

Chapter 5

HOW IT WORKS (STEPS 1—4)

In our experience, the Twelve Steps outlined in the chapters “How It Works,” “Into Action,” and “Working with Others” in AA’s text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*,¹ define a process that works as well for those with eating disorders as it does for alcoholics. So, in the next three chapters, we present EDA’s version of these Steps and clarify exactly how we recovered from our eating disorders. Those acquainted with similar programs will find EDA’s approach reassuringly familiar, yet distinct.

While the EDA approach demands rigorous honesty and integrity, it does not insist on “abstinence first.” We recognize that recovery from an eating disorder is usually a gradual process and that establishing a foundation for a different kind of life takes time and commitment. Through continuous, daily practice, we slowly learn to rely on new ideas and perspectives that work, as we let go of old ones that kept us stuck in a cycle of misery and hopelessness. As the AA text declares:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which

¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 58-71.

demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.²

Let us be completely clear: we think anyone *can* recover from having an eating disorder, though not everyone does. We would like to assure all readers that it is completely normal for someone with an eating disorder to continue to engage in old patterns of thought and behavior until they have—through repeated and determined practice—learned to rely more heavily on a new foundation created through working the Twelve Steps. As the saying goes, recovery is a process, not an event. Just as in the AA text:

Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have, and are willing to go to any length to get it—then you are ready to take certain steps. At some of these we balked. We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not. With all the earnestness at our command, we beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start. Some of us tried to hold onto our old ideas, and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.³

Whether or not we are members of a religious organization, we have to find a different way of relating to the world, a brand new way that enables us to find peace, power, and perspective we formerly lacked. We are not able to change by focusing on ourselves directly. It is too much

² Ibid., 58.

³ Ibid.

for us!⁴ Instead, we have to allow change to happen within and through us by doing two things:

- 1. Removing ourselves from the center of our own attention by placing our focus on something greater than ourselves that we commit to serve without reservation.** All people in Twelve-Step recovery find their new freedom, peace, power, and happiness comes directly through steady reliance on God, manifested as a Higher Power of their own understanding, or on the idea of serving a higher purpose. To provide perspective and meaning to our lives, we replace self-centeredness with God-centeredness or service to the greater good. It is that simple.
- 2. Recognizing that serving God and/or the greater good requires us to first take care of our own basic needs for air, water, food, sleep, clothing, shelter, and physical safety.** We remember the old adage, “God helps those who help themselves.” We found we could not reliably turn our attention to a higher plane until our basic needs—not wants—were met. We must first take care of these basics, and it is *our responsibility*—not anyone else’s—to do so.

These ideas are simple, but not easy to implement!⁵ Here are the steps we took, suggested as a program of recovery, through which we allow the needed changes in ourselves to occur:

⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

The Twelve Steps of EDA

1. We admitted we were powerless over our eating disorders—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 God*.⁶
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 God 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

⁶ “God” in EDA literature can mean the Deity, a deity, a spiritual entity of one’s own understanding (a Higher Power), or a non-spiritual conception (a higher purpose). Reliance on any of these conceptions confers a perspective that transcends our immediate physical, social, and emotional circumstances and allows us to “keep calm and carry on” with what really matters.

our conscious contact with God *as we understood God*, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening⁷ 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.

Many of us first reacted to this list like those who first encounter AA's Twelve Steps: "What an order! I can't go through with it!" And, in the same way that AA members comfort newcomers, we in EDA are happy to reassure, "Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles."⁸ The point is that we are willing to grow along the lines we have set down. We aim for *balance*, understanding that "our real purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God and the people about us."⁹ We claim progress, never perfection.

Our description of the eating-disordered mind in Chapters 3 and 4, coupled with our personal adventures before and after finding recovery, make clear three pertinent ideas:

- That we had serious problems—eating disorders—that we could not solve despite our best efforts.

⁷ The term "spiritual awakening" can refer to an event—a vital spiritual experience—or to a gradual change. We who are atheists also experience a transformation, enabling us to place service before selfishness.

⁸ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

- That no accessible human power had relieved our eating disorders.
- That reliance on God, a Higher Power, or a higher purpose could—and would—restore us to sanity and set us free.

We now present a discussion of each of the Steps. The current chapter, “How It Works,” covers Steps One through Four. The next chapter, “Into Action,” provides a review of Steps Five through Eleven, and the following chapter, “Working with Others,” discusses Step Twelve.

Step One: *We admitted we were powerless over our eating disorders—that our lives had become unmanageable.*

Before recovery, we could not stop “acting out” in ways we knew caused harm. We were miserable. Even when aware that there might be a way to get and stay better, we were stricken with the same “mental blank spots”¹⁰ as people suffering from alcoholism. We persisted in repeating the same behaviors even though what we were doing was irrational considering the possible physical and mental consequences. We remained ill despite our best efforts and the efforts of others who wanted to help us.

Yet, we think it normal for people with eating disorders to take issue with the idea of powerlessness. Most of us had the same difficulty! The key point is not about being “powerless” in the overall context of our lives, but about *having insufficient power to overcome our eating disorders*

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

specifically. Everything we tried—up to the point where we considered taking this important 1st Step—had obviously failed, or we wouldn't have gotten to this juncture at all.

There is a reason why the founders of AA chose the word “powerless” for Step One. The whole point of the Twelve Steps is to enable the person who takes them to *find the power to recover*. If the First Step had said “helpless” or “insufficient” instead of “powerless,” then the 2nd Step—which is all about finding one's own hope, strength, and *power* to change—would not have made as much sense.

Perhaps you are also struggling with the second clause of Step One, “...that our lives had become unmanageable.” Most likely, your life appears fairly manageable on the surface. A lot of things might be going smoothly; that was the case for most of us. But let us explore a bit further.

- Do you use your eating disorder to help you manage your emotional states in one way or another so your life *feels* more manageable?
- Do you feel completely *safe within yourself*, able to rely on yourself to do all that is required of you, without having to resort to behaviors that you know cause harm?

Reflecting on these questions makes clear that the two clauses of Step One are actually parallel: *If you have an eating disorder that you cannot control, by definition that part of your life—which will doubtless be a central part of your life—is not manageable, at least not by you*. Step One is an admission of defeat: despite our best efforts, we could not recover on our own. This is all that is required to make a solid beginning.

The remaining Steps outline techniques to help you let go of old ideas that did not work and lay a solid foundation of ideas that do. Then you will be given directions for building on the foundation you have put in place. You are in charge of all of that, and you are not going to be asked to build on anything that you cannot trust. Steps Two through Twelve are all about finding the power to gain and then retain the sanity that enables you to lead a happy and purposeful life.

If you are reading this, you have probably already admitted you are powerless over your eating disorder and are willing to try almost anything that sounds reasonable in order to recover. You are ready to move to Step Two.

Step Two: *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

Many of us had no problem with the fundamental idea of God. Our main issue was that we doubted our ability to recover, since we had not yet found lasting freedom *despite our belief*. Others of us had always believed in God, yet we couldn't figure out how to allow God into our lives to a greater degree, especially when we knew that meant we would have to lay aside our eating disorders. Some of us who had faith had grown up with a kind of negative fear or resentment towards God that needed to be overcome in order to build a deep and meaningful relationship.

