Using 12 Step Groups

People recovering from addictions often participate in 12-Step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. Many find these groups a helpful source of support. If you have experienced violence or abuse, here are some ideas to consider while “working the program.” As they say in 12 Step groups, take what you need and leave the rest.

**Step One: We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol (or our addiction) — that our lives had become unmanageable.**

When 12 Step groups discuss powerlessness, it may be helpful to explore how power is defined. Some people view power as the ability to control other people, places and things. “The program” asks you to let go of attempts to have this kind of power.

However, power can also be defined as the ability to make choices and act on them. For example, you cannot control the impact of chemicals on your body. But you can choose to seek treatment for an addiction. If you are in an abusive relationship, you cannot control your partner’s behavior. But you can choose to seek help getting safe.

This step encourages you to break through denial and acknowledge that you are out of control with alcohol or another addiction. Before you can do something about a problem, you must acknowledge that the problem exists.

**Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**

Some women feel more comfortable with feminine or gender-neutral images of God or “higher power.” This may be especially true for women who have been abused by a male parent or partner. Remember that 12 Step groups encourage you to interpret “higher power” in whatever way feels right for you. A.A. literature says, “When we speak of God, we mean your own conception of God.”¹ In fact, “You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your ‘higher power.’ Here’s a very large group of people who have solved their alcohol problem.”²

This step encourages you to feel hope. There is a way out of your problems. Help is available. Recovery and healing are possible.

**Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.**

For some women, turning over our will to someone else may sound like a demand from an abuser. It may be helpful to remember that there is a difference between turning one’s will over to a deity (if that is what your religious or spiritual tradition teaches), and being asked to turn your will over to another human being.

It may also be helpful to think of “turning it over” as “letting go,” and willingness as being open to new ideas. Giving up an addiction (or a relationship) can feel pretty scary. You are letting go of something familiar without knowing what will replace it. The good news is you don’t have to do this alone.
This step encourages you to break your isolation by seeking help and accepting the support that is offered.

**Step Four: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.**

Keep in mind that Step Four is not an “immoral inventory.” A.A. literature points out that “assets can be noted with liabilities.” Listing your strengths can be especially helpful if your self-esteem has been battered by abuse.

A.A. literature suggests that you “consider carefully all personal relationships which bring continuous or recurring trouble. Appraising each situation fairly, can I see where I have been at fault? … And if the actions of others are part of the cause, what can I do about that?” When looking at relationships, remember that you are not responsible for violence or abuse committed against you. However, exploring the impact abuse has had on your life can strengthen your resolve to break free of the abuse and heal from it.

This step encourages you to take a realistic look at your life. This allows you to discover your strengths and limitations, and identify your needs.

**Step Five: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.**

When you choose someone to hear your Fifth Step, A.A. literature cautions you to “take much care.” This care is especially important if you are a survivor of domestic violence, sexual assault or sexual abuse. Survivors may want to share this part of their experience with a qualified therapist or advocate. This person should understand that responsibility for violence belongs with the perpetrator.

This step encourages you to share your past with someone you trust. This can help you let go of the shame that comes with thinking you must keep parts of your life secret.

**Step Six: Were entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character.**

Nobody is perfect, so self-improvement is a worthy goal for everyone. But A.A. literature cautions you to “avoid extreme judgments” and “not exaggerate” your defects. This precaution is especially important for abused women. An abuser may have whittled away at your self-esteem by encouraging you to feel defective. A person who wants to control you is not the best judge of your character!

A.A. literature also reminds you to distinguish between societal expectations and your own values. For example, when the subject is sex, “we find human opinions running to extremes — absurd extremes, perhaps.” This can certainly be said about the messages our society directs toward women. Women also get mixed messages about everything from their roles to how they should look or act. Step Six can be a good place to examine what your own values are.

This step encourages you to prepare for change in your usual patterns of behavior. What behaviors do you want to let go of? What patterns do you want to stop repeating?
Step Seven: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

A.A. literature says humility is “a word often misunderstood. ... It amounts to a clear recognition of what and who we really are, followed by a sincere attempt to become what we could be.”8 We should “be sensible, tactful, considerate and humble without being servile or scraping.”9 And, “we stand on our feet; we don’t crawl before anyone.”9 Humility does not mean seeing yourself as less important than others.

This step encourages you to begin letting go of the unhealthy patterns you identified in Step Six. If some of these patterns stem from your experience of violence or abuse, you may want to seek professional help from a person trained to work with abuse survivors.

Step Eight: Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

People in recovery need to acknowledge how their drinking or drug use affected others. But recovery groups remind you to make amends to yourself as well. One such amend might be to stop blaming yourself for domestic violence, sexual assault or other abuse. You are only responsible for your own behavior, not someone else’s.

This step encourages you to identify what needs changing in your relationships with others. “Making amends” does not mean you must reconcile with an abuser. “Amend” simply means “to change or modify for the better.”10 With an abusive relationship, this may well mean ending it. According to the A.A. literature, “If there be divorce or separation, there should be no undue haste for the couple to get together. ... Sometimes it is to the best interests of all concerned that a couple remain apart.”11

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

If you have left an abusive relationship, it may be best to avoid your partner. This is true even if you believe you did something “wrong.” A.A. literature does not say you must contact everyone on your amends list. In some cases, “by the very nature of the situation, we shall never be able to make direct personal contact at all.”12 If “making amends” to an abuser would put you or your children in danger, stay away!

Children often blame themselves for their parents’ problems. So this can be a good time to talk with your children about incidents they have witnessed. Explain that they are not responsible for your alcohol or drug use. Nor are they responsible for an abuser’s behavior toward you or them.

This step encourages you to settle with the past. “When this is done, we are really able to leave it behind us.”13

Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

When doing an inventory, remember to focus on strengths as well as weaknesses. A.A.
literature points out that “inventory-taking is not always done in red ink. It’s a poor day indeed when we haven’t done something right.”  

This step encourages you to maintain the progress you have made in previous steps. And give yourself credit for things well done!

**Step Eleven: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.**

This step encourages you to develop emotional balance. For you, this could mean prayer and meditation. It could mean keeping a journal or taking daily walks. It could mean calling a friend to help you sort out your feelings. Do whatever helps you feel centered and at peace with yourself.

**Step Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.**

A.A. literature says “helping others is the foundation stone of your recovery.” You can do this by sharing your experience, strength and hope with other people like you. When you take back your life from addiction (or abuse), you carry a powerful message!

Many recovering alcoholics and addicts believe carrying their message to others helps them stay clean and sober. Many survivors of violence find that working for social change aids their own healing process. People may call their efforts *working for change, service to others* or *carrying the message*. This step encourages you to discover what you have to offer and to pass it on!

**Note:** The views expressed in this handout are the views of the author only. The author makes no claim to speak for Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or any other 12 Step group.

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3. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 52
4. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 6
5. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 61
6. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 82
7. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 68
8. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 58
9. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 83
12. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 83
13. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 89
14. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 93
15. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 97