

HOW “HOW IT WORKS” WORKS

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(The following is from the Big Book’s December 1938 pre-production multilith. This is the opening of the Big Book’s Chapter Five “How It Works” in the Original Manuscript that was sent out to inform the Fellowship that there had been progress made in the writing of the book, and so that the last changes could be made a few months before the Big Book was published on April 10, 1939. “How It Works” was written and re-written over thirty times and this is how it looked before the very last changes were added. I am NOT suggesting that these last changes should not have been made. Actually, in most cases I think that it was really important that the changes were made, but I think it’s significant to see that the Original Manuscript version reveals more of where the authors were coming from. Differences with how it currently appears in the Big Book are underlined below. Since this is heard hundreds of times by AA members, it often is not REALLY listened to anymore so I have included commentary here, in regular type, on some of the parts that are important and that many AA’s no longer even notice.)

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our directions (thoroughly does NOT mean “slowly”, it means “completely”). **Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program** (please ask yourself occasionally, “Am I currently giving myself completely to AA?” In other words, “Am I CURRENTLY involved in ALL THREE PARTS of AA’s solution for alcoholism: #1 Recovery [which can be found in the Program; also known as the working of all Twelve Steps], #2 Unity [which can be found in the Fellowship; also known as going to meetings, participating in a Homegroup, and interacting with other AA’s], and #3 Service [which can be found in unselfishly doing for others and expecting nothing in return - inside AND outside of AA; also known as altruism.]” I have seen many people go back to drinking who got away from one or more of the three parts to AA’s solution [this includes old-timers], but I have NEVER seen ANYONE return to drinking who remained involved in ALL THREE.), **usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally** (which means “on their own”) **incapable of grasping and developing a way of life which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.** (Please notice that the word “honest” or “honesty” is mentioned THREE TIMES in the first paragraph, and even says that our way of living DEMANDS RIGOROUS HONESTY. Honesty must be really important because this is AA’s MOST READ piece of literature. Also, we need to ask ourselves if we are becoming more and more honest. This is an important form of dealing with reality. Also, I would like to suggest that “grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty” is the ESSENCE of the AA Program and way of life!)

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you [#1] have decided you want what we have (what we have is a spiritual awakening and freedom from the bondage of alcoholism, selfishness and fear as THE RESULT of working all Twelve Steps. Also, please keep in mind that the “we” here is not referring to all the people in AA today. They’re talking about the first members of AA who contributed to the Big Book, and the experiences of the people described in and practicing the Big Book way of life. The promises in the Big Book are ONLY the result of working the Steps as outlined in the Big Book.) **and [#2] are willing to go to any length to get it – then you are ready to follow directions.** (So you don’t have to wait months or years before getting into working all the Steps. Back when this was originally written, the Steps were worked immediately and quickly, and resulted in a 75% recovery rate throughout the fellowship for the first 20 years of AA’s existence.)

At some of these you may balk. You may think you can find an easier, softer way. We doubt if you can. (No subtlety there!) **With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start.** (They’re BEGGING us!) **Some of us have tried to hold on to our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.** (That’s a warning AND a promise. If we let go of our old ideas, especially the ones that don’t work anymore [like how we have been dealing with our alcoholism on our own and how we live our life], we’ll get some positive results. But if we DON’T let go of these old ideas the result will be nil, which means “nothing” or “worthless”.)

Remember that you are dealing with alcohol – cunning, baffling, powerful (and let me add that alcoholism is patient, too!) **Without help it is too much for you. But there is One who has all power – that One is God. You must find Him now!** (I think the Big Book authors are trying to tell us something important here!)

Half measures will avail you nothing. (Half measures do NOT avail us half results. Only being honest half the time is not being honest; only being kind and considerate to others half the time does not bring about half results in spiritual matters. I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to be 100% honest and loving at all times, but the more we are, the more and more freedom, happiness and serenity we’ll experience! And if half measures avail us NOTHING, then LESS than half measures avail us LESS than nothing!) **You stand at the turning point. Throw yourself under His protection and care with complete abandon** (I think the authors are again trying to tell us something important. Also, abandon means “to give up with the intent to never take back”.)

