



[This is a series of articles that try to re-frame AA as a whole, and various AA concepts for people who may need AA, but are averse to some of its aspects. Feel free to change out the “A” in AA to NA or CA or MA or any other 12 Step program. To me, they have the same goal.]

Reframing AA: The program is not what you think it is

by

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In my position as a drug and alcohol counselor, I have worked for a number of different treatment centers, and all have decided to not make 12 Step programs the only option for recovery. While I personally think the 12 Steps are the best path to long-term recovery, due to its track record and size, I can also see their point. Many of our clients have taken multiple runs at AA or NA, and couldn't make it work.

I've talked to many of them, and asked them to tell me what parts of AA rub them the wrong way. To be honest, some people's objections to AA, in my opinion, *are* valid. They are things that drove me crazy when I first came in, but it soon became evident that it would not be hard for me to maneuver around some of those objections. Since I

desperately needed the recovery AA offered, I had to try to find a way to overcome my objections for one important reason: I was going to die otherwise.

In looking back, I can see that most of the problems I had with AA were things I *perceived* about AA. Many of them were, as I see in some of my clients, based on preconceived notions or judgments made after only a cursory visit to a meeting or two.

If you fall into the category of trying AA but having some of the same objections I had (or others), perhaps this article will try to dispel some of these misconceptions. I will also, in further sections, talk about some of the more well-known AA expressions and concepts and how they can be misinterpreted.

As someone with over 40 years of sobriety, I can look at what newcomers see and I can understand where I think sometimes the 12 Step experience doesn't speak well to a newcomer living in the 21st century.

AA old-timers might say *“Well, they haven't hit a bottom yet – they haven't surrendered.”* While this might be true, part of my job is to help people recover, not judge to what level they need to find themselves in order to start getting better. It's my job to “meet them where they're at.” Of course, the key thing is the question *“Are you ready to do what it takes to find recovery?”*

Before going into an exploration about the program itself, let me address complaints I have heard about AA meetings themselves, as some of them are quite valid – at least in how they are perceived. I often joke that some of the worst advertisements for AA are some of the people in it. I think the vast majority of people in AA are great people, but in any group of people, the law of large numbers says that some of them will be – well, not the best advert for AA. Please do not allow some random jerk cause you to leave a program that might turn your life around.

Some of the complaints I have heard are that people in AA seem cliquish. Here's my take on that: I think it's human nature to walk in a room and see who you know there. Chances are you'll walk up to them and start talking. The trouble with standing there in a group talking to your friends, is that you all have your backs turned on those who don't necessarily know people in the room.

I know when I come into an AA meeting room, I often see small bands of people talking, coffees in hand. I then look around and sometimes see people sitting all by themselves. If I don't recognize them, I'll go up and introduce myself to them and ask them if they are new. If they are, they fall into two camps: ones who are happy someone actually acknowledged them, and those who give a perfunctory "hello," but are uneasy at my approach. I understand this. At my first meeting I wanted to come to listen, hoping to not interact that much with people. To that latter group, I just introduce myself and then give them space. The last thing they need is to think "the cult" is going to get them.

Another thing I hear about are that some AA people can turn off newcomers. I call them "stark raving sober." Their whole demeanor often comes across as very dogmatic and even harsh, with assertions that "this is *the* way you do AA." I can understand this, as their way is what worked for *them*, and probably for their sponsor and many around them. However, I always wonder how many people this "my way or the highway" attitude about recovery drove away? As someone with many years in AA (as well as many years in therapy, having worked the Steps, etc.), I tell newcomers there is no "right way" to work AA – other than staying sober. I do feel, however, that working the Steps makes it *easier* to stay sober and lose the cravings. Today, I don't want to drink, but thanks to the Steps, I don't *want to want* to drink.

It's my opinion that some of the main reasons newcomers have trouble with 12 Step programs stems from the *language* used – both in the literature and in the rooms. Firstly, in AA, there is a "shorthand" and a common language that is often used. These sometimes take the form of oft-repeated slogans, but also words that mean different things to different people. The most obvious ones are "God" and "Higher Power" – but there are plenty more. The problem is that a new person only reads or hears the *words*, and not the nuance we have all learned from our time in program. Sometimes newcomers hear some these phrases over and over from different people and can't help but wonder if AA is indeed some kind of cult. If it is, it's the most disorganized cult in the history of the world.

