

A Boomer's Guide to the 12 Steps

Stephen Roos



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Center City, Minnesota 55012
hazelden.org

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roos, Stephen.

A boomer's guide to the 12 steps / Stephen Roos.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59285-696-1 (softcover)

1. Twelve-step programs.
 2. Baby boom generation—Substance abuse.
 3. Baby boom generation—Alcohol use.
 4. Baby boom generation—Conduct of life.
- I. Title.

HV4998.R66 2009

616.86'03—dc22

2009002471

Editor's note

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13 12 11 10 09 1 2 3 4 5 6

Cover design by Mary Ann Smith
Interior design and typesetting by BookMobile Design and Publishing
Services

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Introduction

“Anyone who says sixty is just a number has got to be kidding,” says Hector R., a former schoolteacher in Fort Lauderdale. “The AARP Bulletin says sixty is the new thirty, but try telling that to someone who’s thirty.”

ACCEPT LIFE ON LIFE’S TERMS. It’s a home truth that we Boomers, the kids born between 1946 and 1964, have learned over and over again in all sorts of contexts throughout our lives. We’ve had to accept people for who they are—mates, kids, friends, and colleagues. We’ve had to accept ups and downs in our personal lives. We’ve had to accept ourselves too! We’ve faced the predicaments and calamities, some natural and others man-made, that have rocked our world—and accepted the changes and challenges they brought with them.

Now—just when we’re ready to say “Enough!”—along comes one more thing we have to accept. We’re turning sixty!

“I can’t be sixty,” says Judy D. “How can I be? I don’t look sixty. I don’t feel sixty.”

Actually, Judy isn’t sixty. She’s sixty-three. Whether she’s in denial about her age or just exercising the prerogative of people over fifty to lie about it, she’s right that she doesn’t look or feel anything like what sixty is supposed to look and feel like.

“When my dad was sixty, he looked old,” says Hector. “He acted old too. When he retired he just sat around the house. I’m sixty now, but I’m no senior citizen.”

Hector is right too. Even though the first Boomers are no longer middle-aged, we’re not seniors. According to a recent poll in *USA Today*, Boomers believe old age begins at eighty. That’s not just wishful Boomer thinking either. Not only do we live longer than anyone before us, we also stay healthier longer. The Boomers are, in fact, the first generation in history that can expect to live two or three decades after retirement. Unless we’re struck by a devastating condition or disease, we can expect to remain vital, fit, and “pre-elderly” well into our eighties.

Being pioneers, of course, is nothing new for Boomers. We have been trendsetters since we were born. After all, we grew up in a world that was vastly different from our parents’. The 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s were an era of unprecedented economic growth and extraordinary social change. The civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and gay liberation shaped our attitudes and lifestyles as dramatically as the post-World War II economic boom did.

We’ve had more options, greater opportunities, and considerably higher expectations than any generation ever. But as the first of us apply for Social Security benefits, many of us are bewildered by what looms ahead. How can we *not* be preoccupied by worries about our money, our health, our relationships, and our work, as we enter a new, uncharted stage of life? Accustomed as we are to thinking positively, looking good, and taking a generally proactive role in life, for many of us, it’s as hard to share about the downside going on inside us as it is to ask others what’s really going on inside them.

“I don’t want to seem like I’m complaining,” says Jowin H., “especially when so many people have it worse than I do.”

Says Mack O., “My wife and my kids and buddies from work are used to me complaining about this and that, but I’d be embarrassed to talk to them about how scared I am about the future.”

“My friends think I’m on top of things,” says Charlene P. “If I told my friends how I really feel, they just wouldn’t know how to handle it.”

Though Charlene, Mack, Jowin, and Hector are in Twelve Steps programs, Judy isn’t. But even in Twelve Step programs, where you are *supposed* to talk about anything and everything, you can feel reluctant to speak about the challenges and feelings that come with turning sixty.

Olga Z. has been in Alcoholics Anonymous for eighteen years. “That’s three or four meetings a week most of the time. It adds up to something like three thousand meetings. I thought I had said everything I was going to say—twice.”

“I was there for the newcomer,” says Robert G. “I tried to keep it upbeat. Besides, who wanted to hear about my crap? What good was it going to do anyone, anyway?”

Says Sally B., “Most of the gals in my OA [Overeaters Anonymous] group are my daughter’s age. You think I’m going to ask them for advice? Besides, at this point in my life, I was much more comfortable giving it. Someone convinced me to attend a Step workshop. That’s where I started to make a more conscious effort to connect with other men and women my age. They were working the Steps in the context of who they are now, talking about the things I wasn’t talking about. It helped reinvigorate my whole program.”

