

# A Secular 12 Step Recovery Guide

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This guide contains excerpts from the book *Twelve Secular Steps: An Addiction Recovery Guide* by Bill W. The author can be contacted at the website above, but please feel free to distribute this PDF. This brief guide focuses primarily on early recovery.

## ***What is Secular 12 Step Recovery?***

The original 12 Steps (not shown) were published in 1939 by Bill Wilson (Bill W, but not the Bill W above) in the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the Big Book). That book, now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition, still serves as the basic text for Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA started out as an offshoot of an evangelical society called the Oxford Group; Wilson and many of the 100 founding members were active Oxford Group members. Accordingly, 6 of the traditional AA 12 Steps make specific references to God (or a generic Higher Power). Those Steps suggest that alcoholics and addicts turn over their will and their lives to God so that He can restore them to sanity and remove their defects of character.

Unfortunately, this wording promotes two contradictory goals within the 12 Step framework: a practical program for achieving sobriety AND a generically Christian salvation of the newcomer. Secular adaptations of the 12 Steps have a singular focus on the practical “here and now” solution to alcoholism and addiction (from this point on I’ll simply refer to both as addiction). Yet anyone using secular versions of the 12 Steps can freely add their religious or philosophical beliefs onto the simplified framework. This universalization of the literature more readily accommodates the diverse perspectives towards religion and spirituality found within the fellowships of AA and Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

Secular recovery is grounded in a biology-based understanding of addiction, and it emphasizes an active role for the addict (or alcoholic) in a structured recovery process. Secular recovery evolves; it is a gradual process of learned and earned freedom from addiction.

In truth, the skeptic and the believer alike come into AA or NA at a point when the consequences of addiction finally force us to seek another way to live. Almost without exception it is the motivation born of crisis and desperation that push us through our first months and even years of sobriety. Common sense tells us that the newcomer needs to be presented with a workable plan that is simple, accessible, and effective. Since the beginning two pillars of 12 Step programs have protected the secular path of recovery: the only requirement for membership is a desire to get sober (clean), and the 12 Steps are suggested as a framework for personal recovery.

We can't do it alone, so an important part of this initiation into recovery is to get honest, and to reach out for the help of those who have previously built a successful recovery of their own. Together, we can do this.

## 12 Secular Steps for Addiction Recovery

(The Steps below are an agnostic adaptation of the 12 Steps used by AA and NA)

1. I admitted that I am an addict (alcoholic), and that my life had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that through honesty and effort, combined with the help of others, I could recover from addiction.
3. Made a decision to actively work a Twelve Step recovery plan to the best of my ability.
4. Completed a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself.
5. Honestly admitted to myself and to another human being the results of my inventory, including my defects of character.
6. Became willing to change defects in my character.
7. Accepted responsibility for my actions.
8. Listed all persons I had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when I was wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought to improve my conscious awareness of ethical principles and values, and to use them consistently as standards for my decisions and actions.
12. Having recovered as a person as a result of these Steps, I acknowledge my commitment to help others and to continue to use these principles in my daily life.

### ***Three Phases of Step Work***

We can work the Steps above in roughly three phases. In the initial phase we admit our problem (Step 1) and consider a solution: an action based, functional 12 Step plan by which we achieve recovery one day at a time (Steps 2 and 3). *The main goal of Phase I is to achieve 90 days of sobriety (or clean time) and simultaneously build a support network of fellow addicts (alcoholics).*

In the second phase (Steps 4 through 9), we examine our faults and “clear away the wreckage from the past.” We first analyze and overhaul our inward defects in character (Steps 4 through 7), and then we look outward and repair our relationships with others (Steps 8 and 9).

Steps 10, 11, and 12 make up the third phase through which we maintain our sobriety and find purpose in our lives, including service to others.

