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LIVING THE FIRST THREE STEPS

IN NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS

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"We admitted we were powerless over our addiction,  
that our lives had become unmanageable."

The First Step of Narcotics Anonymous is the first step we take on the road toward a new way of life -- a life of choice and freedom. This is the exact opposite of the way of life we experienced in our active addiction -- the fear and pain, the isolation and despair. It is not a simple task, because when we come to Narcotics Anonymous, we know a great deal about using, abusing, and self-destruction and very little about happiness, caring, and peace of mind.

Although learning how to live a fulfilling and productive life is not easy, it is possible. The Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous offer us the path to follow. Hundreds of thousands of addicts on this path have a message to share: there is hope for us. We do recover.

For many of us, an N.A. meeting is the first time we hear that message of hope, and because of all we've been through to get here, we find it hard to believe. Clean addicts are telling us that JUST FOR TODAY, WE NEVER HAVE TO USE AGAIN. Beyond that, they tell us N.A. offers even more than abstinence from all drugs. It offers us a way to feel different on the inside, a way to act differently on the outside.

We learn that to initiate the recovery process, we need to begin work on Step One: admitting that we are powerless over our addiction and that our lives have become unmanageable. In order to make this admission, we start to apply the spiritual principles of honesty, openmindedness, and willingness in our lives. We begin to get honest about our addiction with ourselves and with other recovering addicts in the Fellowship. We begin to open our minds to new thinking about who we are and what we need to do to change. And we begin to be willing to change and willing to admit that we do not have all the answers, that we need help.

It takes humility to admit that we cannot do it alone. But the Twelve Steps tell us WE DON'T HAVE TO DO IT ALONE ANYMORE.



Our First Step doesn't mention any particular drug. As a matter of fact, it doesn't mention drugs at all. Our experience in Narcotics Anonymous is that our problem goes far deeper than drugs. We believe that while we must be abstinent from all drugs in order to recover, our underlying problem is addiction -- the disease of addiction.

We believe that addiction is one disease, not different disorders according to the different drugs we used. Beyond that, we believe that it is a progressive and fatal disease that doesn't go away when we stop using. While there is no cure for the disease of addiction, the experience of our Fellowship is that we do recover through the application of the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous in our lives. We know today that we will die with the disease of addiction, but we need not die from it anymore.

The disease of addiction affects every area of our lives: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual.

The mental aspect of our disease lies in distorted thinking. One form of this is obsession. Over and over again, the disease tells us that we must use. The obsession points us down the road to self-destruction, but the disease tells us we have no choice, that there is no other way for us. We want what we want, and we want it now. This kind of thinking distorts our decision-making, so that we put our using ahead of all else. Again and again we make choices that are harmful to us and to others, each time expecting it to turn out differently. We hear it said often in meetings: "Our best thinking got us here."

Another facet of our sick thinking is denial. Our denial keeps us unaware of the fact that we have a problem. It tells us that the world has the problem: "If only everyone would just leave us alone." The denial aspect of our disease tells us we don't have a disease.

Even without drugs, our distorted thinking and self-deception can keep us blind to what actually is going on in our lives. For example, we may manufacture our own version of reality to justify destructive or selfish behavior -- and then blame the negative results on anyone but ourselves. Or we may view ourselves as such perfect victims that we are to blame for everyone else's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Neither of these perceptions is true, but we often flip from one extreme to another, blinded to the reality that lies somewhere else.



Our continuing self-deception is why it's not enough for us to get clean. Even after we're drug-free, the dynamics of obsession and justification and denial go very deep in us. That is why honesty -- even honesty with self -- is so difficult for us, requiring a great deal of practice. And that is why it's recommended we have a sponsor -- someone to help us see our own reality and the way the disease of addiction has been running our lives, someone who has personal experience with the distortions and deceptions and denial that color our thinking. We get additional help with honesty by being part of the Fellowship of recovering addicts and going to meetings. We rely on each other to get at the truth, because unchallenged, our disease tells us its own story.

The physical aspect of our disease is compulsion -- the acting out of obsessive thinking in our lives. As far as drugs were concerned, our obsession to use told us we had to do it, and we then acted that out compulsively again and again. Most of us used more and more drugs more and more often, expecting to recapture the times when drugs made us feel good. We accepted or ignored the physical damage we did to ourselves. For some of us, the drugs stopped working, but we didn't stop using. Many of us switched drugs, telling ourselves that we were okay as long as we didn't use a certain drug.

No matter what drugs we used, for us addicts one is too many and a thousand never enough. That is the nature of compulsion. We used in the face of deterioration, degradation, danger, and even death. The denial told us that

~~we~~ <sup>we had</sup> to do it again -- all the way to jails, institutions, and death.

The disease of addiction distorts our emotional lives, too. Most of us describe having felt "different" -- out of place, belonging nowhere, uncomfortable in our own skins. We were unable to cope with our basic feelings -- pain, anger, fear, shame, guilt, even joy and love. Many say that drugs helped alleviate the feelings of inadequacy and shame we had even before we started using. But beyond that, we addicts are notorious for resorting to highly self-destructive behaviors in reaction to even moderate amounts of emotional pain -- because our self-deception tells us the only pain we can stand is the self-inflicted kind. Of course, once we started numbing ourselves with drugs, we were even less successful at dealing with the feelings we had. A great many of us report at the beginning of recovery that we can't even identify what we're feeling, much less know what to do about it.

The emotional aspect of the disease plays back into the mental and physical. We use obsessive thinking and compulsive behavior to avoid feeling our feelings -- or to fix them. With or without drugs, we addicts know how to invest much time and energy obsessively chasing people, places, and things we believe will make everything all right. And once again, our denial and self-deception will tell us the chase is justified -- no matter how much destruction we leave in our path.

Addiction is a disease of the spirit, too. The core of this aspect of our disease is self-centeredness. It takes honesty to recognize our incredible selfishness. We act as if the world revolved around us. We live in the illusion that we don't need anyone or anything, that we can run our own lives very well. Or we experience ourselves as so overwhelmingly needy that we will do whatever it takes to fulfill our needs. We don't know how to be of service to others without expecting something for ourselves in return. Our impulse is to get what we want regardless of the consequences, and our sick thinking justifies leaving a path of destruction. The paradox for many of us is that in the end, our self-sufficiency causes us great pain, because it fails us.

We laugh at meetings when we hear ourselves described as egomaniacs with low self-esteem. We often bounce between feeling on the one hand that we are inferior to everyone around us and being quite sure on the other hand that we are unique and far better than anyone else. Either way, we are caught up in the illusion of being different, and we end up harshly judging others and ourselves in order to keep score. And either way, we never see the reality of ourselves: that we are human beings with strengths and weaknesses like everyone else. To make that admission would bring us freedom. Instead, we are prisoners of our faulty self-perception.

Since we experience ourselves as either superior or inferior to others and never on a par, we are spiritually isolated. We develop a deep feeling of hopelessness, because we have convinced ourselves that we are alone. Our isolation



compounds the problem of our self-centeredness: we are all we can rely on, and yet we are not enough. So we pump ourselves up with sick ego and pride to substitute for a feeling of genuine self-worth. One more time we are bouncing back and forth between better-than and less-than.

Many of us report feeling a lack of meaning in our lives - an emptiness, a spiritual void. We may make this problem worse by behaving in ways that run counter to our own principles and values. Our disease tells us that it's okay to do this, but living in the contradiction can make us feel emptier and more worthless than before. Again, we look to drugs, people, material possessions, and personal accomplishments to fill up the void, but they never work for long, if at all. What we lack are faith, hope, and trust. What we have is despair.

And it is in desperation that we come to Narcotics Anonymous, suffering from this disease of addiction that touches every area of our lives. One of the first things we're asked to do is to admit that we have a disease -- to admit that we are powerless over our addiction and that our lives have become unmanageable.

For some of us this seems obvious. We know our thinking is so twisted we almost died from it. We know we are physically just about wrecked. We know that our spirit is sick and our emotional lives a mess. And we know that we don't know what to do about it.

But for most of us, the First Step is a tough admission to make. We think that in saying, "I am an addict," we are



admitting defeat. We think we should have been able to control our drug use better. If only we had picked the right drugs. If only the drugs were better. If only we could clean up for a bit, we'd be able to handle it better. If only the other people in our lives would have <sup>be</sup>-shaped up. If only we weren't victims of society, our parents, our bosses, the police, "them". Our self-deception tells us that it's possible to be a "successful" addict. Our denial keeps us blind to the reality of our situation: that we have a disease, and it is progressing.

We have found that the way to begin cracking open our delusions is by looking at our addiction in the First Step. Hearing our sponsors and other addicts share honestly about the disease can help break through the first layer of denial for us. Some sponsors go further, asking us to write about how drugs and addiction affected our lives. They tell us that when the truth is written down in black and white, it cannot drift away. It cannot be denied and justified away by our sick thinking. We may ask ourselves questions such as these: In what ways were we powerless over our drug addiction? How did we try to control our addiction? How did powerlessness extend into other life areas, such as work and relationships? How do we try to manage and control situations in order to avoid feeling powerless?

For most of us, working on the First Step is the first time we have answered questions like these honestly. This is no easy task. Because of our expertise at denial and rationalization, it is difficult for us to know what the truth is. But it isn't impossible. With the First Step, we put *the*

principle of honesty into practice. We don't learn how to do this by reading about it or talking about it. We learn how to do it by experiencing it over and over again.

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When we begin to look honestly at whether we are powerless over our addiction, we see that in our drug use, the opposite was certainly the case: we acted as if we did indeed have the power to control our disease. We thought we had everything under control. We thought it was perfectly normal that we used drugs to solve our problems -- and then we thought it was perfectly normal to use more drugs when they weren't the solution anymore and in fact were causing problems of their own. As our disease progressed, some of us switched drugs or tried combinations. We convinced ourselves that we were in control and that we were okay as long as we weren't enslaved to one particular drug. Some of us changed our environment, friends, lovers, or jobs in the futile effort to quit or control our using.

