

# What are 12-Step Programs?

A 12-step approach to substance abuse treatment is a structured step-by-step program to help people with an addiction attain and sustain sobriety. 12-Step programs have helped many people with their recovery from drugs, alcohol or other addictions.

The 12-Step program can be conducted individually or in groups, usually covering 12-15 sessions. Some of the more well-known programs include Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous.

Program principles are based on cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social and spiritual changes that will help you maintain abstinence from substance use. These changes occur throughout the process of genuinely completing each of the 12 steps toward recovery.

## *Core Beliefs*

Core beliefs that shape the program principles include:

- Willpower alone may not achieve lasting sobriety.
- Reaching out for help from others must replace self-centered attitudes and beliefs.
- Long-term recovery involves a process of spiritual renewal.

## *Program Goals*

Therapy in these programs emphasizes two main goals to keep in mind as you work through the 12 steps:

1. **Accepting** the need for abstinence.
2. **Surrender**, or recognizing the need to actively engage with the program to achieve lasting sobriety.

## *Lasting Changes with Continual Practice*

The 12 steps begin by admitting powerlessness over the addiction. The program then guides participants through a process of self-evaluation. Participants take responsibility for future sobriety and make amends with people who may have been hurt by their past substance abuse.

If you are seeking recovery from substance abuse, the 12 program steps will work you through important cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social and spiritual changes.

## Personal Changes During Recovery

- **Cognitive changes** - Understand how your thinking has been affected by your substance use, including denial of the problem and recognition of the negative consequences of your abuse.
- **Emotional changes** - Understand how certain emotional states such as anger and loneliness can lead to substance abuse, and learn how to effectively cope with these emotions.
- **Behavioral changes** - Understand how substance abuse has affected your whole life and how many of your habits have supported your abuse. Get and stay active in the program.
- **Social changes** - Attend and participate in program meetings, obtain and develop a relationship with a sponsor, contact the program whenever you're concerned about relapse, and reevaluate your relationships with people who enable your abuse.
- **Spiritual changes** - Experience hope that you can stop using the substance, develop a belief and trust in a power greater than your own willpower, and acknowledge your own problems, including immoral or unethical acts and harm done to others as a result of your substance

## *Using a Sponsor*

Throughout the program steps, many people [find a sponsor](#). Sponsors have successfully completed the 12-Step program and will individually mentor, support and encourage new program participants.

Sponsors are also available by phone outside of meetings, providing a protective resource in the face of relapse temptation.

# Step 1: Admit Powerlessness

*Edited by Editorial Staff at Recovery.org*  
created on 9 October 2015 | updated on 22 November 2015

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## What Is Step 1?

"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

Step 1 is about letting go. You admit you have a problem and begin to seek out help. It isn't easy, but admitting powerlessness allows you to break the cycle of addiction that you've been stuck in. Alcoholics Anonymous believes that admitting you can't control your alcohol use is a necessary first step on the path to recovery.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

- Accept that something is wrong in your life and that you no longer have control. You must admit complete defeat before building a new life.
  - Embrace the truth and want to make an honest change.
  - Understand that recovery can't be done alone, and acknowledge that you need help.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing Step 1?

- **Abstain from alcohol and/or drugs.** Alcoholics Anonymous believes you need to be abstinent to achieve recovery.
  - **Abandon pride and seek humility.** Once you admit your problems and mistakes, you will find modesty and humbleness. You can't admit embrace powerlessness if you're still holding on to your pride.
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## What Are Some Myths About This Step?

- **Powerlessness means you're weak.** Admitting powerlessness is a crucial step on the path to freedom and strength. It takes honesty and courage to accept that alcohol and/or drugs have taken over your life.
  - **You have to hit rock bottom before you're ready to get help.** It doesn't take a major life event to open your eyes to your addiction or a developing addiction. Sometimes all it takes is a realization that your problem is causing you more pain than the pain you aim to escape from.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step1.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step1.pdf)

# Step 2: Find a Power Greater Than Yourself

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## What Is Step 2?

"Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

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## What Is the Purpose of the Second Step?

This step gives you hope. You are not alone, and something greater than you can help you conquer your addiction and despair.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

*The second step is about having an open mind.*

This is the beginning of the end, in a way. You will end your old life and begin your new one, committed to faith - faith in whatever you choose.

The second step is about having an open mind. As the previous step was about letting go of pride, this step is about letting go of preconceived notions about what AA is and how it works, and making room for change.

