sometimes we don’t even notice that things are bothering us, just as people who work in a noisy factory might not notice how the pressure of that noise affects them. Many of us don’t realize that things that are going on in the world might be affecting us.

Or perhaps we deliberately left something out because we were embarrassed. Or we were looking ahead to Step Nine and feeling fear about making amends, and therefore not concentrating on Step Four. We definitely need to back up at this point.

Or perhaps we have to write down as a principle: “I just did this intensive Step Four and all the promises of Step Four didn’t come true for me!”

You will not be redoing Step Four; rather you will be *adding to* your Step Four. You will not be redoing Step Five; you will be *adding to* your Step Five. So it will not take you a long time. Sometimes it can take a matter of a few minutes. You may not get those promises even the second time, and have to add a bit more, but the Big Book guarantees, and it is our experience, that at least the first time you do Step Five you *will* feel those promises if you do the work.

*Our experience is that you should not use this as an opportunity to delay. Invest the time. Your life depends on it. Do this quickly.*

When these promises come true, there is one more action to be taken.

#### *Admitting to our Higher Power:*

The bottom of page 75 contains an important paragraph. We have already admitted our defects to ourselves while working Step Four. We have admitted our defects to another human being. Now it is time to admit our defects to our Higher Power. The Big Book has specific instructions:

- Step Five Prayer: Thank your Higher Power from the bottom of your heart that you know your Higher Power better. For those whose deepest values do not include the notion of a conscious supreme being, you can translate that prayer into *I am thankful that I find myself getting closer to my deepest values.*
- Carefully review all of your Step Four and any notes you may have taken in Step Five.

- Read the first five Steps.
- Ask yourself if you have omitted anything, and consider that issue carefully.

If your answer is “No” to the last question, as it surely will be, then it is time to do Steps Six and Seven, perhaps that same day, or at least within a day or so.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the first two paragraphs on page 76.



## **Steps Six and Seven: Willingness and Prayer**

**Step Six:** Would you like to live a life free of the character defects blocking you from your Higher Power? Would you like to have sanity so that you will have your addiction removed?

**Step Seven:** If the answer to this question is “Yes,” and it probably is, then say the Step Seven Prayer.

## Steps Six and Seven:

The Big Book devotes one paragraph to Step Six, and Step Seven simply requires us to say the prayer set out in the next paragraph. We have found that if we have done Steps Four and Five the Big Book way, we don't need to spend much more time on Steps Six and Seven. They require moments of reflection, not lengthy study. As a matter of fact, delaying on Steps Six and Seven creates the real danger of relapse.

### *Step Six:*

The Big Book's approach to Steps Four and Five show that we have only four character defects: Selfish/Self-Willed, Dishonest, Self-Seeking/Inconsiderate, and Frightened—and these are so powerful in our lives, so harmful to others in our lives and to ourselves, that we will be very ready to have them removed if at all possible.

Accordingly the vast majority of us who follow the Big Book method (or similar methods) of working Steps Four and Five) are quite ready at Step Six to have our character defects removed. Of course we generally find it important to think on the issue, but not to spend a lot of time doing this.

The Big Book implies that Step Six is done right after—the same day—we finish Step Five. Some of our sponsees have spent a day, in extreme circumstances two, thinking about the issue. None of us encourages delaying at this point. It is rare for someone who has experienced the promises outlined for Step Five (delighted; look the world in the eye; be alone at perfect peace and ease; fears fall from us) to want to delay going on with the rest of the Steps, and particularly Step Six.

It is important, however, that you seriously consider whether you want to have your four major character defects removed. If you have any hesitation, the Big Book provides a simple prayer: “God, please help me be willing to let go of the defect(s) of self-will, dishonesty, self-seeking/inconsiderateness, and fear.” For the atheist or agnostic: “I trust that by focusing on my deepest values I will become willing to let go of the defects of self-will, dishonesty, self-seeking/inconsiderateness, and fear.” Then go on *immediately* to Step Seven.

### *Step Seven:*

The Big Book implies that Step Seven is done right after Step Six. And it says that Step Seven is the simple recital of a prayer set out on BB 76.

The Step Seven prayer is a powerful prayer. This concept of devotion to a Higher Power can be very powerful, because it is the beginning of our transformation from being self-willed to being selfless. We have found saying this prayer to be an important part of our recovery.

For those whose concept of a Higher Power is not a conscious supreme being, some translation might be helpful:

*I am now willing to devote myself completely to my deepest values. I trust that devoting myself to my deepest values will remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to my deepest values and to others. I trust that I will have strength as I go out from here to devote myself to my deepest values.*

Note the concept of “which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows.” There may be aspects of our defects of character which don’t stand in the way of usefulness to our Higher Power or to others. This is an acknowledgment that we are human, that we are not asking to be perfect in all respects. Some of us like to say that God will “use” our defects, that our Step Seven Prayer is, to put it at its simplest: “Use me.”

Note as well, and most importantly, that on page 76, right after the Step Seven prayer, the Big Book tells us, “Now we need more action, without which we find that ‘Faith without works is dead.’”

Nothing is going to happen to us if we just stay at Step Seven. We need to take action, and that is what Steps Eight and Nine are all about. Doing Steps Eight and Nine will remove our defects of character.

**Big Book Assignment:** Say the Step Seven prayer. Then read the rest of BB 76 to the middle of BB 79.

## Steps Eight and Nine: Our Character Defects are Removed

*The direct amends:*

The Big Book's discussion of the range of direct amends:

- *Apology*: "I want to be a better person, and in order to do that I must do my best to undo the harm I've done to you. I am sorry for what I did."
- *Restitution*: "Not only am I sorry for what I did, I need to repay you for the financial harm you have suffered."
- *Acknowledgment beyond the individual*: "Not only am I sorry for what I did, but I need to take the consequences for what I have done, because that is the only way I can make up for the harm that I have done."
- *This chapter also discusses issues relating to those of us who have suffered trauma in our lives, or abuse from others.*

The Big Book does not talk at all about making amends to ourselves, but it is clear that in doing our best to change our past we will have our character defects removed, and that is the greatest amends we can make to ourselves.

We must remember that Step Eight is about willingness to make amends to everyone, but Step Nine requires us to consider whether making those amends might harm others, in which case we don't make those amends even if we are willing to make them.

## Steps Eight and Nine: The Direct Amends

### *Overview of Steps Eight and Nine:*

We are now on Steps Eight and Nine, which the Big Book treats together. This discussion will be in three parts.

Some of us believe that we should make our list of people we have harmed (the first part of Step Eight) the same day as we do Steps Five, Six, and Seven. *All* of us believe that we make that list as soon as possible after Step Seven.

Separating Steps Eight and Nine focuses our attention on: *first*, becoming willing to make amends to everyone; and *second*, considering whether making those amends would hurt the person we want to make amends to, or would hurt others, and therefore *not* making those amends if there would be hurt.<sup>1</sup>

In Step Eight we concentrate on the kinds of amends we have to make, and becoming willing to make them. We don't think ahead to Step Nine about making them, because we don't know whether we'll be making them or not. Perhaps making them might hurt some other person. The issue is whether we would be *willing* to make them.

Step Eight therefore requires willingness to make amends. If you have worked the Steps up to now, and have received the promises of Step Five (delighted, look the world in the eye, be alone at perfect peace and ease, fears fall from you), then you will be in the right frame of mind to consider making amends. You are doing it because you know you have done harm and you want to make up for it. You are doing it in order to rid yourself of your character defects, to become a new person. Keeping these things in mind will give you the proper approach when you actually make amends. You will not expect a great result. You will accept it if a person does not take kindly to your amends.

BB 76 to the middle of page 79 contains the Big Book's complete description of the kind of direct amends which can be made (Step Eight). We will see that BB 79 to 82 contains the Big Book's analysis of what we do when harm might result if we made the amends (Step Nine). BB 82 to 83 discusses living amends and amends we cannot make (Steps Eight and Nine).

Our discussion in this chapter of this Workbook will clarify all the kinds of direct amends which can be made. In the next chapter we will discuss the issue of whether we can make these direct amends if harm would result to others or to the person to whom we would make amends. In the chapter after that we will discuss living amends and amends we can't make.

<sup>1</sup> The word "amends" is both singular and plural. As much as we might like it to be so, there is no such noun as "amend"—only the verb "to amend." So when we speak of "making an amends" it is proper grammar, even though it may feel wrong.

*An OA perspective on Steps Eight and Nine—the victim’s perspective:*

Before we begin our discussion of the Big Book’s approach, it’s necessary to make some general comments from an OA perspective.

As we discussed in relation to Step Four, many of us in OA have had difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences with others. Unlike the alcoholics discussed in the Big Book—but perhaps like many alcoholics and addicts in the world—many of us feel, with justification, that we have been victims rather than victimizers. Our compulsive eating has sometimes been a result of trying to protect ourselves from abuse.

What if we harmed a person only by remaining silent about his or her abuse, thus allowing that person to continue abusing us and perhaps others? What if we harmed a person by staying in an unhealthy relationship? What if that person harmed others years before we were born, and the thought of that person continues to foster resentment and fear? What kind of amends might we owe?

Before we look at the Big Book’s approach to amends, it is necessary for those of us who have complex issues like that to analyze the very simple question, “*What harm have I done?*” It is only through understanding the harm that you have done that you will understand what kind of amends you have to be willing to make (Step Eight), even though you may not be able to make that amends (Step Nine).

There are many different ways of doing this—using index cards for each person or using a sheet of paper listing the people, for example—but the most important part of it is working out *exactly what harms have been done to the other person*. It is only through that analysis that we can then work out what appropriate amends can be made.

Clearly if we have stolen from someone, or if we have deliberately harmed someone physically, emotionally, or in relationships or in the workplace, then the amends we make are directly proportionally to the harm we did. These are simple to understand.

In the case of more complex issues, however, there is more subtle analysis to be done.

Here are some examples of the kind of harms that might have resulted from being a victim. You will note that some of those harms were done to persons other than the person who harmed us:

- allowed the person who was harming us to continue harming themselves by getting farther and farther away from what a good human being can be, becoming more evil, becoming more unable to repent and change.
- harmed others with whom we had relationships by not being able to explain our behaviors in those relationships—the inability to be intimate, to trust, or to be open, for example.
- caused pain to those who loved us by continuing in a relationship that caused us pain.
- acted out by abusing others, either in the same way or in different ways.

- obsessed so much over an unchangeable past that we became simply *not present* for our loved ones, paralyzed by fears, and full of so much anger and frustration that our obsession controlled our thoughts and actions.
- continued to seek co-dependent relationships because of our low self-esteem, and thus harmed those willing to take advantage of our co-dependency.
- sought to take away the pain by obsessing on money, on food, on having children, on hurting others, on drug or alcohol dependency, etc.

These are some examples to help you think about your own situation.

*How we really make amends to ourselves:*

You will also note that the Big Book never talks about making amends to ourselves. This is not an accident. The Big Book says on page 74, “The rule is we must be hard on ourself, but always considerate of others.”

The idea of making amends to ourselves is quite understandable. Because many of us have been victims, and are prey to low self-esteem, co-dependency, people-pleasing, and the like, we often feel that we never take care of ourselves, that we are always doing something for other people. We look forward to confirming our sense of self-worth, to being able to say “no,” to taking time for ourselves. When we treat other people as being spiritually sick without being harshly judgmental, when we are able to apologize for our own mistakes, then we also stop judging ourselves harshly, and are able to see how we can become better people.

But we *will* make amends to ourselves when we transform from persons who have self-will character defects, into persons who

- do not try to control the world (no longer Selfish/Self-willed),
- tell the truth when the truth should be told and who don’t lie to themselves about reality (no longer Dishonest),
- think of others.
- define our sense of who we are through our relationship with our deepest values/Higher Power, and not through what others think of us (no longer Self-Seeking/Inconsiderate),
- are not afraid to stand up for what we believe in (no longer Frightened).

