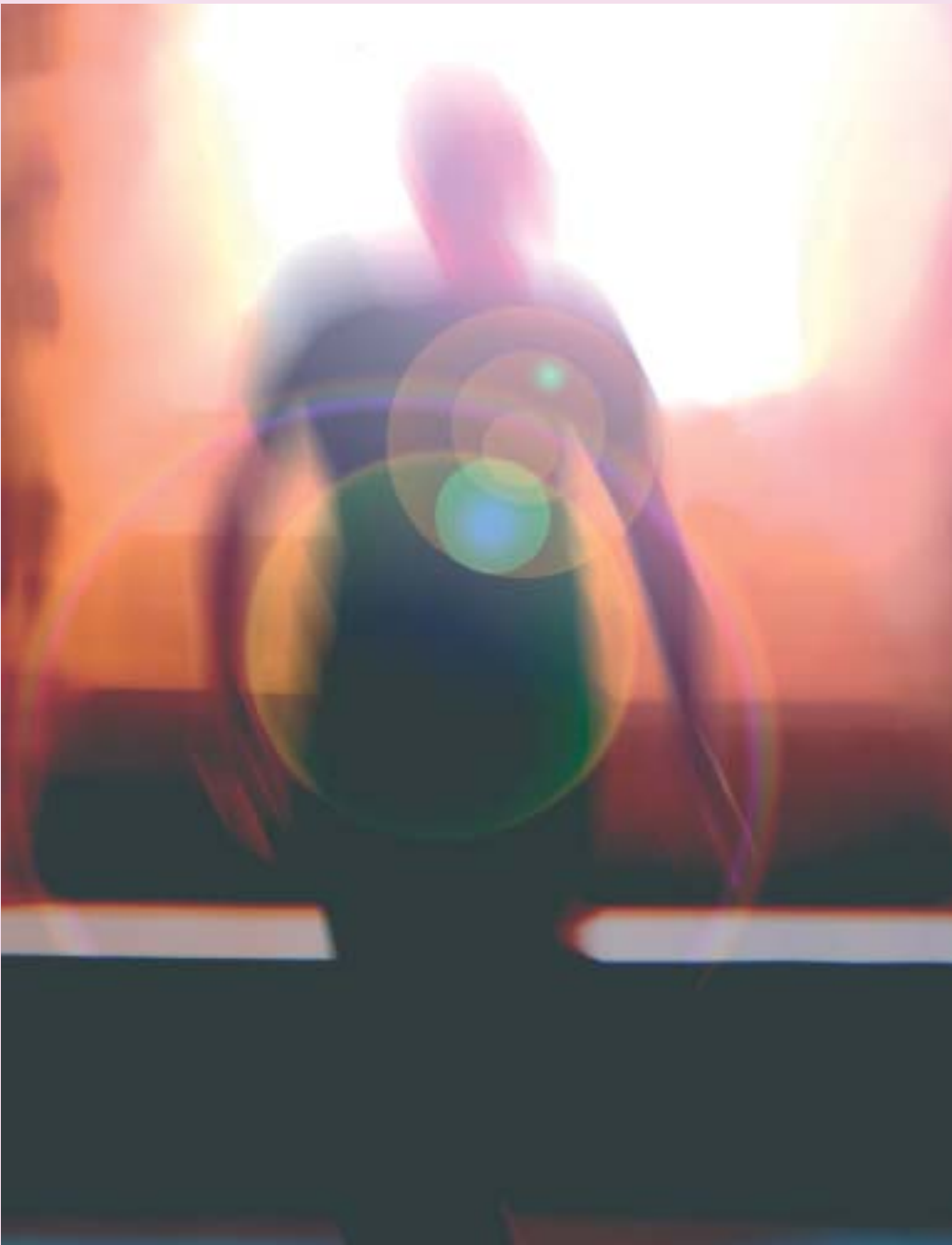


# Throwing light on the 12 steps

In the first part of Rosie B's brief introduction to the 12 steps as developed by AA, she looked at the concept of powerlessness, at the barriers to acceptance of the alcohol problem and the ability of alcohol to numb feelings which can block self-understanding and change. In this concluding part, she look a little deeper at steps two and three, and at the remaining 'growth steps.'



AA Members may be resistant at first to connect with the group. They may share how they are getting on or how they are feeling today and preface this with a statement – 'I am John and I am an alcoholic'. Most come to accept this not as stigmatic labelling but as a way of connecting in a group and it also helps them focus on why they are there – not because of their status, their job, their family life, but because of their addiction.

The second step – 'we came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity', represents a conscious shift to acceptance that something outside of the self and the will can help relieve cravings to drink. This is probably the most controversial of all the steps of AA. It has been interpreted as the pre-eminent example of AA as a religion that promotes God as the supreme external force. It also pre-supposes that all AA members will come to accept that their drinking behaviour constitutes some form of insanity. It might indicate that for the atheist and the agnostic there is no hope. This is not the case. AA tradition insists that controversy and personal beliefs, both political and religious, are left outside the meeting room. Meeting rooms themselves are often held in church halls, but only because they are more cost effective and available. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

A whole chapter of AA's original *Big Book* of early founders' experiences is called 'We Agnostics'. In an increasingly secular age, belief in a God is a matter of choice and in AA the concept of a 'higher power' is the get-out-clause. For many, this simply means that the power that alcohol held over the individual can be replaced by the AA group itself and the supportive human relationships that are built there.

AA and the 12 steps teach tolerance as a way to inter-relate, both within the AA meeting rooms and in the wider world. Tolerance brings peace of mind in a life where intolerance is a noticeable characteristic of alcohol-fuelled behaviours.