However, using these phrases as shorthand makes newcomers feel like outsiders because they don't understand some of these phrases spoken of that the speakers assume

everyone knows. I also think all meetings should have the Steps and Traditions on the wall, so if a speaker mentions the Seventh Step, newcomers can know what that is.

I believe the AA Big Book contains invaluable information for getting and staying sober, but more importantly, how to do so and *be happy*. At the same time, there is one glaring fact: the book was written in 1937 and contains more than its share of outdated phrases and ways of looking at things. This is understandable due to its being written by men that were the products of their time. As a history buff, I always have had a problem with those who judge people in the past by the mores of our current society. I'm sure people in the future will look at us, products of this time, and have plenty of disparaging remarks about us – maybe even calling us barbaric for some of our ways.

Having said that, those of us who have been reading the Big Book for a long time understand that in some ways, we have to “filter out” some of this archaic and dated language. As much as the early founders worked hard to steer AA away from any organized religion or belief, there are still remnants in the book that make even old-timers cringe. At the same time, we know the main message of the Big Book can be as relevant to us today as it was the first day it rolled off the presses.

The one thing I ask of newcomers is to be open-minded about program. Most people in modern society abhor prejudice of all kinds: towards religion, race, sexual orientation, etc. I point out to newcomers that the roots of the word “prejudice” concern pre-judging things, including AA. Or to use more of our AA shorthand: “contempt prior to investigation.”

I tell newcomers, if they can suspend the pre-judgment and talk openly to me about their objections, I might be able to break down some of their walls. I explain that most of their objections were like mine in the beginning, and they mostly came from the *words* used, not the concepts.

A while back, I had a client whose main objection to AA was her impression that she “*had to get up and identify herself as an alcoholic whenever I want to share.*” I asked her where she got that impression. She said “*Well, everyone else there does.*” I explained my belief was that this identification practice started years ago as a way to

take the “charge” out of the word “alcoholic.” However, I went on to explain to her that if she didn’t want to say it, that was fine. Just identify by her first name. If she is asked to share at a meeting, a perfectly fine answer is “pass.” This happens all of the time and no one will think badly of it.

My client pressed me saying “*Won’t people come up and want to know why I don’t want to label myself that way?*” I told her that if they did, ask them to point out where that is written in the Traditions (the “rules” of AA meetings). I then asked her if she had a desire to stay sober and she said she did. “Then that’s it,” I said. “Game over.” In one of those Traditions, it says “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.” It doesn’t even say you have to be stopped, just that you have a desire to do so. I tell anyone new to the program, “If anyone tells you otherwise, walk away.”

The key word my client used was “*label*.” In whatever way we choose to introduce ourselves – or don’t in her case – they’re just words, just labels. The human mind is a pattern matching machine. As a result, we always look at words given to us in a new setting and try to match them up to things from our past. The trouble is that 12 Step programs are animals unto themselves, and thus defy this kind of matching. It’s the attempt to do this matching that throws many people off (myself included).

In my profession, we’ve moved away from labels like “addiction” and “addict” to “substance abuse” and “abuser.” It makes it easier to answer the question “*do you use substances in ways or amounts that others don’t?*” No longer are newcomers marrying up certain words with old pictures in their head from who knows where and when.

[In the next article, we will address the aspect of AA that is often the major objection to the program: the belief that AA is a religious program.]

The “G” word

[In the previous article, the point that was emphasized is that often peoples’ objections to AA have more to do with the words used than the concepts.]

With words, the number one impediment for many people is AA’s use of the words “**God**” and “**Higher Power.**” It doesn’t help that those words are often spoken in a room on church property. I often try to address that first. I explain that when you have an organization without dues or fees (simply relying on the largess of the membership), you want as cheap a rent as possible. Many churches (and synagogues) offer rooms for either low or no rent, hence the reason the meetings are there. There is absolutely no affiliation to the religion of the meeting space, in fact in the AA Traditions (the “rules” of AA meetings) *forbids* any such affiliation. Meetings can also be found in municipal buildings, but usually the rent is higher. Heck, here in L.A., I’ve even been to meetings at “The Comedy Store.”

It’s important to understand that the words “God” and “Higher Power” mean totally different things to different people. The important thing, again, is “words.” I try to direct newcomers to forget about the words used, and focus on the concepts involved instead. This is the first step to helping understand that nuance I spoke about earlier.

