

*Simple
But Not
Easy*

**A Practical Guide to Taking the 12 Steps
of Alcoholics Anonymous**

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“WE, OF Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics *precisely how we have recovered* is the main purpose of this book.”

—Foreword to the first edition of
Alcoholics Anonymous (1939)

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

The purpose of this book is simple: Extract the principles of the Big Book to help people understand the 12 Steps as explained therein, and then take those steps to achieve recovery from alcoholism. AA co-founder Bill Wilson described the program succinctly in recounting his own recovery:

Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant the destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all. BB 14:1

This guiding principle and the caution that we embrace “the simplicity of our program” expressed by AA co-founder Dr. Bob Smith are the inspiration for this book. Simple as the program may be, it requires deliberate action:

Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. BB 25:1

Dr. Bob also addresses the level of effort required in his own story of recovery:

[If] you really and truly want to quit drinking liquor for good and all, and sincerely feel that you must have some help, we know that we have an answer for

you. It never fails, if you go about it with one half the zeal you have been in the habit of showing when you were getting another drink. BB 181:2

This volume is not a replacement or substitute for the Big Book, the wonderful old textbook of recovery. In fact, it is intended to complement the Big Book. The authors hope it will serve as a guide for newcomers and sponsors and as a tool for Big Book study groups and seminars. You should read “The Doctor’s Opinion” and chapters 1 through 7 in the Big Book before beginning.

This book, *Simple But Not Easy*, has one chapter devoted to each of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, as well as some important transitions between the steps. Each chapter incorporates text directly from the Big Book (BB), or careful paraphrasing, that relates to that step or twelve-step concept, followed by some notes from the authors. The passages are organized to describe “a design for living” (BB 28:2) that works for “anyone or everyone interested in a spiritual way of life” (BB 160:0).

Throughout this guide, references to the Big Book include the page number followed by the paragraph number where they can be found. A paragraph beginning on the previous page is identified with a zero (“0”). The page numbers and paragraphs refer to the fourth edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, published in 2001. The Study Edition of the Big Book published by Anonymous Press (AP)—which we highly recommend and use in our twelve-step seminars—has a few differing page citations in the front matter (those Roman-numbered pages preceding the main text), so we have also included citations to those pages.

In the Big Book, text of particular importance is printed in italics, and the quotes in this book retain that emphasis. Where the authors want to make additional emphasis in this volume, text from the Big Book is set in bold.

In the introduction to this book, the authors present some general observations and insights about the twelve-step program and the Fellowship of AA. In each subsequent chapter, there are Big Book passages followed by notes from the authors of this book. These notes were designed to aid in first understanding and then taking the steps, but are not offered as authoritative. Some readers may differ with these views. Although the authors believe their ideas are faithful to the Big Book in every way, they encourage thoughtful debate to the contrary.

INTRODUCTION TO THE 12-STEP SPIRITUAL PROGRAM OF RECOVERY

A Bit of History About AA, the Big Book, and Its Promise of Recovery

*A*lcoholics Anonymous was founded on June 10, 1935, the day AA co-founder Dr. Bob Smith took his last drink and commenced working a “program of spiritual action.” He achieved his recovery from alcoholism with the assistance of co-founder Bill Wilson, who had recovered himself in December 1934 on the advice of a friend in the Oxford Group, a non-denominational Christian fellowship of the time.

The growth of AA was agonizingly slow in its early years. The first one hundred recovered men and women published a book in 1939 describing their collective experience of how a spiritual recovery from alcoholism could be achieved. That book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, came to be known as the “Big Book” and through its fourth edition remains substantially unchanged. In every edition of the Big Book, Bill W’s recovery story is chapter 1 and “Dr. Bob’s Nightmare” is the first account in the “Personal Stories” section.

For over seventy years the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* has offered alcoholics a solution to their chronic, progressive, and fatal illness. This solution cannot be found in fighting or quitting or any other human effort.

Those willing to follow the 12 Steps as explained in this textbook of recovery will realize the benefits of this purely

spiritual solution. When the work of the Big Book is complete, the “great promise” will be fulfilled:

And we have ceased fighting anything or anyone—even alcohol. For by this time sanity will have returned. We will seldom be interested in liquor. If tempted, we recoil from it as from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally, and we will find that this has happened automatically. We will see that our new attitude toward liquor has been given us without any thought or effort on our part. It just comes! That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we had been placed in a position of neutrality—safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us. We are neither cocky nor are we afraid. That is our experience. That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition. BB 84:3

This small book offers newcomers, sponsors, and even long-time members of the AA Fellowship a new tool to identify and understand the basic principles of the Big Book. Once that understanding turns to action—taking the 12 Steps—a spiritual awakening and true recovery can be achieved by anyone.