Most of us viewed temporary periods of abstinence as evidence we could quit any time we wanted -- ignoring the fact that we always used again, as much or more than before. We believed we would stop if things got bad enough. But no matter how bad things got, we told ourselves we could hold out until they got worse. And they did. We promised loved ones that we'd stop using, but that didn't last either. Time after time we said to ourselves, "Today will be different." But we had a lifetime of todays, and they all seemed the same.

We begin to see that for us, there is no such thing as "will power" as far as our addiction to drugs is concerned.

We begin to see that for us, there is no such thing as "will power" as far as our addiction to drugs is concerned. Some of us did have a desire to stop using, but our desire wasn't enough to get us off drugs. Medicine, religion, and psychiatry -- nothing relieved us of our addiction. We never seemed to be able to get clean and stay that way. Our will had nothing to do with it at all.

As we look at what was really going on in our lives, we begin to see with clarity that we had lived a lie. The lie said, "Everything is okay." We begin to admit that the lie would have killed us -- our disease convincing us that that wouldn't have mattered at all.

Finally, when we look honestly at ourselves, we have to admit that we have had no control over all this whatsoever -- that in fact, we are powerless. We didn't deliberately choose to come to this low point of misery and pain -- hopeless, helpless, feeling worthless and alone. But our very best efforts did not prevent it. Our very best intentions did not prevent it. We admit that a powerful force called the disease of addiction has been at work in our lives, and we are powerless over it. We have been trying to live out the illusion of power, the illusion of control, and the illusion is going to cause us to self-destruct. We admit we are powerless over our addiction.

The First Step asks us to go on to admit that our lives have become unmanageable -- unmanageable by us.

For some of us, it's easy to see how unmanageable our lives grew, when time after time we wound up in jails and institutions, losing jobs and friends, destroying families.



Some of us had to experience extreme degradation before we could admit defeat and reach out for help. Others of us may think we are "not so bad", because we still have our jobs or homes or families. But we cannot confuse unmanageability with social acceptability. Denying that we are similar to other addicts keeps us sick.

We are told to apply the principles of honesty and openmindedness as we look at whether our lives indeed have become unmanageable. We begin to admit that we are "different" from other addicts only on the outside. On the inside, we are all alike.

In spite of our best attempts at managing and controlling our lives, the obsession and compulsion of addiction can color our decisions. Obsessive thinking and self-centeredness distort our priorities. When we act out compulsively, we leave a path of destruction in our lives and the lives of those near us. Our sick thinking justifies behavior we swore we'd never do. We try to ignore the endless chain of broken promises to ourselves and others. Our shame isolates us. The denial tells us our misery is somebody's else's fault. Our self-centeredness and self-pity tell us there is no hope for us, because we are different or even unique. We addicts didn't set out to feel miserable, but we found we could not manage and control our own feelings. On the inside, we all wind up feeling the same: alone, afraid, and ashamed.

Again, we have to admit it: We thought we had power over our lives, and when we lived out that delusion, our lives grew more unmanageable. Specifically in the area of drugs, when we didn't admit that we were powerless over our addiction as



it expressed itself in chronic drug use, we kept living out what our disease told us to do, and our lives grew totally unmanageable. When we didn't admit we were powerless, we thought we had power and could control our addiction. We couldn't. We lived a lie that said we could manage our own lives as other people seem to do. We cannot.

We admit it: our way just does not work. We are powerless over this disease of addiction, and our lives are unmanageable by us because of it.

Most of us experience great relief with this admission, because it explains our lives and actions in a way we can live with. It is not that we are bad people or that in some way we are weak and defective. It is that we have a disease. Being powerless over our disease of addiction is neither a crime nor a shame. It is a reality. Far from being a sign of weakness, getting in touch with reality is a sign of strength. Admitting the reality of our disease is the beginning of doing something about it -- the beginning of recovery.

And admitting the reality of ourselves -- our powerlessness over our disease -- activates the spiritual principle of humility in our lives. In the beginning, we tend to confuse humility with humiliation, because we know nothing about the former and too much about the latter. When we come to Narcotics Anonymous, our view of ourselves is very distorted -- abject worthlessness alternating with puffed-up ego and pride. This sick view of ourselves is the exact opposite of humility, which is the honest perception of ourselves exactly as we are at this moment -- human beings

with the disease of addiction, embarked on a program of recovery.

Our work in the First Step helps us experience humility. This Step tells us that on our own, we cannot turn our disease around. This is a humbling admission. We see that no matter how hard we tried to manage and control our lives -- changing drugs, jobs, locations, associations -- we couldn't make a dent in the progression of our disease. And the more we refused to admit that and struggled instead to stay in the disease, the more pain we caused ourselves. Our pain opens wider the door to humility, which allows us to be willing to hear new solutions and follow suggestions that come from outside us.

Humility does not come easy to us addicts, and it takes a lot of practice until we internalize it. But when the spiritual principle of humility is working in us and for us, then acknowledging and accepting ourselves exactly as we are brings us relief and release -- freedom from the illusion that we have to be perfect or that we even can be.

The First Step is an action step, and one of the actions that result from admitting powerlessness over the disease of addiction is admitting, "I am an addict." But that is not enough.

When we are powerless, then we act powerless. We give up the illusion that we can exercise power or control over our disease, and we proceed to live that way. When it comes specifically to our disease as it expresses itself in the compulsive use of drugs, we give up the illusion that we can

use drugs "successfully", whatever that means. Admitting we are powerless over what happens when we act out the disease with drugs gives us the freedom to stop using. We don't have to maintain the self-deception that we can "handle it" anymore, because we admit we cannot.

We used to think we had to use. Now we know that such thoughts are faulty information coming from our obsessive addict thinking. It is our disease telling us we have to use. The reality is we do not have to use. We have the freedom of choice. Now we choose to live as if we have no control over our use of drugs by acting that way. In other words, we live out our powerlessness by exercising no power over our use of drugs. We stop. We choose to stay away from all drugs. We stop fighting with our disease. In other words, we surrender.

The spiritual principle of surrender is a tough one for us, because it sounds like giving up, and that sounds like losing. Our sick pride has big problems with losing. But we in Narcotics Anonymous have learned that surrender is not losing. To choose instead to stay in the struggle is to lose. Our work in the First Step shows us that fighting our chronic and progressive disease is useless. It's a losing battle. Our powerlessness is a fact, whether we surrender to it or not. If we don't, we continue practicing the disease and our pain mounts up. If we do surrender, we opt out of the fight. This is a position of strength. Surrendering to the truth keeps us in reality -- and in recovery.

This surrender takes courage. Despite what our sick pride tells us, it takes courage to admit we're powerless and



then to behave that way. It takes courage just to walk through the doors of Narcotics Anonymous and begin facing up to our living problems. And while we may have a hard time identifying the spiritual principle of courage at work in ourselves, we have no problem identifying it in the N.A. Fellowship. We hear clean addicts sharing their experience of powerlessness over their own addiction to drugs, horror stories far worse than our own. Suddenly, in the group, courage seems possible. We've heard many newcomers say it: "If they can stay clean, I can stay clean."

When it comes to admitting we're powerless over addiction, once is not enough. We have a fatal disease of self-destruction that does not disappear just because we say so. Even after we've been clean for a while, denial often creeps in again. Our rebelliousness dies hard, as does our need to feel we are in control. We may have reservations and think we are different -- that we are not powerless over our disease or that we really don't have a disease at all.

Clean time gives us no power over our addiction. We remain powerless. We are not immune to sick thinking. Our denial and self-deception still may cover up our new awareness again. So we have found that we must continue to work and live the First Step on a daily basis. We continue to practice surrender.

If we don't we may lose touch with the fact of our powerlessness over our disease and allow it to become active in our lives again. We may come to think that we can go it alone, that we don't need the program. We may go to fewer



meetings and lose contact with clean addicts and the message of recovery. Our isolation can reinforce feeling "different" from others in the Fellowship. Once again, we can get trapped in the unconsciousness of self-deception.

In this climate, we are vulnerable to the obsession to use. Some of us have in fact listened when the disease told us one more time that we could "handle it" and be in control. Some of us have moved from the obsession into the compulsion, acted off the disease, and relapsed. None of us who have relapsed have ever reported that suddenly, mysteriously, we had control. On the contrary, those of us who have made it back to the program have reported that our using was just as bad or worse than it was before.

Our disease is progressive, and our lives remain unmanageable by us. Relapse is never an accident. But at any point in the progression when our disease tells us we can use, we can always turn to the First Step again. We can always admit that we are powerless over what our disease tells us, and that if we act off it, our lives very quickly will become unmanageable. Once again, this admission and surrender to reality release us from our sick thinking. We do not in fact have to use. Just because we think about it doesn't mean we have to do it.

We have found that we need to surrender any reservations and doubts. We have the disease of addiction, we are powerless over that disease, and we can recover by using the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous. By continuing to practice and internalize our surrender to the First Step, we eventually go past admitting our powerlessness and the

unmanageability of our lives, all the way to a deep acceptance.

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The First Step goes far beyond drugs, just as recovery from the disease of addiction goes far beyond simple abstinence. We don't have to be using drugs to practice our disease. We don't have to be using drugs to see our self-destructiveness play itself out in our jobs or our relationships. We don't have to be loaded to be overwhelmed by the unmanageability of our lives.

Surrendering to the fact of our powerlessness makes us willing to look at how our disease manifests itself in other areas of our lives. If we act out on our disease in any way, our lives grow ever more unmanageable. Our First Step can be applied in every case. In the beginning, it is easy to see how to apply it by remembering how it works in the area of drugs. We admit our powerlessness over the disease as it expresses itself in our drug use, and so we don't act out on the disease by using drugs. We admit we can't control it, so we don't control it. It's the same in other areas.

