

THE FOURTH STEP INVENTORIES

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The most important part of taking any Step is that we've first done all the Steps before it. They are in order for a reason and they need to be worked that way. We are building a spiritual structure, so the foundational Steps need to be solid or else the whole thing is more likely to collapse. The information for this Step can be found in the Big Book on pages 64 through 71.

This Fourth Step is a very simple, very specific, highly effective tool to begin to see the causes and conditions of how self-will has failed us and how our troubles are basically of our own making. We inventory these things because they lead us back to drinking (if we are lucky) or intense misery and suicide (if we're not so lucky). The 4th Step is not about finding out who we are. It's about finding out who we are NOT so we can get rid of it and who we are will shine through. That's why self-knowledge avails us nothing. We need to find out what God what's us to be. When we finish writing this Step, we'll have exactly what we are going to share in our Fifth Step, we'll have the defects or shortcomings that we ask God to remove in Steps Six and Seven, we'll have the list of harms to make amends for in Steps Eight and Nine, we'll have some of the Tenth Step process to use on a moment by moment basis throughout the day, and part of the inventory process we use when doing our 11th Step evening review. So this three-part inventory contributes directly to at least eight Steps. It not only gives us tools to break free of the chains of our past, but also an incredible way to deal with anger, frustration, fear, guilt, etc. as they come up in our day-to-day living from now on.

Since it is assumed that the conclusions of the first three Steps have already been made, please continue starting your day by saying the Third Step Prayer and also saying it when needed (or even when not needed) throughout the day while you are doing these inventories. I also suggest to people I work with that they read the Third Step in its entirety (from the middle of page 60 to top of page 64) each time they sit down to do some Fourth Step writing. When you start writing, put the following prayer (or something like it) at the top of each blank page as you go along. This is not out of the Big Book but I think it is very important to bring God into every aspect of this process:

"God, please help me with this, show me what I need to know. Please protect me, Your Will not mine be done."

I was at a meeting once and I heard a gentleman say that his sponsor told him that the way to do a Fourth and Fifth Step is that over the next few years, while at meetings, he should begin talking about things that he did in the past. Eventually, he will have shared his entire life-story and he will then be finished with Step Four and Five. I cannot deny or judge any one else's experience but I cannot find agreement with his statement in our literature. That may be his message or a message, but it is NOT the A.A. message. It mentions 12 times in chapters five and six that the inventory needs to be written down. I think that is so because I can only hold one thought at a time in my head so I never see some of the trends of my self-sabotage or the full scope of what has been really going on until I get it all down on paper.

The Fourth Step commentary in the Twelve and Twelve goes into much greater detail about this, but we humans have three basic instincts of life which create self: the social instinct, the security instinct, and the sex instinct. These are needed in order for the human race to survive. All humans have them and they are God-given so they are good, but when we use them selfishly or incorrectly, they cause problems for others and ourselves. When the social instinct is used incorrectly, it brings about resentments. When the security instinct is used incorrectly, it brings about fears. And when the sex instinct is used incorrectly, it brings about harms to others. Left to my own resources, I will invariably overdo in these areas. In my selfish attempt to fulfill these desires, I am in constant conflict with others. That is why, coincidentally, the Big Book's process focuses directly on resentments, fears, and harms; so it gets down to our misdirected instincts and the root of our problems. Nearly every serious emotional problem can be seen as a case of misdirected instinct. All self-centered people have difficulties in these three areas whether they are alcoholics or not.

The first inventory mentioned is on resentments. I think this is a good place to start because we all know who or what we're pissed at. The book says this about resentment: (page 64) "Resentment is the "number one" offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else, from it stem all forms of spiritual disease; (page 66) it leads only to futility and unhappiness, to the precise extent that we permit resentment do we squander the hours that might have been worth while, this business of resentment is infinitely grave, it is fatal, when harboring such feelings we shut ourselves off from the sunlight of the Spirit, the insanity of alcohol returns and we drink again, these things are poison, because of it the world and its people really dominated us, the wrong-doing of others fancied or real had power to actually kill; (page 70) we begin to comprehend the futility and fatality of our resentments, we commence to see its terrible destructiveness; (page 117) never forget that it is a deadly hazard to an alcoholic; (page 145) the greatest enemies of us alcoholics include resentment; (page 325) I can't afford resentments against anyone because they are the build-up of another drunk; (page 552) I realized I had to get rid of my last resentment for my reprieve was running out and if I didn't get rid of it I was going to get drunk." I don't know about you but I always thought resentments were kinda fun and acceptable. I had a problem with most people so resentment became a way of life for me. Now it was saying that even if I felt that a resentment was justified (which I ALWAYS did), it was the biggest cause for leading an alcoholic back to a drink, and I desperately didn't want to move in that direction.

