

Step One

1
2
3 “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had
4 become unmanageable.”
5

6 Step One is, by definition, the beginning of a process. We can't go
7 any further until we've worked this step.

8 Our reasons for formally working Step One will vary from member to
9 member. It may be that we're new to recovery, and we've just fought and
10 lost an exhausting battle with drugs. It may be that we've been around
11 awhile and have been abstinent from drugs, but discovered that our disease
12 has become active in some other area of our lives and forced us to face our
13 powerlessness and the unmanageability of our lives once again. Not every
14 act of growth is motivated by pain; it may even be simply that it's time again
15 to cycle through the steps, thus beginning a new journey.

16 Whatever the case, we're at the point where it's time to do some step
17 work, some concrete activity that will bring about freedom from our addiction,
18 whatever shape it is currently taking. It is our goal to internalize the principles
19 of Step One, to deepen our surrender, to make the principles of acceptance,
20 humility, willingness, honesty, and open-mindedness a fundamental part of
21 who we are.

22 Some of us find a measure of comfort in finding out we suffer from a
23 disease that has caused us to reach the bottom we're now at. Others don't
24 really care what the cause has been—we just want out! There are many
25 different ways to arrive at a point of surrender. For some of us, the road we
26 traveled getting to the First Step was more than enough to convince us that
27 unconditional surrender was our only option. Others may start this process,
28 even though we're not entirely convinced that we're addicts, and find that
29 working the First Step makes it clear that we *are* addicts and therefore must
30 surrender.

31 Before we begin working the First Step, we must become abstinent—
32 whatever it takes. If we're new in Narcotics Anonymous and our First Step is
33 primarily about looking at the effects of drug addiction in our lives, we need
34 to get clean. If we've been clean awhile and our First Step is about some

35 other behavior we've become powerless over, we need to find a way to stop
36 the behavior so that our surrender isn't clouded by continued acting out.

37 The following sections contain questions and discussion that will help
38 us work Step One. It is important to go over this with a sponsor both before
39 and after completing this guide. Checking with a sponsor beforehand will
40 help us focus attention on the sections/questions that are most significant at
41 this point in our recovery. Sharing this guide with our sponsor after we
42 complete it will help us understand what our answers mean in the context of
43 our recovery and how to go forward from there. If you find you'd like more
44 information about a topic before answering the questions, please refer to *It*
45 *Works: How and Why*. Step study meetings are also a great resource for
46 fellowship experience with the steps.

47

48 **The disease of addiction**

49 What makes us addicts is the disease of addiction. It isn't that we
50 used too many drugs or went too far with some other behavior. It's that we
51 really never had a chance to do otherwise because of our disease. There is
52 something within us that causes us to be unable to control our use of drugs
53 and be prone to becoming obsessive and compulsive in other areas. We
54 can tell our disease is active when we become trapped in obsessive and
55 compulsive routines that affect us physically, mentally, spiritually, and
56 emotionally.

57

- 58 • Has my disease been active recently? In what way?
- 59
- 60 • What do I think of when I'm obsessed?
- 61
- 62 • When a thought occurs to me, do I immediately act on it without
63 considering the consequences? In what other ways do I behave
64 compulsively?
- 65
- 66 • How has my disease affected me physically? Mentally? Spiritually?
67 Emotionally?

68

69 Our addiction can manifest itself in a variety of ways. When we first
70 come to Narcotics Anonymous, our problem will, of course, be drugs. Later
71 on, we may find our that addiction is wreaking havoc in our lives in any
72 number of ways.

73

74 • What is the specific way in which my addiction has been manifesting
75 itself?

76

77 • Have I been obsessed with a person, place, or thing? If so, how has that
78 gotten in the way of my relationships with others? How else have I been
79 affected mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally?

80

81 **Denial**

82 Denial is the part of our disease that tells us we don't have a disease.
83 When we are in denial, we are unable to see the reality of our addiction, or
84 we may minimize its effect. We may blame others, citing the too-high
85 expectations of families, friends, employers. We may compare ourselves
86 with other addicts whose addiction seems "worse" than our own. We may
87 blame one particular drug, or if we have been abstinent from drugs for some
88 time, compare the current manifestation of our addiction with our drug use
89 and come to the conclusion that nothing we're doing now is as bad as *that*
90 was! One of the easiest ways to tell that we are in denial is when we find
91 ourselves giving plausible but untrue reasons for our behavior.