We have found that the best amends we made to ourselves was to finish the Steps and work with others.

In that context we *will* say “no” to people who use us, because they harm themselves when they use us. We *will* take time for ourselves because in order to be useful to others we need to refresh our vitality. We *will* be true to ourselves because we will be in touch, in thought and in action, with our Higher Power or deepest values. Those amends are

the deepest ones of all. They can only happen, however, if we clear away what the Big Book calls “the wreckage of the past.”

*The three different kinds of direct amends:*

Now to the Big Book’s analysis of direct amends found on BB 76 to 82. Remember that we will not finish our analysis for another two chapters, so unless the direct amends is obvious, we suggest you refrain from making any amends until you have done a complete analysis.

The Big Book describes three kinds of direct amends. You will find these three amends first discussed on BB 76 to 79. (They are revisited, not in the same order, in the Big Book’s discussion of what we do in case of potential harm, on BB 79 to 82, and we will discuss this in the next chapter of this Workbook.)

*1. A direct apology for actions we have taken (76 to the middle of 78).*

The guidelines given here are that we clean our side of the street, that we don’t mention the other person’s actions or faults, and that we go to them “in a helpful and forgiving spirit.”

Note that we are invited to tell the person that we won’t get over our compulsive eating until we straighten out our past. This can be important for the sake of others who might still suffer, and also to explain why we are suddenly coming back into a person’s life.

The essential action is to be able to say something like this: “I did X and Y to you. I should not have done that. I will never get over my compulsive eating unless I do my best to make up for what I have done. I am on a journey to become a person who is different from the person who did that to you. I am so sorry for what I did. Have I have left anything out that I should have mentioned? If there is anything I can do to balance the books beyond this apology, please tell me.”

Step Eight tells us that we have to be willing to make amends to everyone we have harmed. Step Nine, however, tells us that we have to be careful not to make amends if we will harm anyone else. Willingness is essential in Step Eight. Careful analysis is essential in Step Nine.

For Step Eight purposes, we have to be entirely willing to make amends. We have to imagine situations in which we apologize to people who may have done us harm, perhaps even more harm than we have done to them. If we are to experience spiritual recovery, we need to have that kind of willingness to make amends.

That does not mean, however, that we *will* make the amends, because that may do more harm than good. In such a case, rather than being motivated by the fear of making the amends, we are motivated by the concern for the harm we would do. We have found there is a world of difference. In the former case we are still paralyzed by our fears. In the latter case, we hold our head up high.



For those of us who have been victims, the analysis of the harm we have done will be more complex, of course.<sup>1</sup> Here are some possible examples:

- “I stayed in a sick relationship with you instead of leaving you.”
- “I did not leave you after you hit me the first time.”
- “I did not require you to get professional help.”
- “I allowed you to do harm to our children.”
- “I did not report you to the police, to the authorities, to your parents . . .”
- “I allowed you to continue to harm me for the rest of my life.”
- “I allowed what you did to me to affect how I treated myself, and how I treated others I loved.”
- “I played a part in helping you to become a pitiful example of the worst a human being can be and do.”
- “I am sorry for having been a part of keeping you sick.”

*Naturally you should not even think of making amends like any of these until you have done an analysis of whether harm to others might result.* The chances are excellent that you will *not* be saying those things to the people who have harmed you or others. We will discuss this in detail later on in this Workbook in our discussion of Step Nine, on page 137 of this Workbook. But these are examples of what you might be willing to say, if doing that would not injure anyone else.

Step Eight is clear that we have to be *willing* to make amends to everyone; Step Nine is clear that we *don't* make amends if doing so would harm anyone else. It will be extremely important, in our experience, to discuss the issue of harm to others with another recovered compulsive eater like a sponsor.

## *2. Restitution for actions which caused financial harm (middle paragraph on 78).*

The example given here is having caused some form of financial harm, whether or not someone is after us for repayment. Clearly an apology is not enough in this case. We have to go beyond an apology and repay what we owe for the financial harm we have done.

Most of these cases are obvious and do not require a complex analysis. Twelve Step programs are full of examples of people who repay enormous debts through paying small sums on a regular (weekly or monthly) basis, even if it takes years to repay the debts fully.

<sup>1</sup> This was discussed earlier under Step Four, beginning on page 94 of this Workbook. There we discuss getting rid of our resentments and the possible need for professional help in working on these issues.

The Big Book will discuss this same issue on the next page in the case where repaying someone to whom we owe money will cause financial harm to others, such as our family.

*3. Taking responsibility for actions which affected more than one person (bottom of 78 to top of 79).*

The examples given here are criminal offenses or padding the expense account or being liable to criminal sanctions for not paying alimony. Clearly society as a whole has been harmed by the breach of societal obligations, and amends go beyond a direct apology or even an offer of financial repayment.

We can think of other examples. If we have gossiped about another person so that person's reputation has been harmed, then an apology to that person isn't enough. We have to find a way to repair that person's reputation if at all possible.

If we have observed or been a victim of a crime and done nothing to prevent either that crime or a repetition of that crime, then we might feel that we have harmed a portion of society by paving the way for others to be hurt by the same person who committed the initial crime. Clearly an apology to the individual who committed the crime ("I played a part in helping you to become a pitiful example of what is the worst a human being can be and do") isn't enough. We might have to report the crime, get involved in organizations to prevent crimes like that from occurring, figure out some way to make up for our own fears and frustrations.

In the first full paragraph on page 79 the Big Book provides some general principles and a prayer. We remind ourselves "that we have decided to go to any lengths to find a spiritual experience," and we say the following prayer: "God, I ask that I be given strength and direction to do the right thing, no matter what the personal consequences may be." For the agnostic or atheist, we can say: "I trust that focusing on my deepest values will give me strength and direction to do the right thing, no matter what the personal consequences may be."

The Big Book warns us that if we don't complete our amends, we will return to our addiction:

- BB 70: If we continue to harm others, we will return to our addiction.
- BB 76 and 79: We have to go any lengths.
- BB 77: We have to tell people that we will never get over our addiction until we have done everything we can to straighten out our past.
- BB 78: We have to lose our fear of people we owe money to, because otherwise we will be likely to go back to our addiction.
- BB 80: If we don't place ourselves in the hands of our Higher Power we will soon start back into our addiction.

Some amends may be obvious and simple to make. We make them. But there are issues relating to what kind of amends should be made, and whether such amends should be made, and we urge you to consult with a sponsor or other recovered OAer before making any amends.

**Assignment:** Make a list of all the people on your resentment list. Try to think of the harm you have done to each of those persons. If the issue is complex, consult with someone who has experience, like a sponsor or someone else within OA or another Twelve-Step program. Beside that harm or those harms put down what possible kind of amends you could make, using the three possible kinds of amends (apology, restitution, public responsibility) discussed above. *Then* read from the middle of page 79 to the middle of page 82 in the Big Book.

## **Steps Eight and Nine: Would Harm Result?**

The Big Book discusses how to handle situations where making any of those amends might injure others (including the person harmed) more than it might help the person harmed.

## Steps Eight and Nine: Would Harm Result?

*What if harm would result to another person?:*

The reading assignment introduces us to the Big Book's approach to Step Nine—the issue of whether harm might result to another person if an amends were made, and how to handle it. The Big Book revisits the three types of amends—apology, restitution, public responsibility—but in a different order.

*Restitution:* The Big Book's example (BB 79) is the person who owes alimony to his first wife but who would do damage to his second wife and family if he paid all the money back. He consults with his family and offers to pay back the alimony over time.

*Responsibility beyond the individual:* The Big Book's example (BB 80) is a person in a small town who borrowed money from a rival, denied that he borrowed the money, and harmed the reputation of his rival in that small town. Making amends to his rival would mean that he could harm his current business partner and his family. He consulted with them, and with their consent made his confession in a public manner in church. He thus restored his former rival's reputation.<sup>1</sup>

*Apology:* The Big Book's example (bottom of BB 80 to middle of BB 82) is of a man who has been carrying on an affair. Does he admit it to his wife? If she doesn't know about it, telling her will probably cause her more harm than good. If she does know in a general way, should he provide details? That will also probably cause her more harm than good, and might harm the person with whom he had been having an affair.

This is probably the most significant issue for the person who has been a victim. Do they confront the victimizer, the trauma-producer, the abuser? There is no easy answer, and this is a matter that should be discussed carefully with a knowledgeable and experienced member of OA, like a sponsor, or of another Twelve Step program, and perhaps with a professional.

Does it help or harm a person to say to that person: "I'm sorry that I didn't stop you sooner by ending our relationship"? Or "I'm sorry I didn't tell you how sick you were and require you to get professional help"? Or "Remember me from fifty years ago? I'm sorry I didn't invite you to the prom and lied about why"? Or "You don't know it, but I gossiped about you for years and held you up to public ridicule"? Although each question must be answered personally and individually, the chances are that it will be more harmful than helpful. Amends might be better made by undoing the results of gossip, living a better life, making sure that you don't repeat the same kinds of actions.

<sup>1</sup> Although it doesn't say so in the Big Book, we assume he also paid his former rival back whatever money he owed.

Does it help or harm a person to inform the police of a criminal activity of which you were a victim? Or tell your family of the abuse to protect them? On the one hand, it might create some harm to the perpetrator; on the other hand, it might keep that perpetrator from doing greater harm to others, and thus keep them from further damaging their own inner being. The analogy here might be that it would be better to save a child from falling off a cliff even if you have to break their arm by grabbing them.

Does it help to admit to having committed a crime when going to jail could harm your family? Or to having stolen from your employer when going to jail could harm your family? These are difficult issues to which there is no one correct answer. What might be right for one person might be wrong for another.

There are so many variations that no clear guide can be given. Our experience is that

- if you think carefully about the issue,
- consult with others, including sponsors, who are spiritually fit (have recovered), and ask them for their experiences on how they have worked out whether harm would result, or how to make amends to those who are no longer with us,
- pray, in whatever fashion suits you, to do the best you can,
- while trying your best to be unselfish, honest, considerate, and free of fear,
- you will come to a decision that fits you comfortably.
- And you will either make the amends, freely decide that you would like to make the amends but that it would be harmful to others to do so, and/or think of ways in which amends can be made indirectly.

This is true of amends generally. If we have properly worked Steps Four through Seven, and had the promises of Step Five (delighted, can look the world in the eye, can be alone at perfect peace and ease, and have our fears fall from us) come true, then we truly and understandably wish to make up for our mistakes so that we can become a person different from the person who made those mistakes. We have an opportunity not only to learn from our mistakes, but to take those mistakes and transform ourselves.

We can now rely on our sense of what is right and the right words and actions will come to us. We have come to experience the truth that we don't have to rehearse our amends; the right thoughts and actions will come to us. This is the beginning of being able to rely on our deepest values/Higher Power/God.

**Assignment:** Review the list of possible amends you think you should make to the persons you have harmed just to see if there are other possibilities. Once you have done that, go through each of the possible amends for each person you've harmed and decide whether any or all of those amends will harm that person or other people—not yourself. THEN read from the middle of BB 82 to the middle of BB 84.

## **Steps Eight and Nine: Living Amends and Amends We Can't Make**

*Living Amends:* What we owe to those with whom we spend a great deal of time (family, co-workers, close friends). It is not enough to apologize. We have to live a different life.

*Amends we can't make:* How to approach the problem of amends to those who have died, or who are far away.