## **Phase I: Early Sobriety and Steps 1, 2, 3**

### **Essential Recovery Tools to Achieve the First 90 Days of Sobriety**

- *“Don’t drink or use today no matter what.”* Repeat this phrase so many times that it becomes a reflex. Include it in your 90-day plan as a daily commitment to be renewed each morning.
- *Create a personal recovery network.* Get a sponsor and call them, or someone else in the program (AA or NA), every day in your first 90 days. Get phone numbers from recovered addicts at meetings. *Don’t isolate*, make a call every day in early sobriety.
- Twelve Step programs have a long tradition of recommending *90 in 90*, which means make 90 meetings in your first 90 days of sobriety. If you go over 90, that’s OK.
- *Take action if you experience cravings, or if you feel stressed, irritable, or depressed.* Act now, don’t wait for the balance to tip in favor of an impulsive slip. Things you can do include: go to a meeting, talk to a sponsor or friend, do something constructive such as read recovery literature.
- *Focus on living, and recovering, one day at a time.* Minimize stress by focusing on your immediate, day-by-day needs and priorities. Looking back, *I see this as one of my top three tools in early recovery.* The other two were a daily renewal of Steps 1, 2, and 3, and the daily use of a support network.
- Whenever you can, but at least once a day, find a moment to relax and be content. Create moments when you trust that this is going to work out OK. Often, we waste time obsessing about problems and people that we have little or no control over anyway. Use a secular version of the Serenity Prayer to create in your mind the “serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”
- When you experience anger or frustration, remember to pause and calm yourself long enough to mentally hit the *reset button* and *engage the power of choice*. Think before you react. Build real time awareness of your emotional state.
- Learn your triggers; avoid the “*people, places, and things*” associated with use.
- *Learn about, and start using, effective coping skills.* HALT (avoid **h**ungry, **a**ngry, **l**onely, and **t**ired) is a good one to know, so that you avoid the stress and impulsive decisions caused by these. “Play the tape through” is another coping tool to get you to think about the consequences of the action you are about to take.
- *Living Sober* is an incredibly useful booklet written in 1975 by AA member Barry Leach; it is currently published by AA World Services. This booklet is an excellent collection of strategies and tools that have been passed down by experienced members over the years. This book is a likely source of much of the practical advice (like HALT above) you will hear at AA and NA meetings.

### Complete Steps 1, 2, and 3

1. I admitted that I am an addict, and that my life had become unmanageable.

I will be careful in this guide to avoid “you must” statements, with the exception that you must be honest in completing this Step so that you can create the foundation needed for recovery. Honesty will cut through the denial and rationalizations that we subconsciously use to keep the addiction going (and delay dealing with the consequences). Honesty will get us to awareness, and awareness will bring us into conscious contact with our current crisis.

Sorry, but early recovery sucks. Awareness of our current condition should produce the kind of pain and desperation that will motivate us into action towards recovery. Unfortunately, this psychological pain is a necessary part of the process for many of us. *That’s why we don’t do it alone, and that’s also why we do this a day at a time.*

Let’s kick start our motivation to get sober with a very useful tool which we will use again, *an inventory.*

#### *Work Your Step 1 with a First Step Inventory*

If you are truly an addict, then your recent history should confirm the fact that drugs and alcohol are in control of you, and not the other way around. I suggest we start with a freestyle listing of the worse things you have done in your addiction. Then perhaps move on to a more structured accounting. List consequences of addiction which occurred in the past week, then the past few months, then list the gut-wrenching events from the past few years, and then big items from the more distant past.

You may want to consider the following categories: emotional harm (to myself, and to others), physical harm, social harm (intimate relationships, family and friends), financial costs, moral failures, and “other.”

No matter how you go about doing a First Step Inventory, make sure it is thorough and specific enough to fully answer the following questions:

- Does the evidence confirm I *cannot control* my use of alcohol and/or drugs once I get started?
- Does my history show a *chronic and progressive pattern* of addiction?
- Is there clear evidence of a negative psychological reprogramming resulting in the creation of a serious addiction? Can I measure the *strength of my addiction* by adding up the increasingly harmful negative consequences?
- Is it time to reach out for help? Am I now willing to work with others, perhaps even take suggestions from those who have successfully recovered?

Step 1 should lead us to an acceptance of our addiction, and the death of any hope that we can control our continued drinking and use. This means we must avoid the first drink or drug and remain abstinent.

Condense your First Step Inventory to one page. Keep it with you your first 90 days. Pick out the truly gut-wrenching facts that you can use as part of a relapse prevention strategy. Look at this list if you feel tempted to use. "Play the tape through" and visualize how continued drinking and use will likely end. The list is meant to create motivation to stick to the plan. It keeps you honest when you experience cravings or start making plans to drink or use again. "One last time" is never one last time.

This inventory was a valuable tool for me.

### *Steps 2 and 3*

2. Came to believe that through honesty and effort, combined with the help of others, I could recover from addiction.

Does the plan as outlined so far make sense to you? Do you believe that working with others, perhaps through the fellowship of AA or NA, will help you achieve recovery? Well, my advice at this point is to put anything you can in your favor. Keep the plan simple and realize that this will not be easy. But it is doable if you keep up the willingness to work it today and succeed just for today. Tomorrow you can do the same when it comes.

3. Made a decision to actively work a Twelve Step recovery plan to the best of my ability.

The only evidence of a decision are the actions that result from it. You're either willing to use these tools or you're not. The best indicator of a newcomer's success has nothing to do with what they say, and everything to do with their willingness to show up and be a part of their recovery.

### **Phase II: Personal Reconstruction through Steps 4–9**

The underlying sequence of Phase I was: get honest, complete an inventory, and analyze that inventory to create both a n awareness of the problem and a plan for the solution. This is a key pattern for Phase II as well.

