Working the Twelve Steps of EDA as an Atheist or Agnostic

Perhaps you are an atheist or agnostic seeking recovery, or perhaps you are trying to help someone who is. EDA helps people find and apply solutions to the root causes of their eating disorders, regardless of their position on matters of faith. The process of working EDA’s Twelve Steps creates a sustainable perspective we can rely on to restore inner calm and sanity. Many of the Twelve Steps make reference to God. EDA recognizes that atheists and agnostics can and do recover from eating disorders by working the same Twelve Steps as everyone else, with the understanding that the word “God” can represent the Deity, a deity, a spiritual entity such as a Higher Power, or a non-spiritual entity such as a higher purpose. What follows is a list of the Twelve Steps of EDA and a description of how atheists and agnostics might understand each Step. There is also support for atheist and agnostic views in the EDA Big Book. We encourage you to trust your own truth: take what you can use and leave the rest.

STEP 1: We admitted we were powerless over our eating disorders—that our lives had become unmanageable.
In Step 1, we admitted we were frustrated and unhappy. We saw that it didn’t matter how much power we had in some areas of our lives if we were untrustworthy with ourselves. We could see we had made a mess of things—at least on the inside, where people couldn’t necessarily see what was going on. Before we started in EDA, we were unable to find much emotional safety without relying on eating disordered thoughts and behaviors to calm us down, put things into perspective, and provide an outlet for emotions we did not want. An eating disorder is a symptom of deeper issues, a distraction and an unhealthy response to life’s challenges and internal conflicts. In Step 1 we got honest about our eating disordered thoughts and behaviors, and their consequences. We looked at the many attempts we had made to address our eating disorders. We acknowledged that we used our eating disorders to try to control our emotional states, so life felt more manageable. We saw we lacked what we needed: a means to be calm internally without relying on ideas and behaviors we knew could hurt us and others.

STEP 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
In Step 2, we came to believe that serving a higher purpose or a greater good—something more rewarding and empowering than simply satisfying our own wants and desires—could motivate us to put our lives into perspective and restore us to sanity. In Step 1, we admitted that our eating disordered thoughts and behaviors were irrational. Although we might not have felt insane, we admitted we could not completely trust ourselves to take care of our own basic needs. Some of us felt like we had stopped caring about things we knew should matter. When we saw others who had some of our issues and perspectives recover (and even have fun doing it) we started to hope that we could, too. Recovery is not just freedom from an eating disorder, it is freedom from the unmanageable, recurring thoughts and feelings that drive eating disordered behaviors. We saw that when we were working for a purpose we cared deeply about, we were often able to forget ourselves in the work and reclaim some of the self-esteem and genuine caring that our eating disorders had undermined—provided our basic needs were satisfied. We became willing to take care of our own basic needs so we could show up and do our best for something that mattered deeply to us, personally. Importantly, many EDA members—religious, spiritual, agnostic, and atheist—find they can rely on the wisdom of the EDA program or their EDA group to provide the support needed to gain and maintain this type of healthy perspective. EDA members may rely on “the wisdom of the group” instead of, or in addition to, relying on their own conception of a Higher Power or something that motivates them internally, such as higher purpose. As we practice relying on the perspective that comes from thinking about what matters in the long run while meeting our own basic needs, we grow calmer and more effective. We are more peaceful with ourselves and others. Often, when we do not feel very peaceful, we see that we have neglected a basic need or failed to rely on a perspective that brings peace.
STEP 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.
In Step 3, we made a decision to address our basic physical and emotional needs so we could focus on what mattered most to us in the broader, deeper context of life. We began to rely on trusted tools and practices to bring us peace and perspective and found ourselves increasingly more comfortable. Throughout the day, and whenever upset, we stop and reconsider what doing the next right thing might mean. It is our responsibility to identify and meet our own basic needs and make sure these are squared away, so we are able to respond as adults to whatever life serves up. We need food, shelter, sleep, and some amount of physical activity to meet not just physical but also emotional, social, and purpose-oriented needs. To address any unmet emotional needs, we seek out root causes for our own resentment, fear, self-pity, shame, guilt, confusion, frustration, and despair. We review our part in these emotional traps with other people—even those of us who are introverts—because we gain insight and ideas about how to resolve these common problems by doing so. To address social needs, we recognize that as human beings, we need to be seen and heard. We need to feel valued, and we need to feel useful. This may seem like a lot to tackle, but we don’t have to do any of this perfectly, or alone. We acknowledge the needs and do some work every day to address each category. What does that look like in practice? We do what we talk about in EDA meetings: If hungry, we eat. If angry, we find a safe outlet. If lonely, we reach out. If tired, we sleep. If ashamed, we talk about it. When feeling any strong emotions, we talk or write about them to get perspective. When anxious or troubled, we do something that helps remind us of the bigger picture. To feel useful, many of us work to support our families, do service to help others recover from eating disorders, or get involved in serving our communities. It doesn’t have to be complicated. We try to focus on the next right thing and do whatever it is. Focusing on what matters most to us in the long run, we find that identifying the next right thing to do and staying in balance are not as challenging as we feared. Step 3 requires us to be authentic with ourselves and take care of our own basic needs as the top priorities.

