Serge Prengel

The Proactive Twelve Steps

12 steps workbook

To navigate forward or back, use the arrows in the Acrobat frame.
Personally and professionally, I am interested in how we make changes in our lives.

I have long been interested in the twelve steps.

Millions of people credit the “steps” for their recovery from addiction to alcohol and other substances. I do not have personal or professional experience in this area. So, you may wonder, how are these steps relevant to what I do?

The original twelve steps were written by the people who started Alcoholics Anonymous. However, only the first step of A.A. says something about the struggle with alcohol. The other steps provide a framework to, essentially, "get a life".

There's a logic to this: A.A.'s focus is on dealing with powerlessness and empowerment. One of their key insights is that the best way to abandon destructive habits is to have something better to look forward to. This is why they describe a path toward self-discovery and personal growth.
This path can be a useful tool for your own "hero journey", the process of becoming who you really are.

I believe that, as we develop a deeper sense of who we truly are, we increase our ability to lead a more fulfilling life. This, in turn, makes it easier to make difficult changes.

In this book, you will find the traditional wording of the 12 steps together with an original approach: the "proactive 12 steps".

With this new wording, and the accompanying commentary, my goal is to describe the “steps” as a self-directed process—as opposed to a mystical process in which change somehow happens to you. This is about how you can take a proactive role in your growth as a person.

I originally wrote these steps for people who, like me, were not part of the “twelve steps” culture.

Over time, many people involved in 12 steps recovery have told me that they find inspiration in these “proactive steps”: Not as a replacement for the wording they are so familiar with, but as a way to gain a new perspective on it.
In any case, I am inviting you to see the “proactive steps” as an invitation to a dialogue, as opposed to a directive that is carved in stone.

Let yourself explore what comes up for you as you go through the steps. Take the time to digest each step before moving on to the next.
I realize I’m stuck.

It makes no sense to keep trying to solve my problems with "solutions" that aren't working.

Original wording (AA):
We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable.

Codependency:
We admitted we were powerless over others - that our lives had become unmanageable.

Generic version:
We admitted we were powerless over things we believed we should control -- that our lives had become unmanageable.
Step One:

A new beginning

Somebody once said: If the only tool you have is a hammer, you try to solve everything by hammering.

Well, if the hammer is not solving the problem, it may very well be time to try something else.

The problem is, you may feel that the hammer really should be working... that it will actually work if you just try a little longer...

There’s nothing wrong with persistence. But Step One introduces another consideration: accountability.

It’s not enough to just say: *I believe it will work one day if I just keep trying*. You need to set goals and deadlines. Not for the sake of putting pressure on yourself... but in order to face the reality of what is happening.

Step One is looking squarely at reality. If what you’re doing is not working, you acknowledge that. When
you do, you are left with a feeling of emptiness – you don’t know what to do, or even whether there is a solution. It can be really scary.

Surprisingly, the emptiness allows you to make room for new, unexpected ideas.

**Will these steps work for me?**

Self-knowledge is helpful when you want to make changes in your life. The "proactive 12 steps" will help you gain self knowledge. This, in turn, will help you make the changes you want.

But don’t just take my word for it. Keep track of what’s happening. Periodically ask yourself whether you are making progress. This means that you need to give some thought to how you will define and evaluate progress.

What if you’re dealing with addiction? When people say that the “twelve steps” helped them deal with addiction, they do not mean that they just read the steps. They credit twelve steps *meetings* and the peer support they provide. Even peer support may not be enough. If your habits are endangering yourself or others, you may need to see a qualified professional or go to a rehab program.
The first step is about facing the reality of your situation. It makes no sense to keep trying to solve problems with "solutions" that can't work. Whenever you realize this, you need to look for a different approach.

In other words, the first step is not just the beginning of this process. It is an attitude. It is about staying grounded in reality as you keep track of your progress.
I'm willing to let go of my usual ways, in the hope that this will help me see things from a broader perspective.