Since Bill Wilson liked using different words that mean the same thing, the book uses a few different expressions when describing who and what to write down. People, institutions or principles with whom we have resentment, with whom we were angry, with whom we were hurt or threatened or interfered with, with whom we felt had wronged us, with whom we stayed sore at, with whom we felt “burned up” toward, and with whom we held a grudge. I would like to add the following as well: People, institutions or principles with whom we were annoyed with, agitated by, or let down by; and I also like to suggest that you include your regrets because regret is resentment toward yourself. In my case, the resentment inventory was a long list.

The word resentment comes from the Latin word “sentio” which means “feel”, and when you put “re” in front of any word, it means “again”, so the word resent means “to feel again”. After we experience what we perceive as being wronged by someone, the first response usually is anger or frustration. But then after we have reviewed in our mind what happened for a while and have felt the anger again and again, we move to the next stage, which is resentment. Over a short period of time, as I playback the suspected harm in my head, I become less and less involved in what happened and the other person becomes more and more to blame. Sometimes we are able to let the incident go without moving past anger, but if you are a self-centered alcoholic, that is usually a difficult thing to do since we tend to keep score of these things so we can at some point get back at them. I smell some identification out there.

Each of the three inventories that the Big Book mentions, have four parts or columns. Great debates have occurred over what should be included, but this is how I see it as of today. Of the many different inventory formats out of the Big Book that I have seen, only one or two of them would I say seemed less than effective, so if you have a Big Book Fourth Step format already, go for it. The only one that I can think of that I suggest that you stay away from was one I saw on some website somewhere, which stated that the resentment inventory out of the book only included what is presented on page 65 and nothing else. You will see why this is incomplete in a minute. Also, I can not think of any reasons why a member of our Fellowship would ever need to go outside of A.A. to find a Fourth Step format, since we already have one that has worked extremely well since 1939.

I have printed sheets that I could send you, or get a regular blue-line pad of paper and turn it sideways so that the paper is wider from left to right. Draw four columns (top to bottom), with the fourth column area being wider than the other three. Do this on ten sheets of paper. Write the four resentment column headings (provided below) at the top of each sheet and please make rows below the headings about one inch apart going down from left to right. You now have ten pages for your resentments (with headings and a series of blank elongated boxes).

When you start to write the inventory, complete all of Column 1 and 2 first (top to bottom) before going on to Column 3, and then finish all of Column 3 before going on to Column 4. When you get to Column 3, complete each part of self that was affected first before going on to the next part of self affected. In other words, finish whether self-esteem was affected for all of your resentments (top to bottom), then go on to whether pocketbook was affected for all of your resentments, etc. If you remember a resentment after you have already gone past Column 1, simply put it at the bottom of your list and catch up with that resentment to where you are currently. Also remember that you may have more than one resentment toward the same person, place or thing (this is often true of those closest to us). There is no need for you to write a lot in each box, just put “bullet statements” (one sentence or less) best describing the situations as a mental jogger for later. Once you get the hang of it, Column two can even be filled out with just one word describing why you are angry. By doing this, it tends to take away the emotional sting of what happened, and just gets down to facts. An example of this is perhaps you are resentful toward your father for leaving your mother and then him not being around much. The one word to describe why you are angry might be “abandonment”. When you do your Fifth Step, you can then go into greater detail. Please try to be as thorough, honest, and specific as possible. I always suggest that you keep a dictionary handy for some of the words used in the Column headings (especially the ones in column three).

The four Resentment Inventory columns are:

Column 1 - (from page 64:3) I listed people, institutions and principles with whom I am angry. I am resentful at:

Column 2 - (from page 64:3) I asked myself why I am angry? The cause:

Column 3 - (from page 64:3 & 65:1) In most cases it was found that one or more of the following was hurt, threatened or interfered with. Affects my (what part of self was affected): self-esteem, pocketbook, security (emotional or financial), ambitions (in the future, what did I want?), personal relations, sex relations, or pride.

Column 4 - (from page 67:2) Putting out of my mind the wrongs others had done, I resolutely looked for my own mistakes. Though a situation had not been entirely my fault, I try to disregard the other person involved completely. Where had I been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking and frightened? Where was I to blame?

