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How an Atheist Works the Steps

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Even the ones with "God" in them



My life was in shambles, and I was desperate. Following a third botched suicide attempt, I was threatened with commitment to a mental hospital. Or I could call AA. I chose AA. But I was skeptical that it was the answer because I thought I was just crazy. I thought using alcohol and drugs was a result of my problems, not a cause. I also knew that AA's program relies on a belief system that I didn't have. I told the woman who picked me up for my first meeting of my concerns. She assured me that there would be a place in AA for a crazed heathen like me.

Encouraged by the sense of relief and the lessening of fear that I felt at that first meeting, I decided right then not to struggle over God stuff. I figured if there is a God, I'd lose the battle; if there is none, it would be pointless, wasted effort. That was just under thirty-two years ago, and I have been sober and an active member of AA ever since. That means I have always gone to meetings (mainstream ones--no special meetings for atheist/agnostic members); I have relied on many close and trusted friends in the Fellowship; I do group service; and I try to carry the message to other alcoholics.

Despite my lack of God-understanding, which continues to this day, the Fellowship of AA has been an effective way for me to stay sober. Sober AA members have the experience of recovery, and they listen sympathetically and critically, providing advice and guidance. Their example helps me learn how to live without having to drink--ever, if I don't want to. I have found through my own experiences and observation of others that it doesn't matter what I believe, it's what I do that counts. AA provides the basis for learning what to do.

At the first meeting, I was told the obvious: not drinking is an absolute requirement for sobriety. I didn't drink, and I did whatever was necessary to avoid drinking. That required going to many meetings and reading AA books and other self-help guides. It meant accepting that people would talk about God. It meant breaking off some ill-advised associations and developing a circle of friends I could call on when I felt shaky. It meant getting involved as secretary or other group servant. It meant being willing to lie awake, or be fearful, or feel anxious, or be lonely at times. Life wasn't always easy: I suffered from depression for a time and had to concentrate on "One Day at a Time." Nevertheless, I lost my desire to drink and actually felt good about abstaining.

After I dried out and could begin to understand my condition, I wanted wellness. I wanted to live as a better person in harmony with others and with my circumstances, to be free of the chaos and conflict that had riddled my drinking life. I was told I probably needed to change every aspect of how I acted and reacted and that the AA Steps and program could help me. But what about those God Steps?

Someone once pointed out that the Steps could be considered either a description of changes that occur in recovery or a road map for making those changes. So I decided not to worry about whether I was taking the right route; instead, I focused on changing my behavior. I didn't try to force my beliefs to fit someone else's Step Three or concentrate on doing Steps Four and Five the "Twelve and Twelve" way. I simply listened to what others said about handling life events and tried what they had done in various situations. I haven't thought of my efforts as "doing the Steps," and yet I see that what I try to do approximates the direction of recovery described in the fifth chapter of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Besides not drinking, the most important habit I have tried to develop is not fighting circumstances. I try to accept reality instead of trying to control it. When I make that adjustment, the struggle ends and I find the freedom of knowing there is nothing more I can or must do. That sense of freedom came first when I recognized and accepted my powerlessness over alcohol (Step One). It is available in all life's adventures, if I fit myself to the flow of life (Step Three).

I remind myself regularly to trust the inner resource of the well person inside and the outer resource of the group. The track record of others and my own history show me that I can get through

whatever comes, if I am patient and do what makes sense on a daily basis. This fills the intent of Step Two for me and also provides the benefits of Step Three.

I take responsibility for my actions and feelings. I think this is what Steps Four and Ten are all about--knowing and admitting my part in all my interactions and not making excuses for myself.

Consulting with others before acting on important issues and discussing past actions that bring me discomfort are integral to my life now. I am not experienced enough or objective enough to evaluate past, present, or future without a sounding board. This habit keeps my life running more smoothly and is pretty close to what Step Five describes.

I have made a great effort to stop doing those things that make me feel guilty or that diminish my opinion of myself. The burden of guilt--or fear of being found out--might lead me to seek solace in drinking. I try to do no harm and let others live their own lives. I have enough to take care of without making it worse or taking on the troubles or successes of others. This is what Steps Six and Seven contribute to recovery.

Partly to alleviate the guilt I have felt for my past indiscretions and partly because it is the right thing to do, I try to make up for wrongs through restitution, apology, or just being a better person than I was when I drank. Some are old transgressions and some are not retractable, but I do the best I can. I hope this is what Steps Eight, Nine, and Ten ask of me.

In general, I like to be a do-gooder, so I help when and whom I can. This improves my relationships with my community of humans, and it makes me feel good. When I encourage another alcoholic who wants to follow the AA program but doesn't have a clear understanding of higher power, then I am doing Step Twelve.

What is missing? Step Eleven. I have no conscious contact with God--it's just not there and this does not disturb me. I try regularly to train my brain to a more spiritual viewpoint by a practice that includes contemplation, introspection, and affirmation of gratitude to have been embraced by AA. As a result, I rarely am troubled by that pervasive feeling of separation I used to feel; it has been replaced by a sense of the connectedness of all of us to one other.

Even though I didn't plan it, and even though I don't think about it as "working the Steps," Steps happen in my life as part of an AA-guided recovery. Not one of these practices involves God or believing in God, but all of them together, or each of them alone, fits the intent of the Steps. Atheism and AA's principles are not mutually exclusive, and if anyone tells you that you have to believe in God to stay sober or to remain in AA, he or she is dead wrong. I always tell nonbelievers who ask how they can do those God Steps to look for the goal of the Step and do whatever they can to meet its intent. And don't drink, no matter what happens. Nothing improves if you drink.

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