THE TRUE NATURE OF THE STEPS

The complete text of the 12 Steps are found only on pages 59 and 60 in the Big Book. Here they are:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

These are merely an outline or skeleton of the “spiritual program of action” (BB 85:1). This list of 12 Steps—as so many see hanging on the wall in AA meeting rooms—never hurt anyone. They may provide some relief to those suffering; however, no one ever achieved a spiritual awakening and resulting recovery from alcoholism by attempting to follow these cryptic suggestions alone.

The Big Book fleshes out the steps by first describing in precise detail how to take them and then revealing the results that we will experience in the process. These instructions make it clear that we must be expeditious and diligent in proceeding through the steps. Furthermore, we must take them in the designated sequence. They are action directions, not a list of rules (e.g., the Ten Commandments). For all these reasons, it is very important for newcomers to seek the help of a sponsor in taking these steps.

One way to think about the process of the 12 Steps is:

Step 1: The Problem

Step 2: The Solution

Step 3: The Decision to Move from the Problem to the Solution

Steps 4–9: The Action We Take to Implement the Decision

Steps 10–12: The Maintenance and Growth of Our Spiritual Recovery

It is the Program of Action, particularly Steps 4 through 9, that brings about a spiritual awakening and recovery. Merely discussing the steps in meetings or in coffee shops with other alcoholics will not achieve this result. We have to act!

Once we achieve recovery, the last three steps ensure the maintenance and growth of our spiritual experience and continued recovered life.

WE ARE RECOVERED, NOT “RECOVERING,” ALCOHOLICS

Often in AA meetings we hear people refer to themselves as a “recovering alcoholic.” The authors believe the term “recovered alcoholic” is more consistent with the message of the Big Book and its promise of recovery. In the first 164 pages of the Big Book, the term “recovered” is used seventeen times to describe the result of the steps. Most notably, the title page of the book (as a self-description) states: “The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism” (BB iii).

On the other hand, the term “recovering” is used only once (BB 122:1; aside from a footnote in chapter 8, “To the Wives”), in reference to a wife’s need to tolerate a husband who is still “convalescing” (BB 127:0). So while we are not “cured” of alcoholism (BB 85:1), we are recovered: “We have recovered and have been given the power to help others” (BB 132:2).

ABSTINENCE IS NOT RECOVERY

Many people abstain from alcohol for months, even years, by going to meetings, reciting the steps, and exchanging complaints about their lives with other abstinent people. For these people “not drinking” is their only goal. But abstinence is only the beginning of recovery (BB 19:1).

The authors will gladly send a thousand dollars to anyone who can find anywhere in the Big Book where it suggests to the alcoholic that he or she should “quit drinking.” Saying that would destroy Step 1. We have no power over alcohol, so the Big Book does not frustrate its purpose by telling us to quit.

“DON’T DRINK AND GO TO MEETINGS”

We hear this refrain from well-intentioned people who are unfamiliar with the Big Book’s program of recovery. The fallacy of this advice can be found in the first two sentences of “How It Works,” the text recited at meetings thousands of times each day all around the world:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program. BB 58:1

The promise of recovery is found in the program, not the organized Fellowship of AA. The risk of failure lies in refusing to follow the steps, not missing meetings. The Fellowship of AA, however helpful, is still human, and the Big Book makes it clear that “probably no human power could relieve our alcoholism.” (BB 60:2). Our recovery rests upon a “spiritual program of action” (BB 85:1).

Meetings are rarely mentioned in the Big Book and generally concern happy social gatherings with other recovered people. The only exception is a reference to weekly meetings in the early years of AA that were “to be attended by anyone or everyone interested in a spiritual way of life,” where the prime objective was to “provide a time and place where new people might bring their problems” (BB 159:3).

Two important points. First, anyone seeking a spiritual life was welcome in those meetings, much like the “open” meetings of today’s AA. But even more than that, the Big Book recognized that everyone suffers from the spiritual malady, not just alcoholics. The thought was that anyone could benefit

from the spiritual program of recovery. Second, the meeting was for newcomers and their problems, not the problems of recovered people. Dr. Dan Anderson, longtime president of the Hazelden Foundation and noted alcoholism scholar, often said in patient lectures: “The two purposes of the AA Fellowship are didactic [teaching and learning about the program of recovery] and inspirational [sharing our experience with the common solution to our alcohol problem].”

Chapter 11, “A Vision for You,” is obviously addressed to those scattered people who had no Fellowship to rely upon and recovered solely by studying the content of the Big Book and following the steps (BB 151–164). So, once again, the message of the Big Book is focused on the Program of Action and the power of God, not the frequency of meetings.