92

93 • Have I given plausible but untrue reasons for my behavior? What have
94 they been?

95

96 • Have I compulsively acted on an obsession, and then acted as if I
97 actually *planned* to act that way? What were those times?

98

99 • How have I blamed other people for my behavior?

100

- 101 • How have I compared my addiction with others' addiction? Is my
102 addiction "bad enough" if I don't compare it to anyone else's?
103
- 104 • Am I comparing a current manifestation of my addiction to the way my life
105 was before I got clean? Am I plagued by thinking I should know better?
106
- 107 • Have I been thinking that I have enough information about addiction and
108 recovery to get my behavior under control before it gets out of hand?
109
- 110 • Am I avoiding action because of feelings of shame that will come about
111 when I face the results of my addiction? Am I avoiding action because
112 I'm worried about what others will think?
113

114 **Hitting bottom: despair and isolation**

115 Our addiction finally brings us to a place where we can no longer
116 deny the nature of our problem. All the lies, all the rationalizations, all the
117 illusions fall away as we stand face to face with what our lives have become.
118 We realize we've been living without hope. We find we've become friendless
119 or so completely disconnected that our relationships are a sham, a parody of
120 love and intimacy. It may seem that all is lost when we find ourselves in this
121 state, but it is actually necessary to reach this place before we can begin our
122 recovery.

- 123
- 124 • What crisis brought me to recovery?
125
- 126 • What situation led me to formally work Step One?
127
- 128 • When did I first recognize my addiction as a problem? Did I try to correct
129 it? If so, how? If not, why not?
130

131 **Powerlessness**

132 We as addicts react to the word "powerless" in a variety of ways.
133 Some of us recognize that a more accurate description of our situation simply

134 could not exist, and admit our powerlessness with a sense of relief. Others
135 recoil at the word, connecting it with weakness or believing it to be some kind
136 of character deficiency. Understanding powerlessness and how admitting
137 our own is essential to our recovery will help us get over any negative
138 feelings we may have about it. We are powerless when something is beyond
139 our control—and our addiction certainly qualifies. We cannot moderate or
140 control our use of drugs or other compulsive behaviors even when it's
141 causing us to lose the things that matter most to us. We cannot stop even
142 when it's resulting in irreparable physical damage. We find ourselves doing
143 things that we would never do if it weren't for our addiction, things we're
144 ashamed of if we take the time to think about them. We may even decide
145 that we don't want to use, aren't going to use, and still find ourselves unable
146 to stop when the opportunity presents itself. We have tried to be abstinent
147 from drugs or other compulsive behaviors (perhaps with some success) for a
148 period of time without a program, only to find that eventually our untreated
149 addiction takes us right back to where we were before. In order to work the
150 First Step, we need to prove, and accept on a deep level, our own individual
151 powerlessness.

152

153 • What, exactly, am I powerless over?

154

155 • I've done things while acting out on my addiction that I would never do
156 when focusing on recovery. What were they?

157

158 • What things have I done to maintain my addiction that went completely
159 against everything I believe in?

160

161 • How does my personality change when I'm acting out on my addiction?
162 (For example: Do I become arrogant? Self-centered? Mean-tempered?
163 Passive to the point where I can't protect myself? Manipulative?
164 Whiny?)

165

166 • Do I manipulate other people to maintain my addiction? How?

167

168 • Have I tried to quit using and found that I couldn't? Have I quit using on
169 my own and found that my life was so painful without drugs that my
170 abstinence didn't last very long? What were these times like?

171

172 • How has my addiction caused me to hurt myself or others?

173

174 **Unmanageability**

175 The First Step asks us to admit two things: one, that we are powerless over
176 our addiction, and two, that our lives have become unmanageable. Actually,
177 we would be hard pressed to admit one and not the other. Our
178 unmanageability is the outward evidence of our powerlessness. There are
179 two general types of unmanageability: the kind that can be seen by others;
180 and inner or personal unmanageability.

181 Outward unmanageability is often identified by such things as arrests,
182 job losses, and family problems. Some of our members have been
183 incarcerated. Some have never been able to sustain any kind of relationship
184 for more than a few months. Some of us have been cut off from our families,
185 asked never again to contact them.

186 Inner or personal unmanageability is often identified by unhealthy or
187 untrue belief systems about ourselves, the world we live in, and the people in
188 our lives. We may believe we're worthless. We may believe that the world
189 should revolve around us—or not just that it *should*, but that in fact it *does*.