**Disclaimer:** *I cannot go into enough detail in this guide to do justice to the Steps of Phase II and III. Working with experienced members and reading the basic texts of AA and NA as well as other suggested literature are important parts to working these Phases. I will give a quick overview in this guide more in the way of a walk through than as a comprehensive guide book.*

## *Steps of Phase II*

4. Completed a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself.
5. Honestly admitted to myself and to another human being the results of my inventory, including my defects of character.
6. Became willing to change defects in my character.
7. Accepted responsibility for my actions.
8. Listed all persons I had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

My philosophy on Phase 2 is to use moderation, be open-minded, and have a sense of purpose as you work these Steps. Steps are tools, nothing more. They exist to serve you and your #1 purpose: stay sober today. If you add to that "just be a decent person today," you can basically achieve all that this phase has to offer. Remember, *just stay sober and don't be an asshole today.*

- Steps 4 and 5 are closely linked. It is suggested in many guides that the Step 4 inventory be structured in such a way as to reveal our "defects of character". The Oxford Group, and subsequently the Twelve Step fellowships, attributed the majority of our problems to three primary defects of character: *dishonesty, fear, and selfishness*. I suggest that in our first attempt at Step 4 we will limit our inventory to these three defects. I find these are sufficient to account for our motives behind nearly all of our transgressions or shortcomings in the past.

Remember, these character defects cause us to consistently react to persons and situations in ways that render us dysfunctional in relationships and other areas of life. This dysfunctionality leads to considerable conflict and *stress*. If we create awareness of these deep-seated motives and patterns, and then work on replacing them with a simple set of positive values, we will make better decisions and significantly reduce stress.

Excessive stress and resentments made many of us vulnerable to the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Mood changing chemicals magically made our stress and resentments go away as these substances *changed the way we felt*. Even after we establish some sobriety, excessive stress can still powerfully trigger us towards relapse.

A sponsor (or other trusted individual) will suggest strategies and give other valuable advice on how to work this phase, especially Step 4 which is considered by many to be the most difficult Step. I often recommend using the NA sanctioned guide titled *Working Step Four in Narcotics Anonymous*. It is thorough, and I like its contemporary language.

For now I'll suggest an abbreviated Step 4 for your first go at it. Before we start, Phase II is built upon a foundation of Phase I. Before attempting a first round of completing Steps 4 through 9, I highly recommend completing a continuous 90 to 180 days sober. You should have confidence in your relapse

prevention skills. Delving into your past can be an emotional and stressful process, so best to be prepared.

OK, here's a brief procedure for a compact, abbreviated Step 4.

1. Write a list of individuals who are important to you. Start out with those who are still interacting with you, and then add others whom you don't currently interact with but you still have a strong emotional connection (even if they are deceased, but played an important role in your history).
2. List (hopefully in column next to the names above) your negative interactions with each of these people. Start out by listing incidents where you have wronged them. Incidents in which you think they wronged you belong in the Resentments inventory (more information is given below).
3. List next to each wrong you've done the character defect you attribute to that wrong.

#### *Resentments*

4. Make a list of resentments related to the people on your list. Then add the other resentments to other people. Add any additional resentments (against things or conditions, etc.). Which resentments are worthy of the list? Judge that by the emotional reaction they bring about when you see them in writing. Resentments should be analyzed and discussed on their own. Resentments can pose serious threats to continued sobriety, but again I do not have the space in this brief guide to address dealing with these. In this guide I can only advise you to share them with an experienced sponsor or counselor and discuss with that person how to let go of them, stop obsessing over them, or emotionally neutralize them over time.

#### *Analysis of Transgressions*

Now go through and analyze every transgression with an eye to identifying your part in it. Look for patterns or incidents where you reacted with anger or passive aggressiveness. Is this because you didn't get your way? Are there incidences when you stole or lied? How about other acts which show you have been dishonest and selfish? Are you immature? Are you a person who tends to react emotionally and impulsively? Look for patterns such as being manipulative, controlling, obsessive, or jealous. What actions can you blame on being high or inebriated? Which actions and patterns indicate areas where you need to start taking responsibility towards change? Which incidents could you have handled better by just counting to 10 or so before reacting?

#### *Analysis of Resentments*

Analyze every transgression with an eye to identifying your part in it. Look for instances where you may have over reacted and attributed deliberate harm to you by another, yet, on closer examination harming you may not have been their real intent. Maybe you got fired not because the boss was out to get you but because you got caught constantly slacking off, or stealing, etc. Maybe someone was going through a rough time and

you were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There are some resentments that can be considered *justified resentments* where you were clearly a victim. These can be tough to get past, and we'll touch on them a bit more below.

