

Living the Program: A Brief Commentary on the Twelve Steps
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When we come into sexual recovery through Sexual Compulsives Anonymous among the first things we encounter are the twelve steps. Some of us have come into SCA from other twelve step programs and know something about the steps as a tool to recovery and as a guide to life. Many who have been in other twelve-step programs may have taken the steps in those programs and ask if it is necessary to go through them again in SCA or how that process might be different here. Others coming into Sexual Compulsives Anonymous may have no knowledge of the steps and their first experience of them is sitting in a meeting hearing them read aloud. Some are in a middle position, having only vague ideas about the twelve steps. This brief commentary can be used as a supplement to other guides and may be particularly useful to members of Sexual Compulsives Anonymous since it is drawn from our collective experience.

The twelve steps of SCA have their origin in the twelve steps of AA that were first publicized in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939 and in that program's later publication *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. SCA's version of the first step, "We admitted we were powerless over sexual compulsion – that our lives had become unmanageable" is the step we take when we break through the denial so characteristic of our sexual compulsion. Some people make this admission of powerlessness and unmanageability at a deep level upon entering the rooms of SCA. Some event or series of events has driven them into recovery and hearing the stories of others like themselves and simply reading the first step and the "Characteristics" in SCA's Fourfold is enough. Others in SCA found that taking the first step was a longer process, sometimes involving weeks or even, in some cases, years. It is mysterious why this is so. Nonetheless, SCA is a place where individuals are allowed their own time and paths in taking the first and other steps. People are different and different timetables may be necessary. Often individuals who have taken a longer time to make a deep acknowledgement and acceptance of the first step have been able to share experiences and insights that others who have gotten sober quickly do not have. They can then provide a different and valuable insight into this step. The first step always involves "surrender." Surrender can mean accepting that we have lost the battle to fix ourselves and that we need others' support. At another level it can mean acceptance of ourselves as limited beings who do not run the world. Surrendering to one's limitations and to the need for some outside power may be the start of a reduction of self-centeredness. Members often describe this as a liberating experience. It is as if we have finally relaxed and began to let others into our lives in a real way. The experience of being with others in the rooms in an open and vulnerable way may also facilitate taking the first step. This is why love and tolerance are at the core of the SCA recovery ideal. Finally, some members write out their first step and some do not. It is less important what methods we use in taking the first step than in coming to an internal acceptance of our condition. Writing or not writing are merely means to an end and individuals must discover what works for them.

The second step "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" follows directly from the first step. Many coming into twelve-step recovery express strong aversion to this step since it seems to imply specific religious doctrines. SCA joins with other twelve-step programs in stating that all members may choose their own conception of a higher power. It is usually suggested that the higher power be loving or at least non-judgmental. Most important is the belief that this power can restore us to sanity, that it can release us from our obsessions and compulsions around sex and romance. Most of us often forget that there are consequences to our sexual acting out or to living a life riddled with romantic obsession. Also we experience ourselves as driven to act out compulsively. Finally, we tend to obsess about sex or romance. Repeated compulsive behaviors and thoughts, obsession and the inability to recall consequences are the core of our insanity. Usually we have already tried to fix ourselves and we have failed. If we are powerless over all of these then some power other than ourselves is needed. Recognizing these facts pushes us toward taking the second step. This surrender, combined with the examples of those around us who are staying on sexual recovery plans, is the start of finding a power greater than ourselves which can restore us to sanity in regard to our sexual and romantic compulsion and obsessions.