Now we think you can take it! (They say this because they have just given us over 65 pages worth of information describing the desperateness of the alcoholic dilemma. Now they’re going to lay out the practical program of recovery which clears away what blocks us from a Power greater than human power, which WILL solve all our problems.) **Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as your Program of Recovery** (so it’s a suggested program not a program of suggestions. Also, it’s not enough to just READ about or HEAR about or TALK about the Steps. We need to PARTICIPATE and have an EXPERIENCE by taking ALL the actions that the Twelve Steps require):

1. **Admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.** (For a long time I translated or internalized this sentence as saying, “Admitted I was powerless over alcohol, and WHEN I’M DRINKING my life is unmanageable.” But that’s NOT what it says. When a dash is used in a sentence like this, what it’s saying is: “Admitted we were powerless over alcohol, and admitted that our lives had become unmanageable.” What does our literature say about this admission of powerlessness and unmanageability? In other words, what differentiates an alcoholic physically, mentally, and spiritually, from a non-alcoholic? Physically, the alcoholic has an allergy, or an abnormal reaction, to alcohol. The alcoholic’s abnormal reaction to alcohol is a craving for more alcohol once we take a few drinks. This craving NEVER happens to a non-alcoholic. Because of this, a non-alcoholic can ALWAYS predict how much they are going to drink, but an alcoholic CANNOT. Besides the craving, alcohol DOES something for an alcoholic that it does NOT do for a non-alcoholic. When an alcoholic drinks, they get a feeling of ease and comfort; an “IN control, get up and go into town, I like this” kind of a feeling.

When a NON-alcoholic drinks, they get an “OUT of control, beginning of a nauseating, slightly tipsy, I don’t like this so I don’t want any more” kind of a feeling. That’s why they stop after one or two, and make statements like, “I don’t want another drink because I am FEELING that first one.” Spiritually, because of the selfish and self-centered way the alcoholic views and deals with other people, their emotions, and life; they are filled with inner turmoil, discomfort, and anxiety. Since alcohol is the ONLY thing that the alcoholic has experienced that brings relief from this inner unmanageability, we turn to alcohol again and again, even though it has caused problems for us in the past. We don’t see what alcohol is doing TO us, we ONLY think about what it is going to do FOR us, which describes the alcoholic’s mental obsession. A NON-alcoholic’s relationship with alcohol is a “take it or leave it” kind of relationship, but an ALCOHOLIC’S relationship with alcohol is an “I need it to deal with life” kind of relationship. Please ask yourself if you can relate to the experience of an alcoholic. Also, in the middle of the first paragraph on page 44, the Big Book makes a few statements that can be used to review the information about Step One and the direction we need to move in. In the middle of the first paragraph on page 44, it says: “If, when you honestly want to, you find you cannot quit entirely” [which describes the mental and spiritual part of alcoholism], “or if when drinking, you have little control over the amount you take” [which describes the physical part of alcoholism], “you are probably alcoholic. If that be the case, you may be suffering from an illness which ONLY a spiritual experience will conquer.” If I’m powerless over whether I drink or not, than what I need is the Power with a capital “P”; and if my life is unmanageable, especially my INNER life [WHETHER I’M DRINKING OR NOT] than what I need is a new Manager with a capital “M”. In the Fourth Edition Big Book, this Step is described on Roman numeral pages 25 – 32 (xxv – xxxii), on pages 1 – 44:1, and 52:2.)

