

How It Works for Atheists

This is one atheist's view of how the 12 steps work together as a program for transformation.

- Step 1. We're unhappy with our lives in some way and get to a point where we've tried everything to fix it and failed. This makes us ready to stop trying things that don't work.
- Step 2. We discover that other approaches exist, whether by seeing people who have solved the problems that defeated us, or by believing some intuition that there *must* be a better way.
Since we need to stop trying old approaches in order to clear the way for new behavior, this step describes an act of trust during the uncomfortable time when we give up the old and before finding the new. We trust not only that better ways exist, but that we can find them.
- Step 3. We decide to devote ourselves to living the better life we envision. That better life is defined by intangible qualities such as inner peace or honesty, rather than by material things or social status.
So we decide to stop letting fear, anger or desire guide us, and be guided instead by honesty, compassion, harmony or whatever we want in this life we are building. We adopt these as guiding principles and commit to live by them.
The process is one of personal growth, which cannot be forced but must be nurtured. It is the giving up of force and adoption of a nurturing, fostering role that caused AA's founders to think in terms of God. The idea that they were under orders from a higher authority helped them stop trying to force the flower to bloom. Atheists may need to remind themselves to allow growth rather than try to engineer it.
- Step 4. Ok, if we've decided to try this path, what do we need to do? Where are we betraying the guiding principles we just adopted? And where are we already serving them? The second question is important because it gives us examples of how these guiding principles look and feel to us. That helps us recognize what keeps going wrong in the areas that need to change.
The AA founders described an inventory in which we list the trouble spots--where there is discord instead of harmony, or power struggle instead of cooperation, or condemnation instead of acceptance. Since then, practitioners have learned to include discord, power struggle and condemnation inside oneself as well as with the outer world. Fear and resentment can be separate lists or included with other troubles. After listing these issues, we look at what our current behavior is costing us. This helps motivate us to change. Then we look for the part we could change--where do we have leverage?
- Step 5. Most of us need help with that last question. If we saw where we have leverage, we would already have pulled the lever. So we read the inventory to another person,

someone who doesn't have our blind spots because they aren't us.

When they point out to us what we're not seeing, that can be a great relief or a real piss-off. The comments are worth considering, even if they make us angry. We can always get a second opinion.

It's helpful to write down the comments our listener makes. Things in our blind spots can disappear back into those blind spots once our helper is gone, and writing helps counter this denial.

Step 6. From the two previous steps, we pull out a list of flawed strategies we've been using-- usually strategies for getting what we need that once worked or seemed to, but now cost us too much practically, ethically, or emotionally. We ask ourselves what need we are trying to fulfill.

Some old behaviors will change spontaneously on exposure to this light. Others will be more persistent. We may have invested in these strategies or be afraid of the consequences of change. Whatever the reasons, we need to see and acknowledge them before we are ready to adopt better strategies. We face the fear of change squarely, to become entirely ready to change. Much of psychotherapy belongs here, in step 6. As in step 1, we become willing to give up the old strategy, trusting that we will find a new one.

Step 7. Once the obstacles to change are removed, we can watch for better ways to do what we've done badly in the past. The posture is a receptive one, knowing there are better ways, watching to learn them. This isn't, "I know what I need to do, I just can't make myself do it." That usually indicates force and cuts off receptivity. This is a pitfall for atheists. The deists can ask their gods to take care of it; we have to expect answers to appear. We can ask other people, watch the ones who are successful at this sort of thing, remind ourselves every morning what we're watching for, and trust that we will find it.

Step 8. Steps 8 and 9 consolidate the gains of step 7 by proactively changing our environment to support new behavior. Mostly, this is our social environment we change by locking ourselves out of the old transactions. For example, if we correct a lie we have told in the past, we can never tell that lie to that person again because they now know better. If we apologize for past mistakes, our victim will expect us to behave differently in the future, reminding us and calling forth our new behavior.

In addition to relationships with others, we look at our relationship with our self. Many of us owe ourselves amends for past behavior that betrayed us physically, ethically or in other ways.

Step 8 is listing these opportunities. We could not see them before, when our flawed strategy seemed like the only possible way to act. Now that we want change, we look for ways to incorporate the new strategy.

Step 9. Step 9 is working through the step 8 list, building protection against relapse. We make opportunities to act in the new ways, rather than waiting for situations to arise

and running the risk that an old habit will come forth when we're thinking about something else.

Step 10. Having learned new behaviors by focusing on each one, we now work on integrating all of them into daily life. Each day we can look back and see whether we recognized the situations calling for new behavior. If we missed any, we can make amends immediately, which keeps our momentum going and our conscience clear.

Step 11. The purpose of step 11 is to develop familiarity with the intangible qualities we've adopted as guiding principles. Intangibles work differently from material things, and we need to develop our access to their power.

For example, meditation can help develop access to one's compassion--an important power when facing fears! The qualities that improve one person's life improve other people's as well, so other people will help us bring those qualities into our social world, e.g., the communal love of harmony is a power greater than any individual's love of harmony.

We develop skill with such powers in ways that works for us, whether it's contemplating our guiding principles, conversing with our inner wisdom, or walking the dog.

Step 12. As with steps 10 and 11, this one directs us to extend our recovery into all areas of our lives. It also suggests offering ourselves and our understanding as examples to others. This helps them, extends our social contacts, and develops our thinking.