Those of us who are atheist or agnostic struggled to find a conception of a Power that we could reconcile with our ideas about how the world works. Some of us tried using a conception that aligned well with the "Spirit of the

Universe” described in the AA chapter, “We Agnostics,”¹¹ while others used the power of our EDA group as our Higher Power. People were clearly getting better through reliance on these sources of hope and guidance, yet many of us remained skeptical.

We all agree that some fundamental force or forces seem to be able to create life in the most inhospitable places. Not only do these forces generate life, they regularly triumph over adversity. Trampled plants often renew themselves, lost lizard tails grow back, flesh wounds heal, and broken bones knit back together over time. We accept this as part of the natural world. How wonderful it would be if we who are afflicted with eating disorders could allow ourselves to tap into this fundamental healing power and get well!

Just like the processes through which broken bones heal, we do not need to understand all the details of the recovery process to trust that it works. If we adopt a conception of a fundamental healing force in nature, we will have no doubt about the force being greater than ourselves. Not one among us thinks themselves immune to the forces of physics and chemistry. If we can believe that we are not immune to fundamental healing forces, and if we can believe that surrender to the healing forces of nature can restore us to sanity, we are most of the way through Step Two.

If you have read through all the Twelve Steps, you will have seen that Steps One and Two are laying a foundation. We need to *open ourselves up to a relationship with something greater than ourselves* to get through the remaining steps and fully recover. We urge you to be flexible about this point specifically. Opening up to a relationship with a

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

God of one's own understanding—whether a Power, purpose, or both—can be difficult. The process requires profound honesty and a daily practice that includes both self-reflection and appreciation for all that is good and right. Whatever conception we choose, we will need to *draw upon* it as we move forward with the next Steps. In Step Three we turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God. To do so, we must find a concept we trust to provide perspective on our lives. In Step Seven, we humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings. We will need a Power or purpose that helps us move past current limitations so we can make good use of our time, energy, skills, and talents. In Step Eleven, through prayer and meditation we “seek knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out.” In this Step, as in all the rest, we need a connection to a Power or purpose that provides us with the strength and perspective to keep calm and focus on what really matters.

It is helpful to remember that all of us—religious, spiritual, agnostic, and atheist—are in the same boat. Whether we believed in God or not, our dependence on our eating disorders demonstrated that *God would not relieve our condition without our explicit permission, cooperation, and ongoing action*. The situation is the same for everyone: we commit our lives to God as we understand God and then live out that commitment on a day-to-day basis. *Faith alone is not enough*. We see people of faith struggle mightily with their eating disorders every day. As the AA text makes very clear, *only reliance on something greater than ourselves—combined with action—sets us free*. “Faith without works is dead.”¹²

By this point, those of us who are atheist or agnostic

¹² Ibid., 76, 88.

were prepared to declare the Twelve Steps impossible: we had had enough of all this “God talk!” Then, it dawned on us that the idea of serving a purpose greater than ourselves—anything in which we solidly believed (perhaps the ideas of fairness and justice) could work, if *we fully relied upon the idea of service* to bring us the needed perspective. We could then develop a relationship with this conception that would put our lives in context.

Those of us who are in recovery—regardless of whether we adopted a religious, spiritual, or non-spiritual solution—are all emphatically in agreement:

- *We needed a different way of looking at the world and our place in it*, because our old way left us vulnerable and prone to acting out.
- *We needed to rely on this new way of looking at the world*—instead of our old patterns of thought and behavior—to provide a perspective that brought us peace.
- *We found we could not rely on anything that we were not willing to trust*, and “the result was nil until we let go absolutely.”¹³

Our job in Step Two is to identify or define something greater than ourselves that we can open ourselves up to and trust, for we need to rely on it.

We all had major issues with trust. In Step One, we admitted we could not fully trust ourselves to manage our own lives. We demonstrated repeatedly that we experienced

¹³ Ibid., 58.

“strange mental blank spots”¹⁴ pertaining to our eating disorders; we could not trust our own minds to keep us safe! Yet, even at our very worst—unable to depend on ourselves, struggling to trust those around us, caught up in any number of forms of acting out—we often found we were still able to understand what was fair and just, true and worthwhile. *Except when it came to ourselves.* When it came to ourselves, we seemed unable to maintain anything like a reasonable perspective.

Let us take ourselves out of the picture altogether for the moment and reflect on what we *can* truly trust. We find it helpful to consider the causes we care deeply about. For some of us, these are revealed through our relationship with God: we find peace and purpose to the full extent that we rely upon God (or a Higher Power) to help us. For others, a higher purpose—revealed through our thoughtful response to life as we see it—gives us perspective and peace.

We wholeheartedly believe that *every one of us can find something or some cause besides ourselves that matters just enough for us to be willing to set aside our issues*, one day at a time, to serve it. Our purpose should be something we care deeply about, or our commitment to serve will surely falter. Some of us have chosen to carry the message of recovery as our higher purpose. Others have chosen to advocate for victims’ rights, civil rights, and animal rights. Still others have worked to solve the global problem of access to clean water. We need not look far to find inequitable and unjust conditions or problems to which we could reasonably turn our time and attention. As long as we are earnest about growing stronger so we can better serve our higher purpose,

¹⁴ Ibid., 42.

any will do.¹⁵ If you choose a higher purpose that reflects your core values and about which you feel deeply passionate, you can rest assured that you are well on the way to a durable recovery.

We need not worry whether we have identified a “correct” conception as the focal point for our new frame of reference. Once we get to Step Eleven, our daily practice will help us refine and enlarge our understanding, whether it be of God’s will for us or how to best serve the higher purpose which we have taken to heart.

Once we find something we can use as our new focal point and begin to arrange our lives accordingly, peace and power start flowing into us. With this shift in orientation a new perspective appears almost automatically. Our emotional struggles take on a different meaning when “our main purpose is to fit ourselves to be of maximum service to God (our Higher Power/higher purpose) and the people about us.”¹⁶ Rather than resisting, judging ourselves, and getting caught up in the drama of our lives, we find we can now use our experiences and responses to help us grow into fully aware, deeply empathetic, and genuinely helpful people. Although we are in no way free from having emotions, we no longer need be mired in them: we do not suffer needlessly. We experience pain—sometimes a lot of pain—but we now intuitively know that we can use our pain to some good purpose, such as helping others or making much needed changes in our lives. We know that

¹⁵ A note of caution: if you are atheist or agnostic, we suggest you find a higher purpose other than or in addition to service to family as a starting point. It can be challenging to maintain calm perspective at times when family tension is high.

¹⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 77. Parenthetical phrase added.

running from pain means still more pain, so we begin to accept life on life's terms with grace and dignity; as we do so, we gain peace and power. When we stop running from our emotions, we find ourselves free to experience the many delights that come with being fully alive.