“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understand God.*” The third step can be a difficult step. Some of us have lived lives as active sexual compulsives in which we have not really made any decisions. We have somehow turned our lives and our wills over to our compulsions to sexual thoughts and acting out or to other people as romantic obsessions. These people, thoughts, and actions have ruled our lives but oddly we have not really decided to go down those paths. We have felt driven against our wills or have acted almost as if in a dream state. This does not excuse us. In fact our failing is that we have not chosen. Some of us, on the other hand, experience ourselves as willful, as actively seeking to perform actions or to go down paths that we know at some level will harm us and other people. For the first type of sexual compulsive this step represents the opportunity to concentrate and focus and to make, perhaps for the first time, a real decision. This will be a decision that will have consequences for us. In the second case, the case of those who have willfully chosen to harm themselves and others, the decision is to make a radical turning away from that way of life and the person we have become. In both cases without such a decision it may be impossible to work the remaining steps. We made *a decision*. The subsequent focusing and turning of our will and lives can now be a daily action on our part. Now we can no longer float about the world, refusing to accept that we have a role in our actions or that our actions have consequences. Even less can we willfully choose to do harm. It is probably best to think of this step as turning toward doing good for ourselves and for other people.

This step also pushes us toward further spiritual growth and toward living in the world without anxiety and fear. In an inexplicable way being directed toward doing good for others and living in honest relationships with them reduces fear in our own lives. Meetings play a role here, since it is in meetings, while witnessing the vulnerability and honesty of others, that we develop empathy. We often find ourselves surprised that we are now concerned for the welfare of others in the rooms. Finding ourselves surprised at our newfound empathy is a sign that this is the work of a power greater than ourselves. It is also something over which we do not have full control. We do not force a higher power to work in us. We can act as if we are concerned for others, we can pray for a willingness to put others first, but ultimately we need other people in our lives in order to experience a concern for them. We need them both as models and as the focus of our concern. Finally, the capacity to feel compassion, non-sexual and non-romantic love, is essential for full spiritual recovery from the self-centered disease of sexual compulsion. A word may be required about caretaking. Many of us have come from family and other backgrounds in which taking care of others, to the neglect of our own needs, was instilled in us. We used caretaking as a means of ignoring our own feelings and as a way of controlling others in order to keep them near us. This could be part of sexual manipulation or romantic obsession or it could be how we functioned in general. It could also allow us to accept abuse from others or to be abusive ourselves. This is not the case for all sexual compulsives but it is the case for many. Therefore, some of us have to balance caring for others with a need to care for ourselves. We will not really know if we have these characteristics until we undertake a thorough fourth, fifth and sixth step. These concerns, and others, lead us into the next steps. The other steps become, in part, a way of completing the second and third steps.

The fourth and fifth steps are: “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves” and “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” Some members have taken these steps in other twelve-step programs and have achieved a degree of recovery in SCA without taking them again. But many who have decided to take them again in SCA have found them helpful. Historically there has been much variety in the methods used to write out the fourth step in Sexual Compulsives Anonymous. SCA uses literature from other twelve-step programs as well as other appropriate literature. Sometimes in using other twelve-step program literature on the fourth and fifth steps we have modified those guides in recognition that sexual compulsion is not identical to other addictions and dysfunctions. When taking a fourth step members of SCA have also used commercially produced guides and commentaries on the steps. The wide variety of methods used by members precludes any judgment by SCA as a whole as to which method is best. Likewise, members have taken their fourth and fifth steps with sponsors and in step-writing

groups. Sometimes an understanding member of the clergy or a therapist has been asked to hear a fifth step.

We are told that we are to take a “fearless” and “moral” inventory. Moral has a variety of meanings but it may be a good idea to try to uncover where we have harmed others and ourselves by both active and passive means. “Fearless” is an attitude. Here it means a willingness to hold nothing back at the time. This is a willingness to be honest and to get down on paper those events and thoughts about which we are most ashamed. A frequent outcome of fourth steps in SCA has been the uncovering of shame. Many of us have carried deep-seated shame and feelings of worthlessness. Such shame could be the product of sexual and other abuse or it could be the direct result of our sexual acting out. Finally, many sexual compulsives have experienced sexual abuse in childhood. One important thing to remember is that we are not responsible for our own childhood sexual and other abuse. Furthermore, if we are the survivors of childhood sexual abuse or of sexual assault at anytime in our lives it may be best to seek professional help in dealing with the consequences of such traumas.