Original wording (AA):
Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
Step Two:

Letting go

In Step One, you realized the absurdity of clinging to "solutions" that don't work.

Why then do you still cling to them? Probably because it feels somehow safer to have a "solution" (even one that doesn't work) rather than no solution at all.

Step Two is about letting go of these useless "solutions" to make room for new ones.

Now, of course, there is absolutely no guarantee that you will find a solution that works. There's a big difference between hoping that things work out, vs. expecting and demanding that they do.

It is quite possible that your fears will turn out to be realized. But, even then, you can keep the hope that there's still potential for happiness, even after your fears are realized.
In other words, Step 2 is about letting go of the old, narrow sense of who you are because it doesn't work (even though you somehow believe it should)...

**A new perspective**

There once was an actor who couldn't use his voice the way he wanted to. At some point, he decided to stop trying so hard to make the sounds he wanted happen. Instead, he started paying close attention to how he made sounds - not just his voice per se, but also the movements of his body.

He seemed to have lost his original focus on the voice as he kept experimenting with the movements of his body. But eventually he discovered that he now had an even better command of his body and voice than ever before. So he didn't just go back to the stage; he started teaching his method of movement to the public - it's known after his name, as the Alexander method.

**Feeling stuck as a starting point**

This story shows the difference between acknowledging your stuckness vs. falling into a spiral of despair.
When you hit a really difficult spot, you probably start to feel overwhelmed. You convince yourself that there's nothing you can do about it or about anything else... You start to believe that you are doomed...

This is not necessarily true. Alexander's first step was to take stock of reality - the way things were, he simply couldn't be an actor any more. He was powerless in that sense. But he didn't jump to the hasty conclusion that all was lost. He stayed in the simple reality of observing what was happening. He kept trying to move consciously, focusing his attention on the mechanics and feelings of making movements...

He used his energy to deal with the specific problems at hand instead of using it to generate predictions of hopelessness and doom.

Alexander's story is hardly unique. Way back from antiquity, there are examples of people who have overcome major obstacles through conscious attention. For instance, Demosthenes, born a stutterer, became one of Greece's most famous orators.
I shift my focus, from being fixated on my problems, to seeking a sense of wholeness and contentment in my life.

*Original wording (AA):*
Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of our Higher Power as we understood this Higher Power.
Step Three:

A leap of faith

The Third Step is a leap of faith - but not necessarily religious faith. What is it about?

You decide to put your efforts into increasing your sense of wholeness and contentment in life.

This is harder to do than it seems.

It feels really scary to let go of the “solution” you think you have. It feels like, instead of dealing with the problem, you’re giving up.

The more stuck you are, the more you feel that the only way out is to try harder doing what you’re already doing.

What enables you to let go is the hope that it will work out. As you feel more whole and satisfied with your life, you will be in a better position to deal with what now seems impossible to change.
Transformation

As you progressively let go of your fixation on your problems and your usual ways of dealing with them, you’ll notice how you tend to tighten up -- how much you want to control things -- when you're faced with something new. Noticing this, you're in a better position to start to relax this tension.

You start noticing how you tend to have knee-jerk reactions to certain situations - how it happens so fast that you weren't even conscious that there was any possibility of doing anything different. Noticing this, you become more aware that you have a choice of how to react in these situations.

Little by little, you discover that your range of reactions is much broader than you were accustomed to. You broaden our sense of who you are. Compared to how you used to be, it feels like you have been touched with something greater than yourself.

Indeed, you have expanded beyond the more limited part of you that you used to think was all of you.
I honestly look at the effects of my actions on others and myself.

*Original wording (AA):*
Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
Step Four: 

**Honesty**

When things aren't working well, the temptation is to hunker down, feel defensive, and try to prove why what you're doing *should* work. Of course, this won't magically make things work.

Step 4 is about stepping away from the heat of battle, and taking a non-partisan look at your own actions.

Does it mean that you were bad, and we now have to become good?