## Steps Eight and Nine: Living Amends and Amends We Can't Make

### *Getting feedback for complex amends:*

We strongly suggest that you now discuss your list with someone who has experience within OA, like a sponsor, or within another Twelve Step program. Get some objective feedback on whether your proposed amends are appropriate, and whether they will or won't do harm to another person. Perhaps you're being too easy on yourself and are avoiding making an amends that won't harm another person. Perhaps you're being too enthusiastic and plan to make an amends where you might be harming another person. Perhaps you haven't thought of a more simple form of amends to make. Perhaps you haven't thought of a more creative solution. It's worth getting feedback. You may disagree with the person you consult, but it's well to keep an open mind.

After discussing the three major forms of direct amends (face-to-face, restitution, public responsibility), the Big Book now discusses Living Amends (BB 82 to the middle of page 83) and Amends We Can't Make (last full paragraph on BB 83).

### *Living Amends:*

The Big Book is clear on this point: the people with whom we have long-term relationships deserve much more than an apology. They deserve a reconstruction of the relationship, a different attitude toward them, as well as a relationship with a newly *spiritual* person who has become a sane, compassionate, loving, unselfish, honest, considerate, and fear-free person.

Living with you, working with you, or being your friend, while you were in the throes of compulsive eating, has not been easy for these people. This is, of course, especially true for family, but can also be true for good friends and co-workers.

On the other hand, our experience is that we do not use "living amends" as a loophole to avoid making direct fact-to-face amends. It is important to make direct amends whenever we can. The Big Book tells us that we should discuss our amends with our family, meaning that we should be open and speak to them face-to-face; in ongoing relationships, however, we not only have to apologize—we have to *live* differently.

### *Amends We Can't Make:*

We may owe amends to people who are dead, or whose whereabouts we don't know. If they are far away and an amends is owed, we can write them a letter or telephone them. If it is physically impossible because they are dead or because we don't know where they are, we have to be absolutely honest with ourselves: would we make amends to them if we could? If the answer is yes, then that fulfills Steps Eight and Nine.



Many OAers find it helpful to make symbolic amends for people who have passed on. They go to the gravesite and read a letter and then burn it. They have imaginary conversations with the person in which they make amends. Or they do things that atone for the harms they did—volunteering in areas which would have made the people who have passed on happy, being active in organizations to prevent the kind of harm that was done to those people.

It is quite common within OA to make a list of amends next to three columns: Ready Now, Will Do It Sometime, Will Never Do It. We do the “Ready Now” amends right away. We *always* find that when we do those “Ready Now” amends, the ones in the “Sometime” column move over to the “Ready” column, and the ones in the “Never” column move over to the “Sometime” column. Then we do the ones that we now find in the “Ready” column, and we find that the ones that used to be in the “Never” column that moved into the “Sometime” column are now in the “Ready” column.

The Big Book does say, however, that if we *should be* making an amends, and we *can* make an amends, then we should do it without delay.

Our experience is that if we can, we make the amends face-to-face. An impersonal letter or email or text, or even a phone call, might not be sufficient. Sometimes it might be worthwhile to delay the amends in order to make it face-to-face; but that should not be used as an excuse for delay. Consultation with a recovered OA member, like a sponsor, would be helpful in such circumstances. We have to balance the issue of delay with the issue of how to make an amends properly.

The Big Book advises that we should show true humility and not be “servile or scraping.” After all, we are trying to change ourselves, to become different from the kind of person we used to be. We should not be ashamed of this. We are truly sorry for what we have done. On the other hand, we are on a spiritual journey to be transformed. We have made mistakes and want to make up for them. And “we stand on our feet; we don’t crawl before anyone.” Making amends when we can, without harming others, is a vital part of our recovery.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the Promises on the bottom of BB 83 to the middle of BB 84, and the Promises on the bottom of BB 84 to the top of BB 85.

**Further Assignment:** These promises should give you hope and the incentive to perform the next part of your assignment, which is to make those amends you can make as quickly as you can.

## *The Two Sets of Recovery Promises*

BB 83-85 contains two sets of promises.

The first set contains the famous promises of spiritual awakening, promised to us half-way through Step Nine.

The second set contains the promises that we wanted when we joined OA—the complete neutrality, the lack of temptation, when we are faced with what used to tempt us. It is the sanity promised in Step Two. We are now protected from the mental obsession that used to give us permission to return to that which we know we must abstain from.

## The Two Sets of Recovery Promises:

The Big Book contains a list of promises as to how we should feel when we have completed some Steps. We find them useful as a checklist of how we should be feeling. Generally, if we don't feel what the Big Book promises, there may be work still to be done.<sup>1</sup>

### *The set of spiritual promises:*

The first set of promises are found after the discussion of Step Nine (BB 83-84). They are the best-known in OA. We often hear them recited. They speak of what will happen to us in “this phase of our development” when we are “half-way through.” We think “half-way” means that we are guaranteed this kind of spiritual awakening by the time we are half-way through Step Nine.

Some of these promises are self-explanatory. They appear to be the resolution of the “bedevilments” listed on BB 52. They are the spiritual promises of the Twelve Steps, the “entire psychic change” described by Dr. Silkworth (BB xxix), Bill’s descriptions of Ebby as being rooted in a new soil (BB 12) and Bill’s having a “sense of victory, followed by such a peace and serenity as I had never known” (BB 14), the “emotional rearrangement” described by Dr. Jung (BB 27), the sense of being “reborn” (BB 63), and the “personality change” described in Appendix II on *Spiritual Experience* (BB 569). We have become different people. Our attitude and reaction to life has remarkably changed.

We think it important in the context of OA to emphasize the two promises of not regretting nor wishing to shut the door on the past, and about seeing how our experience can benefit others. If we have suffered traumas in our past, our experience is that we have been given the opportunity to transform those traumas into experiences

<sup>1</sup> There are no promises for Steps One and Two because they are “acknowledgment” steps. We acknowledge their reality: we are powerless and we need to find a Power greater than ourselves to become sane again.

- **Step Three:** we will feel “an effect, sometimes a very great one” (BB 62).
- **Step Four:** we will begin to outgrow our fears (BB 68), we will have learned our lesson, we are willing to straighten out the past if we can, we will have made a good beginning, having accepted truths about ourselves (BB 70-71).
- **Step Five:** we are delighted, can look the world in the eye, can be alone at perfect peace, and our fears will fall from us (BB 75).
- **Steps Eight and Nine:** discussed in this chapter.

There are no promises for Steps Six and Seven because they are moments in time when we acknowledge our readiness and say a prayer.

The promises of living the Twelve Steps by practicing Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, are too many to list, and will be discussed in chapters in this Workbook.

that give hope to suffering compulsive eaters. BB 124 says that our dark past is the greatest possession we have, because we can bring recovery to others through it.

The powerful message of describing the horrible experiences that we have suffered in our lives, and being able to say that we no longer compulsively eat over them, that we have a spiritual and sane and happy life *despite what happened to us in the past*, has been overwhelmingly important and a source of tremendous hope to others who feel hopeless and bogged down by misery, trauma, or self-pity.

These two promises, taken together, can give you the certainty that no matter how horrible your life has been, *you can use that horror to give hope and experience and strength to someone who suffers from your addiction.*

*The set of freedom from addiction promises:*

The second set of promises are found at BB 84-85. The Big Book describes these promises as the result of having “entered the world of the Spirit” (middle of BB 84), which we think means happens at the latest after having completed Step Nine, since the promises on BB 83-84 are clearly spiritual promises. That is why we discuss these promises right after Step Nine, even though they appear in the Big Book after the directions for Step Ten. Sometimes they are called “The Tenth Step Promises.”

For most of us the second set are the promises that drew us into OA. We came to OA for relief from compulsive eating. We couldn’t control our eating, we were dying slowly but surely from that problem, we felt helpless and hopeless, and came to OA as the last house on the block. We didn’t come for spiritual sanity. We came to be relieved of our insanity.

As we studied Step Two, Step Three, and continued to work on Step Four, the Big Book explained to us that, because our minds were so confused by the clash between our self-will and reality, we could not prevent ourselves from returning to those foods, food ingredients or mixtures, and/or eating behaviors, that caused us uncontrollable cravings. Our minds were clouded by regrets and fears. Working Steps Four through Nine cleared up that confusion. We can now look clearly at the foods and behaviors that used to tempt us and no longer want to indulge in them.

Here are the promised miracles that give hope to the newcomers:

We are no longer fighting the foods, food ingredients/mixtures, eating behaviors (including purging or restricting), that we have been abstaining from.

- We are no longer tempted to return to them.
- We are neutral about them.
- We haven’t sworn off them.
- We just don’t want to go back to them.
- We know that they may not be poison to others, but they are poison to us—and why would we eat poison?

- This is a true miracle—one that we should shout from the rooftops: *If you abstain **and** work the Steps, you will be freed from yo-yo dieting, from fixation on eating or not eating or purging, from the bondage of food.* Let us remember what we were like when we first came into the (virtual or real) rooms of OA. We were beaten by our addiction. We wanted hope that our addiction could be stopped. *These promises are the essential guarantee of the Twelve Steps.*

These promises will *not*, however, be with us for the rest of our lives without hard work. We need to work Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, in order to keep ourselves in fit spiritual condition. We can easily lose this miracle if we do not incorporate the Steps into our day-to-day lives. Some of us have learned this important lesson through relapses. We took our recovery for granted. We did not realize how hard we had to work to maintain our recovery.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the paragraph beginning in the middle of BB 84 about Step Ten.

## **Step Ten: Continuing Our Inventory**

We have regained our sanity. We have recovered. But we must keep in fit spiritual condition. To accomplish that, we work Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve.

Step Ten is doing what we did in Steps Four through Nine in order to continue to deal with our resentments and fears and relationships, so that we can live life on life's terms when it doesn't go our way.

We have to continue to clean house.

## Step Ten: Continuing Our Inventory

*Living in recovery:*

We have now recovered our sanity, as promised in Step Two. We are now living in Steps Ten (clean house), Eleven (trust our Higher Power), and Twelve (help others). These three steps are what keep us spiritually fit. We don't go back to Steps One through Nine. They are what brought us to our spiritual recovery and our neutrality over what we've abstained from—the miracle of recovery from compulsive eating.

We are no longer working hard at being abstinent. We are abstinent because we have become spiritually connected. If we continue to be spiritually connected, we *will* remain abstinent.

You may recall that the Big Book used the concept of “obscuring” or “blockage” in its discussion of our relationship with our deepest values/Higher Power/God.

- BB 55: We all have a concept of a Higher Power, but it is “obscured” by things that have happened to us in our lives.
- BB 66: We have been “shut off” from our deepest values.
- BB 71: Our self-will has “blocked” us off from our Higher Power.
- BB 85: We are beginning to sense “the flow of His Spirit into us.”

Steps Four through Nine have removed the blockage. What we deeply believe in—whether it is a specific kind of God or deepest values or anything in between—can now move from our heart directly to our head without being blocked. Steps Four through Nine taught us a skill set for living. Steps Ten and Eleven are where we put this skill set to work on a lifelong basis. Steps Ten and Eleven are all about living a life in which the decision we made in Step Three—to turn our will and our life over to the care of our Higher Power—is fulfilled in practice.

We have become infused with what the Big Book calls on BB 66 “the sunlight of the Spirit.” We have been given true power. We are no longer confused by self-will that kept us regretting the past and fearing the future and unable to live in the present. We are able to be in the here and now. And now we have to learn *how* to live. Steps Ten through Twelve give us the guidance we need.

*Step Ten:*

Therefore on to Step Ten, which is described in only one paragraph on page 84. This one paragraph contains promises, instructions, and warnings.

This one paragraph seems to describe the process we already undertook in Steps Four through Nine. The Big Book even says that this is a new way of living—“cleaning up the past”—which we began by doing Steps Four through Nine—personal inventory and

setting right our mistakes as we live our lives. The Big Book points out that this should continue for our lifetime.