You can see why that fourth column is so totally necessary. In the first three columns we have learned nothing new. I always knew who they were, what they did, and how it affected me; but I still have no tools to deal with resentment when it crops up in the future. The other person, institution or principle is still to blame and there is never anything I can do about that. And worst of all, I still have this resentment. But with that Column 4, I am seeing things perhaps for the first time because I can see the resentment from an ENTIRELY different angle. On page 61 it says, “Admitting I may be somewhat at fault, I am sure that other people are more to blame.” And on page 66, “To conclude that others were wrong was as far as most of us ever got.” I can totally relate to this and that’s why using only the first 3 columns would be ineffective.

I believe that 99.9% of the time, we play a part in bringing about every resentment. Whether it was something we did or said that came back to bite us, or our unrealistic expectation. In that rare instance when we played no part in what happened, we need to look for what we did to perpetuate the resentment well after the fact and how we used the event as an excuse to behave or treat others incorrectly. Here's an example of what I mean. A nine-year old girl felt that her father had abandoned her. He and the girl's mother were having major problems in their marriage and he thought it best to leave before the daughter was negatively affected. The mother then kept the father from ever seeing their daughter until she grew up. As the girl matured, she used the resentment she had toward her dad as an excuse for her alcohol abuse and for hating, trash-talking and abusing men in general (especially her father). She absolutely played NO part in bringing about her father's leaving, but she DID play a part in how she later treated all men.

For the first time, I started to see that I played a part in what really happened between the people, places and things I resented and myself. In a lot of cases, I played a large part in what happened but I conveniently didn't notice. The bottom of page 66 says that, "resentments must be mastered. We need to realize that the people who wronged us were perhaps spiritually sick" (I choose to refer to it as "spiritually blocked"). "Though we did not like their symptoms and the way these disturbed us, they, like ourselves, were sick (spiritually blocked at times) too." As I used this new perspective toward the people whom I thought harmed me, and realized that I made many mistakes too; the easier it was to forgive, forget, and accept when it happened again. For me, resentment is like taking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. Most of these people hadn't even thought of me in years, and some had been buried and long gone. The only person suffering with these feelings was myself, not them. I now wanted to be free. When I finished writing this inventory, resentments of many years started to easily fall from me, even before I did my Fifth Step. Simply amazing!

Besides Column 4 giving me a more realistic view of what happened, I also started to notice something in the first three columns. I would not have ever noticed these things if I didn't write this all down on paper. Remember, our mind can only see one thing at a time. In Column 1, I learned that I was pissed at almost everyone I ever knew. All these resentments rattling around in my head controlled a lot of my time and thinking. I was shocked! In Column 2, I learned that it wasn't the person I was mad at but it was what they did or didn't do that caused the resentment. For example, if I resented Paul (Column 1) because he stole money from me (Column 2), I would just as easily be mad at Steve if he stole money from me. So it wasn't the person I was mad at but what they did or didn't do. Also in Column 2, I usually saw that what the person I resented did was also something I was doing, either to them or others. It's a psychological fact that what we hate in others is usually the same things we struggle with ourselves. (I hate when that happens!) So another thing that we need to do to be free of resentment is to stop doing what irritates us in others! In Column 3 I learned that it wasn't the person who did it or even what they did that triggered the resentment, it was how I chose to internalize and personalize what they did that released the beast. This is a little less obvious so let me give another example. We all have people in our lives who "get under our skin." Perhaps the behaviors or habits of someone we work with bugs us. Why is it that even though they are constantly doing what bothers us, there are times when we barely even notice that they did it again and we go on with our day unaffected? How could it be that the exact same situation occurs more than once yet my reaction sometimes is completely different than at other times? What's really happening when it doesn't effect me is that I am choosing not to personalize it. How I am reacting when it doesn't effect me did not include thoughts like, "This person is not acting the way I think they should," or "They are such a jerk," or "They are trying to take advantage of me." Most often they are not doing it to me, they are just doing it. I'm sure you've all experienced something like this if you think about it. No matter what, someone else cannot make me frustrated or angry. Based on my thinking, I simply choose to react this way. I can, just as easily, choose to let it go. I don't know about you but I want peace of mind today! Eventually (thanks to Column 4), I started to see that it is self-centered of me to believe that I know how others should act and that I have been a fool if someone always does something a certain way and now I'm expecting them to act differently. It is neither necessary nor possible to change others. But if I (with God's help) can change myself, I will find that no other changes are needed. Like a wise man once said, "It is easier to put on slippers than to carpet the whole world." If I can accept that others have their ways about them and that they need no help from me, I have so much more serenity throughout the day.