The second part of Step Two asks us if we are now willing to believe that reliance on God or our higher purpose can restore us to sanity. We are here to tell you that our experience bears this out: *We grow to care more about serving our Higher Power/higher purpose than about the things that stand in the way.* Once we have adopted and practiced reliance on this new perspective for even a short while, the desperate urge to sidestep emotional difficulties eases and the aching black hole of neediness begins to fill up. We become less dependent on old habits and we can more easily see life's emotional challenges for what they are:

- *Signals* that we may be neglecting something that needs to be dealt with first (i.e. taking care of the basics)
- *Reminders* that we are only human
- *Challenges* to our commitment to place service to the greater good ahead of our self-generated emotional states
- *Opportunities* to build bridges of empathy and understanding with others who struggle with similar issues and challenges
- *Means* through which we grow more resilient, strong, and flexible in our recovery
- *Impediments* to fully serving others in the here and now

Everything hinges on whether we can find a Higher Power or higher purpose that we trust enough to be willing to set aside our fears, self-pity, and resentments. If you believe that reliance on your Higher Power or higher purpose can help keep you from acting out—even just for one day—you have just completed Step Two. You are on the road to recovery!

Step Three: *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.*

Until we reached Step Three, many of us were working toward recovery with the idea that we “must” have it, because living with our eating disorders was untenable. We were frightened of what our lives might look like without them, but taking Step Two signaled that we developed hope that change was actually possible for us. We were encouraged to see others having an easier time when they actively sought and maintained recovery as something valuable they wanted in its own right, not because they were running from their eating disorders or felt obligated to “follow the rules.” We wanted the kind of recovery that looked and felt like real freedom. This is where Step Three came in.

For those of us with a deep and abiding faith and trust in God, Step Three makes tremendous sense; our main difficulty lies in following through on our commitment. For the rest of us, Step Three may present a serious obstacle. Some of us get what the AA text describes as “mental gooseflesh” with respect to the idea of worship.¹⁷ Let us be clear: there is no need to get hung up on the word. We ask you

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

to consider the following rewording of Step Three: *“Made a decision to commit our will and our lives to the service of our Higher Power/higher purpose as we understood it.”* We believe this to be the logical equivalent for those who struggle with the idea of God, and somewhat easier to understand and apply.

No matter how we approached this step, when we looked back over our lives, we could readily see that we had been struggling to get ourselves—and sometimes those around us—to conform to our ideas about how things “should” be. Rather than adapting ourselves to reality as it presented itself to us each day, appreciating the beauty and diversity of experiences this world had to offer, and searching for the best way to use our time and talents, most of us spent a great deal of energy trying to make life match our expectations. It’s natural to want the people around us to share our hopes and beliefs, but more than most, we who struggled with eating disorders wanted parents, teachers, classmates, partners, spouses, bosses, co-workers, employees, children, friends, relatives—even institutions and society as a whole—to behave in certain ways, even when this sometimes meant the loss of relationships we cared about. Toward the end of our eating disorder “careers,” some of us insisted only on being left alone in our misery. We hope you have not yet reached this level!

We should point out that we were usually quite virtuous in our efforts to “manage” things. Our motives were generally excellent: we earnestly wanted what was best for all concerned. We worked hard and usually set a good example. We could be patient, kind-hearted, and generous. Many of us were modest and self-sacrificing. We were often delightful company, but at heart we were not satisfied

unless, as the AA text describes it, “the lights, the ballet, the scenery, and the rest of the players” were arranged to our liking. When our arrangements worked well, we were happy and assumed everyone else was, too. When things did not work out so well, we applied ourselves still harder to ensure our expectations were met. Surely if we were just more determined or more gracious, things would work out the way we wanted. When they didn’t, we admitted we were partly at fault, but often blamed others more than we blamed ourselves. We gradually became “angry, indignant, and self-pitying.”¹⁸

Although we often did not realize it, our perspective revolved around the idea that we ourselves were of central importance. We tended to think our ideas were inherently right and were sometimes dismissive of other views. In retrospect, we can see how unreasonable this was. We inadvertently hurt others while making sure we got what we wanted; sometimes they retaliated. We were also hurt when others refused to accept our direction or failed to validate our ideas. *Couldn’t they see we just wanted what was best?* Without ever consciously meaning to be selfish or self-seeking, our thoughts and behavior solidly reflected the idea that we privileged our own thinking above that of others. We were busy “directing the show.” The AA text calls this “playing God.”¹⁹ We had to admit we somehow made everything all about us, our beliefs, and our expectations of how things should be. All Twelve-Step programs make clear that this type of thinking simply does not work. As long as we persisted in forcing our will—our ideas about how things ought to be—on others (and ourselves!), we needed

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 62.

to act out in our eating disorders to assuage the hurt, anger, indignation, and self-pity we suffered as a result.

Remember that we are dealing with eating disorders, which are complex, life-threatening illnesses.²⁰ By the time we arrive at Step Three, we need to find a new frame of reference that provides the objectivity and power to address our condition with all the urgency we can muster. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, full recovery from an eating disorder requires a complete emotional displacement and rearrangement, a *transformation* as profound as any known to human experience. This isn't easy for anyone. We have to place service to God, our Higher Power, or higher purpose ahead of our worldly wants and desires. Can you do it? Of course you can!

Within Twelve-Step programs everywhere, millions of people have been able to achieve exactly the type of transformation we have been talking about. These people are living happily and completely free from their illnesses. The AA text tells us, "People of faith have a logical idea of what life is all about" and that "...we might have observed that spiritually-minded persons of all races, colors, and creeds were demonstrating a degree of stability, happiness, and usefulness which we should have sought for ourselves."²¹ This is absolutely true! We are happy to add that many atheists and agnostics are also quietly living lives of sane and useful purpose. They too have a logical idea of what life is all about and are demonstrating a degree of stability, usefulness, and happiness we ought now seek for ourselves.

²⁰ Arcelus, J., Mitchell, A.J., Wales, J., Nielsen, S. (2011) Mortality rates in patients with anorexia nervosa and other eating disorders. A meta-analysis of 36 studies. *Archives of General Psychiatry*. 68(7), 724-31.

²¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 54.

The AA text declares, “When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon the Spirit of the Universe, we had to stop doubting the power of God. Our ideas did not work, but the God idea did.”²² This statement is certainly true for those who are able to apply the concept of a Higher Power, and the key element, we find, is actually the concept of *reliance*. Those of us with religious convictions as well as those without them find that our ideas failed *not because they were inherently “soft and mushy,”*²³ *but because we had not **relied** upon them.* Religious, spiritual, or neither, we were busy using our eating disorders as a crutch to get through our day-to-day existence, with no clue that a sense of purpose or duty could carry us through life’s challenges instead. Perhaps because we had not taken full responsibility for meeting our own basic needs, we had somewhat childishly allowed ourselves and our emotional condition to take center stage in our lives. When we did so, no matter how strong our religious convictions, philosophical ideas, or moral principles, we simply could not seem to live by them. In the eye of the storm of our emotions, dependent only on ourselves, we were hopelessly stuck, trying to fix something broken within us with tools that were also broken. It didn’t work. We must have something more durable, more powerful, more permanent, and ultimately *more important than we are to ourselves* to serve as our foundation.

In Step Two, we discussed the idea that God, a Higher Power, or a higher purpose could restore us to sanity. Do you trust God, or were you able to define a Higher Power or higher purpose greater than yourself, whom or which

²² Ibid., 52.

²³ Ibid., 53.

you are open to serving? Some of us are such skeptics that this question gave us a significant pause! But once we began to put these ideas into practice we soon acknowledged that *humble and anonymous work is exactly what we (and the world) most need*. No matter how we conceive of God or purpose, the question is whether we are now willing to consider putting everything we have—our time, energy, thoughts, and actions—into being of greatest possible service.

