

Religion

How can your attitudes toward religion affect your recovery?

Twelve Step programs are not religious in nature. Still, for some of us, our religious background can help us in recovery—or it can hinder us, especially if our past experience gets in the way of our search for a Higher Power.

Spirituality is central to the Twelve Steps, and our religious background may influence our current spiritual life. But no matter what our background, we can renew our spirituality now, and we can choose the terms that work for us.

Religion is meant to nourish and sustain our spirit. Growing up, some of us may have attended a church, synagogue, or mosque, or participated in other rituals or holiday celebrations that gave us positive associations with religion. For others, religion is a fairly neutral issue. And some of us may have negative associations with religious traditions or authority figures—perhaps based on our own early experiences.

These past experiences may hold you back in recovery if they keep you from finding a loving, guiding Higher Power you can really trust.

Personal Recovery Story

“Sobriety hasn’t changed my feeling about religion. In AA, I’ve learned you don’t have to be religious in order to be deeply spiritual. I have a Higher Power of my own understanding today. She’s a woman, for one thing. She’s nothing like the God my old church believed in. She’s a feminist, of course, and she has a fantastic sense of humor. She knows me better than I know myself and loves me to pieces. The longer I’m sober, the more I turn to her for guidance. When I first came to AA I heard someone say that their Higher Power has better plans for them than anything they could possibly imagine. After thirty years in AA, I can honestly say that has been my experience too.”

—Jackie, recovering alcoholic

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In order to work a lifetime of recovery, you'll need to find your Higher Power by working Step Two:

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

Does that mean you have to believe in God? Definitely not. A Higher Power can be defined in many ways. Some people may call their Higher Power God. For others it is the inherent greatness of nature and the universe. For some of us it may be a group of recovery friends whose collective wisdom is greater than our own. Some call their Higher Power "G.O.D." for "Group of Drunks" or "Good Orderly Direction." If you're like many people in early recovery, you haven't defined your Higher Power yet. That's okay; you don't have to know who or what your Higher Power is right now—you just need to know that you aren't it.

A belief in God or religion is not necessary. What is necessary is grasping the idea that we can't achieve sobriety alone.

Recovery Action Step

If your spirituality is being inhibited by your past views of religion and God, you might take a look at how you developed those views.

1. Think about some specific early experiences you had with religion and describe them in your journal. How did you feel in each case? Safe? Angry? Happy? Guilty? Shameful? Exalted?
2. Compare these experiences. Do they share a common thread of emotion? Or do they contradict each other?
3. Reflect on these experiences. How strongly have they shaped your attitudes toward religion and spirituality today? Are your current attitudes inhibiting you in working Step Two?

Share your answers with your sponsor and recovery support group. They can listen, share in your struggle, and provide insight and advice that comes from experience in recovery.

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What can you gain from believing in your Higher Power?

When you believe in a Higher Power that has infinite love, understanding, and compassion, you'll find more than recovery from the disease of addiction; you'll grow personally as you experience more freedom and peace in your life.

Read the Big Book, page 63, "How It Works," for a prayer that you can say when you are ready to decide to hand your life over to your Higher Power:

God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will.

By saying this prayer, you are realizing that your Higher Power has a new place in your life. The terms "God" and "Higher Power" can be interchangeable, depending on which of them—or both—you feel comfortable using.

How will spirituality help you with recovery?

All Twelve Step programs promote spirituality, rather than promoting specific beliefs about religion or God. They aim to help you establish a relationship with a Power greater than yourself—however you choose to define it. The Twelve Steps are not a sobriety program or relapse-prevention program, they are a program for living spiritually. Spirituality, not mere abstinence, is what grants us a daily reprieve from our illness of addiction.

Spirituality is the quality of your relationship with yourself, your Higher Power, and the world. How do you know when you are growing spiritually? If you are beginning to see positive changes in your thinking, attitudes, behaviors, and relationships with others, you are growing spiritually.