Before going on to the fear inventory, I'd like to draw your attention to the top of page 67. Contained in this first half paragraph are two prayers to use for all resentments. They are: "We ask God to help us show them the same tolerance, pity, and patience that we would cheerfully grant a sick friend." And, "This is a spiritually sick person. How can I be helpful to them? God save me from being angry. Your Will be done." I like to suggest to people that they start saying these prayers as soon as they start this inventory. Also, read from the middle of page 551 through to the end of 553. This story contains a powerful example of what to do for two weeks or more if you want to get over a resentment. I have to warn you though - DO NOT use these prayers if you do NOT want to get over a resentment, because they DO work.

Now the fear inventory. "This short word (fear) somehow touches about every aspect of our lives. It was an evil and corroding thread; the fabric of our existence was shot through with it. It set in motion trains of circumstances which brought us misfortune we felt we didn't deserve...Fear ought to be classed with stealing. It seems to cause more trouble." As you can see, like resentment, the Big Book does not paint a pleasant picture about fear. I know that I allowed fear to rob me of many important things in life. It has been my experience that all our fears can be grouped together by three descriptions: afraid of losing what I have, afraid of not getting what I, and afraid of someone finding out what I did or didn't do. My favorite two acronyms for fear are "False Evidence Appearing Real" and "Frantic Efforts to Appear Recovered". They are SO true.

The four Fear Inventory columns are:

Column 1 - (from page 68:1) I listed my fears.

Column 2 - (from page 68:1) I asked myself why I had them.

Column 3 - (from pages 67:3, 68:1, & 62:1) But did not I, myself, set the ball rolling? How did self-reliance fail me? I look for my own selfishness and self-centeredness, and go from there.

Column 4 - (from page 68:2 & 3) Just to the extent that we do as we think God would have us, and humbly rely on Him, does He enable us to match calamity with serenity. We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. What, perhaps, is a better way?

I have been told by people who have never done a fear inventory before that they just don't have very many fears. If that be so for you, I'd like to suggest that you take a look at the things you lie about, because you are probably afraid of something if you need to twist reality to the way you want it to be.

Just like all the inventories, the book again includes a prayer. It is, "We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be." This line is then immediately followed by a wonderful promise, "At once, we commence to outgrow fear." We may still have fears, but through trust that God will take care of us, we will outgrow them and then they will be more right-sized and won't control us any more. Now that's freedom!

The last inventory looks at sex and harms. The book talks only about our sex conduct, but on the bottom of page 70 it says that (after we have finished writing the Fourth Step), "We have listed the people we have hurt by our conduct," and on page 76 (in describing Step Eight) it says, "We have a list of all persons we have harmed... We made it when we took (the Step Four) inventory," so I also include harms other than around sex, since we can also harm others in ways that have nothing to do with our sex conduct.

These are the four columns for the Sex and Harms Inventory:

Column 1 - (from page 69:1) Whom did I hurt?

Column 2 - (from page 69:1) Did I unjustifiably arouse: jealousy, suspicion or bitterness?

Column 3 - (from page 69:1) I reviewed my own conduct over the years past. Where was I at fault? Where had I been selfish, dishonest or inconsiderate?

Column 4 - (from page 69:1) What should I have done instead?

From the bottom of page 68 to page 70, again and again, the book talks about shaping a sane and sound ideal for our future sex life. So as part of Step Four, the last thing that I suggest to the people I work with, is that they spend some time writing and creating a future sex ideal that will also be shared during the Fifth Step. I have seen it done as a prayer to God containing the areas that need to be worked toward or as a list of positive objectives and ideals around a sexual relationship that I want in both my partner and myself. These ideals and attributes are not to be compromised nor taken lightly. It is our standard or set of boundaries that we feel God would be proud of. They lead to a healthy relationship from now on.

There are three prayers included with this inventory. On page 69 it says, "We ask God to mold our (sex conduct) ideals and help us to live up to them," and "...we treat sex as we would any other problem. In meditation, we ask God what we should do about each specific matter," and on page 70 it says, "We earnestly pray for the right ideal, for guidance in each questionable situation, for sanity, and for the strength to do the right thing." Notice that these prayers can also be used just as effectively for other issues in our life.

You may have noticed that all three inventories start outside of us or on the surface of the problem, and then go deeper toward the root of the issue. They are highly effective in bringing about the necessary changes within ourselves that then moves us away from the next drink. I've heard it said that resentment is wrong thinking, fears are wrong feeling, and harms are wrong acting. The Fourth Step helps us begin to turn this around.

On a final note, I never noticed until recently that three times during the directions for this Step does it mention becoming willing to make amends. On page

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