

STEP ONE LOS ANGELES DRAFT 9/25/88

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

The First Step of Narcotics Anonymous is the first step we take on the road toward a new way of life -- a life of choice and freedom. This is the exact opposite of the way of life we experienced in our active addiction -- the fear and pain, the isolation and despair. It is not a simple task, because when we come to Narcotics Anonymous, we know a great deal about using, abusing, and self-destruction and very little about happiness, caring, and peace of mind.

Although learning how to live a fulfilling and productive life is not easy, it is possible. The Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous offer us the path to follow. Hundreds of thousands of addicts on this path have a message to share: there is hope for us. We do recover.

For many of us, an N.A. meeting is the first time we hear that message of hope, and because of all we've been through to get here, we find it hard to believe. Clean addicts are telling us that **JUST FOR TODAY, WE NEVER HAVE TO USE AGAIN**. Beyond that, they tell us, N.A. offers even more than abstinence from all drugs. It offers a way to feel different on the inside, a way to act differently on the outside.

We learn that to initiate the recovery process, we need to begin work on Step One: admitting that we are powerless over our addiction and that our lives have become unmanageable. In order to make this admission, we start to apply the spiritual principles of honesty, openmindedness, and willingness in our lives. We begin to get honest about our addiction with ourselves and with other recovering addicts in the Fellowship. We begin to open our minds to new

thinking about who we are and what we need to do to change. And we begin to be willing to change and willing to admit that we do not have all the answers, that we need help.

It takes humility to admit that we can't do it alone. But the Twelve Steps tell us **WE DON'T HAVE TO DO IT ALONE ANYMORE.**

Our First Step doesn't mention any particular drug. As a matter of fact, it doesn't mention drugs at all. Our experience in Narcotics Anonymous is that our problem goes much deeper than drugs. We believe that while we must be abstinent from all drugs in order to recover, our underlying problem is addiction -- the disease of addiction.

We believe that addiction is one disease, not different disorders according to the different drugs we used. Beyond that, we believe that it is a progressive and fatal disease that doesn't go away when we stop using. While there is no cure for the disease of addiction, the experience of our Fellowship is that we do recover through the application of the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous in our lives. We know today that we will die with the disease of addiction, but we need not die from it anymore.

The disease of addiction affects every area of our lives: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual.

The mental aspect of our disease lies in distorted thinking. One form of this is obsession. Over and over again, the disease tells us that we must use. The obsession points us down the road to self-destruction, but the disease tells us we have no choice, that there is no other way for us. We want what we want, and we want it now. This kind of thinking distorts our decision-making, so that we put our using ahead of all else. Over and over we make choices that are harmful

to us and to others, each time expecting it to turn out differently. We hear it said often in meetings: "Our best thinking got us here."

Another facet of our sick thinking is denial. Our denial keeps us unaware of the fact that we have a problem. It tells us that the world has the problem: "If only everyone would just leave us alone." The denial part of our disease tells us we don't have a disease.

Even without drugs, our distorted thinking and self-deception can keep us blind to what actually is going on in our lives. For example, we may manufacture our own version of reality to justify destructive or selfish behavior -- and then blame the negative results on anyone but ourselves. Or we may view ourselves as such perfect victims that we are to blame for causing everyone else's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Neither of these perceptions is true, but we often flip from one extreme to another, blinded to the reality that lies somewhere else.

That is why it is not enough for us to get clean. Even after we get clean, the dynamics of obsession and justification and denial go very deep in us. That is why honesty -- even honesty with self -- is so difficult for us and requires a great deal of practice. And that is why it is recommended that we have a sponsor -- someone to help us see our own reality and the way the disease of addiction has been running our lives, someone who has personal experience with the distortions and deceptions and denial that color our thinking. We get additional help with honesty by being part of the Fellowship of recovering addicts and going to meetings. We rely on each other to get at the truth, because left alone with our own thinking, our disease tells us its own story.

The physical aspect of our disease is compulsion -- the acting out of obsessive thinking in our lives. Our obsession to use tells us we have to do it, and we act that out compulsively over and over again. Most of us use more and more drugs more and more often, expecting to recapture the times when drugs made us

feel good. We ignore the physical damage we do to ourselves. For some of us, the drugs stop working, but we don't stop using. Many of us switch drugs, telling ourselves that we're okay as long as we don't use a certain drug. No matter what drugs we use, for us one is too many and a thousand never enough. We use in the face of deterioration, degradation, danger, and even death. The denial tells us that it's okay. The self-deception tells us that we cannot stop. The obsession tells us we have to do it again -- all the way to jails, institutions, and death.