As we move through our recovery, we have continuing breakthroughs in our denial and self-deception. One by one, we come to see other aspects of our lives where we are keeping too tight a grip on people and circumstances, trying to manage and control and manipulate. With the help of our sponsors, we see that we are behaving in a totally self-centered way in a particular situation. We see that we are trying to keep our own lives manageable by exerting control.

We are quite sure we know how others should think and behave, even if we have to manipulate them into it. One more time, we have a faulty version of reality, and we think we can change other people and events to match it. When it doesn't work and things don't go our way, we are filled with feelings like anger, self-pity, self-recrimination, and pain.

Growing aware of how our disease plays out in our lives is difficult and painful for us. We addicts resist this awareness. Our disease puts our sick ego and pride in the way of admitting that in fact our control is an illusion and our way isn't working. If we are to live Step One in the situation at hand, we have to admit where we are powerless -- a humbling admission, but it's the prerequisite to surrender. And we must surrender and give up fighting the losing battle. We have to stop trying to exercise power -- stop manipulating and controlling. If we do not, our lives continue unmanageable -- and painful. If we do, we experience some freedom and peace of mind.

Freedom and peace of mind: not a very normal and natural state for addicts like us. What's normal and natural for is to use drugs, be obsessed, act compulsively, live in denial, and behave in destructive ways. The difference is that with the Twelve Steps, we are learning another way to live. We have found that the antidote to our disease is in the spiritual principles embodied in this program. It begins with the First Step, when we embark on a spiritually-based formula for living that allows us to be free from active addiction and the self-made prison we called life.



We seek out a sponsor who will help us and guide us. And over and over, as recovery clears away denial, we practice the spiritual principles of acceptance and honesty, humility and hope, faith and surrender. With continuing practice over time, we internalize these principles, and they come to occupy the space inside of us where there used to be only the disease of fear, hopelessness, and self-destruction.

We have found relief and freedom in the spiritual principle of acceptance. We begin to accept ourselves for who we are right now. We work at accepting others exactly the way they are. Accepting life on its own terms goes against our addictive nature, which wants us to rebel. But we come to understand that we can work on changing our attitude and the way we react to the world. It requires discipline and vigilance to keep practicing the willingness to accept life just the way it is -- inside us and outside us.

We exercise the spiritual principle of honesty, continuing to look at our lives and admit we have a disease over which we have no control. Accepting the reality of our powerlessness is the essence of the spiritual principle of humility. Humility is acceptance of who we actually are: members of a fellowship of recovering addicts and members of the human race. There is some freedom and comfort in even the beginnings of humility, as it opens the door to hope: we cannot change on our own, but there is help, and we can ask for it. To counter the natural fear addicts have when we give up the illusion of control, we begin to practice faith -- the faith that somehow, somewhere down the road, everything is going to be all right.



Eventually we experience the spiritual principle of surrender, a profound acceptance of our own powerlessness. We surrender in the struggle with our disease. We surrender to the fact that we need help, and we find it in our sponsors and the other recovering addicts in the Fellowship. We surrender to the necessity of going to meetings, so that addict thinking can be countered by information about recovery. We surrender to the fact we do not know either how to stay clean or how to live life on its own terms. And we surrender to the Twelve Steps, which will teach us just that.

We surrender, and by surrendering, we win. Working and living the First Step each day, we win the arrest of our disease just for today. As our cleantime grows, we begin to experience a freedom we never knew possible -- the freedom to change.

N O T F O R R E L E A S E

"WE CAME TO BELIEVE THAT A POWER GREATER THAN OURSELVES  
COULD RESTORE US TO SANITY."

Our work in Step One prepares us for Step Two. We've admitted we have a progressive and fatal disease, and we admit that we've never been able to stop or reverse it successfully before. But that means there had better be some help for us somewhere, because otherwise there is no hope for us at all.

And hopelessness is so natural to us. Our sick pride and self-centeredness tell us that if we can't do it on our own, we're out of luck: "Okay, you're right! We admit we have a disease, and it's only getting worse," our sick thinking goes. "We admit that nothing we've ever done to fix ourselves has worked. And we also admit we've made a mess of managing our own lives, because our disease is running our lives for us. Well," our disease tells us, "that's that. If we're powerless over this mess, we might as well finish the job off. It's no use."

But the message of the Second Step is the exact opposite of this sick thinking: There is hope. There is help. The First Step is not the last step.

Step One says we are powerless over our disease. But Step Two continues that there is a power even greater than our disease.

Step One says we cannot manage our own lives. But Step Two adds that there is a power far greater than us that can help us manage our lives.

Step One teaches us we have a disease of self-deception, self-delusion, and self-destruction. But Step Two says we can in fact be restored to sanity.

It is the personal experience of addicts in Narcotics Anonymous who are practicing the Second Step and living it in our lives every day that WE DO RECOVER.

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For many of us, the Second Step may look like a brick wall, rather than a door we step through along the path to freedom. It certainly is an unnatural way for us addicts to think -- in terms of hope and help, faith and recovery. It runs counter to our ingrained sense of isolation and despair. Step Two is so unnatural that when many of us see it, we turn off -- or because of our fear of change, we want to run. Our normal addict attitudes kick in: resistance, defiance, rebellion. That's when our sponsors often point us to what it says in N.A.'s Little White Book:

"There is one thing more than anything else that will defeat us in our recovery. This is an attitude of indifference or intolerance toward spiritual principles. Three of these that are indispensable are honesty, openmindedness, and willingness. With these we are well on our way."



It takes honesty to begin investigating and applying Step Two -- honesty to admit that just perhaps we are not the prime force in the center of our universe, honesty to admit that maybe we have been thinking and acting insane, along with doing a generally bad job of living. We need to be openminded to the idea that just possibly there are solutions to our problems and that the solutions may come from beyond us. And we need the willingness, in spite of our fear of the unknown, to reach out for these solutions -- willingness to be restored to sanity, willingness to be helped.

As we look around Narcotics Anonymous, we see plenty of evidence that there is help. At N.A. meetings, we see addicts who talk as if they've done what we've done and been where we've been -- and above all, felt the way we feel. We can see that they, too, are powerless over their addiction. But they seem to have found a way out of what we thought was the inevitable downward spiral of the disease. And it's not just that they're clean. It sounds as if they no longer are lost in the labyrinth of isolation, self-pity, and despair. They hold their heads up. They seem to be moving forward. They sound optimistic. In fact, they seem to have found some answers -- answers that have produced results unlike any we've ever been able to come up with for ourselves.

Our sponsors and other recovering addicts tell us it's simple. Not easy, but simple. They tell us it is possible to live life, not die one day at a time. They advise us to continue taking the Steps down the road opening up right before us. They urge us to begin -- just begin -- to come to

believe there is a Power greater than ourselves that can restore us to sanity.

That is our choice: We can die -- or we can come to believe. It's very simple.

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Coming to believe is the beginning of living the spiritual principle of faith.

Having faith and trust in anyone or anything outside of ourselves is very difficult for us. Our self-centeredness tells us that trust is at best foolish, at worst dangerous. We are quite sure everyone else either wants something from us or is out to get us. So we cultivate the illusion of self-sufficiency -- or we manipulate others into taking care of all our needs. Either way, our ability to trust withers, and our isolation deepens. In the end, many of us are devastated by the realization that we couldn't even trust our own selves to look after our best interests -- that we, too, have failed us. So when the N.A. program asks us to "come to believe" and have hope, it may seem impossible.

But our experience in recovery has shown us it's not impossible. Our sponsors tell us to take it easy. This Step calls on us just to enter into the process -- to come to believe, not to come to know, not even to believe all at once in one day. It's a gradual coming to believe, an unfolding faith that matures throughout our recovery. We practice having faith. For many of us, that means practicing blind faith at first, because faith is too new. Since working at

spiritual principles is the opposite of working at our disease, practicing blind faith is practicing recovery.

The idea of faith seems alien to most of us at first. Our self-deception and sick pride tell us we are super-realists -- street-smart cynics from the school of survivors. Our self-obsession, disguised as intellectual superiority, tells us, "If we can't see it, we don't believe it." But is that really true? Is it really true that we're too hard-core to have faith?

How about the hard-core faith we had in our drug dealers? How about the absolute faith in our drugs? How about our unshakeable faith that if we took enough of the right drugs or the right combinations, we'd get loaded? And if one drug failed us or was unavailable, look how quickly and easily "we came to believe" in another one. As a matter of fact, it's hard to imagine an addict without perfect blind faith in drugs. Such an addict would run precision chemical analyses on the drugs before taking them every single time. We never have heard of such an addict.

So much for our intellectual superiority and the illusion that "if we can't see it, we don't believe it." As practicing drug addicts, we certainly did know about faith, trust, and coming to believe. What the N.A. program is asking us to do is to believe in something that will help us, not hurt us. Now that is not normal behavior for addicts, and it takes work.



The Second Step tells us what it is we need to come to believe. Our First Step pointed the way, by showing us how strong our disease of addiction is. If we are to experience recovery, we must come to believe that there is something more powerful than us and our disease -- what we've come to call our Higher Power.

The Second Step tells us only two characteristics of this Power. First, it ought to be greater than ourselves. And second, it ought to be capable of restoring us to sanity (which we will discuss later). To take the action of the Second Step, we work on coming to believe that such a Power exists.

That's easy for some of us. Our disease has so beaten us up by the time we get to N.A., we're relieved to grab onto the lifesaving idea that there is help for us, another way to live. For others, the very fact we still are alive after all our best efforts at self-destruction seems proof enough that some Higher Power has been at work.

But for many of us, Step Two is a struggle. The idea of faith may bring up our childhood memories of a wrathful and punishing God. Our Higher Power may top the list of those we blame for our lives: "If there were a God, none of this would have happened to me." We may remember with guilt our old let's-make-a-deal kind of faith: "If you bail me out this time, I promise I'll be good!" Our sponsors may ask us to write about faith, to help bring some of these obstacles to light.