In a general way the fifth step means acknowledging and accepting that one is a flawed human being. It is difficult to admit these things to oneself and it may take time to admit them to a higher power. Ultimately this can be freeing and can be a release from the demands of a false perfectionism. We are human beings like others and we now know, at least in part, what our failings have been and can begin to prepare to have them removed. Admitting to another person can also be frightening but almost all who have done it say afterward that a great burden was removed. This can be the beginning of another phase of spiritual growth. It involves humility, acknowledgement and acceptance of one’s humanity and an intimate relationship with another person. If another person can accept us in our failings then it helps us to believe that a higher power had been present in our lives even in our sexual compulsion. Often the fourth through sixth steps are places where members become increasingly conscious of their motivations and defects of character. A word to the person hearing a fifth step in SCA. This person is often a sponsor. SCA experience has taught that it is problematic to hear the fifth step if either sponsor or sponsee is sexually or romantically attracted to the other. Also, it may be good for the sponsor to check to see if he or she thinks of themselves as experts on recovery or on the fifth step.

“Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character” and “Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings” are the sixth and seventh steps. We uncover many of our defects of character in the fourth and fifth steps. But we cannot control, by taking “perfect” fourth and fifth steps, a recovery process which is not entirely in our own hands. A higher power, and life itself, are too large for our control. As some components of our addiction are put down, or as we assume new roles in our lives, new character defects may be revealed to us. But the fourth and fifth steps are good places to begin uncovering our character defects. Some members, upon completing the fifth step, and having identified deep-seated defects in themselves, decide at this point to address these in professional therapy. This too can be one way of “becoming entirely ready”. But how else do we become entirely ready? Here some individuals have taken what are called “counter-measures” in regard to their defects. After identifying character defects they intentionally act in the opposite direction. Usually this involves praying, or engaging in some spiritual practice, that would assist us in the action and preparing us to become ready to have the defect removed. Meditation may be particularly useful here. This is all seen as cooperating with a higher power. Service to others may reduce our self-centeredness, getting us outside ourselves as well as changing our behaviors and helping to develop greater empathy and self-acceptance. Some members have reported that character defects are removed only after the defects caused them such great pain that they were finally willing to give them up. Others have reported that some defects have been lifted in due course by a holistic use of the tools and by attendance at meetings. This too is a form of accessing a higher power. Many have reported a reduction in the tendency to act out our defects but not a complete removal. Another goal of these particular steps is to take us further down the spiritual path of being open to relationships with other people and with a higher power. The growth of compassion in us may come from a variety of means and some members seek the insights of specific religious or

spiritual traditions at this point in their recovery. A balanced concern for others and ourselves and the ability to act spontaneously and with acceptance and joy may be some of the outcomes of taking these steps. Most of us, however, achieve only progress toward such goals.

The eighth and ninth steps are: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all" and "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others." The list of persons may largely come out of our fourth and fifth steps. It is probably best to review the list with a sponsor or another person in SCA or with a therapist or spiritual advisor. One reason to do this is to ensure that we are not hurting anyone in our amends. Some people make an exhaustive list of all people to whom they have behaved badly in any fashion. Others restrict their list to those to whom they have done significant harm. It is difficult to determine which approach is best but it may be good to remember that as human beings we are not capable of making a perfect list. Acceptance of our imperfection is itself progress. It is also important to remember that the second half of the eighth step involves "becoming willing to make amends." Any approach to a person we have harmed in which we are merely going through a ritual action is not a sincere or full amend. In such cases we are still using the other person as an object to get something for ourselves. This is simply repeating what many of us did in our active sex addiction. It is also suggested that if we have resentments toward people it may be better to forgive them first before attempting to make amends. Apologies combined with a willingness to undertake actions to restore the damage we have done in relationships is one type of amend. It takes some insight about our character defects to determine what work at repair is required. Some amends are spontaneous. Others are planned out and discussed beforehand in detail with others. Usually, however, if undertaken in a humble and sincere spirit making amends relieves us of guilt and allows us to live more genuine lives. A general softening of our personalities, a greater acceptance and tolerance of others, less fear, and a greater willingness to live at peace are reported consequences of taking the ninth step. Although individuals for whom we have romantic or sexual obsessions may be placed on the eighth step list, contacting such individuals to make amends should probably be done with care. We must be certain that we are not using the ninth step as a way of reconnecting romantically or sexually. Also, if we have sexually assaulted or abused someone then direct ninth step amends of any sort may only be possible in rare circumstances. It is best to undertake a ninth step amend in such cases only when we are certain that those individuals want to be approached by us and we are prepared for the social and legal consequences for ourselves and our families. Similarly, it is not appropriate to reveal a sexual liaison with someone without his or her permission or if by doing so we are informing a partner who was unaware of the episode. Sometimes all we can do is to accept responsibility for what we have done, live better lives and perform service for others as a way of making amends to those whom we cannot contact.

"Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong promptly admitted it" is step ten. We have now moved out of the past and into the present. One way of thinking of the "wrongs" in this step is to see them as behaviors that harm other people or ourselves. Harming others can consist of abusing them verbally, physically or psychologically by manipulation or by withholding information about ourselves that prevents people from having full relationships with us. It usually means using others only as objects to satisfy our needs. To judge when such wrongs are occurring takes maturity and insight. Writing out our part in relationships that seem distorted, discussing this with others in the program, in therapy or with spiritual advisors and praying or meditating about it are ways of becoming clearer about when we are wrong. Sometimes we admit the wrong only to ourselves, sometimes to others, and often, if appropriate and it would not create further harm, to those whom we have injured. Not taking appropriate self-care, not sleeping, not eating, not allowing ourselves to have privacy to think or meditate, allowing ourselves to be dominated or controlled by others (including others in the program) and not doing the things we have listed in our third column are wrongs to ourselves that we can also rectify. Beating ourselves up internally is also a form of self-abuse. Taking responsibility for other people's actions and dysfunctions are also wrongs we may need to explore. Sometimes drawing a healthy boundary is a way of working the tenth and the sixth and seventh steps. Intuitively taking this step in a particular situation is the goal -- not writing lists of wrongs. But this may take some time to achieve and none of us achieve this perfectly. The ability to

be in healthy intimate relations with appropriate boundaries may be a sign that this and other steps are beginning to have an effect on us.

Steps eleven and twelve are “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood God*, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out” and “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to sexually compulsive people and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” Some members have found prayers derived from other twelve-step fellowships or from particular religious or spiritual traditions useful but Sexual Compulsives Anonymous takes no position on these prayers. We view these as outside issues and we also do not insist, even implicitly, on a specific conception of a higher power. In twelve-step recovery the freedom of the individual is important in developing a spiritual life. Developing a prayer and meditation practice is a great challenge for recovering sexual compulsives. Nonetheless many in SCA say that it is one of most fulfilling tasks a person can undertake. Many SCA members begin their day with some form of meditation, which can include reading or a specific meditative technique and with prayer. It is a common report of sexual compulsives that they “wake up angry.” Prayer, reading, or meditation in the morning may calm the mind and may set us on a better path during the day. Others make a point of stopping during the day, especially in difficult situations, and praying or meditating. Some say being attentive at meetings to what others are saying is a type of meditation. Others pray at night as they review their day as part of the tenth step. Many have reported that the consistent discipline of prayer and meditation has reduced anger. Conscious contact can mean many things, including intuitions, a thought coming to us in our meditation, a sense of being taken care of, a feeling of guidance, peace or detachment from ego-driven concerns. The twelfth step states that the other steps have brought us to a spiritual awakening and that we can now carry the message of the steps. This often means service in Sexual Compulsives Anonymous including sponsorship. But SCA is not a closed system cut off from the larger world. We are meant to reconnect with a world with which we had a distorted relationship in our addiction. Twelve-step recovery also means entering into the healthiest relationships possible with others including, if we choose, sexual and romantic relations. It means caring about those into whose lives we are thrust.