190 We may believe that it isn't really our job to take care of ourselves; someone
191 else should do it. We may believe that the responsibilities the average
192 person takes on as a matter of course are just too large a burden for us to
193 bear. We may overreact or underreact to events in our lives. Emotional
194 unmanageability is often one of the most obvious ways in which we can
195 identify personal unmanageability.

196

197 • What does unmanageability mean to me?

198

- 199 • Have I ever been arrested or had legal trouble as a result of my
200 addiction? Have I ever done anything I could have been arrested for if
201 only I were caught? What have these things been?
202
- 203 • Have I had trouble at work or school because of my addiction? What
204 have these situations been like?
205
- 206 • Have I had trouble with my family as a result of my addiction? What have
207 these situations been like?
208
- 209 • Have I had trouble with my friends as a result of my addiction? What
210 have these situations been like?
211
- 212 • Do I insist on having my own way? What effect has my insistence had on
213 my relationships?
214
- 215 • Do I consider the needs of others? What effect has my lack of
216 consideration had on my relationships?
217
- 218 • Do I accept personal responsibility? Am I able to carry out my daily
219 responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed? How has this affected
220 my life?
221
- 222 • Do I fall apart the minute things don't go according to plan? What have
223 these situations been like?
224
- 225 • Do I treat every challenge as a personal insult? What have these
226 situations been like?
227
- 228 • Do I maintain a crisis-oriented mentality, responding to every situation
229 with panic? What have these situations been like?
230

- 231 • Do I ignore signs that something may be seriously wrong with my health
232 or with my children, thinking things will work out somehow? What have
233 these situations been like?
234
- 235 • Have I ever been in real danger and just been indifferent or otherwise
236 been unable to protect myself as a result of my addiction? What have
237 these situations been like?
238
- 239 • Have I ever harmed someone as a result of my addiction? What have
240 these situations been like?
241
- 242 • Do I have temper tantrums or react to my feelings in other ways that
243 lower my self-respect or sense of dignity? What have these situations
244 been like?
245
- 246 • Did I take drugs or act out on my addiction to change or suppress my
247 feelings? What have these situations been like?
248

249 **Reservations**

250 Reservations are places in our program that we have *reserved* for
251 relapse. They may be built around something like thinking we can retain a
252 small measure of control, something like, “Okay, I accept that I can’t control
253 my using, but I can still sell drugs, can’t I?” Or we may think we can remain
254 friends with the people we used with or bought drugs from. We may think
255 that certain parts of the program don’t apply to us. We may think there’s
256 something we just can’t face clean—a serious illness, the death of a loved
257 one, etc.—and plan to use if it ever happens. We may think after we’ve
258 accomplished some goal, made a certain amount of money, or been clean
259 for a certain number of years, that *then* we’ll be able to control our using.
260 Reservations are usually tucked away in the back of our minds, not
261 something we’re fully conscious of. It is essential that we expose any
262 reservations we may have and cancel them, right here, right now.
263

- 264 • Have I accepted the full measure of my disease? Do I think I can still
265 associate with the people connected with my addiction? Can I still go to
266 the places where I used? Do I think it's wise to keep drugs or
267 paraphernalia around, just to remind myself or test my recovery?
268
- 269 • Is there something I think I can't get through clean, some event that might
270 happen that will be so painful I'll have to use because of it?
271
- 272 • Do I think that with some amount of clean time, or with different life
273 circumstances, I'd be able to control my using?
274

275 **Surrender**

276 There's a huge difference between resignation and surrender.
277 Resignation is what we feel when we've accepted the First Step as true in
278 our lives, but don't consider recovery the solution to our problem. Many of us
279 found ourselves at this point long before coming to Narcotics Anonymous.
280 We may have thought that it was our preordained fate to be addicts, to live
281 and die in our addiction. Surrender, on other hand, is what happens after
282 we've accepted the First Step as true for us *and* accepted that recovery is
283 the solution. We don't want our lives to be the way they have been. We
284 don't want to keep feeling the way we have been feeling.