Suppose you have identified a Higher Power or higher purpose with which you feel comfortable, but you are far from confident in your ability to serve anything without reservation. Perhaps you have a family to support. Surely, you cannot be expected to sacrifice time, energy, and money that your loved ones desperately need so you can contribute towards some “greater good.” That would be adding insult to injury, would it not? Haven’t our families already sacrificed and suffered long enough?

If this is an issue, we ask you to think about long-term impacts on your loved ones; it makes no sense to cause them greater injury. They need us to be real and authentic, solid and dependable. It may be hard for a family to accept that their lives will be better if you are working for a higher purpose, but we assure you, *we are better able to support our loved ones once we are in recovery*. If you were to ask them sincerely about the bigger picture, you would almost certainly learn that your restoration to health and sanity is their greatest concern. They are likely to understand that everything else will fall into place once you are well.

We should also think of the example we are setting for others. If we are able to successfully establish a purpose-driven life, we stand a much better chance of supporting those we love in their own pursuit of the same. Do you find

it scary that your life partner might decide to pursue a higher purpose, or live in service to a Higher Power (activities that might not include you)? Do not be discouraged. Some of us had the same fears, and our family members felt the same way. But our experience is that if we are considerate of our family, attentive to their needs, include them in our efforts, and work hard for their benefit, they generally respond by being similarly considerate, attentive, and inclusive.

Perhaps you doubt if you can find the strength and power to carry out the decision you are being asked to make in Step Three. Your experience may have demonstrated that you cannot completely trust yourself to honor commitments of the sort required of you here. We truly understand and agree that this is a serious concern. We recognize your hesitation and respect your willingness to be honest with yourself about it. But please be assured that the point of Steps Four through Nine is to sweep away any barriers to your sanity and integrity so you *will* be able to honor your commitments. Once you are able to maintain balance and perspective through some emotionally challenging situations, you will begin to see that *reliance on your idea of a Higher Power or higher purpose does for you what you could not do for yourself*. You can trust this process; it works for us and it can work for you, too.

In Step Three, our job is to resolve—decide—to *be open to committing ourselves to serving God, a Higher Power, or the greater good: something that inspires and enables us to transcend our current limitations*. Step Three is a jumping-off point into recovery. Are you now willing to give up the old ways and try some new ones? If so, we ask you to repeat the 3rd Step prayer, or the alternative statement below, or both. We emphasize that there is nothing magical about either one. Your decision to change your frame of reference

is the logical, correct, and practical next step on your path to recovery.

Original form of the 3rd Step Prayer

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. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!²⁴

Alternative 3rd Step Commitment

I, [state your name], am now willing to commit myself to serving the greater good and be of cheerful service to those around me. I am willing to make my service to a higher purpose more important than any desire for recognition or reward. When filled with fear and self-doubt, as I am sure to be at times, I resolve to remember my willingness and do the next right thing that prepares me to be of better service. I gratefully embrace this opportunity to turn my will and my life over to serve a useful purpose.

We encourage you to write the 3rd Step prayer or alternative statement down on paper. Your commitment is your new foundation. Honor it. Repeat it every morning before you start your day. Repeat it throughout the day. Read it before you start your 4th Step, and read it before providing sponsorship guidance to others. Be unashamed. If you have taken this step, you are on solid ground in your recovery!

²⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 63.

Step Four: *Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.*

We think Step Four is crucially important, because it uncovers all the thoughts and emotions that fuel our insane behaviors and helps identify new ways of thinking and feeling that we can use in recovery. This prepares us for the rest of the Steps, which restore us to sanity.

In Step One, we admitted we were untrustworthy and unreliable in taking care of ourselves. If we are honest with ourselves, we will see we haven't been truly available for others, either. We did not allow ourselves to mature and grow as human beings while we were busy acting out and numbing ourselves emotionally. Since we can never be fully effective in serving God, our Higher Power, or higher purpose if we are operating from a place of instability and unreliability, we can hardly hope to be successful in honoring the commitment we just made in Step Three *unless we are willing to expose and let go of the fears and issues that caused us to want to use an escape in the first place.*

As long as we refuse to address our needs and our issues, and as long as we allow ourselves to remain prey to volatile emotions—no matter how good our intentions or how deep our desire to be of service—we are not going to be as effective as if we are truly free to think and act without the encumbrances of an eating disorder. The purpose of Step Four is to help us find, and prepare us to let go of, everything that has been keeping us from being able to handle life on life's terms with dignity and grace.

When we examined our lives closely, we saw that much of our misery and paralysis could be chalked up to durable habits of thought and behavior. Underlying these

habits were ideas that we needed to bring out into the open so we could define a clearer and more reasonable way to think. First, we had to accept that as independent adults, we were each responsible for our own well-being. We needed to meet our basic physical and safety needs before much, if any, progress could be made. In order to establish relationships of trust, including reliance on God, a Higher Power, or a higher purpose, we had to do the initial hard work of taking care of ourselves.

A reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs seems appropriate here.²⁵ His theory of human motivation is built on the premise that people have four basic needs (physical, safety, love/belonging, and esteem), which must be met or they are *too anxious* to achieve "self-actualization" or transcendent, altruistic goals. While some take issue with the idea the one need might supercede another (observing that all needs coexist simultaneously), there can be little doubt that human beings *must* get their physical and safety needs met (such as for water, sleep, food, clothing, and shelter) before they can readily form relationships of trust and interdependence with others. It is only reasonable to suppose that we might not be able to develop a relationship with a Higher Power or honor a commitment to a higher purpose while neglecting to take responsibility for our basic needs for food and safety. First things first!

Why didn't we take responsibility for getting our basic needs met? We cannot be sure, and the answers will vary, but it is clear that engaging in eating-disordered thoughts and behaviors satisfied a set of emotional needs. We needed escape. We needed comfort. We needed soothing. We

²⁵ Maslow, A.H. (1943) A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50 (4), 370–96.

needed momentary release from anxiety or depression. We needed to handle our rage and indignation. We needed a way to express ourselves. Our eating disorders somehow covered a lot of these bases, and yet it was never enough. We were never satisfied.

Why couldn't we be satisfied? In Step Four, we have to confront a basic truth about ourselves: somewhere along the way, for whatever reasons, we took a wrong turn in our development. We might not have been fully responsible for this wrong turn; it may have been made during the innocence of childhood. It doesn't matter. We need to be responsible for ourselves *now*—regardless of how we got here.

Most of us recognized that at least some of our issues were tied to our sensitivity. When we were children, before we developed an eating disorder, we remember having had genuine concerns about serious causes, including questions about the "human condition." Some of us remembered having a pure and unencumbered love of God. Most of us cared a great deal for our friends and families. Our ability to attend to these deep concerns and cares, however, was much diminished by our emotional sensitivity. When hurt, threatened, angry, resentful, or frightened, we were too overwhelmed to serve the causes we cared about. We lacked the peace and power to stay focused on what really mattered, because we were caught up in our emotional reactions to life: people, places, situations, and things. We also lacked an objective, empathetic perspective that would have made our normal, human problems seem manageable. As adults, we find little has changed. While we were often quite good at helping our friends diagnose and solve their issues, *we were easily overwhelmed and unable to address our own problems, because we had no objectivity and no context.* We were stuck in the center of the storm.