I tell them the story of how I was able to resign my position in the debating society on this God/Higher Power topic years ago. When I expressed opposition to the concept of God and Higher Power, an old-timer I was talking to said “*Okay, leave it all out. You can stay here until you’re 100 years old and nobody will ever tell you that you have to believe in any particular thing, or to believe it all.*” This is exactly what I tell newcomers to do. I tell them to not let it be a reason to walk out the door. The one thing I ask them to do, as was asked of me, was this: *to keep an open mind.*

That “soft sell” made all the difference for me. I can also tell them, based on my years in program, that what that old-timer told me wasn’t a lie. I still don’t believe in the kind of Judeo-Christian Higher Power I was raised with, and that’s fine. I tell newcomers about the many members who I respect that call themselves atheists and the growing number of agnostic meetings.

Being an atheist or agnostic in AA is perfectly acceptable. In fact, there is a chapter in the AA Big Book called “We Agnostics.” Note that it doesn’t say “YOU Agnostics.” This was a way of saying “hey, we were just like you and that’s just fine.” As I’ve always said, a formal belief in a Higher Power is not needed for 12 Step recovery. What is needed is the belief that you’re the “lesser power” – at least when it comes to stopping drinking or using (and staying stopped).

For a long time, I thought I wasn’t “doing it right” when it comes to a belief in a Higher Power. Well, there is no right or wrong in this arena, so don’t fret if your belief (or lack of) doesn’t align with others in program. While I did not believe in much of anything in the beginning, I kept that open mind and kept being a *seeker of the truth*. Eventually, I found something that works for me in my life. For me, it is something akin to the Eastern philosophy of “a God within” or more like “my higher self.” I call it my “Higher Power,” and sometimes for brevity’s sake now I’ll even occasionally say “God,” despite my parochial school trauma. What I *do* know is that it doesn’t look like anyone else’s Higher Power. *And that’s okay.*

I also tell new people, “Don’t let how someone else in the meeting describes their relationship with *their* Higher Power make you think you’re doing it wrong.” What works for them, works for them, and bravo! But what works for them might not work for you – or me. Sometimes in meetings people get adamant and go on about “their God,” but I’ve just learned to tune that out as well. There’s a saying in the 12 Step community that’s so important: “take what you want and leave the rest.”

I have given talks to professionals not personally in recovery who have the mistaken impression that 12 Step groups are religious in nature. Again, this is due to a prejudice against some of the words they may have seen in program literature. I go out of my way to explain the difference between religion and spirituality. I even use the old line “*Religion is for those who don’t want to go to hell, but spirituality is for those who have been in hell and don’t want to go back.*”

When talking to mental health professionals, my shorthand on 12 Step programs involves telling them that 12 Step programs are, in essence, ego reduction programs. One thing spoken about in the Big Book a lot is self-centeredness, and its negative

effects on us. One line from the book sums it all up: *“Selfishness - self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles.”* Trust me when I tell you that AA is breaking no new ground on this concept. Philosophers and psychological professionals have been saying the same thing for years.

Sometimes I will use that more technical and psychological way to put a spiritual program into words that a scientific, secular newcomer might be able to hear. Once they are in the rooms, they will begin to understand the nuance that the rest of the people there already understand. Again, this is not the cult changing someone’s mind, but finding a way to match those words to something with which they feel more comfortable. To do that, however, they have to stay in the rooms.

[Words like “Powerless” and “Surrender” some pre-loaded with concepts of weakness and passivity. This article shows those concepts in a different way as well as address the concept of sponsors and sponsorship.]

The Battle is over – and you lost

The word that often stops people in their tracks when they read the first Step is **powerless**. That word goes hand in hand with another hot button word that complicates some peoples’ 12 Step experience: the word **surrender**. Those of us who have been around for a while know the key to Step One is indeed surrender.

The word “surrender,” however, seems to tie to a host of negative concepts that many people are taught from an early age. Mostly, it can be seen as weakness. For people struggling with the concept of surrender, I ask them a simple question: “*Are you out of ideas?*” I tried over and over to find a way to rein in my disease by myself. I had a high IQ and figured I’d suss it out eventually. I didn’t. I tried buying every piece of AA literature in search of “the formula” of sobriety. Unfortunately, I realized that AA is not an independent study exercise, it’s *experiential*.

