

Step Eight

We are now at what we thought was the second major hurdle of the program, but if we completely ignore the implications of step nine, step eight becomes quite easy.

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

This demonstrates the wonderful subtlety of the building nature of the program. In step four, we identified a defect in our behaviour. In step five, we acknowledged the defect to another person (and our Higher Power). In step six, we became willing to have it removed. In step seven, we asked our Higher Power to remove it. We should be convinced that the defect now has no place in our new life. We are not simply clearing away the debris of our old existence. We are reviewing our actions in a way that highlights our previous conduct. *By taking ownership of our past behaviour, we are defining our own moral guidelines.* Although we have never been good at living by rules defined by others, we should be able to live by a set that we define for ourselves.

By breaking the step down into three specific phrases, we can examine it in detail and see that each part in itself is easy. It says nothing about taking any action towards these people, it merely involves being honest with ourselves about how we have affected them.

Made a list...

We undertook a large part of this during step four and we are now going to build upon that earlier work. Our list will typically have three columns, names, the harm we feel we have done, and the amends we feel are due. Nothing more complicated than a pen and paper is required.

We know the behaviours and defects we identified and we start from this. Major headings are useful to trigger memories, Sex, Work, Resentment, Jealousy and Family are good starting points. We often punished people who loved us and we can examine our relationship with every close member of our family: spouse, children, siblings and parents. There are usually many amends to make amongst our loved ones and the thought of trying to make them drives home the burden of guilt. We continually need to revisit the statement that we were sick and suffering from an illness.

During the creation of this list, it can be useful to return to step four and widen our thinking. By doing this we can identify similar incidents and situations. Through practicing self-examination, we illuminate many more dark corners. It is a surprise how far back in our lives we can go and still see damaging behaviour, certainly farther back than we previously thought drink had adversely affected our conduct.

...Of all persons we had harmed...

Persons, not institutions, we can rarely claim the Local Hospital was offended by our actions. If we can identify a particular nurse, recall a specific incident and suggest a meaningful amend, then this person belongs on the list.

We need to be aware of the nature of the harm; we do harm when we try to impose our will on another, causing pain and distress through thoughtless or malicious action. This occurs when we believe other people don't deserve the same consideration or compassion we would expect for ourselves.

The illness of alcoholism involves much more than drinking. Drunk or sober, alcoholics have a tendency to damage people. Sometimes it is unintentional, like a boisterous large child hurting other children in a playgroup. At other times, it is a more calculated harm, varying between great extremes, from murder, rape, and physical abuse through to petty jealousy and gossip. We sometimes damage people with wholly good intentions, by being over-protective of them instead of allowing them to make their own mistakes.

Before going much farther, it is useful to reflect upon this. The anguish caused by murder or rape can be easily imagined, but few of us have directly experienced it, whereas many of us have suffered from malicious gossip at some stage in our life. We judge based upon our own experience, feeling that anything we have been able to survive is acceptable for other people. Unfortunately, this is not true and has no bearing upon the harm that we caused. We cannot judge how badly we hurt somebody; anybody we harmed should be on the list.

...and became willing to make amends to them all

It doesn't suggest how or when we shall take any action, but specifically says, ALL and became willing. It is perfectly normal to add somebody to the list, but as we are writing to think, "I will never do this". The step is in two parts to help guard against only adding people when we are willing to make amends. There are a few reasons why we would not want to include somebody on our list.

Fear, is often present, we fear the retribution they will unleash, or imagine that it is too humiliating to face them. They can still go on the list. This is why this step is separate from the actual act of making amends. Recognising these fears is a healthy part of the step.

Justification, at the suggestion that we have done wrong we normally start to justify why we were forced into an unavoidable situation. To acknowledge that we intentionally harmed people is accepting that we are capable of bullying, sadistic, self-centred or dishonest behaviour.

Unwilling, to acknowledge the harm we have done because we believe the harm they did to us is "unforgivable" and so we are unwilling to contemplate ever being in contact with the person again. The simple fact is that if we are blameless and we are entirely the victim then this person has no place on our list. If we have played a part in harming somebody, regardless of their role then we have to look at how we can become willing to make amends to them.

Forgiving is frequently an obstacle. The phrase "I will never forgive..." previously suggested as heralding a difficult defect is with us again. There is a well-known saying "*to err is human, to forgive divine*" and it is safe to say that most people have a problem with the concept of forgiveness. Unfortunately, where others are able to, we cannot hide behind platitudes. Later, in step nine, we may hope for forgiveness, but part of step eight is that we have to learn ways to become willing to forgive other people (and ourselves).

Do not look for too much advice

Frequently the monkey suggests that we need to go and discuss our actions with somebody present at an incident. The people we turn to are biased in our favour and may collude with us to mitigate what occurred. They don't understand our recovery program and will not want to consider us humbling ourselves in front of our common enemy. By discussing our actions with people outside of AA, it is easy to get the reaction that we want – "they got what they deserved", giving us the freedom to cross a name off the list

How many people should be on our list? Asking other people how many people were on their list is like asking how much somebody earns, rarely polite and often not answered. It is a deeply personal issue, but extremely confusing for most of us. A practising alcoholic will have stood on the toes of hundreds of people in the crowd, how do we ascertain if we should include them on the list?

We may never find the shop assistant we verbally abused, but if their face pushes out from "the crowd" and we remember the incident, we should write them down, it is important to acknowledge the repetition of our actions.

A character defect I discovered was that I liked "nice things". When I visited people's homes, I looked with envy at their possessions and occasionally small objects came home with me. I felt that I deserved them and that my friend would want me to be happy.

Obviously, I eventually abused all of my friendships and I was terrified of facing them. I continually conjured the scene, their returned ornaments, trinkets, tins of salmon, and bottles of wine spread on the table whilst they scornfully told me what they thought of me, expelling me from their homes and their lives forever.

A common temptation is to avoid the painful situations by "swamping" the list with trivia. We include people where there is no amend due because we know they will be forgiving and pat us on the back for our efforts.

To pare it down to revealing proportions we need to ask specific questions, "What is the harm that was done?" and "What is the amend due?" If we don't have a clear answer to these questions, we are possibly padding the list.

Summary

We had felt that our past was a liability and that we needed to keep it locked away forever. Examining it in step eight, reveals that our past marks the path towards a life based upon moral guidelines that we agree to. Miraculously, the old structure is now being recycled to provide the building blocks of our new life.

- Have we left anybody off the list for any reason?

This is the only check we need to carry out. Having six or six hundred people on our list is the correct number for us, providing we haven't deliberately omitted anybody.

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