No matter what you believe in, this is the step in which you become open to the idea that faith in a higher power will help you achieve soundness of mind. The Alcoholics Anonymous "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" book states:

*Step 2 is the rallying point for us all. Whether agnostic, atheist, or former believer, we stand together on this Step.<sup>1</sup>*

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## What Are Some Tips for Completing Step 2?

- **Keep an open mind.** Set yourself up for success. Be open to the idea of looking outside yourself for help and support, and you'll be able to better conceive of the idea of recovery.
  - **Maintain humility.** Accept that you can't conquer your addiction alone.
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## What Are Some Myths About This Step?

- **Your higher power has to be God.** This is a big misconception about Alcoholics Anonymous. Your higher power can be anything that you believe in: the universe, nature, Buddha, music, love, Allah, humanity or even AA itself. AA doesn't require you to believe in anything that you don't want to; each step is a suggestion along the road to a sober life.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step2.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step2.pdf)

# Step 3: Learn to Depend on God

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## What Is Step 3?

"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

This step helps shift your mindset from thinking about concepts to carrying them out. It opens the door to **conforming your will to that of your higher power**.

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## What Is the Third Step Prayer?

Once they have identified their higher power, many people in the AA program begin to use the Serenity Prayer to ask their higher power for guidance:

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Thy will, not mine, be done.*

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

Step 3 is the first step that requires action. The first two steps focus on reflection and introspection.

To achieve full recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous, you must take your faith one step further and create a plan for letting in a higher power.

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## What Are Some Tips for Completing This Step?

- Embrace complete dependence on a higher power and view this dependence as a form of strength.
  - Recite the Serenity Prayer during times of emotional distress or indecision.
  - Make a commitment to turn yourself over to something greater than yourself. Your higher power can be God, nature, the AA community-whatever feels right to you.
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## What Are Some Myths About Step 3?

- **If you depend on a higher power, you will lose your individuality.** On the contrary, turning your will over to a higher power leads to true independence of the spirit. As you practice being conscious of a higher power, it will gradually turn from a hunch or occasional inspiration to an active, working part of your mind.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step3.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step3.pdf)

# Step 4: Make a Moral Inventory

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## What Is Step 4?

"Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

Begin to determine the cause of your drinking. You will examine your emotional problems in order to prepare yourself for a life of sobriety.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

- **Be honest about your moral defects.** They can give you insight into why you started drinking in the first place.
- **Accept that the problem is within yourself and drop the word "blame" from your vocabulary.** You and you alone are responsible for your behaviors.
- **Work closely with your sponsor.** They will share their defects with you, too, for comfort and security.

### Examples of What Would Go on a Moral Inventory

- "I lie to the people I care about, and it's hurt them."
  - "I am power hungry, and I boast about my achievements."
  - "I have alienated those around me by my selfishness."
  - "I bring others down with my self-loathing and shame."
  - "I am self-righteous and judgmental of others."
  - "I am ill-tempered, and I have taken my anger out on my family and friends."
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing Step 4?

- **Don't hold back.** You won't benefit from this step or AA if you don't own up to your shortcomings.
  - **Trust yourself and your sponsor.** Remember: You are more than your mistakes.
  - **Be thorough and write down your inventory.** This will be the first tangible evidence of your recovery.
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## What Are Some Myths About This Step?

- **This step is meant to tear you down.** Members who complete this step say they feel a newfound confidence once they've finally faced themselves. They are ready to start the next chapter of their lives as sober and better versions of themselves.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step4.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step4.pdf)

# Step 5: Be Honest About Your Mistakes

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## What Is Step 5 of AA?

"Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

This step helps ease the anxiety, depression and irritability of hiding the worst parts of you. You are able to rid yourself of isolation and loneliness.

Step 5 of Alcoholics Anonymous teaches you that you can be forgiven for your shortcomings and also forgive others who have hurt you.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

*You'll feel a huge weight lifted once you confide in another.*

- Reveal your most distressing and tormenting memories to another person—most likely your sponsor.
  - Be as honest as possible with that person and look at who you are and who you would like to become.
  - Be vulnerable and don't hold back.
  - Accept advice from that person with an open mind.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing Step 5?

- Let go of reservations; don't worry about being judged for what you've done.
  - Remember that AA is a safe and supportive environment and that everyone has stories they aren't proud of.
  - Choose someone you are comfortable sharing with.
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## What Are Some Myths About This Step?

- **It's not necessary to share your defects with another person—it's enough that your higher power knows.** It's very important to reveal your upsetting memories to another person, so you can receive feedback and advice. You'll feel a huge weight lifted once you confide in another. This will allow you to move on to Step 6 with humility.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step5.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step5.pdf)

# Step 6: Become Ready to Remove Your Flaws

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## What Is Step 6?

"Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

Become fully prepared to rid yourself of the flaws you listed in Step 4.

This step reveals character and your true willingness to recover.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

- Be willing to work with your higher power to remove your defects.
  - Acknowledge that ridding yourself of your desire to drink and your other defects is a lifelong job.
  - Stop pursuing whatever your idea of perfection is. You will never be happy if you aim for such an ideal.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing Step 6?

- Don't beat yourself up if you can't conquer all your defects immediately or even over a longer period of time.
  - You're a work in progress. Be happy about your success so far and celebrate each little victory.
  - Keep an open mind and a positive attitude throughout your journey.
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## What Are Some Myths About This Step?

- **God has to refer to the Christian God.** This is a big misconception about Alcoholics Anonymous and one that causes some people to avoid meetings. God can refer to any higher power you believe in; AA doesn't require that you believe in any specific God. What matters is that you maintain a positive attitude and faith in your higher power.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step6.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step6.pdf)

# Step 7: Ask God to Remove Your Faults

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## What Is Step 7?

"Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

You cannot overcome your character flaws without humility. Too often, alcoholics are victims of pride and selfishness. During this step, you begin to practice modesty and welcome a change of attitude, which will lead to a happy life.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

*It's important to feel the pain you masked with your problem.*

- Give up self-reliance for reliance on God—whatever that may be to you.
  - Learn to practice humility and put character-building ahead of comfort.
  - Make "honesty, tolerance, and true love of man and God the daily basis of living."<sup>1</sup>
  - Accept that humility is necessary to achieve a sober and fulfilled life.
  - Change your perspective from a self-centered one to a humble, selfless one.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing This Step?

- **Be willing to suffer and feel pain.** It's important to feel the pain that you masked with your problem. It is a necessary step toward recovery and spiritual well-being.
  - **Be patient.** You can't change your life overnight.
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## What Are Some Myths About Step 7?

- **Humility isn't necessary for recovery.** You can't see your shortcomings without stripping yourself of your ego and pride. This unfiltered look into yourself allows you to develop a humble attitude and correct your moral defects.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step7.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step7.pdf)



# Step 8: Make a List of People You've Hurt

*Edited by Editorial Staff at Recovery.org*  
created on 9 October 2015 | updated on 22 November 2015

## What Is Step 8?

"Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

In Step 8 you identify the wrongs of your past so that you can repair the damage you've done. Then, you devise a plan for creating healthy relationships moving forward.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

*Realize that you hurt others as well as yourself with your problem.*

- **Discover how many people you have hurt and how you've hurt them.**
  - **Make a list of everyone you've harmed.** Also, pay attention to what you discover about yourself and your problems along the way.
  - **Don't be defensive and blame people for how they've treated you.** Forgive them, because without forgiving others, you cannot forgive yourself.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing This Step?

- Don't minimize your faults and failures by focusing on the faults of others.
  - Realize that you hurt others as well as yourself with your drinking.
  - Look beyond your obvious defects and do a thorough examination of your flaws.
  - Avoid judgments of others. Be objective when evaluating your defects as well as those of others.
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## What Are Some Myths About Step 8?

- **Your problem hasn't harmed anyone but yourself.** People often think that if the damage isn't extreme and noticeable, then there isn't anything beneath the surface. This is a dangerous misconception and something AA calls "purposeful forgetting." You can't get the most out of the 12 steps if you aren't willing to be vulnerable and incredibly honest—even if what you discover about yourself and others is painful to accept.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step8.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step8.pdf)

# Step 9: Apologize to People You've Harmed

## What Is Step 9?

"Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

The purpose of Step 9 is to take action and apologize to those you have harmed with your problem.

This step will provide you with peace of mind, relief and liberation from the chains of regret.

The Alcoholics Anonymous "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" book states:

*The readiness to take the full consequences of our past acts, and to take responsibility for the well-being of others at the same time, is the very spirit of Step Nine.<sup>1</sup>*

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

- Use good judgment.
- Have a careful sense of timing.
- Be courageous and cautious.

### How to Select People to Make Amends With

**Acknowledge the different categories of people you should make amends with.**

- Those you should approach as soon as you are confident in your sobriety.
  - Those you can only make partial amends with since further disclosure may cause more harm than good.
  - Those you shouldn't take action with.
  - Those you can't make direct contact with because of the nature of the situation.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing Step 9?