In talking about surrender the question to ask yourself is: “*Is what I’m doing working to make my life rich, full, and meaningful?*” Is it moving you towards your life’s goals or causing you to move away from them – or be stagnant at best? If the answer is yes, then you can say your life is “workable,” so there’s no need to change. If the answer is no, then consider that it is “unworkable,” in which case it might be time to consider some alternatives that might work better.

Since “surrender” sounds like such a passive word, I try to turn it around and talk about “*taking back control of your life*” from the disease. I explain that our disease hijacks our brains and our decision making. The best way to subvert that process is to get a sponsor and be willing to take direction for a while. As I was told “*you drove the car into the ditch, let us help tow you out.*”

I also try to help people understand the process of sponsorship as well. I sometimes have people who bristle at the word “**sponsor.**” Again, in terms of wording, if you don’t like the word “sponsor,” think of the person as a “guide.”

I explain that this *guide* is a person who has walked the path before you and who can point out the potholes – and sometimes even the land mines. The concept of accepting helpful guidance from someone who shares your disease is so critical. I explain that a good sponsor is simply an objective third party who is divorced from *your* disease (but not his own). To me, that sponsor is someone who has your best interests at heart, but also doesn't have any emotional connection to your disease. As we always say “*you can't fix a broken brain with a broken brain.*”

I explain that finding the right sponsor is a “fit,” where the style of a sponsor needs to fit the style of the sponsee. I explain that it's fine to change sponsors, if they need to. I'd just suggest taking some time for reflection as to whether the desire to change the sponsor is as a result of true incompatibility – or – is it not liking what the sponsor is suggesting you do? If I had acted on the latter, I'd have gone through dozens of sponsors. But if truth be told, a lot of my growth came from doing things I *didn't* want to do and then looking back and realizing it was *exactly* what I *needed* to do.

Our disease wants to get in between us and good decision making, it tries to convince us that there's negotiating to be done with the disease. This is where I change the word “surrender” and speak about it as “committing totally to recovery.” And “committing totally to recovery” is the *powerful* act, not a passive one. The words from AA's Big Book talk about being “willing to go to any lengths” and “half measures avail us nothing” are active, powerful things we do for our recovery. As strange as it may seem, the most powerful thing you can do for your recovery is to admit powerlessness and surrender.

[AA has long ago been stripped of the notion of being for gutter-level drunks. Many of those coming to AA have high-powered jobs, and sometimes object to AA's use of the word insanity.]

Am I nuts?

Another word people sometimes bristle at is the word “**Insanity**” spoken of in the second Step. I want to make sure to the newcomer that they understand what we’re talking about is a *very* narrow band of faulty thinking, not a generalized situation of mental illness.

A while back, I found a definition of “insanity” that fits addiction perfectly. The definition says: “*a state of mind that prevents normal perception.*” I explain that while we can handle most mental functions perfectly well, these functions depend on our *perceptions*. Our perceptions start with the input from our senses, but then build on that data to include information from past experiences, assessments of situations and a myriad of other factors that culminate with us making judgments about our actions.

In this one area, however, our judgment is warped by our disease. I always like to say that if you think of your brain as a computer, the disease is corrupting the data on which you make your decisions – and on *just this one topic*. As a result, as a story from the Big Book illustrates, putting whiskey in a glass of milk and thinking it will prevent anything bad from happening seems like a *perfectly sound and logical idea* (it wasn’t).

If I can get across this concept of impaired cognition, I then explain that this is why we *need* a power greater than ourselves. Because many members are still wrestling with the spiritual side of the program, I tell them to keep it in more human terms. There are people in the rooms who could not stop drinking, despite trying everything society threw at them as a cure for their problem. Many of those people now have decades of sobriety, and – this is the key for me – *and* they are doing it as the Big Book says “*at perfect peace and ease.*” They are happy and many of them rarely think about drinking (or using) in their daily lives. This was a foreign concept when I was new (especially the happiness part). These happy, content sober people, I tell newcomers, are doing what they cannot do and therefore can be thought of as “higher powers.”

The important fact is that none of us can do it alone. As an AA old-timer told me when I was first “auditing” that program *“If you could have done it yourself, you’d have done it by now.”* We need help because of this disease and that corrupted data going into our otherwise perfectly good decision maker. Having an objective, impartial third party to help with that decision making is crucial, especially in the beginning.