No, you're certainly not trying to become an angel (or to convince yourself that you’re one). In fact, if you try to go that route, your life somehow becomes even more unmanageable.

All you have to do is try to not be so defensive. That is, try to just face the reality of what you do without jumping to justify it in the same breath.
The original 12 steps called Step 4 a "fearless" moral inventory. The fearlessness lies in that you accept to face reality, whatever it is.

**Beyond good and evil**

What makes this kind of honesty possible is removing the notion of judgment - that is, the potential for blame and shame. Step Four is about looking at facts - as opposed to adding overlays of judgment and blame onto them in such a way that the facts become obscured.

There is a big difference between being in Criminal Court and doing Step 4:
- In Criminal Court, the rule is for the indicted person to avoid responsibility.
- In Step 4, your goal is to work toward taking responsibility for what you do.

Why would you do that? It is a logical continuation of the leap of faith described earlier. Your hope is that, whatever you find out about yourself, it will be something that you can live with.

This will lead you to eventually get to know your true self - - and that this might turn out to be a better person than you thought you were!
I take responsibility for my actions.

Original wording (AA):
Admitted to our Higher Power, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
Step Five: No excuses

Step Five is not about saying: "I hurt these people, but that was because they had hurt me first".

Blaming somebody else - no matter how richly they deserve it - is a way of not fully feeling these feelings of hurt and anger, of toning them down. Because, when you blame others, you are putting our attention on what others are doing. In effect, you are saying: "If it weren't for what you did, it wouldn't have happened."

This step is about admitting to yourself what may be difficult for you to admit.

Admit it!

If you think we're being coerced into "taking responsibility", the image that comes to mind is that of the stern interrogator - the cop who's badgering the suspect to confess ("Admit your wrongs!").
In that context, you will tend to see things as a battle of wills against the tough cop. Your goal will then be to avoid admitting anything incriminating.

Step Five is different.

Taking responsibility for what you do is a way to realize that you are an active agent in the world. In other words, you are not powerless, even if you are not yet aware of the ways in which your power manifests, or if you don't like these ways.

As you get more of a sense of your power, you will be able to redirect it to focus on getting more of what you really want out of life.
I see that my knee-jerk reactions have to do with being in the grip of more or less conscious fears.

Original wording (AA):
Were entirely ready to have our Higher Power remove all these defects of character.
Step Six:

Character defenses

We all have character defenses, a whole range of them. Some are pretty innocuous, and some are more problematic. Our character defenses are what provides the material of comedy.

For instance, take a greedy character. You could say greed is a major defect. On the other hand, being greedy can also be seen as a defense against the fear of starvation, of not having enough to live on.

What's a character defense? Something we are accustomed to doing automatically, in order to consciously or unconsciously avoid dealing with something difficult.

Talking about "defense" does not condone the questionable behavior. It just makes it more understandable why people hang on to these behaviors.

You don't use your character defenses because you want to be laughed at. Or because you revel in being
evil. Somehow, at some level, you believe this behavior is a protection against something that you fear a lot.

**Becoming more aware of your fears**

If you pay attention, you’ll notice that you go into a defense behavior when you feel threatened. So, when you are in a very stressful situation, you’ll tend to fall back onto your defenses a lot more than usual.

Step 6 is about getting ready to let go of your character defenses. Which means it’s about realizing how much more important they are to you than you had thought. After all, if they weren't, it wouldn't be such a big thing to change!

So you decide to explore your fears in order to eventually be less governed by your fears and your defensiveness... in order to be more willing to go with the flow instead of automatically resisting.
I strive to find my motivation in a deeper sense of who I really am, rather than fear and defensiveness.

*Original wording (AA)*: Humbly asked our Higher Power to remove our shortcomings.
Step Seven:

The power of choice

In Step 6, you noticed that your actions are often motivated by character defenses. So you are now paying attention to your impulses.

Before you did that, it felt like you had no choice over what you did. Now, as you’re becoming more aware of what is behind your actions, you gain the possibility of making different choices.

