

Five Stages to the First Step

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I have a friend who says, "God has a sense of humor . . . It's just not a very good one." In saying this he is referring to the paradox that seems to grow wild along the recovery trail: What we have long thought to be extremely complex turns out to be Sesame-Street-Simple, and what first appears to be offensively simple contains complexities that we never imagined. There is no better example of this paradox than Alcoholics Anonymous' First Step of Recovery: We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, and that our lives had become unmanageable.

This is a life changing step. Life changing that is, if we don't take it lightly, and if we can avoid being fooled by the disease of addiction, that cunning, baffling and powerful culprit who would much rather us skim lightly over good ole step number one.

Years ago, while working with inpatient and outpatient chemical dependency treatment programs, I learned the value of encouraging in-depth exploration of AA's first step. Without the internalization (full acceptance) of step one, there is no foundation on which to build a stable recovery. Without a solid first step, we are destined for relapse. In fact, without that solid first step, we never really even begin our recovery.

It is not so much the step that needs exploring as it is our responses. And though we are each unique, there are certain particular stages of response that most of us can identify in common. In order to provide a frame of reference for this exploration, I developed the following model (Five stages to the First Step) to outline those common themes of response.

I developed this model to assist clients who were just beginning recovery, or coming back from relapse, in identifying just where they were in relation to their "first step work." Since then, however, I have discovered that the Five Stages to the First Step can become a valuable tool for any of us, anywhere along the recovery trail, as we inevitably struggle to identify and accept all that we are powerless over. The paradox, of course, being that only by identifying, admitting and ultimately accepting all that we are powerless over do we begin to experience genuine power in our lives.

Checking for Thoroughness

Since AA's first step can be so deceptively simple, it is important that we check our movement through this essential step for thoroughness. The Five Stages that follow can be used as a check for that thoroughness. To make effective use of this information, be careful not to assume that the goal is to "have arrived at stage five." Instead, the goal is simply to improve our awareness of where we are right now, and to give us a point of reference to understand where we have been, and where we are likely to go. In a word (actually several words) the goal is increased self-understanding and self-honesty.

The Five Stages can help to make sense of our thoughts and feelings as we begin the journey of recovery (or undertake a new stretch of the journey). Hopefully, this material offers the message that whatever we are thinking and feeling at this moment is natural and human, and therefore understandable and acceptable. Admitting powerlessness over addiction is not the latest in a long line of ways to insult and

abuse ourselves. Instead, a thorough first step is a giant step toward releasing ourselves from tyrannical self judgment and an essential step toward claiming personal freedom.

Trying on the Five Stages

For clarity, a description of each of the following stages will be presented in the first person, as if "I" am passing through each stage (and I definitely have). Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to put yourself into the "I" as you read in order to assess where you might be along the trail. It is sort of like "trying on" each stage. Some may easily identify with one particular stage as described, while others may discover a little of themselves at each stage.

If you work with recovering addicts, I encourage you to use this model as a group exercise, or simply a topic for group discussion.

The Five Stages to the First Step

Stage 1: Initial Denial "I don't have a problem!", "The problem is not the booze (or the drugs)!", and "If you don't like it, it's your problem!" are all possible battle cries for me at this stage. I am well defended with excuses and explanations of blame. If there is outside pressure to do something about my chemical use, I still easily view myself as a victim or circumstance. Recognition that I am experiencing a loss of control does rear its ugly head occasionally, but I am able to keep such ridiculous thoughts in their place. I am angry and scared at this stage, but usually denying the fear and minimizing the anger. "I have got it under control," I chant as important parts of my world crumble around me.

Stage 2: Admission This is the stage of putting two and two together, matching my

experience with information gathered. I have either sought some material about addiction on my own, or it has been presented to me by people who care. I have weathered the first waves of anger and fear and can now intellectually "admit" that I have a problem -- that I am powerless over my addiction, and that as a result I am losing control of my life

Anger may now be turned more inward, toward myself, in the form of guilt, disappointment or shame. Fear is still present, although I may for a time continue to deny or minimize it. I would like to think (and may fool myself into thinking) that my intellectual admission of chemical dependency is enough to turn things around. "Now that I see the problem I will call upon my willpower to make everything right again."