We can be grateful that we are now on more solid footing. In Step Three, we made a decision to create a new focal point for our lives through service to God, our Higher Power, or higher purpose; we embarked on the fundamental and vital journey toward the “emotional displacement and rearrangement” Dr. Carl Jung described as critically necessary for recovery in his discussion with Rowland H.²⁶ This idea lies at the heart of all Twelve-Step recovery. With Step Three, we made a decision to shift our context, so that we could understand and address our problems with a degree of objectivity and maturity that was previously unattainable. Now when we look at our problems, we can see them from a different frame of reference: *they affect our ability to work for what really matters*. And problems that stand in the way of our service have to either be solved or put aside. Having just completed Step Three, which established a new perspective, we now need to put it to practical use. The phrase “use it or lose it” has very real and urgent meaning at this point!

Before starting our journey to recovery, we had been fearful of self-examination, concerned that if we took our pride and ego out of the picture there would be nothing left of us.²⁷ Once we regain a sane perspective, though, we begin to see how we can put our existing traits and talents to good use. Even so, we may still be a bit afraid. We have failed many times before, and it has been painful. But we must explore what has been blocking us from real progress all this time, so we can overcome any vestiges of our old ways and prevent a return to them in the future. That is what Step Four is all about: *uncovering and beginning to*

²⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 27.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

address the real reasons for the emotional distress that fueled our eating disorders.

Ironically, the very feelings that we repeatedly experienced as a *result* of engaging in our eating disorders—what the AA text calls the “hideous four horsemen”: Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration, and Despair²⁸—also *reinforced* them. These kinds of emotions (and others such as resentment, fear, self-pity, shame, guilt, and confusion) regularly overwhelmed us and rendered us unable to work or focus effectively—*unless we found escape*. Somehow a reliance on our eating disorders enabled us to cope while slowly strangling and displacing nearly everything that was healthy in our lives.

The AA text reminds us that, just as drinking is for alcoholics, our eating disorders were only a symptom of more fundamental problems. To address these, we had to get down to causes and conditions. We needed to take stock of ourselves to understand what we were *really* dealing with, so we could identify appropriate solutions. Step Four is exactly that: a fact-finding and fact-facing inventory through which we identify ways of thinking and acting we want to stop, keep, and start.²⁹

How can we ensure success in conducting our “searching and fearless moral inventory?” The answer is simple: by following the prescription laid out in the AA text³⁰—or something very much like it. Convinced that our self-focused sensitivity had been the source of much of the pain that drove us to find relief in our eating disorders, we asked ourselves what we had been so sensitive about. We do this by examining in detail the sources and causes of our most challenging and troubling feelings.

²⁸ Ibid., 151.

²⁹ Ibid., 64.

³⁰ Ibid., 64-71.

Below we offer suggestions from the AA “Big Book” and an exercise to help with this Step. This might seem like a lot of work, but let us assure you, it can be completed in a relatively short time. You probably spent more time in escapist engagement with your eating disorder *each week* than is required to complete this exercise. We are convinced you will find it extremely useful, because you will refer to your inventory in all remaining Steps.

The main points of the 4th Step exercise outlined below are twofold:

1. *To establish a list of flaws in our thinking*—areas where we have been caught short in the past—so we can address these squarely and effectively.
2. *To define a new plan of action* for how we would like to respond to each familiar provocation in the future. We are planning exactly how we will “Act, Not React.”

4th Step Inventory

For this exercise, we need an empty notebook that opens in such a way that both left and right pages are blank, and a few separate pieces of paper for brainstorming purposes.

We remind ourselves that our purpose in Step Four is to find what has been causing our emotional disturbance, so that we can use our new frame of reference to define a sane response or resolution to life’s inevitable challenges.

The AA “Big Book” suggests we start our inventory by reviewing our resentments and provides instructions on

how to address them.³¹ Next, we are asked to review our fears. We are reminded that our fears arise from the problems with our perspective, and we are provided guidance on how to address them.³² We are then asked to review our sexual conduct, looking for areas where we had caused harm, or aroused jealousy, suspicion, or bitterness. We are to look at our own behavior, especially where we had been selfish, dishonest, or inconsiderate.³³ Then we are asked to define a sane and sound ideal for future conduct.

Focusing on these areas works well for many of us. However, EDA suggests making worksheets for the eight topics below, because these can continue to plague us until they are addressed directly:

Eight Topics for Exploration

- 1. Resentment:** people and institutions with which we have an old anger that was never fully resolved (same as in the AA text).
- 2. Fear:** things that frightened or still frighten us (same as in the AA text).
- 3. Self-pity:** reasons we felt or feel sorry for ourselves.
- 4. Shame:** things about which we felt or feel ashamed, despite not being responsible for them.
- 5. Guilt or “harms done”:** wrongs we had done or are doing to others.
- 6. Confusion:** situations where we felt or still feel abandoned or bewildered.

³¹ Ibid., 64-67.

³² Ibid., 67-68.

³³ Ibid., 68-70.

7. **Frustration:** things that made or make us angry, even if we have no resentment in connection to them.
8. **Despair:** reasons for hopelessness, past and present.

The AA text suggests creating a table with columns covering the *sources* of the emotional disturbance, the *causes or reasons* why we were disturbed, and *aspects of our lives that are at risk or threatened* by the behavior of others. Later, we are asked to consider *our own part* (errors in thinking) to define a better way to think about the situation, and to create a response or *resolution*. While the AA “Big Book” describes this method specifically for addressing resentments, EDA members have found it helpful to apply this same approach to each of the areas of exploration above.

Basic Guidelines for an EDA 4th Step Inventory

On a separate sheet of paper for brainstorming, we pick a topic to explore from the list above and go back through our lives, writing down every person, principle, and institution we can think of in connection with the emotion (the sources). Next, we rank-order these sources by which cause the most intense or most frequent instances of the emotion we are considering. Then, in our notebook on a pair of facing blank pages, we create and complete a table with **five columns** (see example in Appendix D):

1. **Source:** who or what caused the emotion.
2. **Reason/ Cause:** why we felt the emotion.
3. **At Risk/Affects My:** which part of us was threatened or hurt.

4. **My Error/My Part:** the error in thinking that led us to be sensitive or vulnerable in ways that prevented us from growing stronger.
5. **Resolution:** what we are willing to do about it, both now and the next time we feel this way.

If you are like most of us, this exercise probably seems overwhelming! Let us reassure you that an essential part of the 4th Step exercise includes beginning to establish and reinforce a practice of *moderation*. Some sponsors find it helpful to limit their sponsees's writing to the top ten or fifteen sources of trouble in each topic. Limiting an inventory in this way might feel a bit concerning to those familiar with other Twelve-Step programs, yet will certainly qualify as a "good enough" searching and fearless moral inventory. Recall that we are dealing with eight topics, not just three.³⁴ The keys are to find patterns of problematic thinking and solutions to them that we trust, so we can start to apply those solutions in daily life. It is very important to stay focused and keep moving! Step Ten also gives us a daily opportunity to address anything that might have been unintentionally overlooked. Of course, if anything is really bothering us and could interfere with our recovery, we write it down.

Appendix D provides an example of a 4th Step Inventory. Have a look at it, and then create your own. Merely reading is insufficient!