The wager you’ve been making is that, as you get more of a sense of wholeness and contentment in your life, the choices you make will be less influenced by your fears and the knee-jerk reactions they induce.

A humbling realization

It is humbling to realize that you have conflicting motivations, and that the most powerful ones are not necessarily the ones you'd be proudest of.

Little by little, you learn that lasting transformation doesn't come through sheer force of will. Rather, it is
a result of slowly observing your inner conflicts and fears, and progressively shifting from fear-based reactions to ones grounded in a deeper, safer sense of self.

As you go through this process, you develop a sense of awe -- something that is akin to what religious people may describe as a prayer, in the sense that praying is about being open rather than about placing an order.

A sense of awe

This is a time when you realize how much you want something to happen, at the very time as you are fully aware that it is beyond your conscious control to have it happen when you want it, the way you want it.

There is a lot of tension in that. You can resolve this tension by pretending you can control something, by having a temper tantrum... or by humbly accepting your lack of control over something that is very important to you.

In a way, you're back at Step One - admitting your stuckness, your powerlessness, your lack of control over things you'd so much want to be able to control.
You let yourself want what you want, even though it's not a sure thing, even though there's a big risk of disappointment. This is quite different from, either deluding yourself that you can control the outcome; or pretending to yourself that you don't really want the result, just because you can't bear to want something that you have no control over.

When you make an effort to be conscious of the impulses behind your actions, and of the choices you have, you are engaged in a spiritual process. You are deeply aware of your human limitations, and at the same time you are connecting with a broader sense of self that helps you go beyond these limitations.
I stop blaming and feeling blamed, with a willingness to heal the wounds.

Original wording (AA):
Made a list of all the people we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
Step Eight:

Pleasure in Revenge

There is great satisfaction in getting revenge for what others did to you. If you can hurt them, in turn, at least you'll stop being a punching bag, you'll show them!

It's understandable that there are people you'd love to hurt even more than you've done so far.

Step 8 is about realizing how much revenge and blame are ingrained in all of us... and starting to walk away from these tendencies.

A different focus

Why is that? As long as you keep blaming others (or feeling susceptible to blame), you cast yourself in the role of a powerless victim. You say you have no power over your actions. You pretend you're such a powerless puppet that even the harmful things you do are other people's responsibility!
You’re following these Proactive Twelve Steps to regain power over the things you can have power over. You may not have much power over other people... but you certainly have power over the way you behave.

If you acknowledge that there is some pleasure in your harming other people, that it is your way of feeling less powerless... then you're no longer stuck on the defensive. You now have a choice between continuing to do the same thing, or moving on.

At some point, you may decide that, while there is some pleasure in revenge, it's not really what you want most out of life... that you'd rather focus on being happy.
I swallow my pride, and sincerely apologize to people I've hurt, except when it would be counterproductive.

*Original wording (AA):*
Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
Step Nine:

**Actual apologies**

There's a difference between Step Eight and Step Nine. It lies in the fact that Step Nine is about actually apologizing.

Instead of being essentially in a conversation with yourself, you are now facing another person. A person you have hurt, and who is probably not favorably disposed toward you.

There is the possibility that this person just doesn't get it, is still very resentful, makes fun of your attempts... Just the thought of it makes it harder to apologize.

It's tempting to think: "What really counts is that I resolved things inside. I figured out what I've done wrong, I've become ready and willing to make apologies.

So why bother actually confronting another person, and submit myself to reactions that are beyond my control?"
The freedom of new beginnings

A big change happens, inside you, after you genuinely apologize to somebody you’ve hurt.

Before you apologize: You can't tell people you are sorry because you feel it would mean admitting you're wrong -- this threatens your position in an unbearable way.

After you apologize: you now see that you can still exist and feel safe in a world in which you have taken the risk of feeling sorry for something you did.

This is what this whole process is about.

When is it appropriate?

It may be quite difficult to figure out when it is appropriate to rock the boat, and when it is inappropriately hurtful to others.