Caution: This is a very tricky stage. Many chemically dependent people have privately (secretly) visited this stage previously when faced with blatant, undeniable consequences to their chemical use. If I have ever attempted to change or control my drinking/using patterns, I have been dipping my toe into this stage, testing the waters of admission.

It is not unusual for chemically dependent individuals to spend years moving back and forth between initial denial and admission. The challenge here is to commit myself to reaching out for help, and not letting my guard down prematurely. The first step tells us that we are "powerless" over our addiction, not just a little low on power. There is a big difference between being a little off balance and falling on my ass.

Stage 3: Second Thoughts Even when I do continue in my recovery efforts I will sooner or later encounter this stage of "second

thoughts." It is natural and an essential ingredient in motivating me to the next stage of "acceptance." Second thoughts are not a sign that recovery is not working.

This is the time when Denial, who was knocked down in the admission stage, stands back up. "Wait a minute . . . maybe I have over reacted here . . . I have been very responsible in owning up to my problems and getting my life (relationships, etc.) back together . . . I understand the dangers of over doing it . . . why couldn't I have a beer on a hot afternoon, or a glass of wine with a good meal . . . like normal people?!"

At this stage it is important that I hear these thoughts out, but not follow their lead. Most importantly, I need to do tell someone involved with my recovery about this re-emergence of denial. I need to "tell on myself" -- not so that I can be punished or shamed -- but so that I can reduce the danger of slipping back into old behavior.

Digging a little deeper during this stage I discover my anger at the disease of addiction. I probably need to scream in a rage: "WHY ME?! THIS ISN'T FAIR!"

Stage 4: Acceptance Acceptance and admission are not the same. Admission is an intellectual function. Acceptance is a sense of knowing the truth at a gut level: "Chemical dependency is a disease that I have. It is here. It is real. And it is my responsibility to face it."

I cannot fully reach acceptance unless I have been willing to walk through the painful feelings (anger, guilt, shame, fear, etc.) associated with recognizing that I am addicted and that my life is out of control.

At the stage of "acceptance" I find myself experiencing (possibly for the first time) a sense of being centered, a feeling of being at home or at ease. My eyes wide open, blinders off, I no longer feel threatened or compromised by the fact that I am chemically dependent. Being chemically dependent is far from all that I am, but it is a part of who I am. I have the disease of addiction and for that I am not to be blamed. I am, however, one hundred per cent (100%) responsible for my recovery. Not only do I accept this disease as mine, but I also accept the truth that it is not a disease from which I will recover alone. I will continue to build and use my recovery supports . . . always.

"Acceptance" is not perfect recovery; thank God, there is no such thing. Acceptance is the opposite of denial. In "acceptance" I lower my resistance to everything that I think and feel -- everything that I am. I live with a forgiving attitude toward myself, and eventually toward others. I begin to feel relief.

Stage 5: Daily Willingness This stage is the natural outgrowth of the previous stage of acceptance. In a way they are one, but it is important to emphasize this as a separate stage so that I can affirm the necessity of taking the first step on a daily basis. "Daily willingness" demonstrates my respect for the reality of all that I have learned about the disease of addiction, and about me.

Willingness is recovery's answer to the dreaded and dangerous "willpower." (The John Wayne Syndrome) Willpower closes me down and isolates me in my "control addiction." Willingness opens me to receive the support that I need and deserve.

In "daily willingness" I learn to apply the Serenity Prayer to my life. (God, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.) In doing so, and in accepting my powerlessness over my addiction, I begin the process of reclaiming my personal power in my life. I will maintain this wonderful power only to the degree that I remain focused in the present tense, in my "daily willingness" to do whatever it takes to support my recovery.

Afterthoughts I suggest that you take a few minutes and write about yourself at the stage with which you most strongly identify. A few cautions: "Admission" likes to pretend to be "acceptance," and "second thoughts" present as the "voice of reason." And anyone early in recovery believing themselves to be at one of the final two stages is probably fooling themselves.

Be careful. Be thorough. And know this: It takes time to walk through all of these stages. And it is hard work. Step carefully, and be patient with yourself.

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