Robert was also at the Step workshop: he had relapsed after many years of sobriety. “I’d gone through the Steps before the first couple years I was in program,” he says. “I still used some of them, but basically I was on automatic pilot. But when I came

back from my slip, I knew I had to get into the Steps again. Powerless had a whole new meaning to me at sixty than it did when I was thirty-five and first came into the program,” he adds, chuckling a bit, “and that was just the beginning.”

Not all Boomers in the program are old-timers. Craig W. is in his mid-fifties. He has been battling his addictions, alcohol and more recently crystal meth, for more than thirty years, but has been in the Crystal Meth Anonymous (CMA) program just a year. Hector didn’t develop a drinking problem until he retired. Although the statistics aren’t in yet, he seems to be among the growing number of social drinkers and even non-drinkers who start to drink alcoholically in their fifties and sixties. As Hector says, “The Steps helped me look at who I was—without beating up on myself. I’d been afraid to look, I guess.”

Today, a wide variety of programs take a Twelve Step approach to recovery. Many of them address various types of substance use—the original Twelve Step program is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), but others include Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and groups for users of specific drugs, e.g., Cocaine Anonymous (CA). The Overeaters Anonymous program is known as OA. Some Twelve Step programs address other addictive behaviors—gambling or compulsive sex, for example. Most of these programs share some common elements, such as frequent peer-led group meetings and a sponsorship tradition, whereby newcomers are mentored by more experienced members. And for decades, the Al-Anon and Nar-Anon programs have offered recovery support for family members and others who are affected by a person’s addiction. In this book, we’ll discuss the Steps as they appear in the recovery text *Alcoholics Anonymous*, known as the Big Book. Two of the Steps refer to alcohol specifically—but in fact all of them apply to any addictive substance or behavior.

You don’t need to be in a Twelve Step program to use the

Steps in your life. Says Judy, “I was never in a Twelve Step program, but one of my girlfriends told me she thought I was getting addicted to cosmetic surgery the way she had been to prescription drugs. She was going to the Step workshop after we’d been out to dinner one night, and I tagged along. I didn’t realize she had set me up, but I’m glad she did now.”

Jowin agrees. “My kids, they’re in their thirties, and one of them has a gambling problem,” he says. “I used to go to open Gamblers Anonymous meetings and Al-Anon to show my support for my son. I don’t suffer from addiction myself, but the Steps helped me recognize the problems I have. They also help me with ways to deal with the problems. I mean, what’s the point of recognizing a problem if you can’t solve it?”

And so it goes. The Steps are immensely practical tools that help us to live sane, productive lives, whether we are old-timers or newcomers to the programs, or even if we have never been to a Twelve Step meeting and have no plans to attend one. As we grow, we change. We’re not the people we were ten years ago, even five years ago. And we’re not changing into the people our parents were when they were our age.

The Steps can prove to be just the guide we need as we pioneer in territory that no generation has ever explored before. As Robert says, “Thanks to the Steps, these really are turning out to be the best years of my life.”

Meet the Experts: The Recovering Men and Women Who Shared Their Stories

Charlene P. In Al-Anon for eight years, Charlene has identified strongly as a housewife and mom. When her husband died just after their fortieth wedding anniversary, he left hardly enough money for her to live on. She has few marketable skills and is as

anxious about finding a job as she is adamant about not accepting help from her now grown-up children.

Craig W. Sober a year, Craig is recovering from a crystal meth addiction and only just beginning to deal with child abuse issues. Now in his mid-fifties and HIV positive, he's a model and cater waiter who's only just beginning to face the fact that his compulsive partying has derailed him from the acting career he'd always dreamed of.

Hector R. Sober in AA just 18 months, Hector developed a drinking problem when he retired. A former high school Spanish teacher, he's a loner who faces a life of total isolation. He's dealing with prostate cancer now—and he's scared.

Jowin H. A salesman, Jowin is married with two kids, a son who has trouble with a gambling addiction and a daughter he has spoiled rotten. He got into Al-Anon when his son got into Gamblers Anonymous (GA). Jowin uses the Steps to deal with issues at home (his adultery included) and at work.

Judy D. A mother and a grandmother, Judy is recently divorced and bitter. She devoted herself to being the perfect corporate mate, credits herself with much of her ex-husband's success, and can't help nursing a grievance about her ex-husband's former secretary—his new, younger trophy wife. Although she drank and smoked pot in the 1960s, she did not become addicted to either. After her divorce she became addicted to plastic surgery, which is when a friend introduced her to the Twelve Steps. Although she is still not in one of the programs, she does follow the Steps.