- **Take your time.** Use your best judgment in disclosing your defects. You don't have to reveal them all at once, nor should you. People may take some time to process and understand your admissions.
  - **Don't say anything that will harm others.** It defeats the purpose of making amends if what you say will cause further pain and suffering.
  - **Don't mistake carefulness for avoidance.** Practice good timing when making amends but don't use that as an excuse to delay reconciliation.
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## What Are Some Myths About This Step?

- **You have to disclose every detail of your mistakes.** Full disclosure may harm the one with whom you are making amends, or quite often, other people. It won't make you feel any better to increase the burden of another.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step9.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step9.pdf)

# Step 10: Monitor Yourself and Admit Mistakes

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## What Is Step 10 of AA?

"Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

Step 10 of Alcoholics Anonymous encourages you to examine yourself as a part of your daily routine. Just as you addressed your defects, you must keep your successes in check. It's easy to fall back into a life of pride and self-satisfaction.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

*You must make self-examination a habit.*

Put all of your Alcoholics Anonymous work into daily practice, no matter what life throws at you. Day in and day out you will be tested to see if you can remain emotionally stable, sober and live humbly.

Correction of your wrongs is not a one-time thing; you must make self-examination a tireless habit. Only then will you continue to grow and progress.

Do a spot-check inventory when you have an emotional disturbance. This is a quick, spur-of-the-moment inventory concerned with day-to-day problems. It helps to silence volatile emotions, build character and promote a positive way of life.

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## What Are Some Tips for Completing This Step?

- Avoid making quick-tempered decisions; train yourself to take a step back and breathe.
  - Survey your situation honestly.
  - Admit when you're wrong.
  - Forgive others when they're wrong.
  - Focus on progress, not perfection.
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## What Are Some Myths About Step 10?

- **You constantly need to apologize to everyone.** Some AA members get hung up on this step because it involves admitting when you've done something wrong. But it isn't so much about apologizing to others as it is being aware of actions that harm yourself and others. It is a very personal process of constant inward reflection.
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## References

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step10.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step10.pdf)

# Step 11: Commit to a Spiritual Practice

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## What Is Step 11 of AA?

"Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

Step 11 helps to create a solid foundation for a peaceful and fulfilled life and to develop a more positive way of thinking, which will better serve you moving forward. A daily spiritual practice can help to promote emotional balance and stability.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

- Choose whether you'd like to pray, meditate or practice some other kind of spiritual activity.
  - Envision your spiritual objective, which is improved conscious contact, whether it be with a higher power or your higher self.
  - Create a relaxing environment free of distractions.
  - Focus on your higher power's will for you and let go of preconceived notions.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing This Step?

- **If you choose to pray, don't make specific demands of your higher power.** That communicates that you would like things done *your* way, instead of through its will.
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## What Are Some Myths About Step 11?

- **You have to pray to a specific God.** This step is about opening your mind. You decide how you feel most comfortable achieving this. What's important is that you clear yourself of unwanted defects and make room for care, compassion, love and empathy.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step11.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step11.pdf)

# Step 12: Help Others

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## What Is Step 12 of AA?

"Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

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## What Is the Purpose of This Step?

"The joy of good living" best represents Step 12 of Alcoholics Anonymous. This step prepares you to embrace all 12 steps as you continue your journey into a life of acceptance and understanding. It also encourages you to help others and to empower them as they discover the benefits of AA.

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## How Do You Complete This Step?

*Give selflessly and ask nothing in return.*

- Reach out to your fellow alcoholics who are still suffering. Give selflessly and ask nothing in return.
  - Begin to practice all 12 steps on a daily basis as a foundation for your new life.
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## What Are Some Tips for Completing This Step?

- Bring the same spirit, love and attitude of helping fellow alcoholics to every aspect of your own life.
  - Take your problems as they come and transform them into assets or strengths.
  - Perspective is everything when it comes to continuing to practice all 12 steps in your day-to-day life.
  - Spiritual growth should be your highest priority.
  - Abandon the need for self-importance and prestige. It doesn't bring happiness. Instead, learn to find peace within yourself and with whatever life throws your way.
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## What Are Some Myths About Step 12?

- **You're fully recovered once you get through all 12 steps.** Recovery is a lifelong process that requires discipline and a change in attitude and perspective. Only by regular practice of the 12 steps can you continue to live a sober, happy and peaceful life. The steps become a way of life for recovering alcoholics and a guide to living honestly and compassionately.
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## Reference

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. (1981). New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. Available at: [www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_step12.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_step12.pdf)