In N.A., we find out that the Second Step is about spirituality -- about faith and hope, not religion.

Narcotics Anonymous proposes no dogma or theology or religion at all. Agnostics, atheists, believers, the devoutly religious -- all of us are subject to the disease of addiction, and all of us eventually develop a concept of a Higher Power we are comfortable with.

Many of us focus on what we see at Narcotics Anonymous: rooms filled with clean addicts. We come to believe that there is something at work in these rooms, something we don't understand, but something that's causing profound changes in people who are just like us. We decide to make that "something" our Higher Power. Many of us decide that whatever it is that helps us to have one single day clean -- when we thought we'd never be able to stop using -- we will call that our Higher Power. Some of us conceive of our Higher Power as the creative principle at work in the world and in ourselves. Others say our Higher Power is the body of spiritual principles found in the Twelve Steps.

It really doesn't matter what our personal concept is. Finding and figuring out our own Higher Power is one facet of our journey through the Twelve Steps. Coming to believe gives us hope. Hope fuels blind faith. When we are willing to see evidence of a Higher Power working in our lives, blind faith evolves into a more robust, confident faith. The roads are many and wider than we may think to a belief in a Power greater than ourselves.

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Coming to believe there is a Power greater than ourselves is a potent force for change, because it directly contradicts

our nature as addicts. Opening up our minds just a crack with the beginnings of belief in a Higher Power unleashes powerful spiritual principles to work in us. These are the principles that help us combat the messages of the disease. These are the principles that make our recovery possible.

The spiritual principle of faith in a Higher Power is the opposite of our self-centeredness. In our active addiction, we saw the world only in terms of the way we wanted it to be, which is the way we thought it should be. But no matter how well we fulfilled our needs and wants, we ended up empty inside. The Second Step teaches us that we are not alone, that there is more to the world than what we need and want. Our faith begins to occupy the spiritual void inside of us. It says the world does not revolve around us. We don't have all the answers, but we aren't supposed to have all the answers either. What a relief!

Our faith enhances the spiritual principle of humility, which is the opposite of our sick ego and pride. Sick pride tells us we are the Higher Power in our own lives and gives us permission to manage, control, and manipulate people and circumstances. The First Step shows us that the manageability of our lives is a fiction. With the Second Step, we see that it's okay not to be a Higher Power, because there already is one, and it's greater than we are. Accepting this reality fosters humility: we not only cannot be in charge of our recovery, we don't have to be in charge of it. Humility combats our sick pride -- the illusion that we have power over our disease -- and helps us reach out to a Power better able to deal with it.



Faith and humility ignite the spiritual principle of hope, and that is the opposite of our despair. Despair is the end result of relying on sick ego and pride. It's our sick pride that tells us our way is the best way and the only way. So when our way fails, we think we have no other options. No wonder we despair. But when we come to believe there is something more and better than our way, a Power greater than ourselves, we get a way out of despair. Open to the idea of help, open to the evidence we see all around us in Narcotics Anonymous, we dare to have hope -- hope that we can change.

Working on these spiritual principles does not come to us easily or naturally. At the beginning, we may have to intellectualize them to put them to work in our lives. With patience and practice, we come to live by them. And ultimately over time, they are internalized and integrated *and incorporated* into our thoughts and beliefs. With these principles, we challenge the disease.

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The Second Step tells us that what our Higher Power can do for us is restore us to sanity. This assumes that we've been insane. Some of us readily agree, because we have spent time in mental institutions, often with drug-induced insanity. But we don't have to be candidates for the straitjacket to qualify for the label.

Most of us don't want to admit to insanity, because it doesn't quite square with our image of ourselves -- controlled, calm, cool. In fact, our disease uses our self-

image to keep us blind to the truth of our insanity. This is why many of us say our self-image almost killed us. Our sponsors may ask us to write examples of our insane thinking and behavior, because bringing the evidence into the cold light of day helps us overcome our denial. The spiritual principle of honesty is the antidote for self-deception.

When we examine our drug use, we begin to realize that active addiction and sanity are incompatible with each other. We're already getting a glimpse of our insanity in Step One by looking at how we are utterly powerless over our addiction and yet continue trying to control it. This qualifies for insanity. Now we look at more specifics.

Our ability to rationalize and justify our own warped view of reality is amazing. Our self-deception and self-delusion are insane. We actually paid people money to sell us drugs so that we could die from them. That is insanity. Our behavior was controlled by obsession -- getting and using and finding ways and means to get more. We put our drug use ahead of families, jobs, lovers, life. Over and over we made choices that were harmful to us and to others, each time expecting it to turn out differently. That is insane. Time and again we bought into the insane notion that we could "handle it" and that "handling it" was an admirable way to spend a lifetime. And our disease told us our thinking and behavior were okay, even normal and acceptable for us. That, especially, is insane.

We see that we have had an unfriendly relationship with reality. We couldn't accept the world the way it was, so we took drugs to change the way we perceived it. We couldn't

accept our regular human emotions, so we took drugs to make them disappear. We experience the ordinary people and pressures of life as irritatants and annoyances interfering with our own comfort and ease. This is an insane belief. The insanity we share led many of us to have the same fantasy: being stranded alone on a desert island without any of the world's irritants and annoyances, but with an endless supply of prime-quality drugs. Our warped thinking told us this would have been a perfect life, when in fact it is a prescription for death. The insanity that is our disease always told us that self-destructive behaviors really were acts of self-protection, even self-preservation. Overall, our judgment was determined by our obsessions and compulsions, which tended to exclude us from the realm of rational thinking and behavior.

As a matter of fact, when we examine our thinking and behavior, we see that we were not only irrational, but unpredictable, irresponsible, and unreasonable. We used drugs to "tide us over" until we could stop using. We used drugs to get up the courage to stop using drugs. We held onto our drugs when they no longer masked the pain. We held onto our isolation when we were dying of loneliness. We held onto our self-loathing as if it were self-worth. This is the portrait of our insanity.

Just getting clean may clear up some of our insane thinking. But even when we're off drugs and well into recovery, we still have our disease. Our sick ego and pride may tell us it's humiliating to have to turn to some mystery Power for help, because we can't do it on our own. Our



denial doesn't want us to know that there is anything besides ourselves running things. Our self-deception cultivates our isolation, blinding us to our ability to reach beyond the limits of our disease. Our very fear of change keeps us paralyzed, telling us we are in control and can find our own way out of the pit of self-induced misery. We see and experience proven recovery right in front of our eyes in the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous, and still we think we're different and have to look elsewhere. This is insane.

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What the Second Step tells us is that we can be restored to sanity. Many of us experience ourselves as never having been sane to begin with. We feel that our Higher Power restores us to what we were supposed to be, before our disease got in the way. It takes faith to let this happen, to uncover the self many of us fear is too horrible or worthless to contemplate. We begin to trust a Higher Power to guide us into fulfilling an image of who we truly are, an image we don't comprehend in advance. That takes faith.

What does it mean if we believe a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity? It means we believe we can change. But we have to cooperate in the process. Believing we can change means we no longer think we are doomed to repeat insane behavior over and over again. If we stop acting out destructive behavior, our Higher Power can go to work and restore us to sanity.



That is the action we take in the Second Step: we stop acting insane. It is scary and difficult for us, and it requires practice. Yes, we are powerless over the mental processes of our disease, and we have no control over our obsessions. But we are in fact free from having to act out on our insane thoughts. In the area of drugs, we stop using drugs. We are able to live sanely -- to live through the obsessive thoughts of using without living them out compulsively.

Sane behavior sets the stage for sane thinking. Stopping acting out on the insanity sets us up to be restored to sanity. We may not understand why and how we have behaved in destructive ways, but with the help of our Higher Power, we are able to stop the behavior anyway. We don't wait until our obsession to use drugs is gone before we stop using. We take the action right now. We stop using. And then somewhere down the road, the obsession to use loses its power over us or is removed. That is a job that we can't do for ourselves, because we are powerless over our own disease.

We take the action -- we practice saying no to our disease -- and we watch our self-worth and sanity develop. Sanity is admitting we are powerless over our disease. And sanity means recovery is the most important thing in our lives, because without recovery we have no lives. Sanity is knowing that an addict alone is in bad company. Sanity is giving up our painful isolation to be a part of, rather than apart from, the Fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous.

Sanity brings clear thinking and peace of mind, a rest from the restless searching and questioning, from the belief

we need to be fixed in order to be all right. Sanity is embracing our humanity -- looking at ourselves realistically as addicts and people, no more, no less. Sanity is having a relationship with reality and coming to accept life just the way it is.

It is sane to have spiritual principles operating in our lives. It is sane to have faith in a Power that will give us the strength and courage to recover. It is sane to harness the principle of honesty and begin to examine the reality of our lives. It is sane to regard ourselves with the realism we get from humility, to know that we need help to do what we can't do for ourselves. It is sane to work on accepting ourselves and our lives exactly the way they are today, just for today. It is sane to surrender to the program of Narcotics Anonymous, because through the Twelve Steps, recovering addicts are learning how to live.

Working the Second Step means working on accepting that we cannot do all this for ourselves. In spite of what our disease tells us, we cannot restore ourselves to sanity. Step Two says we need a Higher Power to help us pull it off.

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Sanity is not a one-shot deal. We do not go sane all at once. The nature of our disease is such that we are subject to insanity -- twisted or distorted thinking. It's just the way our minds work. For instance, although we admit we're powerless over our addiction in the area of drugs, we may think that getting clean means getting cured. We may feel

quite sure that we're doing a fine job of managing, controlling, and manipulating relationships and other areas of our lives -- not powerless at all. We may believe that unlike the rest of the human race, we're supposed to feel good all the time, immune to pain, anger, or fear. We continue to look for ways to fix bad feelings by working, dating, consuming, spending, or doing anything else to excess. We may try to "busy" ourselves into numbness. None of this works for us, but that doesn't stop an insane frenzy to fix ourselves -- or the insane thinking that says we have to do it.

