

Step Five

In step four, we created an open wound by honestly probing our past behaviour. Step five will start the healing process. We are putting ourselves in danger if we procrastinate over continuing. Exactly like a physical wound, this one can lead to pain and death if it remains untreated.

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

Reluctance to continue with step five can be complicated. We might feel embarrassed about confessing to stupid behaviour or frightened that we will become open to manipulation. When we examine our reluctance honestly, a common reason for not wanting to continue is the belief that until we admit to our defects we can carry on enjoying whatever they give us.

Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being...

We might cynically claim that if God is “all-knowing” then he is already aware of everything and so we don’t need to do this step. People down through the ages have kicked against their spiritual development with this excuse and we are no different. An omnipotent Higher Power may know about our defects, but it is now time for us to acknowledge them. There are common phrases like “skeletons in the closet” or “bottling things up” and more clinical terms such as suppression or repression to describe these hidden secrets. Whatever we call them, *acknowledging our defects and understanding the pain they create is essential to a healthy way of life.* One of the best ways to start to “own” these issues is to talk openly about them with somebody else.

Who should I talk to

When the original members created the Big Book, there wasn’t the “luxury” of so many meetings and sober alcoholics. The hope was that people would be able to use the instructions in the Big Book to create their own local infrastructure. They offered a number of suggestions about sharing a step four; any trusted person, a doctor or a spiritual leader, it even suggests that we could choose a complete stranger.

For people not working through a clinical recovery program, the idea of taking a three-hour appointment with a doctor is probably out of the question. Whether this is viable depends upon how much our doctor is willing to become involved in our recovery.

A spiritual leader would almost certainly be willing to give the time to listen and this could be the correct thing to do if we are already part of an organised religion. Even for those of us without any religious affiliation there seems to be a strange attraction in talking to a “man of the cloth”. Films and television create the impression that we “ought” to return to the church when we are trying to put our life straight. Remember the earlier warning, that if we become involved, *we should be careful not to confuse the program and religion.* They should remain separate activities within our life.

If we tried the complete stranger method, it is questionable that we would be able to stay honest about our character defects without manipulating the truth to present ourselves in the best light. *The honest statement born in our mind can twist into justification by the time it leaves our mouth.* We explain our side of a situation to get a response like, “They got what they deserved” or “I would have done just the same”. This is human, not alcoholic behaviour. We prefer being blameless and wronged to scheming and flawed, but vindication is of no value to a step five. We are looking to honestly acknowledge our actions, not justify them, a complete stranger may listen, but it is questionable if it would work.

Today, most of us choose to share step five with our sponsor. By this stage, they should have a good understanding of us and be able to challenge as appropriate, but there can be reasons why our sponsor isn’t the correct choice. The emotions created by talking about our intimate secrets are certainly a prime example of when “cross sex” sponsorship is difficult. If we have un-resolved criminal behaviour to disclose, these might be more correctly addressed outside the fellowship. Within AA, there are murderers, rapists and thieves with issues that require careful handling. Whilst a sponsor will be a loyal and close-lipped friend, they aren’t priests, or trained in hearing confession. They aren’t professionally bound by a code of silence. They are ex-drunks who are trying their best to stay sober. If there is an on-going concern such as child abuse, it is correct that our sponsor should challenge this and if required make the relevant authorities aware of the issue.

...the exact nature of our wrongs

The word “exact” means that we have to make sure that we can share our step four as honestly as possible. The choice of the other person and the location has a great bearing upon our ability to achieve this.

We probably shouldn't attempt step five in a public place, such as a restaurant or coffee bar. Many who proclaim that they never show emotion find themselves in tears at some point during their fifth step. It is hard to conceive of honestly sharing our innermost secrets whilst fearing that the couple at the next table are eavesdropping or that the waiter cleaning the table is laughing at our tears. Whilst we can do step five in a steamed up car in a lay-by, it is normal to do it in surroundings that are more comfortable. We possibly think that our home is suitable, but it isn't if we have family around. Partners can overhear, or children need feeding. This will probably be one of the most memorable events of our recovery. It is an extremely powerful experience and an important stage in our development. As such, it is worthy of some forethought and planning, we don't want any fear or interruption to hinder us.

It is also worth considering that we will take a few hours to uncover all of the issues we have become aware of and so we need to allow sufficient time and probably a plentiful supply of tea or coffee to keep both people going.

We need to be confident that we are revealing the untainted truth about ourselves and we can make sure that we stay honest by returning to the framework of our fourth step and the major headings, Pride, Greed and Lust etc. The person we share our step with can gently guide us, but they are not there to make judgement upon what they hear. They are providing our Higher Power with a set of ears to listen to our honest appraisal of our character defects.

There isn't a precise “how” to completing the step, the person, place and timing all contribute, but the most important factor is that we are willing to “see it through”. Some people feel clumsy with written notes, or have reading difficulties. In doing our fourth step we have spent sufficient time investigating our moral defects to know them off by heart. It is perfectly acceptable to work from memory if we are confident that we are not deliberately holding anything back.

Other people find that working through their written notes gives them comfort and support. By using our fourth step notes, we can be certain that we have covered the topics we explored and identified as defective. We may prefer to prepare a short “crib card” of helpful one-word prompts to guide us and ensure that we don't forget anything.

Why am I doing this?

We rarely understand a step until we have completed it. Sharing these hidden secrets with another person often removes the embarrassment from them. We sometimes start to share incidents from our fourth step in open meetings and memories that once horrified us are now merely facts without any shame attached. This will not be true for all of it and some parts will remain confidential for the rest of our lives.

One of the principles of this step is ego-deflation. Creating the impression that we are infallible and maintaining an overbearing belief in our own importance is essential to most of us. Strangely, we can often mask our bloated ego behind a demeanour of inferiority. This means that a more correct term for the experience might be ego-rightsizing.

Some people describe the effect of doing their step five as orgasmic, possibly this is why they are tempted to do multiple step fives! However, we aren't doing the step for reasons of exhilaration and shouldn't be disappointed if this is not the case. If we are confident that we have exposed a complete moral inventory to ourselves, another person and to God, we can humbly recognise we have taken a huge step towards a new life.

And finally...

By the end of steps four and five, we should have a clear understanding of our defects and a list of examples of where they led us into harming people. This list will support us when we get to step eight.

There are suggestions of what we should do with our step four at this stage. Some suggest a ceremonial burning to display the end of that phase of our lives. Others favour keeping it for future reference to see how we change in years to come. Remember that if we do keep it, to put it somewhere that it will remain hidden. Life moves on and it can be embarrassing if somebody unexpectedly finds it.

Summary

- Are we confident that there is no incident hidden in our past that we have decided never to expose?
- Have we examined with rigorous honesty our involvement in any situation where somebody was hurt?

If we hesitate about answering yes to these questions, we are not yet ready to continue.

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