- We continue “to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear.” These are extremely close to what we did in Step Four, isolating our character defects of Selfish/Self-Willed, Dishonest, Self-Seeking/Inconsiderate, and Frightened. Note that this points us directly to the fourth column of the resentment part of Step Four; we are no longer living in columns one through three, rehashing our problems. We know what our defects of character are, and we watch to see if they are re-emerging. So we know how to get quickly to that fourth column, where our defects of character are shown to us.
- “[W]e ask God at once to remove them” (Steps Six and Seven). Now that we are spiritually awakened, we can go directly to our Higher Power even before we discuss them with someone else. We are living on a higher plane.
- “We discuss them with someone immediately” (Step Five).
- We “make amends quickly if we have harmed anyone” (Steps Eight and Nine).

In other words, we continue to do the equivalent of Steps Four through Nine the rest of our lives. We do these steps, however, as Step Ten, because we have recovered our sanity, and we are different from what we used to be. We are living spiritually. But we do need constant tune-ups to keep where we are. As the Big Book told us on BB 64, we have to take regular inventory. The Big Book will discuss this further in its lead-up to Step Eleven.

*The importance of the Big Book’s description of Step Ten—Step Ten is doing Steps Four through Nine in the context of recovery:*

You will note that the Big Book’s description of Step Ten is different from the way it is described in the Twelve Steps that summarize the program. There is a difference between “promptly admitting” when we’re wrong (as found in the Step) and making amends if we have harmed anyone (as described in the Big Book’s discussion of Step Ten on BB 84).

If something is really troubling you in your life, for example, and you end up yelling at your children or your friend as a result, apologizing to your children or friend for yelling at them isn’t going to deal with what is really going on in your life.

Step Ten is the opportunity not only to realize how what is troubling you affects your relationships and way of life, but more important, to do a complete analysis of *all* that is troubling you. It is also an opportunity to pick up on issues you may not have dealt with in Steps Four through Nine; you may now have greater insight into your past, or memories will pop up that weren’t in your original inventory. It is often described as peeling an onion—more is being revealed.

We have found it extremely important to treat a Step Ten just as we treated Steps Four through Nine—perhaps writing things down as we did in Step Four, talking to another



person in Step Five, sensing that we're ready to have our defects removed as we did in Step Six, saying the Step Seven prayer, and then making amends when we can make amends as we did in Steps Eight and Nine. Step Ten is a review of *everything* that is bothering us (resentments), the fears that we have (fears), and any issues relating to relationships (sex conduct).

Life has a way of creeping up on us. Situations we may have dealt with serenely using Steps Four through Nine may keep on happening, and these new recurrences have to be dealt with again. Or we may realize that there are things going on in this world that truly trouble us. Or difficult things may happen to us or our loved ones. That is what Step Ten is all about.

*The differences between Step Ten and Steps Four through Nine:*

There are two major differences:

First, we do Step Tens in the context of our having recovered, not in the process of getting recovery. We aren't re-doing Steps Four through Nine. We've already done them in order to get sane. The promises—both the famous ones and the lesser-known ones—have come true for us. Our job now is to continue our spiritual journey.

This will mean that you won't necessarily feel the promises at Step Five (delighted, able to look the world in the eye, be able to be alone at perfect peace and ease, your fears fallen from you) because you've already felt that. Life will be on a more even keel. But you will gain insight into what is going on in your life and be able to accept any problems as they come along.

Second, we are now "professionals" and not amateurs. Having recovered our sanity, we can use our Step Tens in much deeper ways. Some of us would say that this is part of our emotional recovery. Here are some suggestions:

- Make difficult decisions using the problem as a "principle" in column one of the Resentment form. In other words, write in column one something like: "I don't know whether to break up with my significant other/change careers/apply for another job/send my child to day care, or not." Using the Resentment form will enable you to separate your Selfish/Self-willed, Dishonest, Self-Seeking/Inconsiderate, and Frightened, motives, from your wish to make a decision based on your spiritual sanity.
- Use the Sex Conduct form for *any* relationships, not just ones in which there is some physical attraction. Use it for friendships, work relationships, family relationships, political activities, your relationship with your Higher Power, etc. We create ideals for all relationships in our lives, and the Sex Conduct form can now be used to deal with all of these.
- Using it as a "principle," re-examine your Plan of Eating every so often to be sure you're being both honest about abstaining from more, and not too restrictive about what you're now abstaining from.

- Sometimes we can take our meetings for granted. Revitalize your commitment to carrying the message in OA by putting your meeting, or specific members, down as resentments.
- We find that the Steps Six and Seven part of Step Ten is very helpful and very powerful. We are watchful for our willingness to have our defects removed. Sometimes we can get complacent.
- For very difficult relationships, instead of putting the person's name down in column one, and five or ten bullet points in column two, put those five or ten bullet points into column one, and dig deeper into why each one of those bothers you in column two.
- When tragedies strike, Step Ten is so very helpful in dealing with them.

*How often and when do we do Step Ten?:*

How often and when do we do Step Ten? We practice this in many ways, and often we combine those ways. We do this on a "spot-check" basis (a term used in the AA 12&12) a number of times a day, sometimes in our minds and sometimes on paper. We do this on a daily basis, as part of our Step Eleven evening meditation, phoning our sponsor or another recovered person to do our Step Five. We do this whenever we need to.

At the very least, however, we should do this whenever we begin to experience problems. Using the Big Book, we have compiled a list of twelve circumstances which would be minimum warnings that you should be doing a Step Ten:

*From The Doctor's Opinion (BB xxviii):*

1. Are you restless?
2. Are you irritable?
3. Are you discontented?

*From the Bedevilmments described in We Agnostics (BB 52):*

4. Are you having trouble with personal relationships?
5. Are you not able to control your emotional nature?
6. Are you a prey to misery and depression?
7. Are you not able to make a living?
8. Do you have a feeling of uselessness?
9. Are you full of fear?
10. Are you unhappy?
11. Are you not able to be of real help to other people?

*From the Second Set of Promises described in Into Action (BB 84-85):*

12. Is food becoming a problem in any way? Are you gaining or losing too much weight?

In other words, at the very minimum you should do a Step Ten at least whenever you feel that you're getting slack. You probably should have done one sooner, and maybe you should be doing Step Tens more frequently.

The Big Book's description of Step Ten on page 84 ends with the requirement that after doing our Step Ten we look for someone to help. This reminds us that Step Twelve is at the basis of our recovery.

We have found that as our time in recovery increases, we are more and more able to handle day-to-day tribulations more easily, and have more acceptance as time goes on. This is a direct result of living the Steps. We are in touch with our Higher Power, and Step Eleven will give us this sense of serenity throughout each day. If you still find yourself, after many years of abstinence and recovery, dealing with continual anger or frustration, then it would be a great idea to do a complete analysis of what's going on with you by doing Step Ten.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the last sentence of the first paragraph on BB 85 all the way to the end of the chapter, BB 88.

## **Step Eleven: Living Intuitively One Day at a Time**

Meditation from the Big Book perspective is living each day with purpose and understanding. We review at the end of the day how well we lived without our character defects in order to do a better job the next day. At the beginning of the day we try to plan our day, and if we can't anticipate what might happen, we ask for guidance and then let go, listening to the inner voice of our Higher Power/deepest values, and trusting our intuition to give us guidance, since the blockage between our Higher Power and our thinking and acting has been removed. During the day we continue to remind ourselves that we are not in charge.

## Step Eleven: Living Intuitively One Day at a Time

*Living in recovery a day at a time—Step Eleven:*

We are now pushing forward in our spiritual journey. In Step Eleven we will learn the simple practical directions for turning our life and will over to the care of our deepest values/Higher Power/God. Because the pipeline between our heart and our mind has been cleared through Steps Four through Nine, we learn that we can rely on our intuition to live our lives on a day-to-day basis. Our “will” has become the will of our God/Higher Power/deepest values rather than our self-will. We now live according to what we deeply believe in.

Step Ten describes the life-long process of keeping the pipeline clear and open. Step Eleven describes the process of turning on the tap and drinking the clear cool water of living life on life’s terms. We will see in the following chapters that Step Twelve tells us that in order to keep what we have been so freely given, we must give away all that we have experienced to others.

The Big Book has given us those wonderful Tenth Step Promises respecting neutrality around the things we have abstained from (beginning BB 84). There is an important qualification, however—the last sentence of that paragraph on BB 85: We must keep in what the Big Book calls “fit spiritual condition.”

To be physically fit, we need to move. To be spiritually fit, however, we need to get still.

The Big Book’s directions for keeping in fit spiritual condition are relatively simple:

- We have to continue to clean house (Step Ten, BB 84).
- we have to pray and meditate in order to improve our conscious contact with our Higher Power (Step Eleven, BB 85 to 88).
- We have to carry our message of recovery to those who still suffer (Step Twelve, BB 89 to 103) and in our whole life (BB 104 to 164).
- The Big Book points out that the spiritual sanity that has been given to us through Steps Four through Nine will not last unless it’s also accompanied by action to keep it. It talks of “a daily reprieve”—a day-to-day suspension of a death sentence—that will only happen if we keep our spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For those who find it difficult to say “I have recovered,” the Big Book provides an important qualification right in the middle of page 85: You can say, “I am recovered, not cured.” Our recovery is a day-to-day recovery. We are never cured of our addiction. Our addiction is truly doing push-ups outside the fellowship of OA.

*Step Eleven is the flow of inspiration from our Higher Power deep within us to our thoughts and actions:*

The Big Book begins its discussion of Step Eleven with an important note. We have begun to sense the “flow” of our Higher Power/deepest values/God “into us” (BB 85). It is now time to learn the techniques not only to keep that flow, but to trust that it will provide us direction for dealing with life on life’s terms. In a sense, we are the faucet and our Higher Power is the water. Steps Ten and Eleven keep our pipes clean.

Step Eleven talks about prayer and meditation. The word “meditation” has many meanings in the present day that it did not have in 1939. All forms of meditation can be powerful, and many of us in OA practice the more commonly-known meditation techniques available today—the quiet and dark room, the clearing of the mind, the consciousness and mindfulness of the moment—which help us accomplish what the Big Book asks of us.

The Big Book directions show us that the Big Book’s concepts of prayer and meditation are “asking for guidance” (prayer) and “listening for that guidance” (meditation). This kind of praying is *not* a wish list. It is simply looking for guidance and direction. We need to stop praying for ourselves and start praying for others.

Step Eleven says that we are praying “only” for direction. This reminds us that it is our job, as people in recovery, to spend our time trying to live according to our Higher Power, not trying to fit the world to our desires. This is the message of the Serenity Prayer, the distillation of the Twelve Steps. Our lifelong job is to find wisdom to know the difference between that which we can change and that which we cannot change, and to act according to our Higher Power in all cases.

The Big Book’s “definite and valuable suggestions” (BB 86) are very simple and do not require a great deal of time. They are, we suggest, the minimum of action required for Step Eleven; naturally many OAers will want to, and do, act beyond that minimum, in order to deepen their spiritual lives. But *at least* these minimum actions are needed, according to the Big Book, in addition to all other meditation.

There are three separate periods of meditation: evening, morning, and during the day.

**Evening** (BB 86, middle paragraph):

In the evening we review the day that has passed and check to see if we acted properly without recourse to our character defects. We are reviewing the day to see if we can improve for the next day. The Big Book asks us to consider certain questions which are listed in this paragraph.

You will note that many of these questions appear to echo the inquiries set out in the description of Step Ten on page 84: There are questions relating to:

- resentment, selfishness, dishonesty, and fear (Step Four);
- whether we owe an apology (Steps Eight and Nine);
- whether we need to talk to someone (Step Five);

- praying for forgiveness from our Higher Power (Steps Six and Seven).