We are masters of denial and excuse-making, especially when it comes to self-destructive patterns. We are experts at rationalizing and justifying the decisions we make, keeping ourselves blind to the consequences. Our fear of change may keep us stuck in attitudes and behavior patterns that cause us great pain. Yet we often resist recovery, resist working the Steps and taking the actions our sponsors and the N.A. program ask us to take. We may continue to isolate, even after we know we don't have to anymore. All of this is insane. In many ways, we still have an unfriendly relationship with reality.

Our collective experience in recovery has taught us never to underestimate the power of our insane thinking. Our disease has nothing whatsoever to do with our intelligence. Our ability to understand, explain, and analyze makes no dent in it at all. As a matter of fact, our disease will use our intelligence to make its insane case for hurting ourselves and others. Our disease will tell us that insight is enough. How many times have we had a stunning revelation and finally come



to understand some aspect about our insane behavior? How many times have we then waited for a lightning bolt to strike us and change us, even as we're repeating the same insane behavior over and over? We will think and wait and think and wait -- anything but stop doing the action that is keeping us sick. What we've learned in N.A. is that action, not insight, is the instrument for change. Applying and living the Steps in action opens us up for a Higher Power to come in and change us on the inside.

As our recovery unfolds and as we share with our sponsors and other clean addicts, the denial peels away to reveal different aspects of our lives. We come to see how we've been insane in a specific area, acting out the disease, refusing to admit the reality of our powerlessness, trying to manage people, situations, and our feelings the way we want them -- trying to force square pegs into round holes, and never mind that the pegs get destroyed in the process.

Just as we believe a Higher Power has helped us stay clean when we've never been able to stay clean on our own, we come to believe that this Higher Power can restore us to sanity in other areas where we act out on our disease. As we become conscious of our insanity, we work on allowing ourselves to have faith in that Power to restore us to sanity. It is a continuing process of surrender to the Second Step.

We apply the spiritual principle of honesty and catalogue our insanity: What is our obsessive thinking in this situation, and how are we acting on it? How is our behavior hurting ourselves or others? How are we trying to control our feelings by acting out compulsively? How are we behaving and

thinking as if we were the Higher Power? In what way do we think that we know exactly how everything and everybody should be? How are we trying to manipulate and control the way people perceive us and treat us? How do our denial and self-delusion operate in this situation? How is our version of reality different from reality itself? Are we bringing old reactions to new situations? What are our unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others? How do we feel and behave when we don't get our way?

To work the Second Step means to stop acting out the insanity. Applying the faith in the Second Step, we stop practicing the behavior that we've seen is so destructive to our health or our jobs or our relationships. We stop so that our Higher Power can restore us to sanity in this area, too.

This is a new ballgame for us. Our disease will always tell us we are different, that we are doomed to stay sick in some aspects of our lives, because we've never been able to change our ways before. Our disease fills our heads with a barrage of criticism and negativity, shrieking that nothing is any good, especially not us. Our negativity has been our self-fulfilling prophecy. Defeatist attitudes have usually caused our best intentions to go down in flames.

That's the way it is when we live out our disease. It does not want us to recover. It tells us whatever it takes for us to rebel and resist change. But that's to be expected. We're powerless over what our disease tells us. What we're doing about it today is keeping on working at the Second Step just the same. We turn to our Higher Power again and again. Every time we enter back into the process of coming to believe

that a Higher Power is there for us, we open ourselves up to be helped. With that help, we can speak back to our disease when it justifies and rationalizes insane, destructive behavior. We stop the behavior. Just as it is with drugs, stopping is freedom.

We apply the spiritual principles that work in the Second Step. Honesty begins to open our eyes to the way the disease has been running some aspect of our lives. We plug back into humility, which lets us know that our sick pride and self-centeredness have sent us faulty data about how we are supposed to feel and behave in this situation. We allow ourselves to experience hope -- the hope that our Higher Power can restore us to sanity in this area. We re-apply our faith, which soothes our fear of allowing change in this part of our lives. Our faith in our Higher Power assures us that if we give up our insane thinking, the illusion of control, everything will be all right. When our thinking is guided in new directions by these spiritual principles, our thinking grows sane.

In recovery, our best intentions can become our goals, and our goals can become our reality. The Second Step helps us give ourselves an attitude adjustment. The hope and faith nurtured when we work and live the Second Step help quiet the noisy static in our heads. The Second Step says our negativity and pessimism are a lie. Not only can we live drug-free. We also can come to experience peace and sanity in every single area of our lives. At last, we are beginning to become the kind of people we always wanted to be. Alone, we cannot. Together with a Higher Power, we can. We work on



replacing our negative attitude with gratitude, our fear with faith.

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Over and over again every day, we apply the Second Step in our lives. Yes, we do admit that we are powerless over our disease of addiction and that our lives are unmanageable. But we have come to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. Not "does restore us to sanity", but "can restore us to sanity."

The Twelve Steps are not designed to tell our Higher Power what to do. We're the ones with the disease. We're the ones who need a program for living. Our job is to come to believe in that Higher Power, to have faith. Working on the Second Step is a way we practice faith. For us, it's like getting a new muscle to develop, because practicing faith expands our faith.

The Twelve Steps show us what to do. They are guidelines for the actions we take so that our Higher Power can come into our lives and restore us to sanity, so that we can experience recovery. It is new. It is scary. It is freedom.

"WE MADE A DECISION TO TURN OUR WILL AND OUR LIVES OVER  
TO THE CARE OF GOD AS WE UNDERSTOOD HIM."

Since we are addicts and not angels, Step Three really is uncharted territory for us: making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of a God of our understanding. Fortunately, we are not unprepared.

Practicing each Step prepares us spiritually for the next one, and the First and Second Steps set us up for the Third. We admit our lives have been run by defective thinking, that we are powerless to do anything about it. We admit we have been insane, believing a distorted version of reality that propels us down the road to ruin. But we do have hope. We are coming to believe there is a Higher Power that can help us. We are not doomed to do what the disease tells us we have to do. We can change. We can in fact stop acting out the insanity.

So now what? It is terrifying for us to stop our old, familiar behavior. If we quit acting insane, what do we do instead? We need help. We need to continue with the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous. They show us what to do and how to live. They open our eyes to our own spiritual dimension. Honesty, humility, acceptance, surrender, faith, love -- the spiritual principles in the Twelve Steps provide a brand-new road for our thoughts and actions to run on.

Laying down this new foundation isn't easy. We are getting rid of our old ideas and making way for the new. That's never easy. We have to practice. But it's the very

act of practicing spiritual principles over a period of time that carves out our new path.

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Like all the Steps, Step Three is an action step. To begin with, it tells us to make a decision. This is one of the first mature and responsible decisions many of us ever have made.

We've seen that in our active addiction, much of our decision-making led to disaster, because it was dictated by our obsessions and compulsions. So while our denial told us we were in charge, our disease condemned us to make the same destructive choices again and again. At other times, we saw ourselves as victims who had all our decisions forced on us by family, lovers, employers, society. Ironically, we were comfortable in our victimization: as long as our self-delusion convinced us we really had no options, we could blame everyone else for the decisions we felt we had to make.

Now we are asked to make a decision for ourselves. Because we're addicts, we don't do it easily. On unfamiliar ground, we tend to get paralyzed. Which way should we go? What's in it for us? What if we make a mistake? What if we don't know all the options in advance? Before we make the tiniest decision, we want to know the outcome. Given even a simple choice between left and right, we addicts -- who so often risked our lives playing Russian roulette with drugs -- can become frozen with fear of the unknown.

Our fear would have us avoid the Third Step. Our sponsors tell us that's natural. Our fear causes us to resist our spiritual journey. It may disguise itself as an attitude of indifference or intolerance toward the spiritual principles



in the Steps. But we're told that a little bit of willingness goes a long way. Just being willing to make this Step Three decision contradicts the close-mindedness of our disease -- the stubbornness, rebelliousness, and defiance that protect our fear and keep us sick.

Willingness opens us up to practicing the spiritual principle of faith. Faith fights our fear-induced paralysis. Faith allows us to make a decision without first knowing the outcome, without any up-front guarantees. In the beginning, we make this decision on blind faith, daring to set off down a path many of us never have travelled before.

The Third Step asks us to step out of the familiar confines of our disease to take a very specific action. It is now our turn. We don't wait for a Higher Power to perform magic on us. We make the decision for ourselves, on our own.

As bizarre as it may seem to all of us at first, we make a conscious decision to have hope. Our hope is nurtured by the evidence we see in Narcotics Anonymous: everything is going to be okay, if we just continue living according to these Steps. The Fellowship tells us we are not responsible for our disease, but we are responsible for our recovery. Just for the moment, just for today, we choose to take that responsibility. In the beginning, without knowing fully what it is or what it means for us, yes, we make a decision to work this Program. We make a decision to commit ourselves to the Steps. We make a decision for recovery.

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What we decide to do is to take our will and our lives and then to turn them over to the care of a God of our

understanding. Before we turn them over, we begin learning what they are. We've actually been examining our will and our lives in the First and Second Steps. In Step Three, we continue looking into ourselves, in spite of our natural resistance. We apply the spiritual principle of honesty to keep chipping away at our self-deception and denial. We ask ourselves: What is our will, our self-will? How does it play out in our lives?

Our will is what we want -- what we want to do, what we think we need, the way we want to be, the way we want others and the world to be. And when we act out on our will -- or try to make the world conform to our will -- the result is made manifest in our lives. Our will is what we want. Our lives are what we get.

There's nothing innately wrong with will. Human beings have self-will -- needs, desires, and wants -- and the means to fulfill them. The problem for us addicts is that our self-will often is shaped by self-centered fear, distorted thinking, obsession and compulsion, sick ego and pride, and self-centeredness. Quite a package!