2. **Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.** (Please note that “Came to believe” describes a process, and is not saying that we need to believe anything prior to considering this Step. The question in the Big Book associated with Step Two can be found in the middle of page 47: “We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. – ‘Do I NOW believe, or am I even WILLING to believe, that there is a Power greater than myself?’ As soon as a man can say that he DOES believe, or is WILLING to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way.” Nothing more is needed to move on with the rest of the Program. Our “coming to believe” will take place as we take the actions necessary to work the remaining Steps. Because we get results, our simple belief or our willingness to develop turns into actual faith in a Higher Power as we depend more and more on this Power as a source of guidance in our lives. I’ve heard many people say that the insanity that Step Two is talking about is all the crazy things we did when we were drinking. Things like the D.W.I.’s, the crashed cars, the jobs and families we lost because of our drinking, etc. But we ALL don’t have those things in common. Besides, there ARE alcoholics who NEVER got D.W.I.’s or who NEVER lost jobs because of drinking, but that doesn’t make them any less an alcoholic. Even some NON-alcoholics have gotten D.W.I.’s and lost jobs because of their drinking. The ONLY insanity that we ALL have in common, which is the insanity Step Two is talking about, is the insanity of returning to the first drink even though alcohol has caused us problems again and again. We are not able to see the TRUTH about the damage alcohol has caused us because we ONLY think about relief, ease and comfort that comes by taking a few drinks. Also, for some people, the word “sanity” is not completely clear because it sounds like it’s saying that we are crazy. Other descriptions that capture the essence of what is being said, and can be substituted for the word “sanity” in Step Two, are words like: ...restore us to honesty, reality, freedom, love, peace of mind, truth, or balance. For the newcomer: Step One is where you are, Step Two is where you want to go, and Steps Three through Twelve are how you get there! In the Big Book, this Step is described in parts of chapters 1, 2, 3, and all of chapter 4.)
3. **Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care and direction of God as we understood Him.** (There are three words here that are important to understand. For a long time, I thought that the Third Step said that I turn my will and my life over to the care of God. But it doesn’t say that. What it says is that I MAKE A DECISION to turn my will and life over to the care of God. So the first word that needs to be understood HERE is the word DECISION, which is defined as “making up one’s own mind.” Let’s say my car breaks down. Although the DECISION to get my car fixed is a vital and crucial step, that decision alone does not get the car fixed. I will ALSO need to take the actions necessary to get it fixed. For any decision to mean ANYTHING, it ALWAYS requires further action. If I decide, or make up my own mind, to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understand Him, that decision alone will not turn it over. I will have to take the actions necessary to turn it over. The first three Steps are designed to bring us to the point where we become WILLING to turn our will and our lives over to the care of a Higher Power, Steps Four through Nine are HOW we turn our will and our lives over [because Steps Four through Nine reveal and remove the blocks that prevent us from actually doing so], and the last three Steps are how we KEEP our will and our lives turned over to God indefinitely. After a period of time though, our ego [self-will] begins to reassert itself again; and because of our "human-ness", we fall short in maintaining perfect spiritual focus in all of our thoughts and activities. That is why I believe, even if we have worked the Steps to the best of our ability once, we will need to eventually begin the Steps cycle again and again. The other two words that are important to understand are the words WILL and LIVES. I’ve always thought that the words “will” and “lives” were concepts way over my head and were way too large to relate to or comprehend. But then it was explained to me that my “will” is my thinking and what motivates me, and that my “life” is all the actions that I’ve taken up to this moment. That explanation made the words a little more down to earth and easier to comprehend. So I now understand the Third Step as saying that I decide to take the actions necessary to turn my thinking, my motivations, and my actions over to the care of God as I understand Him. Since it’s been said in many different pieces of spiritual literature that God is Love, it can also be said that the essence of all this is that I need to always be motivated by love, I need to always try to have loving thoughts and always try to take loving actions. Also, what motivates me drives my thinking and my thinking directs my actions, so I need to go deeper than just acting my way into right thinking. If my motivation and thinking is GOD-directed, I will make the right decisions [whether it seems that way at the time or not], and the actions taken will inevitably be healthy. But if my motivation and thinking is SELF-directed, I will mostly make the wrong decisions [even though I may not realize it at the time], and the actions taken will inevitably be unhealthy. Quite possibly, the single most important statement about Step Three can be found at the top of page 64 where it says, “Though our decision was a vital and crucial step, it could have LITTLE PERMANENT EFFECT unless AT ONCE followed by a STRENUOUS EFFORT to face, AND to be rid of, the things in ourselves which had been blocking us.” So it’s saying this Third Step decision will have little permanent effect unless we immediately follow it up with an intensely active effort to work Steps Four through Nine, because where we face these blocks is in Steps Four, Five, and Six and where we get rid of them is in Steps Seven, Eight, and Nine. And what we’re being blocked off from is the ability to turn our will and lives over to begin with. So after working the six middle Steps, then and ONLY then, will we be able to turn our motivations, our thoughts, and our actions over to our Higher Power with any kind of consistency. In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 60:3 – 64:0. The directions for taking Step 3 are on pages 60:4, 62:3, and 63:2 – 64:0. The results of taking Step 3 are given on page 63:1 and the last line of 63:3.)