Many people who use the Big Book interpret this to mean that the Big Book suggests we do a Step Ten every evening. Some of us don't. This is not a point about which to argue. It is a good thing to do, if you can. If it is possible for you to do a Step Ten every evening—actually writing out your Step Four, actually discussing this with another person, actually saying the Step Seven prayer, actually making amends to the people you've harmed—then that would be wonderful.

Some of us distinguish between a Step Ten and a Step Eleven evening meditation. Those note that the Step Eleven meditation asks questions about the day only, whereas the Step Ten actions require us to look at everything that is going on in our lives. They also note that more questions are asked about that day which do not relate to Steps Four through Nine, but relate to how we can do better for the next day. The wording seems to suggest that you can answer the questions in your mind without writing the answers down. For some of us, Step Ten is about relief from being restless, irritable, and discontented, generally, while Step Eleven helps us change and grow for tomorrow, in order to grow closer to our Higher Power.

Again, it is not necessary to debate this point. What is very clear is that at the very minimum you should be doing an evening meditation in your mind, *and* doing Step Ten whenever you are restless, irritable, or discontented, or feeling the eight Bedevilments, or when food becomes a problem. The experience of those of us who distinguish between Steps Ten and Eleven is that the more we are grounded in Step Eleven, the fewer Step Tens we need to do.

The evening meditation sets our mind at ease, providing us with a sense of growth and understanding and giving us direction for how we are to do better the next day.

**Morning** (BB 86 to 87):

In the morning we plan our day. The Big Book provides us with prayers to say:

At the beginning of the meditation:

“God/Higher Power, I ask that you direct my thinking. I especially ask that my thinking be divorced from self-pity, dishonest, or self-seeking motives.”

For the atheist or agnostic: *I look to my deepest values to direct my thinking. I look to my deepest values to divorce my thinking from self-pity, dishonest, or self-seeking motives.*

We *divorce* something that we once loved. And we used to love our defects of character.

We then plan our day, going over it in a spirit of serenity. If we are undecided about what to do that day on any issue:

“God/Higher Power, I ask for inspiration, an intuitive thought, or a decision.”

For the atheist or agnostic: *I look to my deepest values for inspiration, an intuitive thought, or a decision.*

We may do this with a friend or significant other, or by ourselves. We will recite prayers that are meaningful to us. The whole point is to be comfortable with the day ahead.

We conclude our meditation:

“I ask that I be shown all through the day what my next step should be. I ask that I be given whatever I need to take care of such problems. I ask specifically for freedom from self-will. If others will be helped, I ask that I be given the strength to help them .”

For the agnostic or atheist: *I look to my deepest values to show me all through the day what my next step should be. I trust that my deepest values will show me whatever I need to take care of such problems. I trust that focusing on my deepest values will free me from self-will and that I will gain strength from my deepest values to help others.*

The Big Book makes a very significant promise: practicing our morning meditation will, as time goes on, allow us to rely on the flow between our deepest values/God/Higher Power deep in our heart, and our thoughts and actions through to our head. We can have peace of mind knowing that we will be more successful *not* trying to think things through according to our self-will, and rather simply trying to live according to that which we most deeply believe in.

Take it from all of us, believers in a God, atheists, and agnostics. This *does* work. The effort we used to put into analyzing and planning and worrying about everything goes away. We sleep better, we think better, we act better. Our thinking is “more and more on the plane of inspiration. We come to rely on it.” (BB 87)

**During the day** (BB 87-88):

If we encounter problems during the day, the Big Book offers us a prayer and two phrases to repeat.

The prayer is a simple request to focus on the right action or thought. The phrases are the essence of our program: “I am no longer running the show” and “Thy will be done” (for the atheist/agnostic: “My deepest values rule my will”). If repeated over and over, these have a calming effect. They force us to remember what we are really here on this earth for. These prayers substitute momentary anger or anxiety or frustration with acceptance and serenity.

The Big Book then reminds us that there is more action to be taken. We have to give away what we’ve been given. Paradoxically, that is the only to keep it.

**Assignment:** Put Step Eleven into practice. THEN read BB 89 to the middle of 91.



## **Step Twelve: The Urgency**

In order to stay recovered, we must give away what we have received. This is the urgent message of Step Twelve.

## Step Twelve: The urgency

### *Living in recovery—Step Twelve*

We cannot keep our spiritual condition unless we exert every effort to give it away to those who still suffer. This is the spiritual truth. It is repeated in a number of places in the Big Book:

- *The Doctor's Opinion* (BB xxv, xxiii): “as part of his rehabilitation he commenced to present his conceptions to other alcoholics, impressing upon them that they must do likewise with still others.”
- *Bill's Story* (BB 14-15): “[I]f an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he could not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would surely drink again, and if he drank, he would surely die. Then faith would be dead indeed. With us it is just like that. . . . I soon found that when all other measures failed, work with another alcoholic would save the day. . . . It is a design for living that works in rough going.”
- *There Is a Solution* (BB 18-19): “the man who is making the approach . . . has . . . the sincere desire to be helpful. . . . All of us spend much of our spare time in the sort of effort which we are going to describe.”
- *We Agnostics* (BB 53): “Friendly hands had stretched out in welcome.”
- *How It Works* (BB 63): “Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help . . . “
- *Into Action* (BB 77): “Our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us.”
- *Into Action* (84): “we will see how our experience can benefit others.”
- *Working with Others* (BB 89): “Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail.”
- *Working with Others* (BB 94): “[Y]our attempt to pass this on to him plays a vital part in your own recovery. Actually, he may be helping you more than you are helping him.”
- *Dr. Bob's Nightmare* (BB 180-181): “I spend a great deal of time passing on what I learned to others who want and need it badly.” Four reasons: duty, pleasure, paying back the debt owed to the person who gave me the message, and taking out more insurance against a slip.

These are imperatives. We *must* carry the message to those who still suffer or we will not keep our recovery. We *must* think of others rather than ourselves. We *must* sacrifice ourselves for the good of others. These are not empty phrases. They are the direct requirement of Step Twelve.

Some say they are afraid to sponsor. We say that we are afraid *not* to sponsor.

*The “message” we try to carry:*

And what is “this message” in Step Twelve? It is that we have had a spiritual awakening as *the* result of the Twelve Steps. It is *not* that we feel better, or are emotionally better, or love the love and support we get from our group, or we feel at home, or we are happier. These may all be true, but that is not the *message* of Step Twelve.

The *message* of Step Twelve is the *guarantee* in Step Two. After acknowledging that we are powerless over food—in essence that we are insane when it comes to food—we are willing to try the Steps to find a Power greater than ourselves (our deepest values/Higher Power/God) which *will* restore us to sanity, thus giving us Power to deal with our food. We have found sanity, not abstinence. That sanity eliminates the excuses our minds used to give us to return to that which we abstain from. *Thus we are abstinent because we are sane. The spiritual awakening guaranteed in Step Twelve is the promise of finding a Power greater than ourselves which restores us to sanity.*

We can easily forget this and choose the easier way. We can allow our meetings to be mere support groups giving people ease and comfort. We can talk for hours on the telephone about how our day has been or how we’re feeling, without mentioning any of the Steps. We can come to meetings and help move the chairs or make coffee, without speaking to a newcomer or a long-timer who still suffers, about the guarantees of sanity through the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

We will be studying the instructions in the Big Book for carrying the message in the chapter *Working with Others*. Behind these instructions is a whole AA history of devoting hours and hours to helping others. What was so freely given to the early alcoholics was given away just as freely. *Bill’s Story* on BB 14-16 provides only a brief summary of the amazing amount of work he and the other pioneers did to carry the message in the early days, even without success—other than the success of keeping themselves sober. Parts of the chapters *To the Wives*, *The Family Afterwards*, *To the Employer*, and the whole of *A Vision For You*, also show that dedication.

*The promises of Step Twelve:*

The first two paragraphs on BB 89 contain a wonderful list of promises for those who carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps to those who still suffer: immunity from compulsive eating, life taking on a new meaning, loneliness vanishing, being able to watch recovery, establishing a fellowship, and having friends in recovery. Steps One through Eleven are your preparation for Step Twelve. Your recovery will be in direct proportion to your dedication in carrying the message.

*Finding the right person:*

The next paragraph and the following pages (from BB 89-91) are devoted to finding a person who needs your help. These pages were written when Alcoholics Anonymous was centered in only three cities in the United States—New York, Akron, and Cleveland. It was necessary, therefore, to tell the newly-recovered alcoholic living elsewhere how to find someone to help.

Note the amount of work that the Big Book suggests had to be done in those days—another example of the imperative of carrying the message to those who still suffer. These days we rely on having people come to our meetings. We sit back and wait for people to ask us to help them. The early AAers worked very hard just to find alcoholics to talk to.

We have found that these instructions are useful nonetheless.

After we have found a prospect by asking doctors or religious people for referrals, we learn as much as we can about that person and even speak to the family.

Note the significance of how we should be described (BB 90)—as a person who “has recovered” and who is a member of a fellowship who tries to help others “as part of their own recovery.” We have to know how to describe ourselves to the compulsive eater who still suffers. To do that we have to remember what we were like when we first joined.

As Dr. Bob says in his story, *Doctor Bob’s Nightmare*, in helping others he is paying back a debt to the person who took the time to help him.

We have been given a new life that would not have been possible without the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous. We are thankful that we live in a time when Overeaters Anonymous exists, so that we can recover. How many suffering compulsive eaters died without hope, and are still dying without hope, because they were and are not aware of the Twelve Steps? Thus we pay back a gift we received for free, by being there for the next person. Giving back to OA through services is like maintaining a fancy car which we received for free.

*The person we carry the message to may be helping us more than we may be helping them:*

The Big Book is clear. We should be portrayed as people who used to suffer from compulsive eating addiction but no longer suffer from it (we have *recovered*), and it is part of our recovery to help someone else who would like our help.

The idea that the suffering compulsive eater would be doing *us* a favor by listening to us is very important. At page 94 the Big Book says: “It is important for him to realize that your attempt to pass this on to him plays a vital part in your own recovery. Actually, he may be helping you more than you are helping him.”

This is echoed by Bill Wilson in his discussion of his first meeting with Dr. Bob in Akron, six months after Bill got sober and had a spiritual experience. It is discussed in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (OA-Approved literature) as well as on BB 154-156. Bill realizes that if he doesn't talk to another alcoholic, he will go back to drinking. He goes to extraordinary steps to find another alcoholic, and that turns out to be Dr. Bob. Bill points out in *AA Comes of Age* that it was a mutual thing—he needed Dr. Bob as much as Dr. Bob needed him. He was no longer talking down to alcoholics—he was speaking to another alcoholic because *if he didn't he would start drinking again*.

In addition to this mutual need, saying that it is part of your recovery to carry the message opens the door. The suffering compulsive eater is really and truly doing you a favor, and if you accept this as being true and show sincerely how true it is, then the suffering compulsive eater is more likely to listen to you—at the very least with a sense of pity, but more probably with a sense of compassion and interest, and perhaps identification and hope.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read from the middle of BB 91 to the middle of BB 95.

## **Step Twelve: How to carry your message**

The Big Book's instructions for carrying the message of recovery to a person who might be a compulsive eater. Tell your story in such a way that they understand the vicious circle of physical cravings plus mental obsession—that you couldn't stop once you started (cravings); and that you couldn't stop from starting (obsession). They have to understand the nature of the addiction in order to decide whether they need to pursue the spiritual awakening promised by the Twelve Steps. Don't treat the prospect with kid gloves. They have to make their own decision.

## Step Twelve: How to Carry Your Message

*The first meeting with the prospect:*

The Big Book chapter *Working with Others* contains the actual instructions for carrying the message one-on-one to a compulsive eater who still suffers. Although the word “sponsoring” and “sponsee” are not used in the first 164 pages of the Big Book, these instructions are for what we now call sponsoring.