For instance, often what we want for ourselves is at best inappropriate, at worst lethal. But our twisted thinking tells us that what we want is exactly what we need to fix us and make us whole.

Often the way we want others to think, feel, and behave has to do with our own needs and not theirs. But our sick ego and pride tell us that we know what's right for everybody. We are so obsessed with what we want that we're blind to the needs of others. We often have no idea how we really affect other people, so we trample on their desires on our way to

fulfilling our own. We can't figure out why they aren't grateful that we're trying to bring them into line.

When it comes to the world at large, often the way we want it to be has nothing to do with the way it is. But our childish self-centeredness and arrogance tell us that our fantasies are valid. We can't figure out why constantly banging our heads against reality doesn't make reality change.

In every area -- self, relationships, society -- acting out on sick self-will leads us down a path of destruction. We are not bad people. We just don't know another way, and we're doing the best we can. We pursue our obsessions to the bitter end, because they are grounded in fear. We are afraid of what will happen if we don't get our way. And we're afraid we won't get our way without manipulating and controlling. We are afraid to be out of control, because we do not trust. Our disease prevents us from seeing the truth: that we are okay and we will be okay, if only we'd stop controlling.

Some of us come to N.A. with a certain amount of clarity on the subject of our own will. We've already been beaten to the ground by our disease. We know how it distorts our self-will, because we've experienced the near-ruination of our lives. We know that our minds are chaotic with static and turmoil, negativity and criticism. We are quite sure that any thoughts or urges or decisions coming out of all that noise must be sick.

But in the beginning of recovery, many of us can see how our addiction works only in the area of drugs. We admit that we have a disease that twists our will when it comes to drugs. We come to accept that as addicts, our will to use is insane. 44



Even so, after we get clean, we may still want to use. When we share that at our N.A. meetings, we are greeted with nods and smiles of recognition. We are told there is nothing odd about a drug addict wanting to use drugs. It's a normal facet of addict self-will -- and it decreases and even disappears with time and the Steps:

It's much harder for us to see how our disease infects our will in other areas of our lives, too -- how, for instance, acting exactly the way we want in our relationships very often pushes people away and tears those relationships apart. Since our disease is a disease of denial, and since we don't get cured overnight, we cannot see our will at work in all aspects of our lives all at once. It takes a great deal of practicing the spiritual principles of honesty, humility, and acceptance to see past our rationalizations, justifications, and excuses all the way to the truth of our self-will.

Our sponsors tell us that continuing with the Steps, we will learn more and more about the nature of our self-will. It's yet another aspect of our journey of self-discovery. As the fog lifts -- as our denial recedes and our humility and self-acceptance grow -- we are able to see ever more clearly whether we're acting from sick self-will or the spiritual principles of recovery.

For now, we characterize our addict's self-will this way: We want what we want, and we want it now -- and never mind the consequences. Another way to describe our will is this: "I wanna! I gotta! I'm gonna!" An infantile tantrum is our theme song.

In Step Three we make ~~use~~ a conscious decision to take our will and our lives and turn them over. What that means is acknowledging what our will is -- what we want, what we think we need, the way we want our lives to be, the way we want others and the world to be -- and then letting it go. Working the Third Step means making a decision that before we act out our will, we turn it over and let it go. We acknowledge, for example, that we want to do something self-destructive, but we turn over that want -- and we don't do it.

Of course, we addicts don't turn anything over naturally or gracefully. We resist. We dig in our heels. The very idea of letting it go and turning it over collides head-on with our nature as addicts -- our self-centeredness, our grandiosity, our need to manage and control. Once again, we have to practice spiritual principles that oppose the urgings of our disease. In this case, we practice the spiritual principle of surrender. Applying the principle, we are working the Step.

We have to work on surrender, because our disease tells us that surrender is defeat, that loss of control is failure. Even more extreme, our disease tells us that working the Third Step is dangerous. It assures us that if things don't go the way we think they should go, we'll disintegrate or disappear or die. But we have a new way to answer our disease. We return to the First and Second Steps.

The First Step shows us again that our ability to manage and control our lives is only an illusion. Our Second Step labels as insanity the way we rush headlong to self-destruction -- propelled by sick self-will. And now the Third Step tells us to accept all this -- to surrender our

will, to loosen our tight grip on our faulty version of reality. We relax our hold, release our will, and let it go. We surrender our control, because our control is bound to kill us.

Turning over our will and our lives also requires practicing the spiritual principle of humility -- the opposite of our self-centeredness and arrogance. We practice humility when we admit that our own disease is the major obstacle in our lives -- that we are the ones in our own way. Humility allows us to acknowledge that we must turn over our will and our lives if we are to experience recovery and a new way of life. Humility teaches us that we are not alone and do not act alone.

Turning it over also is an exercise in the spiritual principle of faith. Faith is the opposite of our need for control. Our addict impulse is for answers first, actions later. In other words, we want no risks, only guarantees. Having faith is not knowing the end result of turning over our will and our lives -- and doing it anyway. Faith is the act of surrendering the outcome, letting go of the results. If we want something different, we have to do something different. We have to risk recovery.

In faith, with humility, we practice surrendering our will and our lives. We turn them over. We take a deep breath, shut our eyes, hold our noses, and take the leap.

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We are not leaping into the void. We are not turning our will and our lives over to chance. Step Three says we make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to something that can take care of us. We surrender our will and lives to the



care of God, as we understand him. In the face of our self-destructive nature, which for years demanded we turn our will and our lives over to the care of drugs, this is a promising alternative indeed.

If we're going to turn our will and our lives over to God's care, then we need to continue developing a concept of God we can work with -- a God of our own understanding. That means the nature of our personal God is up to each one of us. We don't need to have a perfect understanding and a detailed portrait of God before this Step can work. We turn our will and our lives over to the care of our God, as we understand him right at this moment.

We urge those of us who are bothered by the words "God" or "him" in Step Three not to worry. Many of us feel that way at first. We are told that those words are just shorthand -- a simple way to identify any Higher Power who does for us what we can't do for ourselves. We find our own Higher Power and call it what we like. There are atheists among us who do not believe in God but do believe there is something greater than ourselves and our disease.

Journeying through the Steps helps each of us develop an individual concept of a Higher Power. We have experienced that our personal understanding of that Power changes, deepens, and grows the longer we apply these Steps to our lives.

Many of us begin developing our concept of a Higher Power from the characteristics described in the Steps. The Steps talk about a Power that is greater than ourselves, that can restore us to sanity -- and here in Step Three, that can be trusted to care for our will and our lives.

The idea of care is alien to many of us who have had bad experiences with being taken care of and even with taking care of ourselves. We may associate being cared for with victimization or unhealthy dependency. Many of us regard being cared for as shameful -- a sign of our weakness and inability to cope on our own. We may feel that in turning our will over to another's care, we are turning our will over to another's control.

That's our disease talking. The spiritual principles of honesty and humility tell us the exact opposite: that it's realistic for us addicts to admit that we're unable to cope alone. And our personal experience with N.A. recovery shows us we aren't coping alone at all. After all, suddenly we aren't using drugs. Some power other than our addiction must be at work. We are being cared for.

Some of our sponsors suggest that we assign another attribute to this Higher Power. That attribute is love. These sponsors talk about a loving God -- about turning our will and our lives over to the care of a loving God of our understanding. Many of us believe the very nature of this Power is unconditional love and acceptance and care. Those among us who grew up fearing and resenting a wrathful God -- or certain that there is no God -- often find this new conception difficult but preferable and worth trying. If an old concept of God doesn't feel right, we work on changing it until we're comfortable.

Believe in N.A. Believe in the Twelve Steps. Believe in the spiritual principles. Believe that we believe. Some of us believe in a traditional concept of God. Some of us believe there is innate wisdom inside of us that we've been

too sick to heed -- a higher consciousness of what is right, good, healthy, and sane. Some of us adopt our sponsor's God until we can find our own. It doesn't matter what our conception of God is -- or whether we call it God or not.

We practice the spiritual principle of faith. We work at believing in something beyond our will and our way, our drugs and our disease. It's the search that matters, the spiritual journey, the growing connection with a Higher Power that helps us in our recovery.

What can we depend on? Whom can we trust? Developing our own personal concept of a God whom we can depend on and trust -- who cares and takes care -- is a very practical action we take in our recovery. It's practical, because it works.

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In Narcotics Anonymous, we know that when we decide to turn our will and our lives over to the care of our disease, the results are jails, institutions, dereliction, and death. But what happens when we make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand him? It means we make a decision to defy our disease, having faith that we are going to be okay.

The easiest way to see how the Third Step works is by applying it to the area of drugs. For instance, say we want to use drugs. Our denial may mask our simple desire to use -- trick us into confusing our wants with needs. Our disease may tell us that it's a necessity that we use, that we need to have drugs right away, that we are going to do whatever it takes to get those drugs immediately -- that in fact, it's a matter of life and death. But it's not really all that



complicated. We don't need to use. In fact, we never need to use again. We just want to use, that's all. That is our will.

What do we do? We go back to the First Step. We admit we are powerless over our disease and the way it twists our thinking. Our powerlessness over our addiction means we don't make ourselves begin obsessing about drugs. We're addicts, and one way our disease expresses itself is in the obsession to use. If we then act out the obsession, we are sucked into a vicious spiral of compulsion to use without end. Once again, we admit we're powerless over the disease of addiction, that our lives are unmanageable by us.

We move to the Second Step. We catalogue the insanity at hand: thinking and obsessing about drugs, thinking that we need to use them, thinking we'll die without them, planning the strategies and justifications for using. We acknowledge and accept our insanity -- and we come to believe once again that there is a Power that can restore us to sanity in this area of our lives. We re-experience that hope for recovery. In order to let that Power come into our lives, we move on.