4. **Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.** (One of the definitions for the word moral is “truthful” and another is “conduct in relationship”. Also, I think a key word here in the Fourth Step is OURSELVES, not anyone else. The Big Book provides us with three specifically outlined and powerfully transforming written inventories: the Resentment Inventory, the Fear Inventory, and a Sex and Harms Inventory of our conduct. It also asks us to create a future sex life/relationship ideal. In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 63:4 – 71 and directions for taking this Step are given throughout. The results of taking Step 4 are given on page 70:3.)
5. **Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.** (Please notice that it does NOT say that we just admit our wrongs, although that is part of the process. It says that we admit THE EXACT NATURE of our wrongs. That’s why the three Fourth Step Inventories not only compile what we did, but draws attention more importantly to WHY WE DID IT. The exact nature of our wrongs or why we did these things are what we need to ask God to help us with in Steps Six and Seven. Also, notice that it says that we are to first admit our Fourth Step Inventories to God. I have had some incredible results in working with people by asking them to first find a place where they feel God’s presence strongly and spend an hour or two silently or out loud sharing their Inventories with their Higher Power. From doing this, there is a sense of forgiveness, accumulated power, and a little more understanding that is then carried into the Fifth Step with the person or persons who will hear it. After the Fifth Step is done, we get a deeper sense of humility and another perspective which brings about a strong understanding of our inner workings. In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 72 – 75. The directions for taking Steps 5 are on page 75:1, the first sentence of 75:2, and 75:3. The results of taking Step 5 are on page 75:2 after the first sentence.)
6. **Were entirely willing that God remove all these defects of character.** (There is a very important direction associated with Step Six in the Big Book which is often missed. It says that “if we still cling to a defect we will not let go, we ask God to help us be willing.” So if there is a shortcoming that we are not willing to ask God to help us with, we pray for the willingness until it comes. This should not stop us from going on to Step Seven with the shortcomings we ARE willing to ask Him to help us with. In the Big Book, this Step is described on page 76:1. The directions for taking Step 6 are also there.)
7. **Humbly, on our knees, asked Him to remove our shortcomings – holding nothing back.** (Notice that the wording here is a little stronger than how it ended up in the Big Book. It’s obvious that the authors considered this Step to be a deep and all-inclusive part of this Program. Notice that it’s NOT saying that WE work on our shortcomings, because the only way I can work on my shortcomings is by making them worse. We need to seek our Higher Power’s help with our defects and to begin to take the actions necessary to move in the opposite direction. Also, this is one of the many statements that lead me to see that AA is NOT a SELF-help program, it’s a SPIRITUAL help program. In the Big Book, this Step is described on page 76:2. The directions for taking Step 7 are also there.)
8. **Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make complete amends to them all.** (Please notice that it mentions the word “all” twice! Do you think they really mean that? The word amend is sometimes reduced to only saying that we are sorry. I prefer using the definition found in Chapter 1 Bill’s Story where it says “I was to right all such matters to the utmost of my ability.” It’s more about taking responsibility than it is about only saying that we are sorry. Also, one of the definitions for the word amend is “to change” so we need to change and move away from the behavior that caused the harm in the first place. Just like the Sixth Step, the Book says that “If we haven’t the will to make amends, we ask until it comes,” so don’t forget to pray for the willingness to make the amends that you are not willing to make. In the Big Book, this Step is described on page 76:3. The directions for taking Step 8 are also there.)
9. **Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.** (An important word here is the word “direct”, and I’d like to suggest that WE are not the “others” mentioned here. Also, one of the greatest things that I have ever heard about hesitating to make amends is the following: Is it possible that your lack of willingness to make amends [or move forward with ANY Step] has ANYTHING to do with whether you drink again or not? It sure makes ya think! In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 76:4 – 84:1 and the directions for completing Step 9 are given throughout. The results of taking Step 9 are on page 83:4 – 84:1.)
10. **Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.** (It doesn’t say “IF we were wrong”, it says “WHEN we were wrong” so it’s realistically admitting that we ARE going to make mistakes. By the time we get to the Tenth Step we now have a way to deal with the times we fall short – Steps Four through Nine in a quick way, moment by moment. Also, it says that we “promptly ADMIT it” not “promptly EXPLAIN it”. In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 84:1 – 85:2. The directions for taking Step 10 are on page 84:2, the first line of 84:3, and 85:1. The results of taking Step 10 are on page 84:3 – 85:0.)
11. **Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.** (For some reason, the word “conscious” was not included here originally. Notice that it mentions what we should ONLY be praying for. I believe that if I pray for specific things, I am assuming that I know better than God about what is best for me or someone else. Also, you’ll notice that in Step 10 it says “Continue”, in Step 11 it says “Seek and improve”, and in Step 12 it says “in all of our affairs” so the Program leaves no room for complacency or coasting. Besides, the only way we can coast is downhill! The last three Steps are not MAINTENANCE Steps, they’re GROWTH Steps. To maintain something means to keep it the same. For me, our Program is like walking up a down escalator. If we keep moving forward, we can get to the next level. But as soon as we slow down or stop our forward movement, we go right back down to where we came from. And I don’t know about you but I desperately do not want to go back to where I came from! In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 85:3 – 88:3. The directions for taking Step 11 are on pages 86:1 – 88:0. The results of taking Step 11 are found on page 88 lines 2 – 8.)
12. **Having had a spiritual experience as the result of this course of action, we tried to carry this message to others, especially alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all of our affairs.** (This Step, as written here, obviously has three parts: 1 - the spiritual awakening AS THE RESULT of the Steps. This is a promise. It doesn’t say that it MIGHT happen or that it SOMETIMES happens, it says that it WILL happen IF we work all Twelve Steps completely; 2 – I don’t carry MY message or A message but I carry THIS message - the message of the SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AS THE RESULT OF THE STEPS to alcoholics and perhaps others too; and 3 - practicing the principles of the Steps [the way of life outlined in the Big Book] in ALL of our affairs. Every once in a while I have to ask myself if I think they really mean ALL here and if I’m doing this more and more in my life. When I do this I get a positive result and when I don’t do it I get a negative result. Speaking of carrying this message, I recommend to people I work with that when speaking at an AA speaker meeting that they use the same format as Bill W. did in “Bill’s Story” at the beginning of the Big Book. “Bill’s Story” is 16 pages and for the first 8 pages he talks about what it was like when he was drinking and for the last 8 pages he talks about what happened to bring about a change and what’s it like now that he is in recovery. Most of the time at speaker meetings the speaker will speak for 20 minutes and 19 of it is usually drunkalog and 1 minute is “and now everything is wonderful and we have a nice way of closing”. This doesn’t bring much hope to any newcomers in the room. If we can do half our talk about our experience with drinking [so the newcomer can identify with the fact that we ARE an alcoholic]; and then spend the other half of our talk on experience, strength and hope about what it’s like

