

Applied to ourselves, forgiveness requires a thorough consideration of any hurtful acts we may have consciously or unconsciously committed, coupled with any necessary restitution. Borysenko, 1993

RESOLVING RESENTMENT BY MAKING AMENDS Chapter 5

Alcoholics Anonymous has been quite successful in fostering forgiveness in those working their 12 Steps by a program that essentially requires surrendered self examination and amends.

How do you go about making amends? What steps do you have to take to accomplish such a formidable task if that person has *also* hurt you? Do you have to make amends if you've only resented the person? What effect can that possibly have on creating a forgiving attitude?

Here is the process developed by the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939.

Table 2 The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we 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 we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. 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.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1939

The truth shall make you free.

The Bible: John

1. **We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.**

When you've been knocked down pretty hard by whatever substance you have been using to keep you from having to deal head on with life, admitting that you've been pretty ineffective isn't all that hard.

Many people go into 12 Step programs, or 12 Step-based treatment programs, fully aware that they've not had any success at combating the urge to "use" on their own. Probably the easiest part of it for most people is recognizing that their lives have become a mess.

This isn't always true. Sometimes people have a hard time accepting it. But the substance-dependent person who sits down and talks with someone or writes in complete honesty about his experiences will usually recognize his best efforts haven't produced success.

In and of itself, this has little to do with forgiving. It is crucial to the attitudes required to do the remainder of the steps, however.

Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.

William James

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

This is a rough one for most people who join a 12-Step program. Most come in as angry agnostics (mad at a god they don't believe in), many come in as atheists, and the rest seem to come in as fundamentally religious people who have no personal relationship with God.

Again, this has nothing directly to do with forgiving. But it has everything to do with achieving the attitudes necessary to do the rest. Note that there is no requirement to believe in "God" per se. You can make up your own. It can be a door knob. It just has to be *not* you.

Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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

There is an assumption inherent in the 12 Steps' view of God, regardless of the cautionary reminders that one can choose their own concept of God, that God or your Higher Power does want certain things from you.

What changes for most people going into a 12-Step program is that what is expected by turning one's will and life over to the care of one's Higher Power is not harder than can be done, with help.

I think this Step is critical to the end result of a forgiving attitude, because without it, there can be no willingness to go through the rough period of self examination required to eliminate resentment.

The bottom line of the purpose of the 12 Steps is to produce an awakening of the person's spirit in such a way that he or she has a desire to live a life of happy, joyous freedom. So, all of these Steps are focused toward that end.

We are apt to be very pert at censuring others, where we will not endure advice ourselves.

William Penn

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

This is a tough one, and usually separates those who make it from those who don't. This requires that you at least temporarily set aside what has been done *to* you and sit down and write a list of every person, place or thing you have resented, everything you have ever been afraid of, everything you feel guilty about and don't want anyone to know, and everything that makes you feel insecure. And it is to be done thoroughly and with as much rigorous honesty as possible.

The alcoholic, for example, is, throughout this process, expected to look at how these events in his life affected his self esteem, his personal and financial security, his sex relations, his pride, his ambitions and his personal relationships (AAWS, 1976, p. 64).

This step has a tremendous bearing on creating a forgiving attitude in that it puts *all* the responsibility for how he feels on *his own* shoulders. Yes, others do us wrong, the A.A. text admits. But the only person you can do anything about is you, and that is a requirement of your sobriety.

The result is that the alcoholic, through this process, begins to uncover many of his psychological defenses that he may have used to prevent him from acknowledging the exact nature of the situations that took place. This, as researchers in the field have found, is critical to the process of forgiving.

The adoption of the principle behind this step is ideal because when people are trying to forgive others, there are occasions when the offender just can't or won't move very fast toward setting things right themselves.

That makes sense since most injuries to people we love are born out of unconscious wounds over which we've not yet gained control. So, owning your own part, taking complete responsibility, keeps you from becoming trapped in your entanglement with the other person's inability or refusal to change.

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

Sören Kierkegaard

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

Most people working on the 4th Step try to forget that they are going to have to do this one. By the time they've finished the 4th Step and are ready to do this, they've pretty well come to terms with the God issue.

They've either developed a relationship with a Higher Power, improved the relationship with the God they already had, or have found a way to resolve, "higher power" without relinquishing their desire to remain atheists. There are those who do this successfully, by the way. What seems to be critical in the issue of "God" is one's attitude.

Most, however, have developed some kind of relationship with a power greater than themselves, and open themselves at this point to allowing that higher power deeper inside where the guilt and resentment lie.

Someone the alcoholic can trust is chosen to hear the written 4th Step, and the hours are set aside for this most intimate and rewarding process.

