

Step One

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

We all know the saying that each journey begins with the first step. Each of us has taken many first steps in our lives. They may have included going to school, starting a job, coming out, getting married, or beginning a family. Each of us knows the many feelings that arise with first steps into something new—doubt, confusion, fear, relief, joy, sadness, and more.

Taking the first step in recovery may bring up many of these same feelings. These are natural and even expected feelings any time we start something new. Many women like us have taken this first step in recovery no matter how difficult or frightening it seemed, and each of us has received many benefits, over time, from our efforts. Recovery begins with Step One, when we admit that we're powerless over addiction, and that as a result, our lives are unmanageable.

While AA's Step One reads "powerless over alcohol," we can be powerless over any behavior we can't stop or control. The Twelve Steps of AA have been adapted and used successfully by people struggling with many kinds of addictive behaviors. You can substitute words such as *drugs, food, sex, money, gambling, or relationships* for the word *alcohol*. You can also substitute *addiction*, taking the focus off a specific substance or behavior and putting it on addiction itself.

After reading this first Step, you may wonder how it could possibly apply to you.

Do you have a sense of how little power you have over the way you drink or use drugs?

Are you able to see ways your life has become unmanageable?

Have you tried unsuccessfully to control your addiction?

For some women, this Step makes perfect sense. It is a simple act of admitting what we already know to be true—we can't control our drinking or using or other compulsive behavior. It is obvious to us that our lives are out of control and unmanageable.

I remember feeling a vague sense of comfort when I read Step One. Admitting my powerlessness over alcohol gave me a sense of relief and reassurance. I finally understood why my attempts to control my drinking had not worked. Not being able to control my drinking meant I was addicted to alcohol! Only when I acknowledged that I had no power at all over my

drinking was I able to start making sense of the difficulties in my life. This understanding of Step One gave me a sense of hope.

For others beginning recovery, it can be much harder to recognize powerlessness and unmanageability. This acknowledgment can be particularly challenging for those of us who have continued to maintain our commitments and responsibilities despite our addiction.

Some of us feel that Step One asks more of us than we expected. We enter recovery wanting only to change the way we drink or use drugs. Or we want *more* control over our lives, not less. And no matter what our situation, thinking of ourselves as powerless or out of control can feel very threatening and uncomfortable.

It is common to wonder how a Twelve Step program, and Step One in particular, is going to make a difference in our lives. Yet Step One tells us there is a surprising solution: only when we realize we *can't* control our drinking or drug use or eating, do we find a way to change. Letting go of the illusion that we can control our addictive behavior is the first Step on the journey of recovery.

The Endless Loop of Addiction

One way to let go of our illusion of control and begin to recognize our powerlessness is to look at the endless cycle of our addiction. We use alcohol or other drugs or compulsive behaviors with things like food, relationships, or overspending to change how we feel—to numb our pain or to feel better about ourselves or to forget our problems. But the change is only temporary. Reality swiftly returns when we wake up the next morning with the same feelings and the same problems—along with a hangover and perhaps guilt about what we had done.

We swear to ourselves that this will never happen again. But despite our best intentions, we find ourselves drunk or high or spending again, caught in a cycle of using and regretting, using and regretting—the endless loop that is known as addiction. Having lost control, we feel frustrated, despondent, hopeless, even disgusted with ourselves. There is a saying used in Twelve Step groups about being sick and tired of being sick and tired. When we reach this point, we are ready to recognize the truth.

The truth is, no matter how desperate we feel or how sincerely we believed we would “never drink like that again,” we couldn't force ourselves to stop. We can't overpower an addiction. *An addiction is beyond our power to control.* Only when we admit we are powerless over how we

use alcohol or drugs can we begin to be free. Only when we realize we can't quit any time we like do we finally have a chance to stop the cycle.

Are We Really Powerless?

The word *powerless* is a problem for many women. Many of us were taught to let something or someone else control our lives. It can be difficult to acknowledge we are powerless over our addictions because we already feel powerless in so many other areas of our lives. Admitting powerlessness may appear to be one more instance of our familiar one-down position. It seems like too much to ask of us.

Yet only when we admit our powerlessness and lack of control over our addiction can we begin to find out where we truly have power in our lives. This is the first of many paradoxes we experience in recovery.