working the Steps and practicing a Program of recovery, we then will carry a much stronger message to the newcomer in a way that has depth and weight. We ALL know how to drink. How about hearing more about living a happy, useful, contented life without needing alcohol? In the Big Book, this Step is described on pages 89 – 150. Many tips on how to carry our message of recover to another alcoholic are found throughout chapter 7, and many tips on how to carry our message and practice these principles in all of our affairs are found throughout chapters 8 – 10.)

You may exclaim, “What an order! I can’t go through with it.” Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. (Which is why it’s a good idea to go back and work the Steps, starting with the first one, every year or two. Because we are human, we WILL fall short in keeping spiritual focus in all of our affairs.) **We are not saints.** (An understatement!) **The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines.** (Do you think that this is important? If you do, are you more loving, honest, unselfish and accepting than you were a year ago?) **The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.**

Our description of the alcoholic (Step 1), the chapter to the agnostic (Step 2), and our personal adventures before and after (there are two ways that this can be taken: before and after this part of the book, or your personal adventures before AND after you stopped drinking), **have been designed to sell you three pertinent ideas:**

- (a) **That you are alcoholic and cannot manage your life.** (Drunk or sober. Step One) - Honesty
- (b) **That probably no human power can relieve your alcoholism.** (Step Two. Please keep in mind that this includes everyone in the fellowship, yourself, your sponsor, your support group, etc. Although they are all important, they are still only human power.) - Humility
- (c) **That God can and will.** (Also Step Two, and what a wonderful promise IF God were sought!) - Hope

If you are not convinced on these vital issues, you ought to re-read the book to this point or else throw it away! (Rather humorous! In other words, take it or leave it!)

The Ten Points of the “How It Works” Reading

Chapter five of the book “Alcoholics Anonymous” has always been a faithful guide for people who want to practice the Twelve Step Program. The following Ten Points are a summary of the lifesaving directions given in Chapter Five, and are to be considered as part of your daily Program:

1. Completely give yourself to this simple Program.
2. Practice rigorous honesty.
3. Be willing to go to any lengths to recover.
4. Be fearless and thorough in your practice of the principles.
5. Realize that there is no easier, softer way.
6. Let go of your old ideas absolutely.
7. Recognize that half measures will not work.
8. Ask God’s protection and care with complete abandon.
9. Be willing to grow along spiritual lines.
10. Accept the following pertinent ideas as proved by A.A. experience:
 - (a) the you cannot manage your own life;
 - (b) that probably no human power can restore you to sanity;
 - (c) that God can and will if sought.