What you have read contains the instructions for the first meeting with the prospect. Every OA meeting would do well to compare these instructions with whatever format they may have for welcoming newcomers. (The next assignment, discussed in the next chapter of this Workbook, will include the instructions for sponsoring someone through the Steps.)

Here are some notable aspects of these instructions:

- Each sponsee is to be treated individually, and how that sponsee works the Steps depends very much on that individual’s own state of mind. Thus there is no one specific way of sponsoring a person through the Twelve Steps. This is evident throughout the discussion, where alternatives are set out depending on the reaction of the sponsee. We may have a general approach to how we sponsor, but we also have to take into account the individual we are sponsoring.
- Tell your story from the point of view of the uncontrollable cravings (the “allergy of the body”) and the mental obsession. Start off with your compulsive eating stories and see if they resonate with the prospect. Don’t start off by talking about spirituality. Start off by talking about your condition. You are proving to the prospect that you have experienced what that person is going through. This is clear from the discussion on BB 91.
- After that, you begin to discuss the mental obsession that kept sending you back to compulsive eating (bottom of BB 91 to 92)—the first compulsive bite, the yo-yo dieting, the restricting, the purging. See if these resonate. Your job is to help the sponsee recognize whether they really are a compulsive eater, whether they suffer from the “double whammy” of uncontrollable cravings plus mental obsession (can’t stop once started, can’t stop from starting).
- Then and then only, *if* you are satisfied that the prospect does identify with both the cravings and the obsession, show how desperate you were. Don’t assume the prospect is a compulsive eater. That is up to the prospect. This is discussed on BB 92.
- After *that* is when you can start talking about why you are now different—why you no longer suffer from the mental obsession, how you can be in the presence of the things you abstain from and not be tempted by them.

- And then and then only should you talk freely about the spiritual aspect of the Twelve Steps. If they really are a compulsive eater, then your job is to show how this is a life-or-death issue and one about which they should be as desperate as you were. Once the prospect is clearly desperate, then and only then will they be open to anything that might get them out of this vicious circle. This is discussed from the bottom of BB 92 to the top of BB 93.
- Don't take for granted that your own conception of a God is the one that your prospect will grasp onto. Use simple and non-directive spiritual concepts. You might be surprised how many atheists and agnostics exist within OA, and how many came to OA and then immediately left because they heard people talk about a specific God. This is a disservice to them, to OA, and to your duty to carry the message to *all* compulsive eaters who still suffer. This is discussed on BB 93 to the top of BB 94. You might even think of using "Higher Power" or "Power greater than yourself" rather than "God" at the beginning, at least until the sponsee is clearly desperate and committed. By the time they reach Step Three the specific words should be less important than the idea. The Twelve Steps are all about ego reduction and thinking of others.
- The sponsee is not, however, to be treated with kid gloves. Either the sponsee is desperate or the sponsee is not desperate. This is evident where the Big Book talks about holding nothing back in your description of how you worked the Steps (top of BB 93), and in the discussion of the religious person (toward the bottom of BB 93). Note how direct and honest you can be with the person who is religious: "[C]all to his attention the fact that however deep his faith and knowledge, he could not have applied it or he would not drink."
- After you've discussed the Twelve Steps, point out how grateful you are that they have listened to your story, how it is vitally important for you to carry the message to this person. The person who is still suffering, whether newcomer or long-timer, is the most important person in the rooms of OA. The prospect may be helping you more than you are helping the prospect. Expressing this gratitude reminds us that we keep spiritually fit only if we carry the message. This is discussed on BB 94.
- Then leave the prospect to make their own decision. Don't push, don't hurry it up. Let the prospect think it over. You may only be planting a seed that could take years to germinate. This is discussed from the bottom of BB 94 to the middle of BB 95.



The Big Book describes our attitude to sponsoring in this way: We need to carry the message to another person who might suffer the same addiction we suffer from. We carry that message, grateful that the other person will listen to us. If that person does in fact suffer the same addiction we suffer from, we are humbly happy to help that person recover in the same way we did. But we're not selling anything, we're not preaching from above. We're just there to help if that person wants help. And we will find that *help*, rather than control, is what we must bring to this relationship between the sponsor and the sponsee.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read from the middle of page 95 through to the last paragraph on page 100.

## **Step Twelve: How to Sponsor**

How to sponsor the person who still suffers.

Place the responsibility of working the Steps directly onto the sponsee. They are responsible for working the Steps, not you. They should not become dependent upon you. Do not tell them what to do. Share your experience with them, and leave it up to them to do what they have to do to recover. This is the greatest service you can give.

## Step Twelve: How to Sponsor

*General directions for sponsoring an individual after the first meeting:*

What you read for this part are the general directions for sponsoring an individual after the first meeting.

- The criteria are set out: (a) the sponsee has to have read or be willing to read the Big Book (you can certainly expand that and say that the sponsee must have done his or her own investigation into the Twelve Steps by reading OA-Approved literature, which includes much AA literature); and (b) the sponsee is prepared to work the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous. It is *not* that the sponsee is willing to obey your every command. The sponsee has to be aware of what the work is going to be like, and be willing to do the work. (BB 96)
- You are there to give your sponsee “practical advice.” (BB 96) Note that it is *not* to give your sponsees orders, to tell your sponsee what to do. It is simply to provide practical advice. Even the simple things, like being available to do a Step Three with you (“make a decision”), or listening to a Step Five (“tell his story”) are suggestions and not part of the deal. (BB 96)
- Practical advice is guiding them through the Steps, not being their life coach. Practical advice is reminding them of the importance of continuing to work the Steps, continuing to bring “love and tolerance of others” into the world. (BB 84)
- Sponsoring is not “hands-off.” It requires involvement. It keeps sponsees on track. It’s the ability to be honest and direct and loving—but not controlling.
- Do anything you can to help the person, but not at the expense of your family, and certainly not because you are asked by the person for help. As a matter of fact, if the person asks you for material things it is a sign that the person is not sincere. You will harm a sponsee by being overly generous. (BB 96-97) This is a theme picked up throughout the reading for this chapter. It is emphasized most clearly in the reading from the bottom of BB 97 to the second-last paragraph on BB 98, and the bottom of BB 99 to the top of BB 100:
  - “Job or no job—wife or no wife—we simply do not stop drinking so long as we place dependence upon other people ahead of dependence on God.”
  - “Burn the idea into the consciousness of every man that he can get well regardless of any one. The only condition is that he trust in God and clean house.”

- “Remind the prospect that his recovery is not dependent upon people. It is dependent upon his relationship with God.”
- *Don't* make the sponsee dependent on you. *Don't* listen to the sponsee's constant complaining. *Don't* give of yourself because you think of it as a duty. You cannot allow your sponsee to depend on you because your sponsee *must* become dependent on their deepest values/Higher Power/God. When someone's recovery is more important to you than it is to them, then you are being co-dependent. Our job is to carry the message, not the person. We need to speak the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us or someone else feel; but we do this with compassion. We must not, under any circumstances, pander to a person's denial by softening this program.
- Read the first full paragraph on BB 97 for examples of the kinds of lengths that the Big Book suggests you should go to to carry the message to others. Sometimes we think we've done enough by helping to prepare the literature table or take a meeting or keep the key. But if someone phones us in the middle of the night about to binge, are we prepared to meet with that person face-to-face? Are we prepared to take time out from our day to help the person who still suffers? Do we make ourselves unavailable to sponsor if we have two sponsees? If someone phones our intergroup, are there people able to meet with that person face-to-face? Is there the commitment to working Step Twelve?

This discussion leads to some suggestions for sponsoring:

- *Concentrate on the Steps.* A sponsee who talks about their problems should be reminded that it is the Steps that provide the solutions. That means that your primary role is not to provide emotional support, but to help the sponsee quickly work the Steps. Don't confuse the two. They may need emotional support on a daily basis, but that is not necessarily the role of a sponsor. They can find emotional support from other members, even struggling members, or from meetings. The more you concentrate on the Steps and not their emotional problems, the more you put responsibility onto your sponsee rather than onto you. This provides you with more time to help others who still suffer and need your help.
- *Concentrate more on your experience and your suggestions than in telling the sponsee what they should do.* True humility on the part of the sponsor would suggest that the right answer for the sponsor might not be the right answer for the sponsee. “I can only help you in your journey to find out what you should be doing.”
- *Concentrate on the sponsee and how they experience and learn.* Remember that it is the sponsee who has to recover, and their path to recovery may turn out to be different from yours. They may not be able to understand things

the way you understand them, and you may have to adapt so that the sponsee is able to hear the directions in a way that makes sense for them.

- *Help them with Step One.* There are two areas which a sponsee might find difficult to understand, and sometimes we have to concentrate on these areas for the sponsee to be able to work the Twelve Steps:
  - Our addiction is deadly, but not usually dramatic. The notion of “death by a thousand cuts” often has to be stressed in working with a sponsee. One extra bite or one more restrictive act might not have the same dramatic result of a substance slip that leads one into a deadly situation, or a behavior slip that results in bankruptcy or imprisonment. But the addiction of compulsive eating is deadly and should be understood to be as serious as any other addiction.
  - We have to address the individual Plan of Eating which the sponsee must develop, in order for the sponsee to know what they have to abstain from. In other Twelve Step fellowships it might be more obvious what that particular addict must abstain from, but in OA, because a Plan of Eating is an individual choice, you will almost certainly have to help them in some way. You clearly must emphasize the necessity of absolute honesty. You might also have to help them to understand that there may be a combination of ingredients and behaviors and specific foods. While their Plan of Eating might be entirely different from your Plan of Eating, you can help them with being as honest as possible.
- *Remember that for some OAers the Big Book is difficult to read, while for others it is easy to read.* These differences are important to keep in mind when we take people through the Big Book’s directions.
- *Remember that honesty without compassion can be cruel, but compassion without honesty can enable other people and keep them in their addiction.* We give a lot of comfort to our suffering members, and that is a good thing, because a lot of our members have suffered in their lives. But are we also directly honest with them? Do we point out, with compassion, that when they live in the problem they are not working the Steps which will give them the solution? Sponsees are vulnerable, human, as spiritually sick as we have been, and are suffering deeply. We do not abandon them in their hours of need. On the other hand, we do not enable them to continue in their addiction. The Twelve Steps provide the path for them to be able to work out their own solutions to their problems. Provide them with that opportunity.

- *Although relapse is not part of recovery, relapse may occur:* If your sponsee has relapsed, we urge you to reread the section on relapse in this Workbook beginning on page 116. We hope it helps you to be direct, honest, and compassionate, with your sponsee. We suggest you be flexible with your sponsee, and get them back to working the Steps as quickly as possible. Sometimes requiring them to do the same in-depth readings and work that they did when beginning their Step work can be counter-productive. If they have relapsed, they have made a mistake, and if they figure out what mistake they made, they will feel more powerless, more desperate, and more willing to work the Steps quickly.
- *Remember your role as sponsor ends with your sponsee's recovery:* Once your sponsee has recovered their sanity (Step Nine) and is fully aware of the necessity of continuing to maintain their fit spiritual condition by continuously working Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, then both of you should put your time and energy into helping others who still suffer rather than continue to spend time with each other. You can be available to help your sponsee sponsor others; you can be available to hear the Step Five part of their Step Ten, or help them work out difficult amends issues in the Steps Eight and Nine part of their Step Ten, but your work is basically done.
- We have a duty to work hard at being good sponsors. Weak sponsors create a weak fellowship. There are people in OA who won't sponsor because they are afraid that it will be seen as their fault if their sponsee does not recover. Nothing could be further from the truth. *You are not responsible for the recovery of anyone other than yourself.* We sponsor by bringing the message of recovery to the sick suffering compulsive eater. We can carry the message, but not the compulsive eater.