Mack O. A used-car salesman, Mack has been in the AA program for six years and has college-age kids. Without telling his wife, he took over management of his and his wife's retirement funds and lost most of the family's life savings. Coming clean with her was one of the hardest things Mack ever had to do. Now approaching retirement age, Mack doubts he'll be able to afford to retire.

Olga Z. Olga has been sober in AA for eighteen years. A Russian immigrant, she was born poor but became tough and enormously successful in real estate. Always proud of her fierce independence, she never allowed a romantic relationship to come before her drive to achieve the American dream.

Robert G. He had been sober in AA for thirty years when he slipped. Back in recovery after six months, Robert is now in therapy and on meds. A banker, he took early retirement, never anticipating that it would precipitate a personal crisis.

Sally B. At the age of fifty-eight, Sally has been involved in Overeaters Anonymous for fifteen years. She is married, has two grown-up kids, and is the main caregiver for her elderly father who is suffering from Alzheimer's. She has an at-home business making gourmet fudge. Almost predictably, she has become diabetic and worries that she will not be there to care for her father. It's only when she does her Fourth Step that she realizes how deeply resentful she is as well.

S T E P O N E

*“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—
that our lives had become unmanageable.”*



WHAT ARE YOU POWERLESS OVER? A drug? A behavior? Your temper? The economy? Gravity? When you find you are powerless over something—or someone—do you readily admit it? Is that getting easier as you get older? Or has time made it harder for you to admit when you're beat? Has your powerlessness ever made your life—or some aspect of your life—unmanageable? Is it unmanageable now?

Don't be too quick to say no. Denial comes in many shapes and sizes, and we all experience it at one time or another. Sometimes, a bit of denial can get us through a tough situation. Left unchecked, however, denial can turn a tough situation into a disaster. Age brings wisdom, no doubt, but it's no guarantee that we'll be able to see through our denial. By the time we reach our fifties and sixties, we may be so adept at certain forms of denial that it becomes an involuntary response. In fact, we may even claim that age exempts us from certain problems.

"I thought alcoholism was like acne," says Hector. "You had to be a kid to get it. I didn't drink or do drugs when I was young. In fact, I didn't have my first drink till I was forty. I didn't have my first hangover till six years ago. Even when things got really bad, I thought I was too old to become an alcoholic."

How many of us have learned that you can't be too old to develop problems with sex or money? How many of us are still going to Al-Anon to learn how to deal with our powerlessness over other people? For some of us, the substance we are powerless over is food. "When my friends told me they were worried about my eating, I just pretended I didn't hear them," says Sally. "If they said it again, I stopped seeing them too. I wasn't addicted to food. I just liked food better than other people did."

Can someone even be addicted to plastic surgery? "I was deeply hurt when my husband decided he wanted out of the marriage," says Judy. "Who wouldn't be? When I discovered

plastic surgery, I felt I had found the solution to all my problems. I decided to have my eyes done, but my doctor convinced me to have a full face-lift. Then I wanted to have some body work. My insurance wouldn't cover it, so I had to pay for it myself. I'd gone through a major part of my divorce settlement when I realized I was out of control."

"Who would have thought the Internet could become an addiction?" asks Mack. "It sounds absurd, but I was spending so much time online trading stock from my 401-K that my life was becoming unmanageable. That led to some serious problems in my finances and in my marriage."

The Power of Denial

But whatever the substance or behavior, we can always find a way to deny it's a problem. Olga thought her superior willpower would keep her out of harm's way. "I could quit any time I wanted. That was what proved I wasn't an alcoholic. My doctor told me I had to stop drinking," she explains. "That was it. No more drinking. I got through two days without booze and, believe me, those were the two longest days of my life. The third day I drank. Even though my health was in serious jeopardy, it was a conscious choice. Booze was more important to me than my health. That's my denial system killing me."

Robert thought he was too smart, too rich, and sober too long to drink again. He had just celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of his sobriety when he slipped. "I knew the Big Book by heart. I could say the Serenity Prayer [see page 113] in my sleep. I thought I was just too damn smart to go back to drinking. I still had money in the bank. That was my rationale. I found out that some of the richest, most successful people in the world are

active alcoholics. Also, some of the smartest and most talented people. The hardest-working.”

“I was badly in debt,” says Craig. “I knew I wasn’t the sharpest tack in the toolbox, but I wasn’t living on the streets. I attended my first Twelve Step meeting when I was twenty-five, but I’ve never put together more than six months of continuous sobriety before. But as long as I could point the finger at someone who was worse off than I was, I figured I was okay.”

Unmanageability, however, is as hard to admit as powerlessness, especially at our age. Now that we’re older, we’re supposed to know better. The truth is that very often our lives can look manageable, even when inside we’re spinning out of control.