FIGHTING WORDS

The first fruit of entering the world of the Spirit is the realization that we are no longer fighting anything or anyone, even alcohol. And this—the absence of fighting—is an indicator that sanity has returned. It sets the stage for removal of our obsession without thought or effort on our part—particularly quitting drinking.

We should be very cautious about accepting advice that encourages us to continue any fight, however well-meaning. Phrases like “Don’t drink and _____” are always about a fighting tactic for alcohol. Step 1 teaches us the fallacy of this advice: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol” (BB 59:2).

POWERLESSNESS

We often hear at meetings that in addition to alcohol, we have no power over “people, places, or things.” The truth is that we have no control over other people, situations, or outcomes, but we do have power in many areas.

However powerless over alcohol we are, we still have the power to take the steps that are the suggested “program of recovery” (BB 59:2).

Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. BB 14:1.

That is how the Big Book describes the action to be taken on the path to recovery, and you have the power to pay the price.

And the Big Book tells us that we have the power to help others, once we have achieved our own recovery (BB 132:2).

So we are not powerless over everything. Don't use it as an excuse to do nothing. Remember the words of the “Serenity Prayer” and change the things you can:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO BEGIN?

All that is necessary is the desire to stop drinking and the ability to exercise certain positive attitudes: willingness, honesty, and open-mindedness. The Big Book tells us this over and over.

The only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking. BB xiv:0

Upon a foundation of complete willingness I might build what I saw in my friend. Would I have it? Of course I would! BB 12:4

Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements. BB 13:5

We have emphasized willingness as being indispensable. BB 76:1

To duplicate, with such backing, what we have accomplished is only a matter of willingness, patience and labor. BB 163:1

Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery. But these are indispensable. BB 568:3

How long do you want to wait to get well? Let's begin right now.

Step 1

THE PROBLEM: NO POWER

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

*Learn about the step: BB xxv–xxxii (AP xxiii–xxx),
1–8, 18–24, 30–43*

Take the step: BB 30:2

THE BODY PROBLEM: CRAVING FOR MORE AFTER THAT FIRST DRINK

“Lack of power, that was our dilemma.” BB 45:1

“We believe, and so suggested a few years ago, that the action of alcohol on these chronic alcoholics is a manifestation of an allergy; that the phenomenon of craving is limited to this class and never occurs in the average temperate drinker.” BB xxviii:1 (AP xxvi:1)

Alcoholics have an “allergy to alcohol” that causes a craving for more alcohol after it is ingested. BB xxvi:3, xxix:0, xxx:5 (AP xxiv:3, xxvii:0, xxviii:5)

Alcoholics are “not drinking to escape; they [are] drinking to overcome a craving beyond their mental control.” BB xxx:0 (AP xxviii:0)

“All these, and many others, have one symptom in common: they cannot start drinking without developing the phenomenon of craving. This phenomenon, as we have suggested, may be the manifestation of an allergy that differentiates these people, and

sets them apart as a distinct entity. It has never been, by any treatment with which we are familiar, permanently eradicated. The only relief we have to suggest is entire abstinence.” BB xxx:5 (AP xxviii:5)

“The insanity of alcohol returns and we drink again. And with us, to drink is to die.” BB 66:1

Ultimately, because the disease of alcoholism is progressive, for the alcoholic to drink is fatal. BB 15:0, 30:1, 24:4, 66:1, 154:4

THE MIND PROBLEM: SOBER OBSESSION THAT IT'S SAFE TO DRINK

“The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this illusion is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity or death.” BB 30:1

“We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking. We know that no real alcoholic *ever* recovers control. All of us felt at times that we were regaining control, but such intervals—usually brief—were inevitably followed by still less control, which led in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization. We are convinced to a man that alcoholics of our type are in the grip of a progressive illness. Over any considerable period we get worse, never better.” BB 30:3

“The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink.” BB 24:1

“How then shall we help our readers determine, to their own satisfaction, whether they are one of us? The experiment of quitting for a period of time will be helpful, but we think we can render an even greater service to alcoholic sufferers and perhaps to the medical fraternity. So we shall describe some

of the mental states that precede a relapse into drinking, for obviously this is the crux of the problem.” BB 34:3–35:0

“This is the baffling feature of alcoholism as we know it—this utter inability to leave it alone, no matter how great the necessity or the wish.” BB 34:2

“We are without defense against the first drink.” BB 24:1

“Once more: The alcoholic at certain times has no effective mental defense against the first drink.” BB 43:3

PERSONAL HOPELESSNESS

“We OF Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly **hopeless** state of mind and body.” BB xiii

“We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, know thousands of men and women who were once just as **hopeless** as Bill. Nearly all have recovered. They have solved the drink problem.” BB 17:1