[Like “Surrender,” the word “Acceptance” can connote weakness and passivity – which is the exact opposite of what is really is – self-care.]

You’re done hurting me

Another hot button word is “**Acceptance.**” To many this word, like “surrender,” is also seen as describing a passive action. *“Oh well, this is just the way it is, I guess I might as well accept it.”* No – that’s not how it is. Acceptance is quite often a very active action. It is a person taking care of her or himself regardless of the circumstances.

Acceptance is, at its base, a very selfish act. By “selfish,” I mean that in the good definition of the word “selfish.” It is an action that helps only one person: me. It is me practicing self-care in its purest form.

Firstly, realize that almost always, if you’re having to consider accepting something or not, it’s something you don’t like. There aren’t a lot of people sitting around saying *“Crap! I guess I have to accept the fact I hit the lottery!”*

No, we need to accept situations or actions taken against us that we don’t like. They are often things that were hurtful to us, things we don’t think are fair, things done to us that we would never do to another person. Except... they are what they are. Most importantly, they are almost always things in the present we cannot change, or things from the past – which, again, we cannot change. I always heard acceptance defined as *“being willing to let go of the hope of a different past.”*

Let’s say somebody did something hurtful to me. Not just inadvertently hurtful, but deliberately hurtful. It hurt me at the exact time it happened (or when I heard about it), as it would hurt anyone. This thing, however, happened let’s say last Thursday. That person hurt me last Thursday, but I have been the one hurting me since last Thursday if I don’t find acceptance about it. Whether it’s a person who’s hurt me, or some situation I don’t like that is happening – they both have one thing in common: I can’t change it. Chances are that if it’s a person I am dealing with, they haven’t thought about it at all since. If it’s a situation, it’s devoid of directing any personal attention towards me either.

I am the only one generating stomach acid about it. *I'm* the one who grits his teeth whenever he thinks about it. *I'm* the one walking around with those bad, inwardly directed feelings. And when I don't feel good, I want to make those feelings go away. Do you know what would help them go away? A drink, a joint, a pill, a bump (etc.) – but only for a short time. And then that pain is back again, stronger than ever.

If, however, we take the active step of accepting whatever the situation is, we are saying to that person or situation “You are done bothering me. You're not worth my precious and limited time on Earth.”

Finally, back on the topic of words, we usually use the word “acceptance” about situations we cannot control. When it comes to personal hurts from other human beings, the word “forgiveness” can be substituted. It doesn't mean we like their actions, or agree with them, or condone them. We're just done letting those people live rent-free in our heads.

[One thing many alcoholics and addicts have is low self-esteem and often a very loud inner critic. Finding a way to silence that “negative radio station” is crucial in finding long term recovery and peace of mind.]

Becoming a Human Being

Another AA word that is easy to misinterpret is “**Humility.**” Like many other of the words people can have trouble with in this program, this one is often married up with some preconceived – and erroneous – thinking tied to the word itself.

When I came in, the word humility meant to me that I had to walk around like a Buddhist monk or Mother Theresa. It was also a word that was a short distance from “humiliation,” which is nobody’s idea of a fun way to live.

What I came to learn was that humility involved none of that. As I heard someone once say “*Humility is just having an objective view of yourself in the world.*” In other words, I’m not at the top of the heap, and I’m not at the bottom of the heap, I’m just one of the “great middle.” This means I see myself for what I am – a human being – flaws and all. If we can begin to absorb this concept, it can help us learn to see ourselves through “a new pair of glasses.”

Humility can also cut the legs out from under that nasty inner critic radio station many of us have inside that wants to blast all negative, all self-critical, all the time.

I believe if we scrape down on each of our “character defects” we will almost always find fear at the lowest layer. For me, the greatest fear that drove so many of those character defects was “*fear of not being enough.*” Not enough a good person, a success, a man, a son, a partner. Fear of not being as good as you, not as smart as you, not as attractive as you – but especially the fear of all of those things being seen by others.

The people tortured the most by all of these things is us. One of the main problems is that we hold ourselves up to impossible standards. We gauge our self-esteem based on our evaluation of ourselves compared to perfection. There’s an effort doomed to failure! Through humility, we can find some self-compassion and learn to judge ourselves on the

human curve, because humility teaches us that we're right in the middle of the pack called *humanity* on almost everything.