Recovery is about empowerment—finding and using our true inner power. It may seem contradictory to claim our power when we've just admitted our powerlessness, but actually we are made more powerful by this admission. How can this be true? It's very simple. By admitting our powerlessness over our addiction, we are freeing ourselves to turn our attention to areas where we *do* have control. When we give up the struggle to control the things we can't control, we begin to discover our true source of power.

Questioning the idea of powerlessness doesn't mean we abandon or ignore Step One. Many women who have walked the Twelve Step path translate this Step into words that help them discover how the ideas of powerlessness and unmanageability fit their personal experience. We have the freedom to interpret this Step in whatever way helps us recognize the power of our addiction.

The idea of powerlessness made Sandy, who sought help for her destructive relationships as well as her addiction to alcohol and other drugs, feel even more depressed than when she was using. It was helpful for her to use different words to think about this Step. "To say I was powerless was not good for me," she recalls. "It didn't feel right. My body responded with a drop in energy. Rather than *powerless*, I use the word *surrender*—as in surrendering to the truth. I surrender because I cannot control the amount and the way I use." For Sandy, surrendering to her inability to control her substance use was the beginning of her recovery journey.

Some of us may not question our feelings about powerlessness because we have learned that others find us more attractive if we have less power. We may have received messages, directly

and indirectly, that we are more feminine, more acceptable, and more lovable when we have little or no power. It is important that we not confuse our desire for approval with our powerlessness over our addiction. It is especially important for women to acknowledge the power of their addictions while discovering their personal power through recovery.

“As a woman, I need to claim my power,” says Sandy. “I am empowered when I look inside and ask myself, ‘What do I think? What do I feel? What are my options?’ I start figuring out what’s true for me—not whether it will please other people or make them happy. I don’t want to be insensitive to others, but I also need to be more sensitive to myself.”

Maria, a physician in her sixties, has given serious thought to power and powerlessness. Maria developed alcoholism following her divorce and became sober after going through several detox programs. Because she had achieved success in a competitive profession, at first she was concerned about admitting powerlessness—it felt too much like giving up and giving in. Only after much soul-searching was she able to see admitting powerlessness as a way to *prevent the further loss of her power*.

“Women have always been powerless,” says Maria. “So admitting I’m powerless over alcohol is really a way to keep the power I do have. I’m admitting that there’s something I can’t control and that by trying to control it, I am going to lose even more power than I’d already lost by virtue of my being female.”

Like Sandy, Maria focuses on enhancing the power she has gained through her recovery rather than thinking of herself as a powerless person. Now that she is sober, she expresses her feelings and asserts herself without agonizing over what people think of her. This, she knows, gives her a true sense of personal power. But she recognizes that this power does not mean she has control over her drinking. The drinking is out of her control.

For Chase, a nonbinary person in recovery who counsels people in the queer community with substance use issues, the concept of powerlessness seems more “appropriately humbling” to “a white, cisgender, heterosexual man of middle income.” Chase sees that men with that level of privilege have been taught that they need to have all the answers. For women and people of diverse gender experience, however, Chase believes that “you don’t want to be sitting with the sense of powerlessness, because it has already caused a lot of pain in your life.” With their clients and in their own recovery, Chase finds that it is helpful to see substance use as a way to try to feel better, to gain some power over a difficult emotional world. “It’s a good fit for a while,

until it stops being a good fit,” they observe. “So the recovery process is about taking that part of you that wants to manage your stress, to connect with other people, and find that consistently through being sober instead. In that way, it is about gaining power, not about losing power.”

Looking Inside

If we enter recovery because someone else wants us to, we may not think powerlessness is the problem. Instead, it probably seems as if someone else has the problem. Many of us try to get sober or stay abstinent because families or friends want us to, or because the court sent us to a recovery program. We attend meetings to please or obey someone, or maybe to reduce tension at home.

“Getting clean wasn’t something I wanted to do for myself,” says Elena, who had a cocaine addiction and started going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings because her husband, Joe, threatened to leave her. “I figured it was the only way to save my marriage. If I stopped using, Joe would stay. That was all that mattered. I went so I could keep him from leaving. It never occurred to me that I was powerless over cocaine or that I really had a problem.”

