Step One

We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsions --that our lives had become unmanageable.

“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”

(Romans 7:18)

The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous knew alcoholics needed to admit their powerlessness over alcohol. Replacing the word “alcohol” with “addictions and compulsions” expands the step to cover other addictions and the rest of our habitual dysfunctional behavior driven by our emotions which falls under the category of “compulsions.” Others add powerlessness over people, eating, drugs, gambling, spending, sexual addiction, or whatever else they are struggling with. The Steps work for any and all life problems.

Step One is about admitting powerlessness over ourselves, other people, and life. In order to admit we are powerless, we have to come out of denial to face the truth about ourselves and our lives. It is in the admission that we can begin to get help. Like the prodigal son, who realized when he came to his senses that he was living in squalor and starving and could be eating better as a servant for his father, we have a moment of clarity when we open our eyes and get a different perspective about our lives (Luke 15:17). This is the beginning of hope, even though what we see might tempt us to feel hopeless.

None of us like to admit powerlessness. We spend our lives trying to be in control of all kinds of things. Adult children of dysfunctional families may find powerlessness especially frightening because as children there were so many things they were powerless over. I took on the role of keeping things under control as a young child. When I heard my parents fighting, I listened through my closet wall and would go in at the right moments to keep it from getting worse. I was “the voice” that tried to get my family to listen and do what was right: my dad to stop drinking, my mom to leave, my parents to care about the effect on the kids, and my younger siblings to behave. I felt like I had to be in control or everything would fall apart. Adult children of dysfunctional families overreact to things they don’t have control over. Their underlying fear is that if someone else makes a wrong decision, they will lose complete control of their own lives and become a victim again. It may sound foolish, but when it is happening, it is real and powerful. They also try to make the people that hurt them acknowledge the hurt and still hold onto the hope that the family can change. They may continue to be drawn into their family’s dysfunction, even as adults, and find themselves unable to let go of the drama, even though they hate it.
As an adult, I went into my marriage naturally taking on that same role. I tried to get my husband’s family to see how messed up they were and to get my husband to admit his problems in our marriage. As a result, I was unable to control myself and live my own life. Letting go of my attempts to control other people was incredibly scary for me and, without the Steps was impossible. Codependents try to control people, places, and things because they fear letting go and they are emotionally dependent on the other person. They desperately need the other person (the addict, the spouse, the emotionally or physically ill person, the irresponsible person, or the difficult person) to change and don’t believe they can be okay if the other person doesn’t. They need to learn that they have the right and the power to live their own lives, whether the other person changes or not, and that they don’t have the right and the power to tell other people how to live their lives.

Different personalities also like to be in control. I am a type A (some have even called me triple type A). I like order and efficiency; I hate wasted efforts. As a result, I am time-pressured and want to be in charge, so I drive, make the schedule, and control the details, so I can call the shots and direct the show. It is painful for me to not be able to control the agenda. This is my natural nature and coupled with my childhood experiences, you can tell that letting go and admitting powerlessness wasn’t and isn’t easy for me.

The book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (commonly referred to as “The Big Book”), talks about alcoholism being an obsession of the mind and an allergy of the body. The allergy of the body is the physiological addiction and the obsession of the mind is the psychological addiction. An obsession is something that has power over you. It occupies your thoughts and dominates your life. It leads you to compulsively do things you may not want to do. We are all familiar with obsession. Codependents and adult children of dysfunctional families try in vain to control other people and things and need to admit that they can’t make anyone do anything. The obsession to force people to do what they want them to do drives them to do crazy things like follow the alcoholic to bars, mark alcohol bottles, search cars, wallets, computers, and phones, sit up all night waiting for someone to come home, yell, scream, beg, deny, ignore, plead, threaten, explain, rage, put off their own plans, and tolerate unacceptable things.

*Powerlessness* means “no power.” It is as futile as standing on the seashore and commanding the waves to stop or telling the sun not to go down. It would be equal to plugging a vacuum into the wall to vacuum the floor and it doesn’t turn on. You would have no power to vacuum. Not even a little—none. For an addict, it means admitting that all the things you’ve been doing to control your addiction haven’t worked even though you believed for a long time that you could do it and promised yourself, God, and others that you wouldn’t drink, use, or act out again, only to find yourself doing it again, feeling ashamed and hopeless, only to promise you’d never do it again and fail. It takes hitting a bottom to realize you are truly powerless over your addiction and need help.

For codependents and adult children of dysfunctional families, you have focused too much of your time and energy on others. You may have tried to control people, places and things, and now have to admit that you are unable to make other people do what you want. As a result, your life is out of control and unmanageable. When you strive for other-control, you lose self-control. You suffer from over-control of others and under-control of yourself. Or maybe you haven’t
tried to control others, but you’ve allowed them to control you and you’ve hoped that by giving in things would get better. They haven’t and now you have to face how unmanageable your life is.

A bottom is different for everyone. It is that one thing that had to happen for you to give up. If you didn’t hit your bottom, why would you want to do things differently and face all the unpleasant facts about your life? Why would the addict want to face the consequences of the addiction? Why would the codependent or adult child of a dysfunctional family want to see the wreckage self-created by striving to control or please others? Why would any of us want to see how badly we have mismanaged our own lives? What else could motivate you to change except complete and utter unmanageability? Things have to fall apart so that they can be put back together the right way.

In Step One, all of us admit we are unable to control the things we so desperately want to control. We have tried and failed. We can now admit it. The addict has to admit that all attempts to stay sober were futile, the codependent that all the attempts to control others are useless and that pleasing people doesn’t work either, the adult child of a dysfunctional family that all the old coping skills aren’t working, and there is nothing that can be done to change the family of origin. When we can admit we are powerless and that everything we have done to exert our power has failed, we will be able to admit that our lives are unmanageable and unworkable. We will say along with the Apostle Paul: “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out’” (Romans 7:18).

It took a lot for us to admit our powerlessness over our own lives and the lives of others and to look at how unmanageable our lives are; but it really is a relief to finally be able to face that truth.

**Step One Questions**

**We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsions**

--that our lives had become unmanageable.

1. What part has denial played in your life?
2. What are you powerless over in your life?

3. What have you done to try to assert your power over your addictions, compulsions, and other people?

4. How has your life become unmanageable as a result of your attempts to control your addictions, compulsions, and other people?

5. What did it take for you to admit your powerlessness and hit your bottom?

6. How has your life been affected by the choices of other people?
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