We hear a lot about the concept of “self-love” in society. While I think it is key, this is another of those concepts where the words sometimes put people off. To some people, “self-love” seems self-indulgent. It seems like an effort to not hold ourselves accountable for problems we might cause in life. For me, I prefer using the phrase “self-acceptance.” This is tied back to the idea of judging myself on the human curve.

There's a major realization I had a while back that has helped me be a little gentler on myself and quiet that inner critic that resides in me – that resides in all of us, actually. That realization is that we're all just these little kids running around in adult suits. And we're little kids who *never got the manual*. You know, the manual that explains how to do life perfectly. The manual that teaches us how to handle difficult situations and people with grace and aplomb. The manual on how to deal with our emotions, and how to feel good about ourselves – especially when we're not perfect.

Since we all didn't get that manual, we spend our entire lives going through life in an unending series of “trial and error,” “trial and error,” “trial and error.” Sadly, some of our errors in that “trial and error” process affects others and their errors affect us.

And how do we deal with all our errors? If you are like the way I was, you look back at all of them and beat the hell out of yourself. My inner critic was a radio station playing constantly in my head, reminding me not only of what I was doing wrong in the moment, but sometimes of everything I had ever done wrong at any point in my life. It would point out all the bad things I'd ever done, all the bad decisions I had ever made, all the ways my defects made me not the person I wanted to be.

The thing about this radio station is that it's very discriminating in what it tells me. It will always tell me things that helps reinforce its existence as a generator of my bad self-esteem. It never points out all of the good things about me. It never points out all of the good deeds I have done in my life. It never points out all of the good decisions I've made.

Humility teaches me an important lesson. It's said best in my favorite paragraph in the Big Book. “*A.A. and acceptance have taught me that there is a bit of good in the worst*

of us and a bit of bad in the best of us. When I complain about me or about you, I am complaining about God's handiwork. I am saying that I know better than God."

My little real-time editor can easily strip out the references to "God." If you do, you're left with a critique of a negative behavior that doesn't help us: being judgmental. The quote doesn't just talk about me complaining about others, it reminds me that it also goes for complaining about myself and the feelings I might have about myself as well.

To me, that means I have to accept I'm right where I'm supposed to be today. I'd like to be a better person. Heck, I'd like to be a perfect person. But I'm not. I'm human, and humility's job is to remind me of that. Maybe I'm where I am – flaws and all – to learn something. Perhaps to not judge others until I get to perfect myself.

When I ruminate about things from the past, I'm the epitome of self-centeredness. How can I be of service to others when I can't even be of service to myself? That's why we do that fearless and thorough inventory before we get to looking at our defects. It's an effort to say *"that was the old me. With the help of the Steps and the Big Book, I'm now a new John and I get a fresh start."*

I have a friend who is a couples' therapist. She always talks about how, in an argument, the cheapest of the cheap shots you can deliver is bringing up the past to someone. That's because there's nothing that person can do about it, and the sole purpose is to make the other person feel bad. This is also the case with us *about ourselves*. It's a cheap shot to keep re-running the "what ifs" and the "if I only I had" in your head. It's also important to realize that when we look back at bad decisions, we always aggrandize the road not taken. *"If only I had done this, things would be so different and so much better!"* How can you know that? The thing that you wished you had done instead of what you did do might have been ten times worse. To me, I did what I did because that's what I was supposed to do – whether I like it or not.

Again, for me, it was all about not being enough. Hence my character defects were generated to try to hide those feelings of shame and unworthiness. And, of course, many of those character defects involved doing things that caused me to then have even more reasons to feel bad about myself.

One more thing that humility also does is to help me to remain teachable. When I was younger, when someone warned me about something, I took it with a grain of salt – because I was smarter than you. As a result, I often did *exactly* what the person was warning me not to do – and with the bad results that they had predicted. I now understand the old adage: *“Smart people learn from their mistakes, but people with wisdom and humility can learn from other peoples’ mistakes.”*

[Some words used in AA have been used from the beginning, so changing them would be a difficult thing, but looking at other ways to see them can help.]