³⁴ Not all sponsors recommend limiting entries, nor does the AA source material, which suggests an inventory covering resentments, fears, and sexual conduct. AA does not include a separate inventory for self-pity, shame, guilt, confusion, frustration, and despair; however, many of us found ourselves unable to progress in recovery until we addressed each of these topics specifically.

4th Step Inventory Example: Resentment

To start, we brainstorm on a separate sheet of paper. We will use this information to fill in our five-column worksheet later. In the discussion below, we offer resentment as an example, but the approach works well for each of the topics we recommend exploring: resentment, fear, self-pity, shame, guilt/harms done, confusion, frustration, and despair.

1. First, we brainstorm about sources of resentment. A resentment is usually an old, unresolved anger that lurks in the background of our minds, ready to jump out whenever an opportunity presents itself. Thinking back, we list any one or anything that causes us to feel resentment.

- To list people, think of family members, former relationships, past and current friendships, jobs, etc. It might be useful to look at cell phone, email, and social media contacts.
- We do the same with institutions. Institutions can be groups of people, organizations, or places such as banks, credit card companies, magazines, police departments, cities/states/countries, restaurants, colleges, universities, and organized religions. If thinking about them makes us angry, we put them down on our list.
- We brainstorm for principles we might resent, such as: the idea of love at first sight; racism and other forms of prejudice; and sayings such as “honesty is the best policy,” “you live under my roof, you follow my rules,” and “fake it ‘til you make it.”

Then, we go back through our list and mark the top ten people, top two institutions, and top three principles that we feel the most “hot emotions” about.³⁵ Finally, we take the first person from that list, and put their name on our inventory worksheet in the first column on the left, under **Source**.

2. In the second column, **Reasons/Causes**, we list the reason(s) why we were upset, leaving a few empty lines between each one (we will need the space later). When listing reasons, we are specific. We do not say “they treated us badly,” we list exactly what they did or said, or in some cases what they didn’t do that we thought they should have done.

We repeat this process—listing sources in the first column, and reasons in the second column—for the top ten people, top two institutions, and top three principles. *Once done with these, most EDA sponsors recommend their sponsors stop.* We recall that we are looking for *patterns* in our incorrect thinking. We want the inventory to be fearless and thorough, but if we list every person from our brainstorming list who has ever wronged us (and how), we might never finish! We cannot afford to get bogged down now. *We are not looking for other people’s errors, only our own.*

We keep these brainstorming lists to use when we get to Step Eight. Our daily Step Ten inventory can be entrusted to pick up anything important that we might inadvertently miss.

3. In the third column, **At Risk/Affects My**, for each *reason* (not just for each source), we write if the cause of resentment affects or threatens any of the following: self-esteem, pride, ambition, finances, security, sexual or intimacy needs, and family or social relationships.

³⁵ Not all sponsors recommend limiting entries, nor does the AA source material.

- **Self-esteem** reflects the way we feel about or value ourselves: self-respect or self-regard. Our dignity and composure, as well as our self-esteem, can feel threatened when people or institutions disrespect, discredit, or undermine who we are (or what we are trying to do.)
- **Pride** is taking pleasure or finding joy in one's achievements, possessions, or character. Pride can feel like self-esteem, but it contains the seeds of arrogance—a hard, brittle humorlessness—that interferes with our ability to connect empathetically with others. People and situations that threaten our pride appear to compromise or diminish the way we want others to see us.
- **Ambition** includes the desire for reward, recognition, or validation. Ambitions can be long term, such as dreams and goals for our future (jobs, finances, relationships), but they can also be short term desires or wishes (wanting to be respected or included in conversations, events, and friendships). Anything that reduces the chances that we will get what we want is a threat to our ambition.
- **Finances** mean our economic base: our bank accounts. Much that we depend on for our stability, including hopes for future opportunities, may be tied up with our sources of income.
- **Security** involves anything we need—or think we need—for health and safety, such as food, clothing, home, job, and transportation. For some of us, the possibility of any change initially felt like a challenge to our security!

- **Sexual or intimacy needs** include relationships of trust and mutuality that enable us to care for ourselves and others at a physical, emotional, and (for some) spiritual level. Whether or not we are able to recognize it before recovery, part of being human involves the need for physical connection and intimate touch. Threats in this area can include attitudinal problems, unreasonable expectations, health issues, lack of trust, and things that lead to and include infidelity.
- **Family and social relationships** cover connections with members of our current families, families of origin, friendships, and coworkers—on the job, in the community, and in organizations and institutions. Threats to such relationships can include issues with integrity and trust (as with sexual relationships), but may involve external factors, such as institutional or cultural bias, societal expectations or prejudice, and slander.

If we feel **any other emotions** in addition to resentment when we review the sources and reasons columns, we list them.

At this point, we stop and review our worksheet so far. It should be obvious that there is quite a lot going on with us! Our most important relationships are usually quite messy, and while other people involved are not necessarily blameless, we must keep in mind that the inventory is ours—not anyone else's. We need to stay focused on our own thoughts and behavior. Anything that interferes with our ability to see our issues clearly leaves us vulnerable to the familiar comfort of irrational, old ways of thinking and behaving. We have to be rid of resentment or risk backsliding!

4. Next, we brainstorm for the fourth column, **My Error/My Part**, in which we consider each instance where something we care about has been put at risk and reflect on whether *we ourselves might have contributed* to the situation in some way. We have to find out where our thinking left us vulnerable. In most cases, we discover that we had been *selfish, self-seeking, dishonest, or afraid*. We did the wrong things, because self-focused thinking prevented us from understanding—and then fear prevented us from doing—the right things, even when we objectively knew what we should do. We suffered as a result, sometimes a great deal. Many times, we found we had relied on other people, institutions, or principles to solve our problems, to validate us, or to reward us in some way. We had expectations that were neither realistic nor reasonable.

Before listing our errors, however, we find it useful to consider the idea that the other people involved are quite likely to have been suffering, too. For each person against whom we have resentment, and for each reason we have resentment, *we think about the suffering of the other person involved*. As the AA text states:

The Resentment Prayer

We asked God to help us show each person, in each situation the same tolerance, pity, and patience we would cheerfully grant a sick friend. When a person offended, we said to ourselves, “This is a sick man. How can I be helpful to him? God save me from being angry. Thy will be done.”³⁶

³⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 67.

Now that we have considered the suffering of others involved in each reason for resentment, we can fill out the fourth column, My Error/My Part. We resolutely consider where we had been at fault, disregarding the other person's errors altogether. Exactly how had *we* been selfish, self-seeking, dishonest, and/or afraid? What, exactly, prevented *us* from doing the right things?

Common Errors to Consider

- **Self-seeking** behavior is when we act out in ways that draw attention to ourselves or to gain advantage over others. It is always selfish! It can be as subtle as saying to someone, "I look fat" when we are looking for them to say that we *don't* (because fat is supposed to be a bad thing). In most cases we are seeking comfort, validation, and reassurance that we exist and are noteworthy or remarkable in some way.
- **Selfishness** is being concerned with our needs while ignoring the needs of others. Being inconsiderate of others is always selfish, but not necessarily self-seeking. Thinking we know how other people should live their lives reflects a selfish perspective, but is not necessarily self-seeking if we do not share or impose our opinions.
- **Dishonesty** comes in many forms including outright lying, dishonesty through omission, dishonesty with ourselves, cheating, infidelity, untrustworthiness, unreasonable expectations of self and others, arrogant and ungrateful attitudes, and blaming others for what ails us.