There is nothing in the Big Book that implies that sponsors should be of the same gender. This is an individual decision on the part of both a potential sponsee and a potential sponsor. The Big Book's approach to sponsoring makes potential problems less likely. If you are simply there to provide your experience, strength, and hope, in helping your sponsee to work the Steps; if you place the responsibility for working the Steps on your sponsee and make a clear distinction between that and emotional support; you will be able to help more people who still suffer without developing an unhealthy relationship with them. OA needs sponsors who are available to help those who still suffer. Don't deny them what they need!

*The life or death need to carry the message to those who still suffer:*

The greatest service you can do is to be a sponsor. Without enough sponsors, meetings can wither and die. The same can be said of the entire OA fellowship. Public information work is wonderful, but if a newcomer is attracted by that information and arrives at our door, and then can't find a sponsor, they become visitors and not members.

We should remember that eleven steps are not effective for continued recovery. We *must* also, as our Step Twelve responsibility, carry the message through sponsorship, regardless of whether our sponsees recover. We have a duty to be the best sponsors we can be, but that is as far as that duty goes. Remember that after six months of unsuccessfully trying to get alcoholics sober, Bill Wilson told his wife Lois that he had not been able to keep one alcoholic sober; and remember that Lois said, "Yes, you have. You're sober!" It was precisely at that moment that carrying the message of recovery was transformed from a charitable act to an absolute necessity for continued recovery.

*We need the compulsive eater who still suffers more than that person might need us.* With that sense of urgency, OA will grow. Remember, we should not be afraid to sponsor. In reality, we should be afraid *not* to sponsor. When we say, "Work the Steps," our Step Work is Step Twelve – our preparation has been Steps One through Eleven.

The Big Book discusses "the domestic problem" from the bottom of BB 98 to the bottom of BB 100. It provides some practical advice on this issue which we do not have to discuss at length.

There is a wonderful passage on BB 100 which is worth quoting: "Follow the dictates of a Higher Power and you will presently live in a new and wonderful world, no matter what your present circumstances." What a wonderful promise! No matter what our circumstances, no matter how much we have or don't have, no matter how sad our life may appear to be, when we work the Steps and rely on our deepest values/Higher Power/God, we will live in a new and wonderful world. Once the blockage is removed, and once what we most deeply believe in flows into our thinking and action, our world will be wonderful. We will accept what we can't change, and change what we can and should change. We will have serenity and peace.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read from the bottom of BB 100 to the end of BB 103.

## **Step Twelve: The Clear Message of Sanity**

More promises of sanity through the Twelve Steps. More reminders of how necessary it is to carry the message to those who still suffer. A reminder to keep Tradition Five paramount—that our primary purpose is to carry the message to those who suffer from our addiction, not to provide comfort to those who feel bad.



## Step Twelve: The Clear Message of Sanity

*The neutrality from temptation, the freedom from the obsession:*

More promises from the bottom of BB 100 to the top of BB 101. This whole sense of neutrality from temptation, of being able to be around the things we have abstained and not to want them or to have our mind find some method to persuade us to return to them, is the miracle we wanted—the reason we came to OA. And another promise on the bottom of BB 102—we can be around the foods we abstain from without any worries or fears.

Note how clearly the Big Book says in the middle paragraph on BB 101 that we should not try to protect the still-suffering addict from temptation. It “is doomed to failure.” It is important for us to tell our compulsive eating stories so that others can identify with them. That identification comes powerfully when we talk specifically about how we ate, what we ate, or what we don’t eat now. In OA this is especially important because we each have to develop our own Plan of Eating, and learning from others is part of that.

The Big Book provides an excellent guide as to whether or not we attend gatherings where food we must abstain from might be served. We have to have “a legitimate reason for being there.” We are given a question to ask: Do I have a good “social, business, or personal” reason for attending a gathering? If we do have a good reason, then that is the reason for going—not to give in to our own personal desires, but to fulfill that reason. It is an excellent formula for dealing with difficult situations.

On BB 102 the Big Book suggests that we find an appropriate time to tell our friends about our addiction and our fellowship. We can be open about this because we have now recovered from our compulsive eating. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. As well, by telling our friends we make it possible for them to refer still-suffering compulsive eaters to us.<sup>1</sup>

*Our job description in recovery:*

Now that we have recovered, we are able to get our job description. You will recall that on BB 63, in discussing the effect of working Steps Four through Nine, the Big Book said that we have a new employer. And on BB 77 the Big Book told us that our mission was to become able “to be of maximum service to God and the people about us.” Our job description is found on BB 102: “Your job now is to be at the place where you may be of maximum helpfulness to others, so never hesitate to go anywhere if you can be helpful.”

<sup>1</sup>Remember that Tradition Ten, which talks about “attraction, not promotion,” is about OA public relations and not individual relations. It is quite common for us as individuals to promote our willingness to help other compulsive eaters who still suffer so that we can fulfill our Step Twelve responsibilities.

Recovered members of OA remind themselves of those words again and again. The word used to describe how helpful we have to be is *maximum*—not minimum, not occasional, not over-the-phone-while-doing-dishes. This reflects the kind of dedication that you can see in the history of AA. Do we find this in OA? One of our dedicated OA friends says: “People keep telling me how much they want what I have. But they’re not willing to do the amount of work that I do to keep what I have!”

Respectfully, we suggest that your recovery will be in direct proportion to your dedication to carrying the message. Think about how you can best carry the message to those who still suffer. Think about how to tell your story, in a way that conveys the desperation you felt, to the person who is not sure whether they are a compulsive eater.

Every time you carry that message of desperation you remind yourself that this is life-or-death. Helping others, especially using your story, reminds you of who you used to be and who you are now.

Carrying the message is both the burden and the joy of your addiction. You keep it all “green,” alive, in front of you constantly. If you don’t do it to the best of your ability, you will succumb to compulsive eating and that will lead to your demeaning and debilitating death. We must not forget that.

*The importance of understanding what it means to be a real compulsive eater:*

Note, however, that we have had to accept that we are truly compulsive eaters as defined by the Big Book—people who have a combination of uncontrollable cravings and the obsession of the mind; people who can’t stop once they’re started, and who can’t stop from starting; people who are subject to the double whammy. Real compulsive eaters, from the Big Book perspective, are those who get uncontrollable cravings, who can’t stop once started, *and* who need a spiritual awakening to overcome the obsession of the mind, to be able to stop from starting.

This is important because there are sponsees who might not have our problem. They might be able simply to eat moderately or to stop from starting, just by getting hugs and fellowship, or making a number of outreach calls a day, or going to a lot of meetings and calling in their food. If we aren’t clear about our problem, then people won’t be clear about the solution we offer. People who use our fellowship as a support program might end up saying that the Steps and God gave them the ability to eat anything again without problems.

That is *not*, however, what Overeaters Anonymous is about. Its primary purpose is to carry the message of *recovery through the Twelve Steps* to those who still suffer. From the Big Book perspective, “those who still suffer” refers to people who can’t stop once they’ve started, and who can’t stop from starting. The Twelve Steps are *not* about hugging and fellowship, but about facing our defects of character and cleaning up our past so that we can be guided in the direction of our Higher Power. If you have our problem *and* need a Twelve Step solution, then we are here for you. If you don’t have

our problem, there are many other programs which might help you, ranging from non-profit to for-profit support groups and diet programs.

We often hear in meetings words like this:

- “I’ve been in this program for ten years and I have found a lot of emotional and spiritual help. I am hoping that physical recovery will come as well.”
- “Just keep coming to meetings.”
- “Get a sponsor and do what they tell you.”
- “It’s just a wonderful feeling to come to a place where everyone understands you.”
- “I come to be able to unload the stresses of my life.”

Sometimes we like to hear this. They are welcoming words. We feel as if we are home, in a safe and protected place. This has been vitally important for so many of us who have lived with fear and guilt and shame and isolation. We *need* to feel at home.

If that is *all* that is said, however, newcomers may get the wrong impression. They may see OA as a safe haven in which to continue to *live with* their addiction, rather than *recover from* it. We have to encourage newcomers to get abstinent and work the Steps.

So when you look for a sponsor, look for someone who has recovered from the same compulsive eating condition that you have, not someone who may have the same gender or color or sexual orientation or religion as you. And when you sponsor, be available to anyone who asks you.

**Big Book Assignment:** Read the following:

- middle paragraph on BB 130 that begins with “Those of us . . .”,
- from the bottom of BB 132 (“So we think . . .”) to the end of the first paragraph on BB 133 (“ . . . demonstrate His omnipotence”).
- from BB 160 (“Many a man . . .”) to the top of BB 161 (“ . . . All Powerful Creator.”).
- BB 164.

## ***Step Twelve: A Vision For You:***

We are at the end of our Big Book Study. These last readings speak of the joy of recovery. They describe the kind of meeting that attracts those who still suffer—a meeting with joy and happiness and hope. And they describe the importance of carrying the message well.

If your meetings are not full of joy, what joy can you bring to them? If your meetings are not attracting those who still suffer, what can your meeting do to change that? If your fellow OAers go through cycles of relapse, what can you do to help them end those cycles and achieve recovery?

As our study draws to a close, we point out that the Big Book’s approach has led us to some interesting ideas, many of which have already been discussed in this Workbook.

- The Big Book invariably describes the person who has worked the Steps as “recovered” and not “recovering.” The importance of this is to emphasize the transformation that has happened to us as a result of working the Steps.
  - If using the word “recovered” still worries you, then use “recovered but not cured.” The promises after Step Nine (BB 85 to 86), the neutrality around things we are abstaining from, make clear that *once we recover, we are no longer tempted*. This is the result of having had a spiritual awakening in which we are conscious of the presence of our Higher Power/deepest values/God.
- We cannot keep abstinent, however, if we do not keep in fit spiritual condition. Therefore the most important thing in our lives is to maintain our consciousness of our spirituality—and that means, from the Big Book perspective, to work Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, as hard as we worked Steps Four through Nine.
- Although the Big Book provides directions for working the Steps without a sponsor, now that we have recovered we have an obligation, through sponsoring, to help those who still suffer.
  - Sponsoring is vital for keeping our recovery; it is also very important for those who still suffer. This program exists because one person carries the message of recovery to another, and sponsors can provide you with extremely important honest feedback, and advice, and experience.
  - Look for a sponsor and use a sponsor. If a sponsor cannot be found, then find someone else who wants to work the Twelve Steps and work together. Our experience is that working with other people gets us out of our isolation. But don’t let the lack of a sponsor give you an excuse for not working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

- You can recover in *weeks*. The Steps are simple. The instructions are simple. With the desperation combined with hope and dedication, it is possible to go from Step One through to Step Nine in weeks.
  - We don't take Steps One and Two—they are steps we acknowledge. Steps Three, Six, Seven, and Eight, should not take a long time to get through. Step Three is a prayer; Step Six is willingness; Step Seven is a prayer; Step Eight is a list.
  - Step Three is *immediately* followed by Step Four. Steps Six, Seven, and Eight are *all done within a day or so* of finishing Step Five.
- The OA Tools of Recovery provide significant ways of helping us keep abstinent while we work the Steps. Once we have recovered, we live in Steps Ten through Twelve, and that keeps us abstinent.
  - We must remember that we are a Twelve Step program, however.
  - Instead of saying that you were upset so you did a Tool, think of what Step you haven't yet done that allowed you to be upset.
  - Newcomers might find it easy to do the Tools and not to do the Steps, and that will not provide recovery, because it is the Steps and not the Tools which give us recovery. On the other hand, working the Steps without using some of the Tools can be difficult.
- The amends we ultimately make to ourselves are to become transformed into recovered people, people who are able to say “no” when it is appropriate to say it, who are able to repair the damage we've caused by our isolation and fears, who are able to enjoy our lives no matter what our situation.
- After you have completed Step Nine, and have achieved the freedom from the eating obsession, you can then carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer. The Big Book makes this clear on BB 164: “[Y]ou cannot transmit something you haven't got.” If you haven't recovered your sanity, then you can transmit your hope and your strength and your commitment, but you can't carry the message of recovery itself.
- If you don't work the Steps, nothing you do to keep busy will give you recovery. Keeping busy *can* help you keep abstinent while you work the Steps, but if you don't work the Steps, you will relapse at a certain point. Some of us have done a lot of service work while we were in relapse. The service work didn't get us out of relapse. We got out of relapse by getting abstinent and working the Steps.
- Every person who wants to be a member of OA should know exactly what having “a desire to stop eating compulsively” means. Let us examine this point in more detail.