STEP 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
In Step 4, like everyone else in EDA, we looked at our resentments and fears, and why we had them. We also examined our self-pity, shame, guilt, confusion, frustration, and despair. In each case, we asked ourselves what was threatened or at risk, such as security, relationships, ambition, loss of what we have, or inability to get what we need. We identified what our part was, such as where we’d had unreasonable expectations, pushed an agenda, or were selfish. We looked at what we could do to restore dignity and integrity. In each case, we defined a long-range solution and picked a small thing we would do in the current day that could move us incrementally forward. When unsure, we sought guidance from others.

STEP 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
In Step 4, we admitted when and how we failed to maintain emotional balance and lost perspective—and how this hurt us and others. As we did so, we began to trust the calm, kind, wise, inner voice of reason that responded with patience and integrity when we explored solutions to situations that caused our own and others’ pain and suffering. In Step 5, we saw how, along with the many things we did right, we had been anxious, rigid, intolerant, impatient, dramatic, selfish, immature, and avoidant. We held ourselves accountable to at least one trusted person in EDA for not just what we said and did, but for what we thought. Together, we calmly reviewed what we ought to have thought and done instead. Humility and a sense of humor helped us find a healthy, balanced perspective.
STEP 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
In Step 6, we concluded it was not useful to focus on our insufficiencies or on how difficult our lives had been, because it did not help. Instead, we focused on what was going right. We accepted ourselves as human: fallible, vulnerable, shortsighted, and at times, self-centered. We accepted that our most troubling thoughts and behaviors stemmed from our insufficient efforts to satisfy our basic needs. We became willing to be more conscious and intentional about meeting our basic needs. We committed to recognize positive changes in ourselves as we did so.

STEP 7: Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
In Step 7, we looked at our “shortcomings” in a new light. We saw that when in balance, even our most problematic traits and thoughts could be useful. We became committed to using our emotions to good purpose. We might be angry or frustrated because something is not fair or just; if so, we take calm, carefully considered action to address the root causes for our feelings. Fear usually means we are concerned about loss or lack. If we think we are going to lose what we have or not get what we need, we might want to take steps to address the concern. Self-pity shows we are capable of empathy and compassion, including for ourselves. Guilt means we have morals and either need to live up to them or change them. Frustration is a sign we are eager to get something done. Despair signals readiness to let go of what isn’t working and move forward with a new approach. In each case, we start taking small, incremental steps to resolve situations that bother us, and we keep doing so as new situations and opportunities arise.

STEP 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
In Step 8, we made a list of people we had treated in ways that went against our values, even if we had also been hurt. We accepted responsibility for our actions. We tried to see things from the perspective of those we had harmed.

STEP 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.
In Step 9, we consulted our sponsor or a fellow EDA member who had worked the Twelve Steps to ensure we were making appropriate amends. Once assured, we went to the people we had injured and admitted our fault and regret. Our statements were simple, sincere, and without blame. We listened carefully to those we had hurt, committing to right wrongs as best we could and expecting nothing in return. We took the restorative actions and accepted the results.

STEP 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
In Step 10, we check in with ourselves throughout the day. Many of us also do a written daily 10th Step where we review the events of the past day, and concerns we have about the upcoming day. We write down one or two emotionally challenging situations, defining long-term resolutions with actions we can take right away—within a day or two. We list some things we feel good about, specifically identifying the positives in our own and others’ actions and attitudes.

STEP 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will and the power to carry that out.
In Step 11, we listen for that calm, kind, wise, inner voice of reason throughout the day, and consider how what we are doing reflects what matters most deeply to us. We prioritize taking care of our basic needs (including taking time for rest and play) and spend time each day being of service to others. We do the next right thing, do what we love, and notice what is going right. (Please see EDA Big Book pg 195.)
STEP 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others with eating disorders, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

In Step 12, we recognized a profound shift in perspective had happened due to our Step work, evidenced by our increasing sanity, peace, and balance in our relationships with ourselves and interactions with others. Though typically not fully recovered after only one round with the Steps, we saw real progress. We began to sponsor, helping others work the Steps to find and live by their own truths. This work helps keep us in balance and strengthens our own recovery. May everyone experience the joy of sponsoring in EDA!

For more information about EDA and about EDA meetings, please visit www.EatingDisordersAnonymous.org.

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