Anything that shields us from the truth about ourselves is a form of dishonesty.

- **Fear** is a complex emotion that can prevent us from seeing the truth about ourselves (and others) in the context of our lives as a whole. When we perceive a threat to any of the aspects of life that matter to us (the list above), we are likely to respond in ways that do not reflect the person we want to be. When we are afraid of losing what we already have, afraid of not getting what we want, afraid of not being good enough, or afraid of the unknown, we typically react from a place of selfish protectiveness rather than a place of empathy and compassion. This is self-limiting, for it prevents us from growth and from creating the relationships of trust we need to recover. (We discuss fear as it relates to eating disorders in more detail below.)

We do not necessarily limit our errors to self-seeking, selfishness, dishonesty, and fear. Please refer to Appendix D for examples.

5. Now we are ready to reflect on the idea, “We admitted our wrongs honestly and were willing to set these matters straight.”³⁷ In each situation, we ask ourselves what helpful attitude we can now assume, what “kindly and tolerant view” of other people might now help us take appropriate action—instead of an inappropriate reaction—the next time we experience a similar feeling of resentment or anger. We write all this down in the fifth column, **Resolution**. Please

³⁷ Ibid., 67.

note that we are not yet planning for, or making, amends. Instead, we are using our new frame of reference to define a way of looking at each situation that takes away the pain and power to hurt us.

When done with our exploration of resentment, we can breathe a sigh of relief. We may not yet feel very different, but we know we are making progress. Now we tackle each of the remaining topics, first brainstorming on a separate page of paper, and then, using the same pattern we used for resentments, completing our “searching and fearless moral inventory” worksheets.

Remaining Inventory Topics:

- **Fear:** We list things that frightened or still frighten us. We consider death, illness, insanity, abandonment, loneliness, aging, the unknown, losing what we have, not getting what we want, financial insecurity, body image, sex and intimacy, not being good enough, and fear for others’ safety and security.
- **Self-pity:** We identify reasons we felt or feel sorry for ourselves.
- **Shame:** We name things for which we felt or feel ashamed, even though we are not responsible for them. We include situations where we were bullied or abused, and anything for which we feel embarrassment (but which we did not cause), such as childhood poverty, basic personality (i.e. introverted/extroverted), gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other peoples’ issues.

- **Guilt or harms done:** We are explicit about wrongs we had done or are doing to others. We include lies, cheating (including infidelity), manipulation for recognition or reward, theft (including non-payment of taxes), property damage, and any emotional or physical damage done to others.
- **Confusion:** We identify situations where we felt or feel abandoned or bewildered.
- **Frustration:** We list things that made or make us angry, even if we have no resentment in connection to them.
- **Despair:** We outline reasons for hopelessness, past and present.

Exploring Fear

One emotion that we examine thoroughly is fear, because it features so prominently in our lives. We ask ourselves what fundamental issues give rise to not only specific fears, but also our pervasive anxiety. The AA text suggests that we were afraid because self-reliance failed us,³⁸ and indeed, many fears seemed to stem from our lack of control. We cannot control whether we get old or sick, even though we can influence things a bit. We cannot control whether people like us or leave us, even though our attitudes and actions may influence these outcomes. Even when we are in complete control, or think we are in control, we may still be afraid, because we have not always been able to do what we know we need to do.

³⁸ Ibid., 68.

All of us—whether we suffered from orthorexia, anorexia, bulimia, compulsive overeating, BED, OSFED, or other disorders—found balance and moderation with food challenging. Most of us were afraid of gaining (or losing) weight. Our thoughts tended to go back to old patterns whenever we were anxious. For some of us, even the *idea* of recovery was scary; what a cycle of misery that created!

Learning to listen to and trust our bodies takes time and patience. It is easy to second-guess decisions regarding food, and hard to let things go by trusting in the bigger picture. Mindful eating is a goal for many, yet others find the more they focus on food the more obsessive a concern it becomes. It may be helpful to know that everyone's weight fluctuates within a relatively narrow range over the course of a month or a year, varying with hormonal cycles and seasons. This applies to all people, regardless of biological sex. Other factors may also play a part; we try not to worry too much about it. We reassure ourselves that we *can* make conscious decisions and then make an effort to be aware when “hunger” pangs signify emotional needs. Our connection to God, our spiritual connection, or our focus on serving a greater purpose may require more attention. Perhaps we are neglecting sleep or need to pay attention to a significant other. Perhaps we are facing a fear that we have not yet given ourselves time to consciously address.

We think of the healthy example we want to set for other people in our lives and do our best to avoid modeling behaviors that are rigid, restrictive, or excessive. We make a conscious effort to remind ourselves that what is most loveable and precious about us has nothing to do with our body size. No one who truly loves us is going to care how big or small we are unless we are hurting our health. People who

love us certainly are going to care if we are healthy, but we do not want anyone to worry about whether we are taking proper care of ourselves. That is our job, no one else's. We want to be sure we have enough energy, focus, and balance to do what needs to be done every day. If we focus on how we can be of service, we can let go of fear, let go of the past, and trust that we will be safe.

Many of us were afraid of our bodies. We thought of them as entities separate from our minds, when in reality our minds and bodies are integrated and inseparable. We struggled to control our impulses. We imagined that our bodies had needs—primal, instinctual needs—that were impossible to manage. Some of us were afraid of the intimacy of sex; others were frightened at the intensity and/or impropriety of our sexual urges. Awkwardly, some of us were all the above. Here we must remind ourselves that we are fundamentally no different than anyone else. Sexual release and physical intimacy are important components of human experience, yet few of us have an uncomplicated history when it comes to sex. In working Step Four, just as we consciously work to define a sane and reasonable response to other aspects of life, we define an ideal for our sexual conduct that respects the power and importance of sex while enabling us to care for ourselves and others in a safe and authentic way. In full recovery, living out our ideal is a source of great joy and satisfaction.

As with food and sex, physical exercise was another area where many of us went to extremes, either through avoidance or by overdoing it to the point of damaging our bodies and our relationships with others. In recovery, we need to be ever mindful of balance and moderation. We think it best to follow rational guidelines. Medical authorities suggest that about an hour of mixed activity every day is

healthy.³⁹ Walking is perfectly good exercise; gardening and household chores count. Aerobic exercise is important for optimal health, but we should be cautious about overdoing it: consultation with a doctor is recommended. Rigidity and fear around anything, including exercise, generally signal a weak connection with our Higher Power or higher purpose. If you are focused on service to others, however, you will probably be too busy to overdo it with exercise!

Most of us were frightened that we would be even more miserable, anxious, and unhappy if we stopped engaging in all forms of our eating disorders. Such self-concerned fears kept us stuck in old patterns for a long time. But when we become willing to face our fears so we can recover, we start to see that *a focus on food is only a distraction*.

Though at first we were frustrated and afraid that letting go of control might mean we would suffer from even worse body image issues, we had to learn to stop “playing” with our food and body weight. Food is nutrition and energy; our bodies let us know what they need. If we eat more than we need, we will be uncomfortable, but we will not be hungry again for a long time. If we skip a meal because something distracts us, we will eat more—perhaps more than usual—at the next meal. But overeating or undereating on a regular basis are red flags that we are not taking care of basics, or are ignoring something that needs to be addressed.