We move to Step Three. We make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. We acknowledge what our will is in this instance: we want to use drugs. At the very same time that we have a desire to stay clean, we want to use. We do not tear our hair out over what our disease tells us to do. We do not beat ourselves up about it. We do not struggle with it. Whether it's just a fleeting thought or a full-blown obsession, at last we actually can do something positive and practical about it. We work the Third Step on it. We turn it over.

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We make a conscious decision that instead of acting out on our will, we're going to turn it over to God's care. We let go of our will to use. One more time, we make a decision that just for today, we won't use, no matter what.

By turning over our will and surrendering our lives, we get ourselves out of our own way. We get our will out of the picture. We make room in our lives for the Power who is greater than ourselves, who can restore us to sanity, and who can take care of us. We ask God to help us with our obsession to use, to help us go through our thoughts and feelings without destroying ourselves.

Recovering addicts in the N.A. Fellowship share with us about some of the results of living the Third Step: We experience that we are not alone. We find that God does help us go through whatever we have to go through without our using. We always survive our obsessions, and they always pass. We really never have to use drugs again. We really can learn how to live beautiful and fulfilling lives clean. When we act on our will to use, then the drugs and our addiction work in our lives. When we surrender our will to God's care, then God can work in our lives.

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But now what? If we're not going to act on our self-will, what are we going to do? We have found that hearing about recovery and talking about recovery don't change us. Taking action changes us. If we're powerless over what our sick thinking tells us to do, then we need to get some direction. Living the Third Step means asking our Higher Power to show us what action to take instead. Many of us get down on our knees to ask our Higher Power for help with a

prayer such as this:

"God -- I am an addict. I am powerless over my addiction, and my life is unmanageable. But I've come to believe that you can restore me to sanity. So I turn my will and my life over to your care. Please guide me in my recovery. Teach me how to live. Please show me what I have to do right now, and help me accept your will."

Just saying such a prayer -- reaching beyond our disease for help -- is an exercise in recovery. Even if we're only mouthing the words and acting as if we have faith, we are working against the despair and self-centeredness of our disease. Asking a caring God for help -- an act of ego-deflating humility -- actually opens us up to being helped.

When we ask a Higher Power we can't see or hear to show us what action we need to take, how do we get our answers? We have come to believe that God speaks to us through those around us. We addicts finally have found people we can turn to for help, insight, guidance, and direction -- right here in Narcotics Anonymous. They are recovering addicts who have experienced exactly what we're going through.

We get suggestions and directions from our sponsors. We get input from other friends in the Fellowship. We get insight when members share their experiences at meetings. In the beginning, it seems miraculous. From these sources, we're hearing the answers we need -- answers that sound "right" to us.

What should we do right now? The answers to that



question never will be: Use drugs. Go on a rampage. Destroy ourselves. Lash out at others. Isolate from human contact. And plunge ourselves into tension and turmoil. We can say with calm certainty that directions like these come from self-will shaped by the disease of addiction.

Instead, if we listen really well, we hear directions like these: Call our sponsor. Go to a meeting. Write about our insanity. Reach out to a newcomer. Go back to work. Get some rest. Ask for help. Say a prayer. And don't use, no matter what. Our experience is that directions like these promote recovery.

When we try these actions on, they often feel awkward and don't seem to fit us well. They're not supposed to. They're new. We practice them until they fit a good deal of the time.

What is God's will for us? We do know that a loving and caring God that is capable of restoring us to sanity would want us to be clean, to be free of all expressions of the disease in our lives, to experience peace and security and joy. We believe God wants us work this N.A. Program and to practice the spiritual principles in the Twelve Steps: honesty and acceptance and faith and love. But how does that translate into specific action? What does God want us to do right now?

Wouldn't we addicts just love to be able to figure out every aspect of God's will. After all, that would be the ultimate fix -- an intellectual exercise, producing painless, perfect knowledge in advance. But that's impossible. If we had perfect knowledge of God's will for us, it's we who would be God. We aren't.

We do the best we can, as addicts and as human beings. 54

In time, as we continue to apply these Steps to our lives, the principles of the program are internalized and integrated within us. Then when we ask ourselves, "What action should we take right now? What might a loving, caring God want us to do? What might God's will be?" -- many of the answers well up from deep inside us, from our recovery and not from our disease.

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The scary part about the Third Step is that we don't know what will happen after we do it. We may know the way we want it to turn out or the way we think it will turn out. We may delude ourselves into believing that turning it over means saying, "Okay, God, take me -- I'm yours," and then sitting back and waiting for our wildest dreams to come true. Or we may be absolutely sure that if we surrender our way and do something different, there'll be no end of disaster, defeat, and doom. Both kinds of thinking reflect our disease, not our recovery.

That's where our faith comes in. We turn our will over -- and leave the results to God. That is the exact opposite of the normal addict reflex -- wanting to know exactly what's going to happen next. But now we are building new reflexes. We do not know the result of turning our will and our lives over to God's care. But we do it anyway. We have picked a Higher Power we can trust. So we work on having faith that if we turn our lives over to his care, we are all right. And we believe the opposite is true, too: if we don't surrender, we're back on the road to relapse.

After all, it's not as if letting go of the way we lived is letting go of lives filled with happiness, peace, and 55

freedom. Rather we are turning over lives that, with our best efforts, have been totally unmanageable. We have faith that living in partnership with a Higher Power is far better than living by our own power alone.

Even if we have only blind faith -- and even if we're only acting as if we trust in God -- the Third Step works anyway. We do not need to see the force of gravity in order for it to keep us from flying off into outer space. The Program works the same way. We turn our lives over, let go, take action, leave the results to God, and accept those results.

In the area of drugs, that means we make a decision to turn our will to use drugs over to God's care. We ask God to help us not act out on our self-will. We ask God to show us what action to take right now. We take that action. We go to a meeting, call our sponsors -- and just for right now, we don't use no matter what. We work on our faith. Having faith means knowing we are going to be cared for, and we're going to be just fine. As a matter of fact, if we stay clean, we are fine right now, even though we may not feel that way. In the care of the disease, we are not all right. In God's care, we are all right. That's faith.

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The Third Step works in any area of our lives. We acknowledge where our sick self-will is running things, make the decision, turn it over, ask for help, do what we're supposed to do, and leave the results to our Higher Power -- knowing and accepting that everything is going to be all right.

We addicts don't make this surrender easily or lightly --



or totally. As newcomers we often complain, "We turned our will over, but then we took it right back. We turned it over again and took it back again. We must be doing something wrong!" But we are told we're doing absolutely nothing wrong at all.

There are no sudden saints in Narcotic Anonymous. The Third Step is not a quick fix. We do not turn our lives over one fine day and

then do only God's will forever after. It just doesn't work that way. To have self-will is part of being human. To have destructive self-will is part of being an addict.

Now we're privileged to be in a Program where at last we can do something about our disease. Practicing the Third Step over and over is recovery. Every single time we're aware that we're caught in defective or destructive thinking or behavior, we can make the Third Step decision again. That is exactly what we do with our self-will: we turn it over. We keep having the disease -- so we keep applying the Step and keep turning it over, keep working on leaving the results to God.

And we can let go of our self-will only when we are aware of it -- and only when we're willing to do so. Because of our disease, we're often not willing -- and we're even more often unaware.

After all, denial and self-deception are the hallmarks of addiction. With the very best of intentions, we may think we're turning over all aspects of our self-will and every single facet of our lives to the care of our Higher Power. We may think we're doing it, but we're not. There's nothing bad or shameful about that. The fact is, our denial prevents us

from seeing all the ways our disease affects our behavior. Denial keeps us unconscious of aspects of our self-will -- how we try to manipulate, manage, and control outcomes in just about every area of our lives. We deceive ourselves with excuses and rationalizations that blind us to our true motives. And we can't surrender our will when our disease convinces us our will has nothing to do with what's going on.

That's why the Third Step alone won't solve our problems. If it did, we could say "We turn it all over," and abracadabra! We'd be one hundred per cent successful at letting go and letting God run every aspect of our lives. Our self-will would match God's will for us all the way down the line. Perfect at last!

Unfortunately, perfection is out of the question. Fortunately, we have the Steps. As we apply them, we learn more and more about the nature of our self-will, how our disease determines what we want and the way we want the world to be. And awareness of our self-will expands even more as we share with our sponsors and other addicts. When we can't see clearly how an attitude or behavior is hurting us, they can, and they tell us. It's always easier to see self-will at work in someone else.

Living the Third Step teaches us the opposite of living in denial. Living in humility relieves us of the illusion of perfection. And learning what our destructive self-will is teaches us what God's will isn't. the Third Step unleashes a process that punctures our sick pride, deflates our ego, and at last helps get us out of our own way. It allows us to begin to change.

It's not only denial that keeps us from applying the Third Step. It's also our resistance to change -- and that's another example of our self-will at work. We hate change. Being addicts, we reserve some areas of life where we are quite sure we don't need God's help and can handle matters ourselves. We refuse to turn these areas over to the care of our Higher Power. Or we will tell ourselves we are turning them over, but we aren't. We may delude ourselves into thinking that our will is God's will. In fact, our denial often hides our fear.

For example, the area of relationships is a tough one for many of us. We often refuse to let go of even destructive behaviors and painful situations, because of our fear. On the one hand, we're afraid of the unknown. On the other hand, we're quite sure we can predict the terrible and terrifying results of letting go and letting our Higher Power in. We refuse to admit our powerlessness and the unmanageability of the situation. We refuse to surrender. We prefer familiar misery to the potential freedom.

We weave the most incredibly elaborate fabric of justification and rationalization: "What turmoil? What insanity? What damage and destruction? This is the way it's got to be. It's everyone else's fault. If only they did this and didn't do that, everything would be fine!" And when it's suggested that we stop managing and controlling and start surrendering this relationship to the care of a loving God, we resist: "There's nothing wrong here. There's nothing to turn over. Everything's the way it's supposed to be. Not only that, it's already turned over! And, boy, are we powerless! We've been praying about it night and day!"