285

- 286 • What convinces me that I can't use successfully anymore?
287
- 288 • Do I accept that I'll never regain control even after a long period of
289 abstinence?
290
- 291 • Can I begin my recovery without a complete surrender? What would my
292 life be like if I surrendered?
293

294 **Spiritual principles**

295 There are probably countless ways in which spiritual principles are
296 connected to each of NA's Twelve Steps. For the purposes of this guide, let's

297 look at how some spiritual principles are connected to each step, and explore
298 some suggestions for how we might incorporate them into our lives. In the
299 First Step, we will focus on honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility,
300 and acceptance.

301

302 The principle of honesty in the First Step starts with admitting the truth
303 about our addiction, and continues with the practice of honesty on a daily
304 basis. We begin to be able to be honest with ourselves; and, consequently,
305 with other people.

306

- 307 • If I've been thinking about using or acting out on my addiction in some
308 other way, have I shared it with my sponsor or told anyone else?
309
- 310 • Have I stayed in touch with the reality of my disease no matter how long
311 I've had freedom from active addiction?
312
- 313 • Have I noticed that without the necessity of covering up my addiction, a
314 lot of reasons why I used to lie no longer exist? Do I appreciate the
315 freedom that goes along with that? In what ways have I begun to be
316 honest in my recovery?

317

318 Practicing the principle of open-mindedness in Step One mostly
319 involves being ready to believe that there might be another way to live and
320 being willing to try that way. It doesn't matter that we can't see every detail of
321 what that way might be or that it may be totally unlike anything we've heard
322 before; what matters is that we don't limit ourselves or our thinking.

323 Sometimes we may hear NA members saying things that sound totally crazy
324 to us, things like "surrender to win" or suggestions to pray for someone we
325 resent. We demonstrate open-mindedness when we don't reject these
326 things without having tried them.

327

- 328 • What have I heard in recovery that I have trouble believing? Have I
329 asked my sponsor or the person I heard say it to explain it to me?

330

- 331 • In what ways am I practicing open-mindedness?

332

333 The principle of willingness in the First Step can be practiced in a
334 variety of ways. Many of us get our first experience with willingness when we
335 first begin to think about recovery and either don't really believe it's possible
336 for us or just don't understand how it will work, but we go ahead with the First
337 Step anyway. Taking any action that will help our recovery is showing
338 willingness.

339

- 340 • Am I willing to follow my sponsor's direction?

341

- 342 • Am I willing to go to meetings regularly?

343

- 344 • Am I willing to give recovery my best effort?

345

346 The principle of humility in the First Step grows out of our surrender.
347 It is most easily identified as an acceptance of who we truly are—neither
348 worse nor better than we believed we were when we were using, just *human*.

349

- 350 • Do I believe that I'm a monster who has poisoned the whole world with
351 my addiction? Do I believe that my addiction is utterly inconsequential to
352 the larger society? Or something in between?

353

- 354 • Do I have a sense of my relative importance within my circle of family and
355 friends? In society as whole? What is that sense?

356

- 357 • How am I practicing the principle of humility in connection with this work
358 on the First Step?

359

360 The principle of acceptance goes beyond simply admitting that we're
361 addicts. When we accept our addiction, we feel a profound inner change
362 that is made apparent by a rising sense of hope. We also begin to feel a

363 sense of peace. We come to terms with our addiction and recovery, and
364 what that will mean in our lives. We don't dread a future of meeting
365 attendance, sponsor contact, and step work, but instead begin to see
366 recovery as a precious gift and the work connected with it as no more trouble
367 than other routines of life.

368

369 • Have I made peace with the fact that I'm an addict?

370

371 • Have I made peace with the things I'll have to do to stay clean?

372

373 • How is acceptance of my disease necessary for my continued recovery?

374

375 **Moving on**

376 As we get ready to go on to Step Two, we'll probably find ourselves
377 wondering if we've worked Step One well enough. Are we sure it's time to
378 move on? Have we spent as much time as others may have spent on this
379 step? Have we truly gained an understanding of this step? Many of us have
380 found it helpful to write about our understanding of each step as we prepare
381 to move on.

382 • How do I know it's time to move on?

383

384 • What is my understanding of Step One?

385

386 • How has my prior knowledge and experience affected my work on this
387 step?

388 We've come to a place where we've seen the results of our old way of
389 life, and accepted that a new way is called for, but we probably don't yet see
390 how rich with possibilities recovery is. It may be enough just to have freedom
391 from active addiction right now, but we will soon find that the void we have
392 been filling with drugs or other obsessive/compulsive behaviors begs to be
393 filled. Working the rest of the steps will fill that void. Next on our journey is
394 Step Two.