The disease of addiction distorts our emotional lives, too. Most of us describe having felt "different" -- out of place, belonging nowhere, uncomfortable in our own skins. For some reason, we were unable to cope with our basic feelings -- pain, anger, fear, shame, guilt, even joy and love. Many say that drugs helped alleviate feelings of inadequacy and shame that we had even before we started using. But beyond that, we addicts are notorious for resorting to highly self-destructive behaviors in reaction to even moderate amounts of emotional pain -- because our self-deception tells us the only pain we can stand is the self-inflicted kind. Of course, once we started numbing ourselves with drugs, we were even less successful at dealing with the feelings we had. A great many of us report at the beginning of recovery that we can't even identify what we're feeling, much less know what to do about it.

The emotional aspect of the disease plays back into the mental and physical. We use obsessive thinking and compulsive behavior to avoid feeling our feelings -- or to fix them. With or without drugs, we addicts know how to invest much time and energy chasing people, places, and things we believe will make everything all right. And once again, our denial and self-deception will tell us the chase is justified -- no matter how much destruction we leave in our path.

Addiction is a disease of the spirit, too. The core of this aspect of our disease is self-centeredness. Only when we look at ourselves honestly can we recognize our

incredible selfishness. We act as if the world revolves around us. We live in the illusion that we don't need anyone or anything, that we can run our own lives very well. Or we experience ourselves as so overwhelmingly needy that we will do whatever it takes to fulfill our needs. Our impulse is to get what we want regardless of the consequences, and our sick thinking justifies leaving a path of destruction. We don't know how to be of service to others without expecting something for ourselves in return. The paradox for many of us is that in the end, our self-sufficiency causes us great pain, because it fails us.

Sometimes we see ourselves as egomaniacs with low self-esteem. We often bounce between feeling on the one hand that we are inferior to everyone around us and being quite sure on the other hand that we are unique and far better than anyone else. Either way, we are caught up in the illusion of being different, and we end up harshly judging others and ourselves in order to keep score. And either way, we never see the reality of ourselves: that we are human beings with strengths and weaknesses like everyone else. To make that admission would bring us freedom. Instead, we are prisoners of our faulty self-perception.

Since we experience ourselves as either superior or inferior to others, we are spiritually isolated. We develop a deep feeling of hopelessness, because we have convinced ourselves that we are alone. Our isolation compounds our problem of self-centeredness: we are all we can rely on, and yet we are not enough. So we pump ourselves up with sick ego and pride to substitute for a feeling of genuine self-worth. One more time we are bouncing back and forth between better-than and less-than.

Many of us report feeling a lack of meaning in our lives -- an emptiness, a spiritual void. We may make this problem worse by behaving in ways that run counter to our own principles and values. Our disease tells us that it's okay to do this, but living in the contradiction can make us feel emptier and more worthless

than before. Again, we look to drugs, people, material possessions, and personal accomplishments to fill up the void, but they never work for long, if at all. What we lack are faith, hope, and trust. What we have is despair.

And it is in desperation that we come to Narcotics Anonymous, suffering from this disease of addiction that touches every area of our lives. One of the first things we're asked to do is to admit that we have a disease – to admit that we are powerless over our addiction and that our lives have become unmanageable.

For some of us this seems obvious. We know our thinking is so twisted we almost died from it. We know we are physically just about wrecked. We know that our spirit is sick and our emotional lives a mess. And we know that we don't know what to do about it.

But for most of us, the First Step is a tough admission to make. We think that in saying, "I am an addict," we are admitting defeat. We think we should have been able to control our drug use better. If only we had picked the right drugs. If only the drugs were better. If only we could clean up for a bit, we'd be able to handle it better. If only the other people in our lives would have shaped up. If only we weren't victims of society, our bosses, the police, "them". Our self-deception tells us that it is possible to be a "successful" addict. Our denial keeps us blind to the reality of our situation: that we have a disease, and it is progressing.

We have found that the way to begin cracking open our delusions is by looking at our addiction in the First Step. Hearing our sponsors and other addicts share honestly about the disease can help break through the first layer of denial for us. Some sponsors go further, asking us to write about how drugs and addiction affected our lives. They tell us that when the truth is written down in black and white, it cannot drift away. It cannot be denied and justified away by

our sick thinking. We may ask ourselves questions such as these: In what ways were we powerless over our drug addiction? How did powerlessness extend into other life areas, such as work and relationships? How do we try to manage and control situations in order to avoid feeling powerless?