Usually, but not always, during this Step, the person hearing the 4th Step Inventory will help the alcoholic figure out his motives if that has been difficult for him to do. And the person hearing the 4th Step will often share his own experiences in return.

This has the effect of reducing shame and further enlightening the alcoholic about the amount of anger and psychological defenses he has had toward his offender (real or imagined), and it works toward preparing the way for an attitude of forgiveness.

Don't fight your problem. Know that there is a solution.

Joseph Murphy

6. **Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character;**
7. **Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.**

For the sake of expediency, I will discuss these two together.

They're both very similar in nature; one being involved in developing the willingness to make one's own personal change, and the other involved in actually reaching out and asking a power greater than you to make those changes happen.

This Step is critical to developing a forgiving mind set because the habit of resenting dies hard. The habit of self-pity, as a psychological defense against change, dies very hard.

In order to do this Step, he has to have done all the ones that preceded it. Though that is true of all of them, this one is especially important because the person with whom he takes his 5th Step is going to have helped him figure out what exactly it is he needs help with from his higher power.

Then, in asking that higher power to make the changes, he will be working toward trying to model what it is he believes his higher power wants in his heart.

Alcoholics who make it this far have had a spiritual awakening deep enough to pretty much propel them through the remaining five Steps.

The best way out is always through.

Robert Frost

- 8. Made a list of all persons we 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.**

Again, as with Steps 6 and 7, I'll discuss these together, since one deals with willingness and the other with the action necessary after it has been attained.

It's tough to go make amends to someone that you believe has hurt you. Think about a man who has fouled up his job and his marriage by drinking, who has a wife that has gone into vicious screaming fits, shredded his clothing, and in other ways taken revenge.

Maybe he's been drinking *at her* for years because of something she did in the early years of their marriage. Maybe he really, really believes she is terribly at fault. And maybe she is!

This is where the forgiving heart created by the preceding steps works its wonders. With the guidance of his sponsor, or whoever it was that helped him through his 5th Step, he will go to her with a forgiving heart and make amends for *his* part in their strife, taking care to not bring any of her problems up for discussion.

He is there for himself, to clean his own slate, and by this time in the process, he realizes that his behavior and attitudes are the *only* thing over which he has any control.

This, I believe, is the clincher for demonstrating that a forgiving heart has been achieved.

The absurd man is he who never changes.

Auguste Barthelemy

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

Going beyond what is expected in the process of creating a forgiving heart, this part of the 12 Step process insures that the alcoholic will *continue* looking at himself carefully. He is instructed in the text (AAWS, 1976, p. 86) to constructively review his day when he retires at night and check to see where he was "resentful, selfish, dishonest or afraid."

This step is about maintaining the spiritual condition he developed in the first nine steps. In our focus on forgiving, it also has the effect of making sure that a forgiving heart is truly achieved. That takes place, interestingly enough, through the fact that looking at all of your behavior all of the time as a way of life produces a life based on true humility. . . . humility as in *absence of false pride*. And it just becomes easier to see your injuries in a greater context.

First keep the peace within yourself, then you can also bring peace to others.

Thomas à Kempis

11. 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.

Several recommendations exist in the text for how best to do this.

The biggest one being to consult the massive amount of literature written by knowledgeable people in the world.

One of the suggestions for meditation recommended is the prayer of St. Francis which, among many other beautiful virtues, was chosen because it encourages the alcoholic to bring the spirit of forgiveness to his relationships (AAWS, 1979, p. 99).

Lord, make me a channel of thy peace – that where there is hatred, I may bring love – that where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness – that where there is discord, I may bring harmony – that where there is error, I may bring truth – that where there is doubt, I may bring faith – that where there is despair, I may bring hope – that where there are shadows, I may bring light – that where there is sadness, I may bring joy. Lord, grant that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted – to understand, than to be understood – to love, than to be loved. For it is by self-forgetting that one finds. It is by forgiving that one is forgiven. It is by dying that one awakens to Eternal Life. Amen.

St. Francis, qtd. in AAWS, 1979

Few people can fail to generate a self-healing process when they become genuinely involved in healing others.

Theodore Isaac Rubin

12. 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.

The effect of having had a spiritual awakening almost always inspires people to make themselves available for others. But what is also key here is the reminder to “practice these principles in all our affairs” meaning that a way of life has been defined that has certain requirements.

The net effect of those requirements is a set of principles for living that insures a forgiving heart and the serene sobriety the AA program promises.

The preceding two processes, each overlapping each other in some areas, and yet in others addressing different issues, are comprehensive enough that a comparison of one to the other is instructive.