If a resentment keeps popping up in your head, attach a mental TAG to it. Use a short phrase that pops up (the TAG) with the resentment every time you think about it. The TAG should be worded to remind you to return mentally to the present moment. "This is not going to steal any more time from me" or "they don't get to live rent free in my head", something like these may work for you

Remember— another strategy for dealing with resentment is to constantly remind yourself to stay in the moment. Continuously focus on keeping sober and clean just for today, and just be a decent person today.

When it comes to evaluating our history outlined in Step 4, most of us could certainly use some outside help in separating fact from the fictions born of self-centeredness and rationalization. That's the goal of sharing our Step 4 inventory in Step 5.

### Step 5

Share the analysis of wrongs you have done others and ask for insight into patterns and motivations you may have missed.

Share the resentments list and have someone help you to analyze it and separate facts from distorted perceptions, as well as see your part. For "justified resentments" where you were truly a victim, talking about these injustices with someone you trust will definitely help you in the process of moving past them.

Use that secular version of the Serenity Prayer we listed previously on your resentments, and strive for *the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Steps 6 and 7 are linked. Once we build awareness of our defects in 4 and 5, we take action in Steps 6 and 7 to become accountable for the use of basic positive principles and values in our current decisions and behavior.

For now, use the Golden Rule in dealing with others, and that means everyone. *Treat them as you would have them treat you.* Obligating yourself to this principle is a willingness to change defects in your character.

As for a Step 7, choose to be responsible for your actions today and do the right thing. Use your judgment to guide actions and decisions; do not act on strong emotions. Be aware of when you are angry, depressed, irritated, or craving to drink or use. These are times you are likely to over react. Hit the reset button and let these emotions settle, then do the right thing.

Don't spend too much time thinking about yourself; even thinking about your self-centeredness is itself self-centered.

Keep a journal with brief entries of your slip ups and your positive progress related to negative defects and positive values like love, empathy, accountability, and kindness.

*Alert:* you can use your 4th Step Inventory of Transgressions as a quick start to your Step 8 Inventory.

Steps 8 and 9 are linked. Through an inventory of offenses and the making of amends we work on improving, and in some cases mending, our relationships with others. Once again, accountability (amends in Step 9) becomes an important part of our actions.

Use your brief Step 4 list of people as a temporary list for your Step 8 inventory. This lets you deal with important people in your life first. Your list of the wrongs you've done to them is not intended to lower self-esteem and produce guilt, it is intended to produce motivation to be accountable today in how you treat these people today.

### *Step 9 Amends*

My advice is do not make any face to face amends involving direct confessions and offers to make things right in your first year, except if these are necessary.

Get advice before making significant amends. If people who are close to you bring up your addiction and want to talk with you about your past, talk with them if you feel OK doing so. Make sure the situation is under control (no one is drinking, or shouting, or emotionally at a dangerous level).

Living amends—staying sober is a direct amend, a living amend to everyone on your amends list. Do this in your first year (or at least until you can get advice from a trusted person).

Probably most people on your list don't want to hear your confessions and explanations and promises to make things right now anyway. It doesn't mean that much when your sobriety is measure in weeks or months. How many have heard such promises before? Let your actions speak for now.

### **Phase 3: Long-Term Sobriety and Steps 10, 11, and 12**

10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when I was wrong, promptly admitted it.

11. Sought to improve my conscious awareness of ethical principles and values, and to use them consistently as standards for my decisions and actions.

12. Having recovered as a person as a result of these Steps, I acknowledge my commitment to help others and to continue to use these principles in my daily life.

In your first year or two of recovery Step 10 is the most important Step in this Phase, and I couple Step 11 to it. The journal entries I mentioned above is a good way to start a Step 10 for now. Journal significant actions, thoughts, incidences from the day. Compare your actions to the positive values you obligated yourself to, such as compassion, understanding, responsibility, and fairness. Address incidences when you

are in the wrong with a quickly acknowledgement oversights to the involved person or people. This creates real time awareness and accountability. Also, you regain your ability to learn from your mistakes.

Many people of faith start the day with a prayer to God asking that HE guide them today to be the person He would like them to be. That's a great way to do Step 11, and one could accomplish pretty much the same by meditating on the values you wish to adhere to in your actions and decisions of the upcoming day.

Step 12 is available to us at any stage or phase of our recovery. As a newcomer, you can start out being of service in little ways. A very effective way to help someone is simply be there to listen to them. Try to understand what they are saying, and what they are going through. Offer to give rides to meetings if you can do this. Good sponsors will often suggest ways for you to get involved.

### *Last Notes on Working the 12 Step Process*

Attend to your sobriety first, always.

Please, don't do this alone. Build a network, get a sponsor, go to meetings, and get in the middle of the boat. If you're going to take on that 500 pound gorilla known as your addiction don't get some tools together (heavy ones), and bring some friends into the fight with you.