What's required here is not talking about the first three Steps, but working them. Slowly, gently, and deliberately, we apply the Steps to the problem.

Going back to Step One, we look for the way our disease has been running our thinking and actions. We reaffirm our powerlessness -- over our disease and over every aspect of this situation. We admit that we can't change another person, that our selfish efforts at controlling events and outcomes are fruitless and even do damage. We list the ways our lives are unmanageable: the more we twist things in one direction, the more they go in the other direction. We work on not only admitting but accepting our powerlessness and the unmanageability of our lives.

We go to Step Two and acknowledge our insanity. We examine the ways we've been acting and thinking irrationally in this situation. We admit that our sick pride and arrogance have nothing to do with reality, that our self-centeredness has distorted our perception. It's insane to think we can control the present and predict the future. It's insane to think we always know what's best for us -- we who have had a remarkably good track record at self-destruction. It's insane for us to think that our Higher Power is able to help us do what we've never been able to do for ourselves -- stop using drugs and stay stopped -- but is unable to help us with other aspects of our disease. We re-enter the process of faith, coming to believe that we can be restored to sanity in this area, too.

If we go no further than the Second Step, we get stuck. We eventually continue acting out the insanity over and over again, continuing in pain, continuing in the disease. It is

not enough to acknowledge our insanity and God's ability to help us. Acknowledgment is not recovery. Action is recovery. We don't wait until we want to change or feel comfortable with the idea of change. Comfortable comes later. If we have just a wisp of the willingness to act as-if we're willing -- we move to Step Three.

We make the decision to surrender -- to let go of the need to run things, to let go of the comforting illusion that we control people and situations. To combat our denial, many of us write on the Third Step. We list the facets of our sick self-will in the area we're looking at. What do we want? What do we think reality ought to be? What are our unrealistic expectations? We catalogue the results of our self-will. We look at our fear of losing control no matter what. We examine our belief that we have the power and right to transform other people into exactly who we want. We see how our selfish pursuit of self-will -- fueled by our fear, ego, and pride -- destroys love and relationships by insisting we get our own way.

We make a decision to release these attitudes and behaviors -- to stop our self-will tantrum, to stop torturing reality into the shape of our fantasies. It just doesn't work anymore. We surrender. We make a decision to give up our struggle with reality and accept it the way it is. We make a decision to act on faith. Our faith says if we let go, everything is going to be all right. If we don't, it won't.

What action do we need to take instead? We ask God to help us. Letting go of the old behaviors and attitudes frees us to hear other ideas, suggestions, directions. We may make mistakes. But if we share with other recovering addicts and

stay openminded and willing, at the very least we don't act out the disease.

Even when we are practiced in working this step, we may undo our surrender. Our fear of losing control may take over again, and we may try to fix that fear again. We resist acceptance. We resist accepting that things may very well be exactly the way they're supposed to be. We rebel.

For instance, if we surrender the illusion we can control another person, that person may in fact stay the same.

"Well," we may tell ourselves, "that can't be right! Obviously God is forgetting what his will is!" We tend to think that having faith means believing that things are going to turn out exactly the way we want. If they don't, we figure God needs our help.

Without even realizing it, we're into the insanity of self-will again. We may think we're in the Third Step, but we really fell out of it. Often our sponsors and friends have to point out that we're back in the old behavior, with the same old stranglehold on reality. We have to ask for guidance again and turn it over again, knowing that God is taking care of us.

Eventually, as we continue surrendering and working the Twelve Steps, acceptance is internalized and grows deeper. With humility -- and the courage we get from our Higher Power -- we accept the truth of our addiction, of other people, of the circumstances of our lives today. Ultimately, over time, we live the surrender. As our self-centeredness lessens, our fear lessens. We realize we don't have to go it alone anymore. This is not weakness or slavery. It is strength. A friendly relationship with reality gives us the freedom to



relax our vigilance, loosen our grip, and live our lives.

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We addicts come to Narcotics Anonymous with long careers in fixing ourselves. We use drugs, jobs, relationships -- money, property, and prestige -- to fix what we think is wrong with us. The problem is, we're fixing only the outside. Our disease is inside of us, and recovery is an inside job.

We do not heal ourselves. We don't know how. It's God's job to change us and heal us on the inside. Our job is to take action and practice the spiritual principles called for in the Steps. When we practice living the first three Steps, our new actions and attitudes take us off the old road of insanity and onto the new road of recovery. We get ourselves out of the way so that God can go to work in us, where the disease is. One inside area where we need healing is our emotions or feelings.

We addicts do not regard feelings as a natural part of our humanity. Many of us think there's something wrong with us when we feel, for example, fear or pain. We are afraid of expressing our feelings. Or we experience feelings only in the extreme -- for instance, if our anger always explodes into rage. Our normal behavior is to medicate, manipulate, or avoid our feelings. We've done that so well for so long.

Now with the first three Steps, we stop acting out the disease. We are saying no to many of the behaviors we use to keep our feelings at bay. That means we start feeling our feelings. They begin to bubble up to the surface. When that happens, most of us don't know what's going on. Many of us are so unfamiliar with our own emotions -- with fear and

anger, pain and shame -- that we don't even know what to call them. We may blame other people for the way we feel. We may be so unused to having emotions that we think we're going crazy. We doubt whether we can survive the storms going on inside us. We are overwhelmed. Our sponsors tell us that feeling our feelings is a positive development, but it feels anything but positive to us. We think there must be something wrong.

It's an addict fantasy to think that working the Steps means we're going to feel perfectly wonderful and serene all the time. The very action of working the Steps produces emotions in us. Our instincts want us to do what we've done all our lives: run from the feelings or fix them.

Our Program teaches us we don't have to run anymore. In the first Three Steps, we acknowledge and name as best we can the feelings we're having. We examine whether we want to act off them in inappropriate, insane ways. Then we work the Third Step on them -- releasing them and turning them over. We ask God to help us to not use those feelings as an excuse to destroy. We ask our Higher Power to show us what action to take instead. And we leave the results to God.

For example, if we used drugs to ward off the fear of talking to people, we <sup>undoubtedly</sup> will experience that fear when we first get clean. We may know intellectually that we have nothing to be afraid of, but it doesn't matter. The fear is real. We acknowledge it and ask God to help us not act it out, to feel it without fixing it. Somewhere down the road in our recovery, in God's time and in God's way, the fear may be healed. One day, in God's time, fear will not run our lives. In the meantime, we practice experiencing our fear without 64

doing anything about it except turning it over to the care of a loving God.

We remember how the Third Step works in the area of drugs. When we stop using, we don't feel joyous and lighthearted. If we are able to label our emotions at all, we say we're afraid, hurting, angry, ashamed. In any event, we feel bad. We are told that we won't always feel this way, that it will get better -- if and only if we don't take drugs to fix it. We make a decision to stop using drugs to fix our feelings. In faith, we turn our feelings over to a God of our own understanding. We ask him to help us, to guide us, to show us what to do instead of using. We go to a meeting, call our sponsor, reach out to help someone newer in the Program than we. And no matter what, we don't use, no matter how bad we feel. The feelings we have as a result of getting clean don't disappear right away. But in God's time, we do feel better.

Our sponsors tell us that feelings are temporary and do pass, if we let go of them. They share their own experience in walking through feelings without fixing them in any way -- without drugs and without obsessive thinking or other controlling behaviors. It's totally amazing to us addicts the first time we personally experience that we don't die from our own fear and pain. Whatever our feelings, God helps us go through them. With time and practice working the Steps, we develop a friendly relationship with our own emotions. With humility and acceptance, we come to claim our humanity.

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Working the Third Step lays down the foundation for working the rest of the Twelve Steps and continuing on our

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spiritual journey. We turn over our familiar stubbornness, arrogance, rebelliousness, and defiance -- the close-mindedness that can lead to relapse by causing us to avoid working the Steps in the first place.

When we live the Third Step and truly turn over self-will, fear, and destructive behaviors, we may experience a void in their place -- an emptiness inside, a sense of loss. This is a good sign. It means we have indeed let go of something. But when we feel that void, we tend to want to fix the emptiness, because our disease tells us there is something wrong with it. That's our disease lying to us, and that's where faith comes in. When we experience an emptiness, if we don't try to fill up the space in any way -- if we just let it be -- God can come through that open door, and the healing process can reach down inside us. Where there was fear and destructive self-will, we now can experience recovery.

Every time we make the Third Step decision -- every time we do not act out our disease in any area of our lives -- every time we say no to our self-will when it's sick -- every time we don't fix our feelings and turn instead to our Higher Power for help -- our self-esteem grows. We are learning how to live. We are learning how to be human. We are learning to have faith.

When we live lives shaped by the Third Step, we also are learning maturity and mature decision-making. It's the opposite of living lives shaped by our disease -- the irresponsible, destructive behavior and the immature self-centeredness, demanding that the world fulfill our wants and needs. Every time we take the Third Step, we acknowledge that

we are not alone in the world. We let God into our decision-making process. We build confidence in our own ability to make decisions that harm neither ourselves nor others.

And as we let God into our lives by applying the Third Step, our personal experience of God and our understanding of him grows. As our understanding of God grows, so does our ability to surrender our will and our lives to his care. It gets easier.

But it also requires patience. Recovery is a lifelong process. We keep practicing acceptance and surrender and letting go with faith. That is how we learn new thoughts and responses. That is how the spiritual principles become a part of us.

Our sponsors tell us that as a result of living the Steps, one day we develop deep within us part of the solution to our disease: the self-acceptance, the faith in a Higher Power, the love for others, that contradict the urgings of our addiction. One day our will is aligned with God's will a good



deal of the time. One day the spiritual principles have more power in us than the disease does most of the time. One day we accept our partnership with a God who is taking care of us all of the time. That is peace, that is serenity, and that is what we want.