We are not defective

In the past few articles, I have spoken of another set of words I don't think serve us well in recovery, and are often off-putting to newcomers: those words are “**character defects.**”

To those of us who were raised in dysfunctional households or had trauma in our past, they would be better named “*defense mechanisms*” or “*coping mechanisms.*” We didn't just wake up one day and start utilizing them for no reason, they served a purpose. For many of us, these weren't insane behaviors, these were sane behaviors developed in an insane environment!

I always like to use the phrase “we didn't come out of the womb with...” to clients. We didn't come out of the womb with feelings of anxiety, or depression, or low self-worth – or any one of many other negative feelings we have about ourselves now. Nor did we come out of the womb with *our defects*, which in my business are more generally known as maladaptive behaviors. These were coping mechanisms that were developed for a reason, but which no longer serve us. They are, instead now, *character liabilities*. The good news is that if they can be learned, they can be unlearned.

Looking at and changing these behaviors can also be a way to change our often self-destructive *patterns*. Unless we work on changing these underlying behaviors, we're probably doomed to continually repeat patterns that aren't helpful to us.

To do this, we need to follow the progression of the Steps, which are laid out in a specific order. In order to work on our character defects, we first have to determine what they are. By the way, I'm going to continue to call them “character defects” because it's part of that AA shorthand we all understand.

I like to explain the Steps to a newcomer, showing their logic and progression as a process of change. It's important to explain that the 4th Step inventory isn't just a way to sell more notepads, it's a way to go into that scary attic of our minds and clear out the

junk so we no longer have to carry around that baggage. When I was done with my first 5th Step, I was no longer John 1.0 – a victim of his upbringing. I was the start of John 2.0, the author of his new life. I was a person learning to live a better and more decent life, so that I no longer had to see myself as a piece of garbage.

Steps Six and Seven deal with helping to identify those maladaptive behaviors and work to minimize them to the best of my abilities. Those maladaptive behaviors were easily identified, as they were usually embedded in that last column of my inventory.

A quick sidebar to talk about *faith* – not a faith in a God or a Higher Power, but faith in the program and the 12 Step process. A lot of the things that helped me in the Steps were not understood by me until I completed them and I looked backward at them. For many of us, doing a 4th Step inventory can be a daunting and scary task, but we do it anyway – because people we respect tell us it’s the way to freedom. It isn’t until we walk out of finishing our 5th Step, having told that inventory to another person, do we see what people were talking about. After I finished my first 5th Step inventory, I was able to look people in the eye again – something I hadn’t been able to do for years.

Well, the same faith in the process is true with the 6th Step and working to change our patterns. We developed a lot of these character defects as defense mechanisms, and they have been with us most of our lives. This is where faith *in the process* has to come again. We need to have faith that these defects, which once served us, will be supplanted by more constructive ways of dealing with life and its challenges *if we let go of the old ones*.

It’s then *my* job to recognize these bad non-helpful behaviors when I do them and try my best to not have them happen again. This is my side of the bargain here. I don’t believe the seventh Step is meant to summon the “defect fairy” who comes down and removes these defects without any work on my part. In working on these defects, I do my best to bring down their presence in my life as low as possible and then if it’s time, they’ll be removed totally – and I can be done with them. Getting rid of these maladaptive behaviors means I’m not doomed to continue making the same bad decisions based on those behaviors.

[For many AA members, they did not come into program with a perfect “three-point landing.” Many people with current long-term recovery started with short-term recovery – sometimes over and over again. The key, however, is they kept coming back.]

A stumble is not a fall

There are another couple of words that trip up both newcomers and veterans alike. Those words are “**Slip**” and “**Relapse**.” I came from old-time AA where those two words were interchangeable. In working in the substance abuse field for a while now, we professionals have chosen to see these activities as two different things.

A common occurrence among people leaving treatment is to have a lapse in judgment – in other words a slip. Those people were committed to recovery, but they had a moment of insanity – like someone committed to a diet who all of a sudden finds themselves eating something because they were standing in front of an open refrigerator. In many of these cases, if those who slip can recognize what went wrong and try to set up safeguards so that it doesn’t happen again, they can right the ship and move on – hopefully not to slip again.

A relapse, on the other hand, is when the person heads right off the deep end and returns to the behavior that landed them in rehab in the first place.

The saddest of situations is where a person has had just a slip, but is then so ashamed, that they feel they’ve thrown everything away – and that slip turns into a full relapse.