“[W]e have recovered from a **hopeless** condition of mind and body.” BB 20:1

“Almost none of us liked the self-searching, the leveling of our pride, the confession of shortcomings which the process requires for its successful consummation. But we saw that it really worked in others, and we had come to believe in the **hopelessness** and futility of life as we had been living it.” BB 25:1

“In the doctor’s judgment he was utterly **hopeless**; he could never regain his position in society and he would have to place himself under lock and key or hire a bodyguard if he expected to live long.” BB 26:3

“What you say about the general hopelessness of the average alcoholic’s plight is, in my opinion, correct. As to two of you men, whose stories I have heard, there is no doubt in

my mind that you were 100% **hopeless**, apart from divine help.”
BB 43:2

UNMANAGEABILITY

“[W]e were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.” BB 60:2

“They are restless, irritable and discontented, unless they can again experience the sense of ease and comfort which comes at once by taking a few drinks—drinks which they see others taking with impunity.” BB xxviii:4 (AP xxvi:4)

“We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn’t control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn’t make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn’t seem to be of real help to other people—was not a basic solution of these bedevilements more important than whether we should see newsreels of lunar flight? Of course it was.” BB 52: 2

An alcoholic is “a victim of the delusion that he can wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world if he only manages well.” BB 61:1

Alcoholics lead lives typified by: a need to control, self-pity, self-delusion, self-seeking, self-will run riot, and God playing. BB 60–62

HOW DO YOU TAKE STEP 1?

“We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery.”
BB 30:2

“If we are planning to stop drinking, there must be no reservation of any kind, nor any lurking notion that someday we will be immune to alcohol.” BB 33:1

NOTES ON STEP 1*No Power Over Alcohol*

The Big Book teaches us that all alcoholics face inevitable consequences. First, we have a body problem—the craving for more alcohol once we take the first drink. Second, we have a mind problem—at certain times we are obsessed with the false notion that we can control and enjoy our drinking, like a “normal” person. Our powerlessness over alcohol is demonstrated by a simple equation.

Consequence of the Body Problem = Can't Drink
Consequence of the Mental Problem = Can't Quit
Can't Drink + Can't Quit = NO POWER

By recognizing this dilemma, we understand and accept our powerlessness over alcohol and give direction to our personal hopelessness, thus beginning the process of recovery.

Finding Your Real Bottom

Many newcomers to AA wonder if they have reached their “bottom,” having heard that it is a fundamental part of Step 1. That “bottom” is often described in terms of the horrible events and outcomes experienced by the alcoholic. Certainly, being honest about our alcoholic life helps demonstrate our powerlessness over alcohol, but terrible consequences alone do not bring us to our “bottom” in AA—the place where we can begin to recover.

Your “real bottom” is not an external event. It is the moment you admit to yourself that:

1. you lack any power over alcohol,
2. your life has become hopeless as a consequence of that powerlessness, and

3. neither you nor any other human can solve the problem (BB 60:3).

Our lack of power over alcohol continues throughout our lives—recovered or not. The physical consequence of taking the first drink and the obsession that prevents us from quitting are ongoing realities for all of us. Recognizing that problem is your “real bottom.”

Taking Step 1 is evidence of a desire to stop drinking and an awareness of the problem we face. It gives reality, understanding, and direction to our hopeless situation, even if we do not yet recognize the solution. Our utter hopelessness provides us with a place to begin.

An Unmanageable Life

You probably know if your life has “become unmanageable,” if you are “restless, irritable, and discontented” when you are not drinking (BB xxviii:4; AP xxvi:4). But if you are unsure, consider the “Bedevilments” facing the alcoholic as described in the Big Book:

We were having trouble with personal relationships, we couldn't control our emotional natures, we were a prey to misery and depression, we couldn't make a living, we had a feeling of uselessness, we were full of fear, we were unhappy, we couldn't seem to be of real help to other people . . . BB 52:2

Next, most AAs are familiar with the spiritual “promises” that the Big Book offers “before we are halfway through” the 9th Step (BB 83:4). The life of an unrecovered alcoholic—abstinent

or not—can be described in terms of those “9th Step Promises” **in reverse:**

Know a lack of freedom and happiness. Regret the past and wish to shut the door on it. Fail to comprehend serenity and to know peace. Lack understanding of how your experience can benefit others. Feel uselessness and self-pity. Be interested only in selfish things and have little or no interest in your fellows. Self-seeking grows with each passing day. Fear of people and economic insecurity increases, too. Remain clueless on how to handle baffling situations. Do everything yourself—without success.

Can you find yourself in these descriptions? This is the unmanageable life that Step 1 acknowledges.

Step 1 Perfection

We must get and hang on to Step 1, **perfectly**. It is reality. It is the problem.

Step 1 is not a “spiritual principle” like the following eleven steps that seek to solve the problem. Those “spiritual principles” defy perfection, but Step 1 does not (BB 60:2).