Many of us enter recovery without an awareness of our inner needs and with no sense of being powerless. It may take a while to believe we have an addiction or to admit that our drinking or using other drugs causes us unhappiness and conflict.

The first step in recovery is to look inside ourselves. Turning inward is the beginning of becoming more truthful with ourselves. Honesty is essential because our addictions thrive on *dishonesty*: we have become accustomed to hiding from our true feelings and values.

Most of us begin recovery without a clear sense of our inner lives or feelings. This was certainly true for me. I was so overly concerned with outer appearances that I rarely stopped to notice my real feelings—who *I* was, what *I* really felt, wanted, and needed. Like many other women, I had numbed myself to my feelings. As I became more conscious in sobriety, I realized alcohol had helped me avoid my anxiety and fear. It kept the door to my inner self locked.

When we misuse substances, we lose contact with our inner selves. While our values may urge us to be responsible, creative, loving, and open, our lives are filled with dishonesty, rigidity, fear, and distrust. This split between our inner values and our outer lives causes deep pain.

As difficult as it is, we need to let ourselves admit our powerlessness and feel our discomfort. This is how we’ll stop the cycle of drinking and using and open the door to our inner selves.

Layers of Denial

When we deny that something exists, we can't change it. If we deny a problem, it will remain a problem. If we insist we're not hurting, lonely, and frightened, then there's no opportunity to learn how to feel better. Only when we tell ourselves the truth—and risk seeing ourselves as we are now—can we begin to change.

Becoming aware of our real relationship with a substance or a compulsion allows us to break through our denial. We often stay in denial because we'd rather not experience all our feelings or face the painful truth about ourselves. Our denial also protects us from the fear of facing what it means to be addicted and from the necessity of giving up our usual ways of coping with the world.

In addition to our own attempts to deny the truth of our addictions, the people around us may pressure us to deny our addictions. Sometimes it seems that our culture encourages our communities and families to pretend that women don't develop addiction. Because of this, we often feel we aren't taken seriously when we try to get help. People are often unwilling to listen to us because it's unpleasant to face a problem like this openly. Many of us find our drinking or other drug use overlooked, ignored, or downplayed. This cultural denial can extend to our families, who join society in looking the other way.

Shannon had blackouts from her drinking from the time she was thirteen. Her brother often covered for her and even diverted their parents' attention with his own addictive behavior. Shannon's parents were unable to see the obvious signs of her alcoholism.

To Shannon's delight, adults bought liquor for her, bartenders didn't ask for her ID, and police officers always let her off the hook, once even taking her home rather than arresting her after she was stopped for drunk driving.

Shannon, now sober for two years and in her early twenties, believes no one acknowledged her problem because she was an attractive young woman. "I could raise hell and still make it all look good because nobody believed I was doing the things I was doing," she says. Her alcoholism was invisible to everyone else, so it was hard for Shannon to see the seriousness of her condition. The denial of the people around her reinforced her own denial.

When we do dare to openly admit we have a problem with alcohol or other drugs, we become vulnerable to criticism and rejection, which adds another pressure to maintain our denial. The unfortunate truth is that our society judges women with addictions more severely than men in the

same situation. Being a drunk or an addict is bad enough; being a woman who is drunk or addicted is doubly shameful. Women with addictions are often stereotyped as promiscuous, slovenly, and immoral. If we have children, we are often shamed further by ourselves and others if our drinking or using interferes with our ability to care for our children.

It takes a great deal of courage to be honest with ourselves. The layers of cultural denial increase our own personal denial, and we find it more difficult to recognize and admit that we have a problem. We may be reluctant to name our addiction or to admit we are powerless or out of control. It may seem as if we are confessing that we've done something wrong. We will not want to open the door on our inner self if that self seems "bad" or "hateful." So instead of "admitting," many of us prefer to think of "acknowledging" or "recognizing" our addictive patterns.

The Only Way Out

Cultural messages about what it means to be a woman can strengthen our denial. We are often expected to direct our attention toward caring for others, not toward self-care, self-knowledge, or our own inner experience. We may believe it is selfish to focus on ourselves. We may feel we are demanding too much when we ask for what we need, set limits, or say no. If we step outside the roles expected of us, we risk being told we're not giving enough of ourselves or fulfilling our "feminine" role. All these pressures to be selfless can make it hard to look inside and see our own needs. This keeps us in denial.