For most of us, working on the First Step is the first time we have answered questions like these honestly. Being honest means evaluating and accepting conditions as they actually are. Our difficulty with honesty is the result of our disease. Because of our expertise at denial and rationalization, it is difficult for us to know what the truth is. But it isn't impossible. With the First Step, we begin to put the principle of honesty into practice in our lives. We don't learn how to do this by reading about it or talking about it. We learn how to do it by experiencing it over and over again.

When we begin to look honestly at whether we are powerless over our addiction, we see that in our drug use, the opposite was certainly the case: we acted as if we did indeed have the power to control our disease. We thought we had everything under control. We thought it was perfectly normal that we used drugs to solve our problems -- and then we thought it was perfectly normal to use more drugs when they weren't the solution anymore and in fact were causing problems of their own. As our disease progressed, some of us switched drugs or tried combinations. We convinced ourselves that we were in control and that we were okay as long as we weren't enslaved to one particular drug. Some of us changed our environment, friends, lovers, or jobs in the futile effort to quit or control our using.

Most of us viewed temporary periods of abstinence as evidence we could quit any time we wanted -- ignoring the fact that we always used again, as much or more than before. We believed we would stop if things got bad enough. But no matter how bad things got, we told ourselves we could hold out until they got

worse. And they did. We promised loved ones that we'd stop using for them, but that didn't last either. Time after time we said to ourselves, "Today will be different." But we had a lifetime of todays, and they all seemed the same.

For us, there was no such thing as "will power" as far as our addiction was concerned. Some of us did have a desire to stop using, but our desire wasn't enough to get us off drugs. Medicine, religion, and psychiatry -- nothing relieved us of our addiction. We never seemed to be able to get clean and stay that way. Our will had nothing to do with it at all.

As we look at what was really going on in our lives, we begin to see with clarity that we had lived a lie: "Everything is okay." We begin to admit that that lie eventually would have killed us -- and that we have a disease that told us it wouldn't have mattered at all if we did.

Finally, when we look honestly at ourselves, we have to admit that we had no control over all this whatsoever -- that in fact, we were powerless. We had not deliberately chosen to come to this low point of misery and pain -- hopeless, helpless, feeling worthless and alone. But our very best efforts could not prevent it. Our very best intentions could not prevent it. We admit that a powerful force called the disease of addiction has been at work in our lives, and we are powerless over it. We had been trying to live out the illusion of power, the illusion of control, and the illusion was going to cause us to self-destruct. We admit we were powerless over our addiction.

The First Step asks us to go on to admit that our lives had become unmanageable -- unmanageable by us.

For some of us, it's easy to see how unmanageable our lives had become, when time after time we wound up in jails and institutions, losing jobs and friends, destroying families. Some of us had to experience extreme degradation before we

could admit defeat and reach out for help. Others of us may think we are "not so bad", because we still had our jobs or homes or families. But we cannot confuse unmanageability with social acceptability. Denying that we are similar to other addicts keeps us sick.

We are told to apply the principles of honesty and openmindedness as we look at whether our lives had become unmanageable. We begin to admit that we are "different" from other addicts only on the outside. On the inside, we are all alike.

In spite of our best attempts at managing our lives, the obsession and compulsion of addiction color our decisions. Our obsessive thinking and self-centeredness distort our priorities. When we act out compulsively, we leave a path of destruction in our lives and the lives of those near us. Our sick thinking justifies behavior we swore we'd never do. We try to ignore the endless chain of broken promises to ourselves and others. Our shame isolates us. The denial tells us our misery is somebody's else's fault. Our self-centeredness and self-pity tell us there is no hope for us, because we are different or even unique. We addicts didn't set out to feel miserable, but we found we could not manage and control our own feelings. On the inside, we all wind up feeling the same: alone, afraid, and ashamed.

Again, we have to admit it: We thought we had power over our lives, and when we lived out that delusion, our lives became unmanageable. Specifically in the area of drugs, when we didn't admit that we were powerless over our addiction as it expressed itself in chronic drug use, we kept living out what our disease told us to do, and our lives grew totally unmanageable. When we didn't admit we were powerless, we thought we had power and could control our addiction. We couldn't. We lived a lie that said we could manage our own lives as other people seem to do. We cannot.

We admit it: our way just does not work. We are powerless over this disease of addiction, and our lives are unmanageable by us because of it.

Most of us experience great relief with this admission, because it explains our lives and actions in a way we can live with. It is not that we are bad people or that in some way we are weak and defective. It is that we have a disease. Being powerless over our addiction is neither a crime nor a shame. It is a reality. Far from being a sign of weakness, getting in touch with reality is a sign of strength. Admitting the reality of our disease is the beginning of doing something about it -- the beginning of recovery.