If we are to work the Steps and walk free, we have to establish trust with our Higher Power or higher purpose, so we can be present for the things that matter in a larger context. The specific details of what we eat will balance out if we are *making an earnest effort to eat for the purpose of*

³⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2008) Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/resources/recommendations.html>

building our capacity to be useful. We eat healthy food when we can; and, when we do not, we recognize that our bodies may need things our minds may not fully appreciate—and let it go. We ask God or we turn to our Higher Power or higher purpose for help in keeping our thoughts on what we can do to be of useful service.

If we trust in our Higher Power or higher purpose and we are doing everything we can to set aside our fears and do what we think is the right thing, *we will have to trust that the outcome will be okay*—even if it terrifies us or feels wrong at times. When we are working to make life better for others, we need not worry about ourselves as much, provided we are taking care of basics. At the most rudimentary level, *taking care of basics means: If hungry, eat. If angry, find a safe outlet. If lonely, reach out. If tired, sleep. If ashamed, talk about it.* We learn to be accountable to ourselves and to others because this restores our integrity and objectivity. We need these to break free of our old patterns. We take care of ourselves so we can move beyond our immediate concerns to things that matter in the long run. As we gradually come to rely on something greater than ourselves to bring peace and perspective, we are able to eat when hungry and stop when moderately full. We can find peace with food. We can enjoy it and we can leave it alone when we are not hungry. Our bodies will not punish us; they will be restored to health and balance.

When considering the errors in our thinking with respect to all forms of fear, we identify attempts to control what is not ours to control. We list where we have allowed our thoughts and actions to be ruled by fear when we knew we should have done something else instead. Relying on the perspective now provided by our Higher Power or higher purpose, we remember that *our fears exist for a*

good reason: to help us focus our attention on what really matters. In each situation where we listed a fear, we ask ourselves what a person of integrity and dignity would do if they found the courage to act despite their fear. The AA “Big Book” directs us to apply the fear prayer: “We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be.”⁴⁰ In each case, we make a conscious decision whether to set aside our fear or make use of it in some way to initiate needed changes. We list what we now think we should do in response to each provocation in the Resolution column.

In a similar fashion, we go back through our lives, covering (at minimum) the top ten trouble spots in all categories.

When we get to “guilt or harms done,” we review our brainstorming list with someone who has more experience with the Twelve Steps to ensure our perspective and our resolutions are honest and appropriate.

Exploring Sexual Conduct

Specifically in the area of harms done, we consider whether we have adequately addressed our sexual conduct. Have we used sex to manipulate someone into paying for a meal or for our room and board? Have we sought to obtain validation for ourselves through sex or allowed people to think we loved them when we did not? If so, we now add the people affected to the “harms done” table. In the fourth column, My Error/My Part, we list selfishness, dishonesty, and inconsiderate attitudes and behavior. We list where we created jealousy, suspicion, and bitterness. In the fifth col-

⁴⁰ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 68.

umn, Resolution, we list what we now think we ought to have done instead of what we did, and what we will want to do in the future. As the AA “Big Book” notes, “...we tried to shape a sane and sound ideal for our future sex life.”⁴¹ We keep in mind that our aim is to use our sexual power in an authentic and meaningful way. Again, as with resentments, we are not yet planning for or making amends. We are simply using our new frame of reference to define an approach that we can live with in peace and dignity. In full recovery, we find we can share a finer intimacy than ever.⁴²

Example Resolutions

- *For a resentment:* Use my Higher Power to help me find the courage to do the right thing (be specific), instead of letting fear and anger stop me from doing what I know is right.
- *For a fear:* Understand that my fear of gaining weight is normal for someone recovering from an eating disorder. Trust that my body will be restored to health and balance if I take care of basics (eat when hungry and stop when moderately full) and resolutely turn my thoughts to how I can be of service to God or the greater good.
- *For a shame:* Work on using my voice and realize that I am not here to make everyone happy. I am here to become the authentic person I believe I was meant to be, with grace and dignity.

⁴¹ Ibid., 69.

⁴² Ibid., 134.

- *For a guilt:* Quit setting expectations for other people and be grateful for what I myself can do. Search for, recognize, and appreciate the good in everyone. Seek ways to be of service, either to the person I hurt or to people similarly situated.
- *For a despair:* Continue doing the work required by the Steps and rely more on God or my Higher Power/higher purpose to provide perspective, so I do not fall back into old behaviors that used to make me untrustworthy.

Feelings Serve a Purpose

Once done with all eight topics, we look over the completed pages. We carefully consider how our reactions to life situations have put us in positions where we felt resentment, fear, self-pity, shame, guilt, confusion, frustration, and despair. Writing about these has not made us immune to these emotions, but by now we have a starting point to develop some confidence that we need not actively seek escape from our emotions in the future. Our efforts so far have shown us that avoiding our feelings holds no true relief, no real joy, and serves no good purpose. *We begin to build trust in our capacity to handle our feelings by relying on our God, our Higher Power, or our higher purpose instead of our eating disorders to see us through situations of emotional disturbance.*

We remember that recovery takes time: it is a process, not an event. Until we have built up a solid and durable habit of reliance on a Power or purpose greater than ourselves to provide peace and perspective, we are quite likely

to resort to using our eating disorders when upset. Yet, we have already begun to see that a different perspective—one that requires us to take care of our basic needs so we can turn our attention to what really matters—has started to provide the relief we were seeking all along.

Upon completing our 4th Step inventory, others assure us we will still experience many of the same unpleasant emotional responses as before. Yet, there is a real difference: our work so far has shown us a coherent set of resolutions to situations that cause us pain. When we apply these solutions consistently, relying on our God, Higher Power, or higher purpose to provide the peace, perspective, and power that was formerly missing from our daily lives, *we find we can now turn even heavy emotions to good purpose—regardless of the circumstances.* We soon see that our emotional responses to life are not as extreme and overwhelming as before. The key lies in resolutely putting first things first, taking care of basics, and then turning our thoughts to how we can be useful.

By putting service into a position of central importance, we not only find relief from our neediness and suffering, we discover we can use our emotions to a good end. Rather than running from our feelings, we see that they exist to ensure we take care of basics and help us empathize with the plight of others. Our emotions now provide the fuel we need to make meaningful changes in our lives. If hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, we deal with these first, so we can turn our attention back to service.

As we do so, we see how our emotions actually motivate us to be better people. When we feel sad, we can focus on what would bring joy to others. When we feel pain, we can now address personal and societal issues

directly. We can reflect and be grateful that we are now able to experience depth of feeling and attachment without having to numb ourselves. Our ability to experience pain without running from it becomes a strength that can bring hope to others who struggle as we once did. We can share our experience, strength, and joy with others. Sometimes we find it amazing that we can now just be present with others, rather than trying to solve everyone's problems. When we feel guilt, we find we can now admit and correct our mistakes. When we feel overwhelmed, we find we can now stop whatever we are doing and prioritize according to what matters in the larger context provided by our Higher Power or higher purpose.

If you have made it this far and completed a personal inventory of the sort we describe, you are well on your way to a solid and sustainable recovery! Please do not stop now. Steps Five through Nine provide direction on just how we go about getting out of our own way, so we can have a life we truly love and enjoy in peace and freedom.