If a woman is miserable in a relationship with a man, she may tell herself, "Well, I'm not very happy, but he's really doing the best he can and he needs my support, so I shouldn't complain." Believing that it would be selfish to think about what *we* want or believing that we don't deserve anything better, many of us relieve our pain by using alcohol or other drugs. Not only do we deny our feelings, but we deny that we are addicted as well.

As you work through Step One, you can start to let your real feelings come to the surface. Consider trying something new. Just for a little while, ignore the voices saying you're selfish and demanding for wanting something better for yourself. Try to ignore the possibility that someone might treat you as if you're invisible, unimportant, or shameful. Imagine, instead, that you have opened the door you had kept locked by your denial and are on the other side. Imagine you are in a calm, quiet inner place. Imagine a still voice telling you that you deserve to be taken seriously

and accepted without judgment. Imagine that you have the right to ask for and receive help—and that help comes.

In this quiet inner place you can start to trust—or just for now, *act as if* you trust—your inner self. Soon you may find that you need less denial to protect yourself. Eventually you will be comfortable with what you find and more hopeful about your life.

Is Life Unmanageable?

Step One asks that we first gain a better understanding of powerlessness. Then it asks us to recognize that our life is unmanageable. Many women hear the word *unmanageable* and immediately say, “Yes, that’s my life!” Others aren’t so certain.

Deciding whether or not life is unmanageable can be difficult for some of us because women typically manage dozens of day-to-day details and take responsibility for others’ needs. On the surface, it may appear that we’re managing reasonably well. Everything seems to be running smoothly, as long as we don’t ask ourselves how we’re feeling and what we really need.

Maintaining the illusion of a manageable life can prevent us from seeking the help we need. How can we have a problem if we still get the kids to school on time, balance the checkbook, do all the chores, and show up for work every day? How can life be unmanageable if it looks so orderly?

Our appearance of control and order can mask an underlying fear and lack of self-acceptance that drives us to make everything on the outside look as perfect as possible. In truth, we may be attempting to maintain as much control as we can—actually *micromanaging* the lives of everyone around us—so that we can avoid feelings of emptiness, worthlessness, anxiety, and even panic.

In recovery we learn how to put less energy into controlling other people and events, and we invest more energy in taking care of ourselves. We begin to see that it’s not our job to manage everything around us. We *do* have a job: to take responsibility for our own well-being. When we do, we’ll have more energy to express ourselves creatively and successfully.

For some of us, there’s no question that our lives are unmanageable; we don’t need to be convinced that we’re not in control. Many of us have lost spouses, children, jobs, and our reputation as the consequence of our drinking or drug use. We’ve embarrassed ourselves in public, wrecked cars, been hospitalized, gone to jail. Unmanageability, and the powerlessness that creates it, may be all too familiar to many of us.

For Ruth, there was no debate about manageability. A minister now in recovery from alcoholism, bulimia, and nicotine addiction, Ruth came into AA at the age of forty after humiliating herself. She passed out on the floor at a party given in her honor. Her guests had to step over her on their way out. It was the last in a long series of progressively worse public displays of drinking behavior.

Ruth's admission of powerlessness and unmanageability is definite. "Nothing could have been more unmanageable than what happened at that party," she says. "It was a symbol of unmanageability. I really did feel powerless; it was so obvious that I had no control over my behavior."

Like Ruth and others, many of us directly connect unmanageability with our lack of power and control. Vivian, who became sober as a single mother with two young children, listened to a woman read Step One at her first AA meeting. When the woman said the word *unmanageable*, Vivian knew she was in the right place. "I recognized what unmanageability meant right away," she says. "I knew I was completely unable to stop drinking."

When Vivian woke up each morning, she would start the day by telling herself that she wasn't going to drink. But soon she'd begin to think about alcohol and head for the cupboard. "And that would be it," Vivian says. "I would drink until I blacked out."

It was clear to Vivian that she couldn't manage her behavior, much less anything else. In a meeting, she heard someone say, "If you hired someone like you to manage your life, would you continue paying her?" In other words, are you doing a satisfactory or even passable job at managing your own life? Vivian realized that she would fire herself immediately. She was so impaired by alcoholism that she couldn't take care of herself or her children. She realized her life was truly unmanageable.