And admitting the reality of ourselves -- our powerlessness over our disease -- activates the spiritual principle of humility in our lives. In the beginning, we tend to confuse humility with humiliation, because we know nothing about the former and too much about the latter. When we come to Narcotics Anonymous, our view of ourselves is very distorted -- abject worthlessness alternating with puffed-up ego and pride. This sick view of ourselves is the exact opposite of humility, which is the honest perception of ourselves exactly as we are at this moment -- human beings with the disease of addiction, embarked on a program of recovery.

Our work in the First Step helps us experience humility. This Step tells us that on our own, we cannot turn our disease around. This is a humbling admission. We see that no matter how hard we tried to manage and control our lives -- changing drugs, jobs, locations, lovers -- we couldn't make a dent in the progression of our disease. And the more we refused to admit that and struggled instead to stay in the disease, the more pain we caused ourselves. Our pain opens wider the door to humility, which allows us to be willing to hear new solutions and follow suggestions that come from outside us.

Humility does not come easy to us addicts, and it takes a lot of practice until we internalize it. But when the spiritual principle of humility is working in us and for us, then acknowledging and accepting ourselves exactly as we are brings us relief and release – freedom from the illusion that we have to be perfect or that we even can be.

The First Step is an action step, and one of the actions that result from admitting powerlessness over the disease of addiction is admitting, "I am an addict." But that is not enough.

When we are powerless, then we act powerless. We give up the illusion that we can exercise power or control over our disease, and we proceed to live that way. When it comes specifically to our disease as it expresses itself in the compulsive use of drugs, we give up the illusion that we can use drugs "successfully", whatever that means. Admitting we are powerless over what happens when we act out on the disease with drugs gives us the freedom to stop using. We don't have to maintain the self-deception that we can "handle it" anymore.

We used to think we had to use. Now we know that such thoughts were faulty information coming from our obsessive addict thinking. It is our disease telling us we have to use. We do not have to use. We have the freedom of choice. Now we choose to live as if we have no control over our use of drugs by acting that way. In other words, we live out our powerlessness by exercising no power over our use of drugs. We stop. We choose to stay away from all drugs. We stop fighting with our disease. In other words, we surrender.

The spiritual principle of surrender is a tough one for us, because it sounds like giving up, and that sounds like losing. Our sick pride has big problems with losing. But we in Narcotics Anonymous have learned that surrender is not losing.

To choose instead to stay in the struggle is to lose. Our work in the First Step shows us that fighting our chronic and progressive disease is useless. It's a losing battle. Our powerlessness is a fact, whether we surrender to it or not. If we don't, we continue practicing the disease and our pain mounts up. If we do surrender, we opt out of the fight. This is a position of strength. Surrendering to the truth keeps us in reality -- and in recovery.

This surrender takes courage. Despite what our sick pride tells us, it takes courage to admit we're powerless and then to behave that way. It takes courage just to walk through the doors of Narcotics Anonymous and begin facing up to our living problems. And while we may have a hard time identifying the spiritual principle of courage at work in ourselves, we have no problem identifying it in the N.A. Fellowship. We hear clean addicts sharing their experience of powerlessness over their own addiction to drugs, horror stories far worse than our own. Suddenly, in the group, courage seems possible. We've heard many newcomers say it: "If they can get clean, I can get clean."

When it comes to admitting we're powerless over addiction, once is not enough. We have a fatal disease of self-destruction that does not disappear just because we say so. Even after we've been clean for a while, denial often creeps in again. Our rebelliousness dies hard, as does our need to feel we are in control. We may have reservations and think we are different -- that we are not powerless over our the disease or that we really don't have a disease at all.

We are not immune to sick thinking. Our denial and self-deception can cover up new awareness. We have found that we must continue to work and live the First Step on a daily basis. So we continue to practice surrender. Clean time gives us no power over our addiction. We remain powerless.

Losing touch with the fact of our powerlessness over our disease allows it to become active in our lives again. We may come to think that we can go it alone, that we don't need the program. We may go to fewer meetings and lose contact with clean addicts and the message of recovery. Our isolation can reinforce feeling "different" from others in the Fellowship. Once again, we can get trapped in the unconsciousness of self-deception.

In this climate, we are once again vulnerable to the obsession to use. Some of us have in fact listened to it when the disease told us one more time that we could "handle it" and be in control. Some of us have moved from the obsession into the compulsion, acted off the disease, and relapsed. None of us who have relapsed has ever reported that suddenly, mysteriously, we had control. On the contrary, those of us who have come back have reported that the effect of using on our lives was just as bad or worse than it was before.

