Step One

"We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable."

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

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

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

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

Before we begin working the First Step, we must become abstinent—whatever it takes. If we're new in Narcotics Anonymous and our First Step is primarily about looking at the effects of drug addiction in our lives, we need to get clean. If we've been clean awhile and our First Step is about some
other behavior we've become powerless over, we need to find a way to stop
the behavior so that our surrender isn't clouded by continued acting out.
The following sections contain questions and discussion that will help
us work Step One. It is important to go over this with a sponsor both before
and after completing this guide. Checking with a sponsor beforehand will
help us focus attention on the sections/questions that are most significant at
this point in our recovery. Sharing this guide with our sponsor after we
complete it will help us understand what our answers mean in the context of
our recovery and how to go forward from there. If you find you'd like more
information about a topic before answering the questions, please refer to It
Works: How and Why. Step study meetings are also a great resource for
fellowship experience with the steps.

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

• Has my disease been active recently? In what way?

• What do I think of when I'm obsessed?

• When a thought occurs to me, do I immediately act on it without
considering the consequences? In what other ways do I behave
compulsively?

• How has my disease affected me physically? Mentally? Spiritually?
Emotionally?
Our addiction can manifest itself in a variety of ways. When we first come to Narcotics Anonymous, our problem will, of course, be drugs. Later on, we may find our that addiction is wreaking havoc in our lives in any number of ways.

- What is the specific way in which my addiction has been manifesting itself?
- Have I been obsessed with a person, place, or thing? If so, how has that gotten in the way of my relationships with others? How else have I been affected mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally?

Denial

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

- Have I given plausible but untrue reasons for my behavior? What have they been?
- Have I compulsively acted on an obsession, and then acted as if I actually planned to act that way? What were those times?
- How have I blamed other people for my behavior?
How have I compared my addiction with others’ addiction? Is my addiction “bad enough” if I don’t compare it to anyone else’s?

Am I comparing a current manifestation of my addiction to the way my life was before I got clean? Am I plagued by thinking I should know better?

Have I been thinking that I have enough information about addiction and recovery to get my behavior under control before it gets out of hand?

Am I avoiding action because of feelings of shame that will come about when I face the results of my addiction? Am I avoiding action because I’m worried about what others will think?

**Hitting bottom: despair and isolation**

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

What crisis brought me to recovery?

What situation led me to formally work Step One?

When did I first recognize my addiction as a problem? Did I try to correct it? If so, how? If not, why not?

**Powerlessness**

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

What, exactly, am I powerless over?

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

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

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

Do I manipulate other people to maintain my addiction? How?
Have I tried to quit using and found that I couldn't? Have I quit using on my own and found that my life was so painful without drugs that my abstinence didn't last very long? What were these times like?

What has my addiction caused me to hurt myself or others?

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

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

Inner or personal unmanageability is often identified by unhealthy or untrue belief systems about ourselves, the world we live in, and the people in our lives. We may believe we're worthless. We may believe that the world should revolve around us—or not just that it should, but that in fact it does. We may believe that it isn't really our job to take care of ourselves; someone else should do it. We may believe that the responsibilities the average person takes on as a matter of course are just too large a burden for us to bear. We may overreact or underreact to events in our lives. Emotional unmanageability is often one of the most obvious ways in which we can identify personal unmanageability.

What does unmanageability mean to me?
• Have I ever been arrested or had legal trouble as a result of my addiction? Have I ever done anything I could have been arrested for if only I were caught? What have these things been?

• Have I had trouble at work or school because of my addiction? What have these situations been like?

• Have I had trouble with my family as a result of my addiction? What have these situations been like?

• Have I had trouble with my friends as a result of my addiction? What have these situations been like?

• Do I insist on having my own way? What effect has my insistence had on my relationships?

• Do I consider the needs of others? What effect has my lack of consideration had on my relationships?

• Do I accept personal responsibility? Am I able to carry out my daily responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed? How has this affected my life?

• Do I fall apart the minute things don't go according to plan? What have these situations been like?

• Do I treat every challenge as a personal insult? What have these situations been like?

• Do I maintain a crisis-oriented mentality, responding to every situation with panic? What have these situations been like?
• Do I ignore signs that something may be seriously wrong with my health or with my children, thinking things will work out somehow? What have these situations been like?

• Have I ever been in real danger and just been indifferent or otherwise been unable to protect myself as a result of my addiction? What have these situations been like?

• Have I ever harmed someone as a result of my addiction? What have these situations been like?

• Do I have temper tantrums or react to my feelings in other ways that lower my self-respect or sense of dignity? What have these situations been like?

• Did I take drugs or act out on my addiction to change or suppress my feelings? What have these situations been like?

Reservations

Reservations are places in our program that we have reserved for relapse. They may be built around something like thinking we can retain a small measure of control, something like, “Okay, I accept that I can't control my using, but I can still sell drugs, can’t I?” Or we may think we can remain friends with the people we used with or bought drugs from. We may think that certain parts of the program don’t apply to us. We may think there’s something we just can’t face clean—a serious illness, the death of a loved one, etc.—and plan to use if it ever happens. We may think after we’ve accomplished some goal, made a certain amount of money, or been clean for a certain number of years, that then we'll be able to control our using. Reservations are usually tucked away in the back of our minds, not something we’re fully conscious of. It is essential that we expose any reservations we may have and cancel them, right here, right now.
• Have I accepted the full measure of my disease? Do I think I can still associate with the people connected with my addiction? Can I still go to the places where I used? Do I think it's wise to keep drugs or paraphernalia around, just to remind myself or test my recovery?

• Is there something I think I can't get through clean, some event that might happen that will be so painful I'll have to use because of it?

• Do I think that with some amount of clean time, or with different life circumstances, I'd be able to control my using?

**Surrender**

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

• What convinces me that I can't use successfully anymore?

• Do I accept that I'll never regain control even after a long period of abstinence?

• Can I begin my recovery without a complete surrender? What would my life be like if I surrendered?

**Spiritual principles**

There are probably countless ways in which spiritual principles are connected to each of NA's Twelve Steps. For the purposes of this guide, let's
look at how some spiritual principles are connected to each step, and explore
some suggestions for how we might incorporate them into our lives. In the
First Step, we will focus on honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility,
and acceptance.

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

- If I’ve been thinking about using or acting out on my addiction in some
other way, have I shared it with my sponsor or told anyone else?

- Have I stayed in touch with the reality of my disease no matter how long
I’ve had freedom from active addiction?

- Have I noticed that without the necessity of covering up my addiction, a
lot of reasons why I used to lie no longer exist? Do I appreciate the
freedom that goes along with that? In what ways have I begun to be
honest in my recovery?

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

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

- What have I heard in recovery that I have trouble believing? Have I
asked my sponsor or the person I heard say it to explain it to me?
• In what ways am I practicing open-mindedness?

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

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

• Am I willing to go to meetings regularly?

• Am I willing to give recovery my best effort?

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

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

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

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

The principle of acceptance goes beyond simply admitting that we're addicts. When we accept our addiction, we feel a profound inner change that is made apparent by a rising sense of hope. We also begin to feel a
sense of peace. We come to terms with our addiction and recovery, and what that will mean in our lives. We don’t dread a future of meeting attendance, sponsor contact, and step work, but instead begin to see recovery as a precious gift and the work connected with it as no more trouble than other routines of life.

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

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

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

Moving on

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

• How do I know it’s time to move on?

• What is my understanding of Step One?

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

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