This is indeed a conundrum in AA that can only be dealt with between a person and their sponsor. I’ve had sponsees tell me about some “not too sparkling” behaviors and then ask me “should I reset my sobriety?” My answer is this: “which will stop the relapse process in its tracks?” This is important because both answers could be true.

A person with perfectionist tendencies might say “Well heck... I’m no longer perfect, I’m going to have to reset my time, so I might as well go get my money’s worth.” Now the trouble with that thinking is that it doesn’t acknowledge the “powerless” part of the first Step. If you are like me, I can certainly decide when to go out, but I can’t have any

guarantee of when – or if – I would be able to get sober again. For me personally, I think I've used up my “get out of Hell free” cards.

The other edge of the sword is the person who is willing to forgive her or himself and continue moving forward. If the person can see it as just an unforced error and learn from it, that choice might help that person find long-term recovery. As has been said, the strongest part of a bone that's been broken is at the place where it was broken and is now healed. This is the metaphor I like to tell clients who slipped.

The only problem is if it that slip happens again... and again... and again. At a certain point, you're not showing yourself self-forgiveness, you're just letting your denial drive the bus.

If resetting your sobriety time is part of the guilt and shame – lose it. In the big picture, nobody cares about your time but you. At the most, some of your friends in the meetings. If they're your real friends, they'll be there to support you because they realize this is a disease that can recur in anybody at any time.

Here's the important thing about resetting your sobriety date: *you may lose the days, but not the experience.* Whatever happened can strengthen your continued sobriety and help others if you talk about it. As I have heard said: “*In the history of the world, everything that works perfectly didn't work at all in the beginning.*” It took Edison and his team over a year and thousands of attempts to perfect the light bulb. It shouldn't be a surprise that something so difficult as kicking an addiction shouldn't have the same learning curve.

The most important part about counting days in program is this: The disease doesn't give two hoots about the number. All of my time in the program hasn't built up any anti-bodies that will prevent a relapse. We are all just people climbing up the outside of the Empire State Building. It doesn't matter if you're on the tenth floor, the fiftieth floor, or the ninetieth floor: we are all just one “let go” away from disaster. In fact, the higher up you are, the bigger splat you'll make!

[It is vital for anyone in recovery to take ownership of their sobriety and to see that while circumstances might have driven them to a program, it will be the benefits of the sobriety that will keep them in the rooms.]

Don't set yourself up

The final word in this series I want to talk about is a word I forbid sponsees to use: the word “**can't**.” “*I can't drink! I can't smoke weed!*” Of course you can! We live in a world where very few people are more than a couple of minutes away from any of that stuff.

Instead of “can't,” find another phrase that works better: “I choose not to” or even acknowledging the allergy of the body by reminding yourself “I'm allergic to that stuff.” And if your allergy is like mine, it has one undeniable symptom: I break out in stupidity and self-destruction.

It's important to take ownership of our recovery. Framing sobriety as involving things we can't do is setting up sobriety as an authority figure that we will eventually rebel against. It's vitally important to see sobriety as an act of pure self-compassion. Your disease always wants to frame sobriety as deprivation. What about all of the deprivation we had when we were into our disease? We deprived ourselves of time with friends and family, social events, experiencing more of this wonderful world. Most importantly, it deprived us of true happiness, of growth, and of loving self-acceptance. I ask you: “*Is there any type of drug or booze that's worth giving that up for?*”

If you'd tried AA and had a negative experience, hopefully some of this has given you a new way to think about the program. Somebody once said that if you have a lousy meal at a restaurant that you're visiting for the first time, chances are you're not going back. I truly hope you might consider trying it again.

Another thing said in 12 Step programs is to try six different meetings before making a decision to not come back. Meetings have a personality, and they can vary wildly, even in the same town. I had a client who I convinced to try a different meeting every day for a week and report his findings. For four days in a row, he would come in and say “Hated it!” and then give a derisive description of the meeting and the people there. On the fifth

day, however, he came in and said “I found my people!” It turned out that the meeting was full of the same type of snarky personalities as he had – and they spent time goofing on things about AA. But they were sober – which is all that counts. That’s the most important thing to remember: the only metric is sobriety, and everyone has just today.

A.A.'s Twelve Steps

(substitute your drug or behavior for “alcohol” if needed)

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.