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# My Nine-Step Program

*A collection of wisdom that didn't work*

**S**HORTLY AFTER coming to AA in 1959, I devised my own nine-step program, a mishmash of things I had heard at meetings or things other AAs had told me in discussions. For the most part, I avoided the Twelve Steps program — particularly the middle portion, which required an inventory and the repairing of the damage I had done.

Somehow, I maintained my sobriety for all those years, subsisting on many sayings, aphorisms, and gems of wisdom, each of which contained a grain of truth. But they did not add up to a thorough working of the Twelve Steps.

Stretching these small quantities of truth into my own nine-step program worked — in the sense that I stayed sober, through the grace of God. But by the end of that first decade of sobriety, I was more fearful, more depressed, and more insane than I had ever been, even in my drinking days.

Because I was so sick mentally and spiritually, I became convinced that the program had failed to cure my mental difficulties. In the belief that I was too sick for the program, I sought help from psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapy groups, all to no avail. I just continued to get sicker.

Here is the nine-step program

that carried me through nearly a decade of a sober hell, filled with depression, fear, and the certainty that I was losing my mind:

(1) *Easy Does It*; (2) this is an individual program; (3) if you are sober, you are a winner; (4) the Twelve Steps are only suggestions; (5) take an inventory only when you are ready; (6) the only people you really hurt are those closest to you; (7) you make amends just by being sober; (8) most modern AAs (especially me) are high-bottom drunks; (9) the Big Book is outmoded.

If you work my nine-step program, I am pretty sure you will get the same bad results I obtained. But if you want to try anyway, you must equip yourself with a rationale for each of the nine steps. This will enable you to give smart, logical comebacks to the AA members who will continually counsel you to work the Twelve Steps as originally written. The best way to handle these zealots is to explain that you have nothing against any of the Twelve Steps and that you intend to work each of them eventually. But for now, you are simply not quite ready.

For the specific rationale behind each of my nine steps, I suggest the following:

## 1. Easy Does It

Occasionally, it occurred to me that I should be doing an inventory. Or I might wonder, "Why don't I get any serenity and contentment out of this program?" At these moments, there was instant comfort in remembering that getting myself all worked up about such matters might lead me back to the bottle. "Just take it easy," I'd tell myself. "Remember, I am to progress at God's pace. I will surely get serenity one of these days."

## 2. This is an individual program

This is another helpful aphorism. I stopped reading the Big Book after only a couple of months of sobriety because I realized that "this is an individual program." I could pretty much take (mostly, not take) the measures described in Chapters Five and Six of the Big Book when and as

I wished. My "individual program" translated into a lot of meetings and Twelfth Step work. When I felt particularly bad, I would heavy-up on the meetings. Apparently, I was willing to go to an awful lot of meetings if it meant that I didn't have to work the Twelve Steps.

## 3. If you are sober, you are a winner

What a helper this little step was when I was really feeling down. Often, after a meeting, I would talk to another AA about my depression or fear. Almost as often, I would be consoled with: "You must be doing something right — you're sober. So you're still a winner." But there remained my nagging, seldom-expressed question: "If I am a winner, how come I feel so much like a loser?"

## 4. The Twelve Steps are only suggestions

Here was solid backing for my position that you did any of the Twelve Steps you needed, at the time you needed them, in the way you wanted to do them. I never noticed until years later that there are at least a dozen musts in the Big Book. The book offers surprisingly little leeway in the manner and the order in which the Twelve Steps are to be worked. The only way to contented sobriety is to work all of the Steps as they are "suggested." There is no invitation to the reader to modify, reject, or interpret. There is no "easier, softer way."

*"Now that I was sober, I was no longer hurting anyone."*

### **5. Take an inventory only when you are ready**

Another great help to the designer of his own program is this little gem. Its logic always impressed me, because, of course, I wanted my Fourth Step to be thorough, even perfect. "Today," I thought, "I am not prepared to do a perfect Fourth Step. To attempt it might get me more upset, more depressed, even drunk. There is an added benefit. I don't have to take a Fifth Step, either, because I am not yet prepared with a written Fourth." Somehow, ten years went by, and I was still not quite "ready."

### **6. The only people you really hurt are those closest to you**

When I finally did get around to AA's amends Steps, my own sixth step helped a great deal. I told myself that I had hurt my wife and children only during my drinking days. But I had apologized for all of that alcohol-caused misery. Now that I was sober, I was no longer hurting anyone. A long time later, I realized that I had continued to lie, cheat, and steal through all of those sober years as a nonworking member of AA. All in all, I had hurt far more people in those sober years than I had ever hurt in my drinking days, including employees, business associates, shopkeepers, salesmen,

clients, and friends — dozens and dozens of people.

### **7. You make amends just by being sober**

Here's another way to duck the amends Steps. I presumed that my years of sobriety had made me a basically nice person, and that my family and others around me should feel privileged to associate with me. Just by being alive and being me, I was making amends to those I had harmed (my immediate family). This simple and beautiful step meant that I didn't have to list on a piece of paper *all* of the people I had harmed, and then make direct amends to them. Somehow, it escaped me that this sober, "nice" guy was abusing employees, lying to bosses and clients, padding expense accounts, and fencing sarcastically with almost anyone whom he perceived as a threat. These defects finally came home to roost when I was fired from a fine job — primarily for the faults just described.

### **8. Most modern AAs (especially me) are high-bottom drunks**

This is another real comforter. The low-bottom, hard cases that Dr. Bob and Bill encountered obviously had to work the Twelve Steps faithfully and fast if they were to remain sober. But, just as obviously,

the "modern" high-bottom cases (like me) did not have to go to such lengths, I believed. We had much greater leeway in deciding when and how we worked a Step or even whether we wished to work the Step at all.

### **9. The Big Book is outmoded**

This concept — that the Big Book was old-fashioned and had been replaced by newer, better stuff — led me into the wonderful world of non-AA literature. I could ignore the book with the blue cover and immerse myself in red books, green books, 24-hour books, little-this books, and little-that books. When I felt I was wandering too far afield, I could dip into the more modern (but much less specific) *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. There were also side trips into books on personality, psychology, and psychiatry. For ten years, the Big Book, the written source for working the Steps, was a deep, dark secret for me, as I searched for truth and meaning every place except where it was.

Working my nine steps for a period of ten dry years brought me to the point where I was ready to drink again. In those ten years, my untreated character defects caused me untold mental pain, got me fired, and drove me to many forms of mental therapy in a futile effort to

cure my depression and fear.

The turning point came when I met an old-timer who told me that if I worked the Steps, my fears and depression would begin to lift. As my sponsor, he encouraged me to work through the Twelve Steps quickly, including the action Steps in the middle, which require a thorough inventory, admission of wrongs to God, to myself, and to another human being, and the cleaning-up of the damage I had done, drunk *and* sober.

Since I started working AA's Steps, much of the fear and depression that haunted my life is gone. Some of my defects have been lifted from me, though I am still wrestling with two of the most damaging.

I believe that if I continue to work the Twelve Steps over and over again, my life will continue to improve in all areas — physical, mental, and spiritual. I also seem to be more willing and better able to help others through working the Steps myself.

*D.O., Chicago, Ill.*