“My friends spend a lot of their time talking about how stupid young people are today,” says Charlene. “How they get into trouble and can’t get themselves out. How was I going to explain to my friends that I was screwed up too?”

“I never drugged—only drank,” Mack says. “I didn’t gamble. How could it be bad if it looked so good? I wanted to die, but even at my worst my life looked manageable. But I was totally out of control with money. I had lied to my wife about it too.”

Often we’re just kidding ourselves. “Well, I have to admit my life *looked* unmanageable,” says Judy, smiling ruefully. “But *I* looked fabulous. That’s what I told myself, anyway. As long as I looked good, it didn’t matter how messed up life was.”

Sometimes feelings can overwhelm us and make our lives unmanageable—even if we have a lifetime of dealing with them. You don’t have to have an addiction to have problems with depression, anxiety, resentment, fear, and low self-esteem. They can get the better of all of us from time to time.

“I was the most capable person in my admittedly not too capable family,” says Sally. “Who else was supposed to take care of

my father when he developed Alzheimer's? I just couldn't imagine putting him in a home. When some of the gals asked me how I did it, I told them that you could do anything if you put your mind to it. I acted like it was no problem at all. I was in total denial about how angry and resentful I was feeling."

Fortunately, Sally came out of her denial before her resentment got the best of her. Robert wasn't so lucky. "I kept telling myself I had luxury problems," he says. "I had worked hard all my life and it was my turn to sit back and enjoy. But I had a bad case of depression. My doctor recommended antidepressants and therapy, but I told him I wasn't that bad. Then the depression got worse, and that led me back to drinking."

We can feel overwhelmed by health issues. We don't have to be out of control with spending to know how money problems can make our lives unmanageable. Some of us find ourselves alone for the first time in our lives and overwhelmed with feelings of loneliness. Step One can prove invaluable in helping us admit our powerlessness over these feelings and how unmanageable those feelings have made our lives.

"We went through most of our savings when my husband was sick," says Charlene. "When he died, there was nothing left. I told myself some money would turn up eventually. I'd never gotten a degree, and I didn't have any experience working outside my home. I bought lottery tickets every week, thinking that was how God was going to take care of me. It wasn't till I was totally broke that I got real. Thanks to my denial, things got a lot worse before they got better. It was a tough situation, but it didn't have to be that tough!"

"There's a history of prostate cancer in my family," says Hector. "When my doctor told me my PSA was up, I just put it out of my mind. Didn't make an appointment with a urologist. Didn't even think about it. A man my age in AA told me I better

check it out. It turned out I was sick, but fortunately, they got it early. I realized that I needed to practice Step One in every area of my life, not just my drinking and drugging.”

“It took me a long time to admit I had problems that were making my life unmanageable,” says Sally. “But the day I did, my life started to change for the better.”

By denying our powerlessness as well as the unmanageability of our lives, we are also denying ourselves the possibility of solving our problems and moving on. For Twelve-Steppers, sobriety is not just about putting down the drink or drug and learning how to stay out of trouble with money, sex, and relationships. It’s about dealing with the anxieties and fears that have plagued us all along and discovering a happier, more joyous, and freer life than we ever imagined.

It’s never too early to start, and it’s never too late. Taking Step One can be the watershed, the decisive turning point for anyone at any age. Before we can reclaim our true power, we have to face our powerlessness over the addictive substances or behaviors that are controlling our lives. There’s no age limit on that life lesson.

“I guess I thought that once I hit sixty, life would just naturally be a downward spiral,” says Mack. “It’s a two-way spiral, but before I can start going up again, I have to admit how unmanageable it’s been for me.”

Those of us of the Boomer generation are facing a new set of physical, economic, spiritual, and emotional challenges that come with aging. Whether Boomers in recovery are thirty days or thirty years sober, such challenges impact our sobriety. In *A Boomer's Guide to the 12 Steps*, Stephen Roos examines these challenges in the context of each Step and illustrates his points through the experiences of nine recovering people representative of this generation, including

- Judy, whose husband left her for a younger woman
- Sally, who is the caretaker for her elderly father
- Jowin, whose son moved back home
- Craig, who is only one year sober and dealing with life-threatening health problems

Those featured in this book are dealing, sometimes struggling, with the circumstances, relationships, and feelings that affect everyone who is trying to get sober—or stay sober—as they age. Through their shared experiences, we learn to approach the Twelve Steps from a whole new angle and to continue to grow and flourish in recovery.



With *A Boomer's Guide to the 12 Steps*, STEPHEN ROOS offers Boomers in recovery a meaningful tool to weather the challenges that come with growing old. Roos is the author of several books, including *A Young Person's Guide to the Twelve Steps*.

Cover design: Mary Ann Smith

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