

Don't Sell the Newcomer Short! Tell him that 'how it works' means working the Twelve Steps

Jack is an alcoholic who lives in a comfortable Chicago suburb. Years ago, he recognized his drinking problem and joined AA. He went to meetings regularly and frequently. His drinking got worse. He continued to go to meetings, and every few weeks or months, he got drunk. His life became more unmanageable, and he went to more meetings. This continued for twelve years of meetings and drunkenness.

In all these years, Jack never worked the Twelve Steps. Why not? "I didn't understand how and was ashamed to ask, particularly after all the years I'd been going to meetings," he said. Nobody ever took him aside and explained to him that he got drunk because he hadn't worked the program. Finally, he got drunk again -- and this time something happened. He ran into some AAs who told him that "how it works" means that this is how the program works. In addition, they guided him each Step of the way in working the Twelve Steps.

"In a period of twenty-four hours," he declared, "I took Step Three aloud with another AA as it suggests on page 63 of the Big Book. I wrote a 'searching and fearless' Fourth Step and then took my first Fifth Step with another AA member, who took his with me at the same time. Then we discussed Steps Six and Seven and prayed to have our character defects removed. Then, with his help, I listed the people I had harmed, and we talked about making direct amends starting right then. I began with my wife that same evening. I did more work with the Steps in twenty-four hours than I had done in twelve years around AA before that day."

That happened in November 1971, and Jack has been sober ever since. He's made all his amends. He's continued to work every one of the Steps, including a number of Fourth and Fifth Steps. Changes within him are reflected in a dramatically better life for him and his family. With a rueful smile, Jack says, "I'd have done those things much sooner, but no one ever showed me how."

Jack is talking about the sponsorship he didn't receive for twelve miserable years. For a dozen years, he heard about an "individual" program where members take what they want and leave what they find distasteful. He heard there were no musts. He went to meetings where people got in touch with their feelings instead of with the Twelve Steps.

He stayed drunk. Immediately upon working the Steps, he began to experience continuous sobriety. He found the AA message.

That message is far more than just not drinking. It's the witness by men and women who have found a life so good, so joyous, and so useful that they don't have to drink any more. It describes a way of living that offers hope, meaning, and direction, and it provides specific tools in the Twelve Steps that enable each of us to become what we should be. It works as effectively for a new AA member as it did for Jack.

It's axiomatic that I can't give away what I haven't got. Unless I work the Twelve Steps on a continuing, lifetime commitment, there are three things I won't understand: (1) what the AA message is, (2) how to experience it, and (3) how to help another alcoholic find it.

The kind of change that Jack describes will be experienced by any alcoholic who wants to stay sober and will follow the directions in the program. This will work, too, for the AA member who has been sober a number of years and finds himself suffering from depression, anxiety, fear, hostility, boredom. Invariably, in my experience, these symptoms are the results of inadequate work with the Steps. Work the Steps, and the symptoms disappear.

Sponsorship is carrying the message, and the Big Book outlines precisely how to do it. I think it's useful to go through each Step with the person I work with. We examine the First Step with the realization that no alcoholic can ever again drink successfully. At the same time, each of us stays sober only twenty-four hours at a time. Just staying sober does not bring manageability to our lives. That results from working the Steps that follow Step One, and each of us will be really healthy to the degree that we apply this program.

Step Two provides a natural basis for looking at the connection of honesty with sanity. Sanity is the quality of seeing the truth about any situation. If I lie or am dishonest in any way, this is a direct route to insanity and disintegration. God will restore me to sanity, but He'll do this only in response to certain actions on my part. The Second Step is the obvious place to discuss each person's right to approach God as he understands God. Honesty is my avenue to God as well as to sanity.

If the person is willing to do it, we take Step Three aloud as suggested on page 63 of the Big Book. Then we talk about what this means to each of us.

If an alcoholic could take only one Fourth and one Fifth Step in his entire AA career, he'd probably want to wait until he was sure of including everything. Even then, he'd undoubtedly miss some items. I spent the first sixteen years of my AA life suffering from the delusion that I should take only one Fourth and one Fifth Step. After sixteen years of sobriety, I tried repeating them and found immense benefits that far outweighed trying to subsist on the Tenth Step.