What “having a desire to stop eating compulsively” means:

We have a duty to explain to a newcomer exactly what the purpose of OA is. And that is clearly Tradition Five: to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer. Tradition Five is a direct reflection of Step Twelve: We have had a spiritual awakening as *the* result of the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous, and that is the message we must carry to those who still suffer. And Step Two tells us that a spiritual awakening provided us with sanity, the sanity around our compulsive food and eating behaviors that allows us to be around our triggers and not be tempted by them.

*OA is simply a group of individuals whose individual job description is to help those who still suffer, and who have banded together in fellowship to be more efficient and more powerful in carrying that message.* We are not professionals. Our Twelfth Step work requires us to carry the message that the Twelve Steps have brought us recovery from our compulsive eating. Even though we may have other skills, our role as persons carrying the message of recovery does not necessarily include providing emotional support, therapy, counseling, legal advice, advocacy, or even friendship.

Some people might come to OA not to recover, but to find companionship and support. They are isolated, they are full of self-pity, they have or have had difficult lives, they may even have medically-dangerous physical problems because of their eating issues. They enjoy the companionship of being with people who share their addiction. If given the opportunity, some people attending OA meetings may ignore the Steps and use the Fellowship only as a place where they can share their problems and get emotional support. They can turn meetings from a program of recovery based on the Twelve Steps into group therapy sessions.

If they do that, they are really attending our meetings for the wrong reasons. Unless they show a desire to stop eating compulsively, then, according to Tradition Three, they have not defined themselves as compulsive eaters. So our fellowship has a duty to explain what being a compulsive eater really means so they know exactly what it is they need to have a desire to stop from.

Although they may hear Traditions Three and Five repeated every meeting, they may not have really heard the message from those of us who have recovered, who have incorporated the Twelve Steps into our lives and have at least completed Step Nine. We are here to help anyone, at any time, in any way, who suffers from the addiction that we have—compulsive eating in its many forms. In doing that we will often need to give companionship and support.

Our job, however, is *not* to give companionship and support. Our job is to carry this simple and powerful message: ***IF you suffer from our addiction—and ONLY if you suffer from our addiction—we have found a way out that works for us, and we are willing to share that way with you.*** We can't solve other problems. We have a solution to our compulsive eating that works for us.

Our meetings should reflect that. Everything we say should reflect that. We may offer other things like love and compassion and understanding. *Our purpose for existence, however, is to carry the message of recovery to persons who have our compulsion.* We not only offer experience, strength, hope. We offer recovery through the Twelve Steps.

The newcomer should therefore know our purpose. We do a disservice to someone who only seeks comfort and companionship. That person should be joining other groups that offer *only* comfort and support.

So here is a helpful brief definition of what it means to have a desire to stop eating compulsively, as derived from the Big Book, and as reflected in the first pages of the *OA Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and the OA pamphlet *A New Plan of Eating*:

- Compulsive eaters get abnormal cravings when they indulge in certain foods, food ingredients/mixtures, and/or eating behaviors, such that they can't stop once they've started; *and* they have a mental obsession that keeps them from returning to those things causing the cravings even if they have been away from them for a time, such that they can't stop from starting.
- This combination of not being able to stop once you've started, and not being able to stop from starting, is the vicious circle that defines any addiction, including ours. It is not how much one overeats or undereats, or how heavy or thin they are; it is whether the person has experienced this up-and-down vicious circle, *and* accepts that eventually it is or will become a life-or-death addiction.
- The Twelve Steps give us recovery from the mental obsession. The insanity is removed on a day-to-day basis, and we can look at all the things we have abstained from and no longer want to return to them.

*Carrying the message of recovery in all our affairs:*

From BB 104 to 164 the Big Book provides a picture of carrying the message of recovery in all our affairs. It contains the chapters *To the Wives*, *The Family Afterward*, *To the Employer*, and *A Vision for You*. Although some of them might seem to be addressed to people who are in contact with the addict rather than the addict themselves, and *To the Wives* might seem relatively male-oriented and paternalistic, each of these chapters contains wonderful passages and worthwhile advice.

The point of practicing "these principles in all our affairs" is clearly that we must live a worthy life consistent with our own spiritual awakening and consistent with our deepest values/Higher Power/God. It's all very well to carry the message of recovery to those who still suffer, but we have to treat everyone with tolerance and love and compassion.

Your assignment from the last chapter involved reading selected parts of those chapters. We will not, however, be studying them in this Big Book Study. The purpose of this Big Book Study has been to help you work through the Steps to your own recovery.

We are living in the midst of a compulsive eating epidemic. Generations are being born who have a lower life expectancy than their parents, caused in great measure by compulsive eating and the easy availability of cheap and unhealthy foods. The Twelve Steps provide a solution to the problem of compulsive eating. While the majority of its members should be reducing their individual sizes, OA as a carrier of the message of recovery should be growing in size.

If you are interested in further readings about the background and history of the Big Book, and the origin of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, we recommend the following AA books, all of which are OA-Approved literature: *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, *Pass It On*, *Dr. Bob and the Good Old-Timers*, and *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous*. We also recommend OA's founder Rozanne's book, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, the history of OA, as an honest discussion of OA's history and problems.

This brings us to the end of our Big Book Study Workbook. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to do this Big Book Study. We hope it is the beginning of your journey through the Twelve Steps.

We conclude this Big Book Study with the OA Responsibility Pledge. Note that the Steps and the Traditions use "we," but that the Responsibility Pledge uses "I." Each of us must commit as individuals.

**Always to extend the hand and heart of OA to  
all who share my compulsion; for this I am  
responsible.**



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We can find a source more powerful than we are, one that can overcome the mental obsession that gives us permission to indulge in our addiction. That source becomes available through working the Twelve Steps and connecting us with what we deeply believe in. We all believe in something. For some of us, it is a God of some kind, or a Spirit of the Universe. For others it is strong human values. The Steps unblock the passageway between our deepest beliefs and our thoughts and actions, That becomes the source of power that can overcome the mental obsession. The Twelve Steps have worked for millions of addicts, whether deeply religious or ardently atheist or somewhere in between. The Steps can work for you. Nothing is lost, and real recovery is possible, by working the Twelve Steps of Overeaters Anonymous.

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Step One has shown us that we cannot recover on our own—that we *need* to find a Power greater than we are. Step Two has shown us that we *can* find a Power greater than we are if we work the Steps.

In order to work the Steps, we must abstain from all those foods, ingredients, and behaviors, which have tended to cause uncontrollable cravings in us. Only then can we be rigorously honest enough to work the Steps that will remove our mental obsession, and free us from the temptation of returning to that which we have abstained from.

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Step Three involves understanding: (a) that our basic problem is that we want to control our life and the lives of others around us, and (b) that our failure to do so has created resentments and frustrations and emotional upheavals to the point that we cannot think clearly enough to avoid the temptation of returning to that which we have abstained from.

We must make a decision to go forward with the Steps in order to clear our minds, become sane, and thus be free from the temptation.

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## Steps Six and Seven: Willingness and Prayer

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Step Six: Would you like to live a life free of the character defects blocking you from your Higher Power? Would you like to have sanity so that you will have your addiction removed?

Step Seven: If the answer to this question is “yes,” and it probably is, then say the Step Seven Prayer.

## Steps Eight and Nine: Our Character Defects Are Removed

### *The Direct Amends*

124

The Big Book’s discussion of the range of direct amends:

- Apology: “I want to be a better person, and in order to do that I must do my best to undo the harm I’ve done to you. I am sorry for what I did.”
- Restitution: “Not only am I sorry for what I did, I need to repay you for the financial harm you have suffered.”
- Acknowledgment beyond the individual: “Not only am I sorry for what I did, but I need to take the consequences for what I have done, because that is the only way I can make up for the harm that I have done.”
- This chapter also discusses issues relating to those of us who have suffered trauma in our lives, or abuse from others.

The Big Book clearly does not talk about making amends to ourselves, but it is clear that in doing our best to change our past we will have our character defects removed, and that is the great amends we can make to ourselves.

We must remember that Step Eight is about willingness to make amends to everyone, but Step Nine requires us to consider whether making those amends might harm others, in which case we don’t make those amends even if we are willing to make them.

### *Would Harm Result?*

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The Big Book discusses how to handle situations where making any of those amends might injure others (including the person harmed) more than it might help the person harmed.

### *Living Amends and Amends We Can’t Make*

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*Living Amends:* What we owe to those with whom we spend a great deal of time (family, co-workers, close friends). It is not enough to apologize. We have to live a different life. *Amends we can’t make:* How to approach the problem of amends to those who have died, or who are far away.

## **The Two Sets of Recovery Promises**

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BB 83-85 contains two sets of promises. The first set contains the famous promises of spiritual awakening, promised to us half-way through Step Nine. The second set contains the promises that we wanted when we joined OA—the complete neutrality, the lack of temptation, when we are faced with what used to tempt us. It is the sanity promised in Step Two. It is the sense that we are now protected from the mental obsession that used to give us permission to return to that which we know we must abstain from.

## **Step Ten: Continuing Our Inventory**

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We have regained our sanity. We have recovered. But we must keep in fit spiritual condition. To accomplish that, we work Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve.

Step Ten is doing what we did in Steps Four through Nine in order to continue to deal with our resentments and fears and relationships, so that we can live life on life's terms when it doesn't go our way. We have to continue to clean house.

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Meditation from the Big Book perspective is living each day with purpose and understanding. We review at the end of the day how well we lived without our character defects in order to do a better job the next day. At the beginning of the day we try to plan our day, and if we can't anticipate what might happen, we ask for guidance and then let go, listening to the inner voice of our Higher Power/deepest values, and trusting our intuition to give us guidance, since the blockage between our Higher Power and our thinking and acting has been removed. During the day we continue to remind ourselves that we are not in charge.

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### *How to Carry Your Message*

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The Big Book's instructions for carrying the message of recovery to a person who might be a compulsive eater. Tell your story in such a way that they understand the vicious circle of physical cravings plus mental obsession—that you couldn't stop once you started (cravings); and that you couldn't stop from starting (obsession). They have to understand the nature of the addiction in order to

decide whether they need to pursue the spiritual awakening promised by the Twelve Steps. Don't treat the prospect with kid gloves. They have to make their own decision.

*How to sponsor*

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Place the responsibility of working the Steps directly onto the sponsee. They are responsible for working the Steps, not you. They should not become dependent upon you. Do not tell them what to do. Share your experience with them, and leave it up to them to do what they have to do to recover. This is the greatest service you can give.

*The clear message of sanity*

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More promises of sanity through the Twelve Steps. More reminders of how necessary it is to carry the message to those who still suffer. A reminder to keep Tradition Five paramount—that our primary purpose is to carry the message to those who suffer from our addiction, not to provide comfort to those who feel bad.

**A Vision For You**

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