Our disease is progressive, and our lives remain unmanageable by us. Relapse is never an accident. But at any point in the progression when our disease tells us we can use, we can always turn to the First Step again. We can always admit that we are powerless over what our disease tells us, and that if we act off it, our lives very quickly will become unmanageable. Once again, this admission and surrender release us from our sick thinking. We do not in fact have to use. Just because we think about it doesn't mean we have to do it.

We have found that we need to surrender any reservations and doubt that we might have. We have the disease of addiction, we are powerless over that disease, and we can recover by using the Twelve Steps of Narcotics Anonymous. By continuing to practice and internalize our surrender to the First Step, we eventually go past admitting our powerlessness and the unmanageability of our lives, all the way to a deep acceptance.

The First Step goes far beyond drugs, just as recovery from the disease of addiction goes far beyond simple abstinence. We don't have to be using drugs to practice our disease. We don't have to be using drugs to see our self-destructiveness play itself out in our jobs or our relationships. We don't have to be loaded to be overwhelmed by the unmanageability of our lives.

Surrendering to the fact of our powerlessness makes us willing to look at how our disease manifests itself in other areas of our lives. If we act out on our disease in any way, our lives grow ever more unmanageable. Our First Step can be applied in every case. In the beginning, it is easy to see how to apply it by remembering how it works in the area of drugs. We admit our powerlessness over the disease as it expresses itself in our drug use, and so we don't act out on the disease by using drugs. We admit we can't control it, so we don't control it. It's the same in other areas.

As we move through our recovery, we have continuing breakthroughs in our denial and self-deception. One by one, we come to see other aspects of our lives where we are keeping too tight a grip on people and circumstances, trying to manage and control and manipulate. With the help of our sponsors, we see that we are behaving in a totally self-centered way in a particular situation. We see that we are trying to keep our own lives manageable by exerting control. We are quite sure we know how others should think and behave, even if we have to manipulate them into it. One more time, we have a faulty version of reality, and we think we can change other people and events to match it. When it doesn't work and things don't go our way, we are filled with feelings like anger, self-pity, self-recrimination, and pain.

Growing aware of how our disease plays out in our lives is difficult and painful for us. The addict resists this awareness. Our disease puts our sick ego and pride in the way of admitting that in fact our control is an illusion and our

way isn't working. If we are to live Step One in the situation at hand, we have to admit where we are powerless -- a humbling admission, but it's the prerequisite to surrender. And we must surrender and give up fighting the losing battle. We have to stop trying to exercise power -- stop manipulating and controlling. If we do not, our lives continue unmanageable -- and painful. If we do, we experience some freedom and peace of mind.

Freedom and peace of mind: not a very normal and natural state for addicts like us. What's normal and natural for is to use drugs, be obsessed, act compulsively, live in denial, and behave in destructive ways. The difference is that with the Twelve Steps, we are learning another way to live. We have found that the antidote to our disease is in the spiritual principles embodied in this program. It begins with the First Step, when we embark on a spiritually-based formula for living that allows us to be free from active addiction and the self-made prison we called life.

Over and over again, as recovery clears away denial, we practice the spiritual principles of acceptance and honesty, humility and hope, faith and surrender. We seek out a sponsor who will help us and guide us. With practice over time, we internalize these principles, and they come to occupy the space inside of us where there used to be only the disease of fear, hopelessness, and self-destruction.

We have found relief and freedom in the spiritual principle of acceptance. We begin to accept ourselves for who we are right now. We work at accepting others exactly the way they are. Accepting life on its own terms goes against our addictive nature, which wants us to rebel. But we come to understand that we can work on changing our attitude and the way we react to the world. It requires

discipline and vigilance to keep practicing the willingness to accept life just the way it is -- inside us and outside us.

We exercise the spiritual principle of honesty, continuing to look at our lives and admit we have a disease over which we have no control. Accepting the reality of our powerlessness is the essence of the spiritual principle of humility. Humility is acceptance of who we actually are: members of a fellowship of recovering addicts and members of the human race. There is some freedom and comfort in even the beginnings of humility, as it opens the door to hope: we cannot change on our own, but there is help, and we can ask for it. To counter the natural fear addicts have when we give up the illusion of control, we begin to practice faith -- the faith that somehow, somewhere down the road, everything is going to be all right.

We surrender, and by surrendering, we win. Working and living the First Step each day, we win the arrest of our disease just for today. We begin to experience a freedom we never knew possible -- the freedom to change.