Reading Bill's story in the Big Book, I find that he took the first eight Steps in the first week he was sober. If he could do it, so can we. So I encourage the person I work with to get started writing his inventory early in his sobriety. This is with the understanding that his Fourth Step, like all the Steps, is to be repeated as long as he's in AA.

In my experience, these headings are generally helpful for a Fourth Step: Resentments, Dishonesty, Sex, Selfishness, Self-Pity, Fear, Sarcasm, Intolerance, Jealousy, Money. In addition, the seven cardinal sins can be used, too: Pride, Lust, Anger, Envy, Greed, Sloth, and Gluttony. There is some duplication, but not enough to hurt. To be effective, the inventory should be honest, thorough, specific, and written.

At Step Five, if the person wants to take it with me, I take mine with him at the same time. If I expect a person to be completely honest and open about himself, I have an obligation to be equally honest and open about myself. If I'm unwilling to do this, the obvious question is: What am I afraid of, and what am I hiding?

After Step Five, I suggest he read the paragraph at the bottom of page 75 and check the thoroughness of his work with the first five Steps.

Then, we discuss Step Six and examine our willingness to have our character defects removed.

Following this, we take Step Seven aloud, using page 76 as a guide but being specific in listing the defects to be taken away.

At this point, he can begin writing out his Eighth Step. Here, it's important to list everyone harmed, alive or dead, including those people who can't be found and those to whom amends cannot be made because it would injure them or others.

When the list has been made, I encourage the person to begin making direct amends as soon as possible and to do a thorough job with this part of the program. We often hear that we make amends "just by staying sober." That's in sharp contradiction to the line in the Big Book (page 82)

that says, "We feel a man is unthinking when he says that sobriety is enough." Chapter Six provides a precise guide to the need for going to any lengths to make direct amends and clear up the past so we can live productively in the present.

We approach Step Ten as a daily inventory that often ties in with Step Eleven in a review of the previous twenty-four hours. Making notes of what turns up in my Tenth Step gives me a useful reference for writing my next Fourth Step. I prefer to do this in the morning. Many prefer the evening. My experience with prayer and meditation has given me immense respect for the need to pray only for knowledge of God's will and the power to carry it out. Regular practice with Step Eleven provides a method that brings overall discipline into our lives. It's only as good, I find, as my continuing work with all the other Steps. Not surprisingly, more time and effort invested in prayer and meditation pay off with better results throughout the day.

At this point, the alcoholic I'm working with will have a clear understanding of Step Twelve and the message. He'll be equipped to help others experience what he has found. The Twelfth Step promises us a spiritual awakening as a result of working these Steps. With compelling clarity, it says that we don't have a message to carry unless we work the other Steps.

My primary aim is to encourage anyone I sponsor to work hard and persistently with the Steps. If he does this, he will find a growing ability to reach his own answers in living. My role is not to give advice on job, marital, or other problems. An alcoholic will live his way into an understanding of how to solve his own problems if he'll just work and rework the Twelve Steps.

That kind of sponsorship demands time and energy. If I do it right, working with others is work. It requires a far greater commitment than simply taking drunks to meetings or signing them into treatment facilities. It's what sponsorship meant when the Big Book was published. When that first edition appeared in 1939, the foreword began:

"We, of Alcoholics Anonymous, are more than one hundred men and women who have recovered from a seemingly hopeless state of mind and body. To show other alcoholics precisely how we have recovered is the main purpose of this book. For them, we hope these pages will prove so convincing that no further authentication will be necessary."

Since that first 5,000-volume printing, the Big Book has been revised twice and reprinted so many times that 1,900,000 copies had rolled off

the press by the end of 1977. More than one million alcoholics have experienced the miraculous vitality in its pages. It has turned them into sane, useful men and women who can say, "No thank you" to a drink and make it stick. For these grateful human beings, "no further authentication will be necessary."

The person I sponsor enables me to experience continuing change and growth, because working with him forces me to keep working with the program, too. Otherwise, I'm talking about things I used to do but don't bother with any more. He helps me find new meaning and relearn old lessons that might grow dim without his need, which reflects my own. I don't try to function as a counselor, therapist, or spiritual guide, but simply as one beggar showing another beggar where there is bread. Together, we share the program's healing message.

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