



Twelve Steps are spiritual principles, not religious

Bill W., cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was hospitalized three times for alcoholism. The third time Bill's doctor offered a blunt diagnosis: If Bill's drinking continued, he had one year to live. Bill's options were clear: death, insanity or sobriety.

Bill chose sobriety.

Eager to share what he'd learned, Bill drafted a book. *Alcoholics Anonymous* (published by AA World Services, NY, NY) was published in 1939, and it introduced a new program of recovery -- the Twelve Steps. Today more than 16 million copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (also known as the "Big Book") are in print.

Despite their popularity, the Steps are still widely misunderstood. The costs of such misunderstanding can be counted in the number of lives lost to alcoholism and other forms of addiction -- people who might have gained sobriety through the Twelve Step program.

This situation can be changed if newcomers to the Steps are willing to rethink some common assumptions. Perhaps the most common misconception is this: "Twelve Step groups are like cults, and you have to 'get religion' in order to join."

A hasty reading of the Steps may give some people this impression. But if we probe the day-to-day practice of Twelve Step groups, we get a far different picture. A cult is a group that centers on a single personality and forbids dissent among its members. In contrast, Twelve Step groups are based on a set of principles -- the Steps themselves. And Twelve Step adherents often disagree on many points.

We can understand this better by distinguishing between "spiritual" and "religious." True, many recovering people weave traditional religious practices into their application of the Steps. However, no specific religion is endorsed by the Steps. In fact, someone who lives by the Steps could be Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or agnostic.

But if the Twelve Steps are not a religious program, we can still call them a spiritual program. In fact, the Steps echo what writer Aldous Huxley called the "perennial philosophy," or a core set of ideas and practices shared by many spiritual traditions. The Steps have one major concern: human transformation, the kind that Bill W. experienced in becoming sober.

At a more basic level, we can see the Steps as a set of principles for an overall design for living. We can state these principles as:

- **Admit powerlessness (Step One).** For people addicted to a chemical, this means admitting they cannot predict when their use of chemicals will begin or end. No matter what the consequences, chemical use continues.
- **Open up to a source of power outside ourselves (Steps Two and Three).** If we are powerless over chemicals, then the next step is looking elsewhere for such power, however we care to define it. The Steps refer to this as a "Higher Power."
- **Take inventory (Steps Four to Nine).** Our Higher Power can begin to operate in our lives once we remove the blocks to it. Finding those blocks in ourselves is called taking inventory. And what this inventory reveals is thoughts and actions that fuel drinking and drugging.
- **Maintain and strengthen spirituality (Steps 10 to 12).** That is, practice new ways of thinking and acting that open us to our Higher Power.

The Steps can be summed up even more succinctly: problem, solution, and plan of action. Step One defines the problem -- powerlessness over chemicals. Steps Two and Three point to a solution -- a

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Higher Power. And the remaining Steps explain what we can do to make our Higher Power a working reality.

Ultimately the Steps are practical tools. Their underlying principles are couched in early slogans such as "One day at a time" and "Take what works and leave the rest." In fact, the Steps at several points ask only for a "willingness to change." That furnishes a point of entry for any of us Twelve Step newcomers and skeptics alike.

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).