The third step of AA is often a turning point – one to which many AA members will return to on a daily basis: ‘We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him (or her).’ It is a step for dealing with resentment and frustration in life that might trigger cravings. When the JCB of their own will meets the immovable object that life sometimes presents, this step says hand it over to a higher power – whoever or whatever you conceive that external force to be.

Practical application of the process of handing over is expressed in AA’s ‘Just for Today Card’ which has imprinted on it the useful words to help members focus when things are going wrong in life: ‘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.’

AA has never claimed to be a substitute for other therapeutic interventions that an individual may need. Moreover, 12-step facilitation has been included within therapeutic programmes for substance misuse for decades.

AA members sometimes talk about how the penny takes a while to drop in understanding the meaning of all the 12 steps and the programme of AA. They find they return time and again to step one, two or three on a daily basis to keep balanced. Others talk about the process as peeling back layers of an onion to find who they are. It is about deeper self-awareness, but it is also a journey on the road to self-actualisation.

AA members call on a range of useful well-worn phrases, as tools to remind themselves to keep focused. One of these phrases is – ‘there is no growth without pain’.

AA members never graduate as such. The 12 steps is not a PhD thesis either. It is a programme for living that is useful long after an individual has put down their drug of choice. The fact that people keep coming back to an AA meeting is often interpreted as a developing dependency on AA. The pros and cons of that are debatable. But what coming back does, is allow for reinforcement of the learning process which strengthens a personal commitment to change, that can be so easily challenged in daily life. It also encourages people to get involved, to maybe start up meetings where needed and carry the message of their own recovery to others.

Steps 4 to 12 have been called the real growth steps. They are designed to enable a person to re-evaluate their life, beginning with step 4 and an honest self-examination and in step 5 the sharing of events and themes in their life with another. Talking about losses, shame and guilt, related to their addiction, is tough. Such honest appraisal may need several re-visits and a shift to arriving at new perspectives of the past. Keeping a daily inventory keeps people mentally flexed to deal with

life. Fear of growth and of life is replaced by a strength gained from fellow members, and for some it is true, from a faith. The emptiness inside, experienced by many in their drinking, disappears. People are encouraged to stop projecting into an unknown future which can fuel irrational fear, and after learning from their history, to move on from dwelling in a past that can’t be changed.

Step 7 focuses on looking at the things about ourselves that cause us problems. Writing a balanced inventory of things we like about ourselves is of course as important as writing down the negatives, particularly for people who

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may have lost a sense of self-worth. People often find it extremely difficult to balance negative self-perception with positive assessment.

Steps 8 and 9 and 10 help people to acknowledge past behaviours and to make amends to a list of people who were harmed in some way by drinking or drugging behaviours, and to continue to do so. This becomes part of an inner process of cleaning house. In step 8, AA advises that not everyone on the amendments list will appreciate being approached. Sometimes the willingness to make amends is all that is possible.

The 12 steps are not all about hard work. Step 11 is a re-vitalising step, and is there to encourage meditation and reflection. Ironically, many members, used to going to extreme lengths to plan a drinking strategy, find quiet meditation one of the hardest steps.

AA could not exist without step 12 being put into practice. The focus on helping others, but not ‘fixing’ others, requires an awareness of one’s own limitations and motives. Learning the

difference between humility and humiliation helps. Members of the AA ‘fellowship’ are often helped along the way by an AA sponsor, a person who will be about two years or more away from a drink or drug. All it takes is one sober person passing a message about how they stopped drinking to another human being who has asked for help. Sponsors act as guides and friends. The 12th step is the seed from which AA has grown to be worldwide organisation with meetings that take place most days of the week, at evenings and weekends in many towns and cities.

The AA 12-step book gives a fuller explanation of how it works. It involves lots of practical advice and common sense and it calls on deep personal knowledge and experiences of how people may relate better to themselves, to one another and a wider world without alcohol and go on to live useful productive lives. In that sense the steps are not owned by anyone but are open to everyone who wants to use them. That is also why they have been adapted for use with a range of other addictive problems.

AA members often remind each other that many more people go on to die from their addiction than will remain free of alcohol. That is undoubtedly true. This fact is possibly the best reason why the occasional article about the 12 steps and their benefits is important. Alcohol addiction and dependency is one of the greatest problems faced by many different societies across the world. Self-help grew from the users themselves, to address the problem. It’s free, and it is available most evenings and weekends, it is accessible and its provision does not depend on government or any commissioner.

I have experienced the death of close friends and relatives from alcohol addiction and faced death myself. Any death is a tragedy. But death from alcohol misuse can be slow and tortuous for the individual and their family. It can be one of the loneliest, saddest, and deeply disturbing endings for any human being. It is not only the fact that alcohol misuse can affect almost every physical organ in the body including the brain, but alcohol addiction wastes so much human potential, often slowly but inexorably, without dignity but with anguish, without peace, but with turmoil. It leaves in its wake, ruined relationships, shattered families, broken homes and damaged children.

The gifts of AA are there for the taking, and in the very act of taking the 12 steps on board, an individual will find themselves in a giving relationship with other human beings. As AA members are fond of saying – you can’t give away what you have not got.

In its 70th year, AA and its 12 steps have a lot to offer. But it is not the only way.

**Drug and alcohol workers who are interested might benefit from visiting an open meeting of AA and NA as an observer. AA service offices can help you to find one near you. Call 0845 769 7555. The 12 traditions of AA may be found on the AA website: [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org)**