Essie is glad relapse is part of her story because it has "brought me to surrender." She says, "Whenever my life seems to be unmanageable, I like to go back to that First Step and just surrender." Rather than moving through Step One and never looking back, Essie has used the concept of powerlessness over her addictions as a starting place she can return to whenever she needs to.

Looking Good on the Outside

Unmanageability may be more difficult to accept when our lives look good on the outside, especially if we can compare our circumstances to someone whose life looks worse. Katy, who

has binge-eating and alcohol use disorders, couldn't relate to unmanageability—partly because she had accomplished many of her goals, but also because she was surrounded by alcoholics and heroin addicts who had more serious problems. Compared to her companions' lives, her life seemed manageable.

Still, she had no trouble admitting powerlessness. For six months before she began recovery, Katy had a daily struggle with food. She binged and cried every day, swearing off with firm resolve in the morning, and then bingeing again by three in the afternoon. She knew she was powerless; she couldn't stop.

“But viewing my life as unmanageable was very difficult because I was so successful in the world in many ways,” she recalls. “I've always been an achiever; I had an intellect and was able to make things happen. So I felt I was managing pretty well.”

While for some of us outward appearances may hide the turmoil underneath, there may come a time when we recognize that our public image is about to collapse. Shannon embraced unmanageability even though her external life seemed to work. She had all the trimmings—a nice apartment, a job, and friends. But secretly she knew that it was all held together by a slender thread and that her emotional life was unmanageable.

“I was suicidal. I knew it was just a matter of time and circumstance before things started to fall apart,” she says. “When I went to a meeting and heard this Step, something deep inside me understood what it meant. I didn't really want to admit it, but I knew how serious my situation was. Unmanageability made sense to me. I thought, *How in the world do these people know this?* It was such a relief.”

A New Form of Power

Despite a history of limited political and social clout, women have wielded tremendous personal and psychological power. Often we do this by supporting the growth and talents of others. Unfortunately, this supportive, cooperative power is often taken for granted and given little value in our culture.

There is a special place where this kind of power is valued and honored: in Twelve Step recovery programs. The Twelve Steps of recovery rely on people to mutually support each other. This is a different kind of power. It is an example of the cooperative form of power at its best.

The Twelve Step emphasis on cooperative power may not seem obvious at first because the original AA literature contains many references to a very different kind of power—a style

referred to as “power over.” Power over is about winning and losing, control and dominance. Many women don’t relate very well to this kind of power. If anything, we know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of it—to be dominated by someone else.

Often in AA meetings you’ll hear “power over” references. People talk about “utter defeat,” “devastating weakness,” and “singlehanded combat” in their description of the battle between the drinker and the drink: “Alcohol, now become the rapacious creditor, bleeds us of all self-sufficiency and all will to resist its demands.”* In other words, alcohol wins and the person with alcoholism loses.

Rather than experiencing power as a battle, cooperative power uses the idea of “power *with*” or “power *to*.” Unlike the struggle involved in “power *over*,” the idea is to share power so that we can create more of it.

Throughout the Twelve Steps, there are many references to the power of working with other people to heal and prosper in a way that we could never do in isolation. This is “power with” or “power to” in action. It’s a shared experience, a win-win situation.

All these ideas about power can help you begin to explore what power means to you.

Where do you have power in your life?

Where does that power come from?

Where do you have the capacity to join with others and create a shared experience of power?

Where do you have the power to make better choices for yourself?

In recovery we develop the power of choice. When we’re struggling with an addiction, our choices are very limited. It feels like the addiction decides what we’ll do and where we’ll go and how we’ll act. By taking the First Step, we regain the power to decide for ourselves. We can choose whether we want to continue to try to control the things we can’t, like our addictive cycle, or control the things we can, like our participation in recovery. By admitting our lack of control over our addictions, we empower ourselves to experience a whole new way of life.

Let powerlessness be your partner and guide you to a new experience of power. Awareness of unmanageability in your life is a sign that you are on the recovery path. Change is possible; *there is a solution.*

* *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981), 21.