This is OK - welcome to the real world, where choices are not necessarily simple. This is very much the essence of the growing process exemplified by the Serenity Prayer. You want to acquire the wisdom to know the difference between when to accept things
and when to fight for change. You acquire this wisdom through trial and error.

It's useful to think of this Step as a guiding principle, as opposed to a recipe that you must follow blindly. There's no guarantee you'll be absolutely right, beyond reproach, if you follow this step. Instead, you have to figure out how it applies to your situation; this engages your conscious attention and helps you learn by trial and error.

You may be making a mistake in making apologies to people you shouldn't. On the other hand, you may be erring by being too cautious... So, you experiment.

Here's one way to look at it. If apologizing is a way to make you feel smug and superior (like playing a game of "I'm a better person than you"), then it's probably not appropriate. Conversely, it is appropriate when it is a way to build a bridge to the other person, to feel closer.
step ten

I live mindfully, paying attention to the motives and effects of my actions.

Original wording (AA):
Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
Step Ten:

An inner moral compass

Step Ten means staying conscious, aware of what you do in your life. Conscious, aware... as opposed to living in a cloud of denial. Taking responsibility for your actions.

Step Ten is the compass that has you ask: *Did this move help me move toward where I want to go?*

Or, to put it into a more colorful way: How can you expect to soar with eagles if you keep behaving like a turkey?

Ultimately, Step Ten is about keeping in mind who you are and what you want out of life. Admitting being wrong is not about staying in a childlike role - the bad little kid who gets punished for being wrong. It's about noticing where you went off course, and gently putting yourself back on the right track.

This is a good time to revisit earlier steps, about being defensive, about *shoulds*...
This is a process. You have to keep working at it, because your habits are solidly ingrained. Going through this process is not a one-time thing that you do, and then it’s over.

This process is about learning a different way of dealing with life.

As you life goes on, you’ll keep facing the reality of what you do and who you are, and how you want to deal with that.
I stay tuned inside, in touch with a broader sense of who I really am, and a deeper sense of what I really want.

*Original wording (AA):*
Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with our Higher Power as we understood this Higher Power, praying only for knowledge of this Higher Power's will for us and the power to carry that out.
Step Eleven:

**In a nutshell**

This Step is about being able to continue "doing the right thing".

It's about going beyond the tight boundaries of your habits and knee-jerk reactions. "The right thing" is not just that what takes you out of a tight spot. *Doing the right thing* gives you the sense that what you're doing is in harmony with the order of all things.

Suppose you're getting angry at somebody and laying a lot of blame on them at a time when you can get away with it. It may feel good at the moment - it lets you get off steam. But it certainly isn't something that makes you feel especially in harmony with your higher sense of self. Nor is it an action that you're especially proud of yourself for.

This is not a watertight definition of "doing the right thing" - it has a lot of holes. There are ways to improve on it. On the other hand, there is some merit to this lack of precision: This Step is about intuitively
feeling what's right, as opposed to analyzing it with your logical mind.

What is implicit in this Step -- as in the whole Proactive Twelve Steps approach -- is that you are inherently good. All we have to do is let yourself connect with what is good within yourself -- whether you call it God, a Higher Power, or anything else.

**Meditation**

Within this context, meditation is a good way to be in conscious contact with your true Nature, your Life Force, your own inherent goodness.

You can experiment with various forms of meditation -- some techniques may work better for you than others.

The test of what works is that you start to feel how you get to trust your intuition more and more. You see yourself doing the right thing.

What it's about is finding a sense of peace, a sense of space. It's the opposite: of feeling agitation, of rushing around. The opposite of feeling "I can't bear this".
As I feel better about myself, I reach out to others who feel stuck.

Original wording (AA):
Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to other (alcoholics, codependents, people who feel stuck...); and to practice these principles in all our affairs.
Step Twelve:

A different outlook on life

In the original wording of the Step, the expression "spiritual awakening" conveys that something very powerful is happening. It implies that, for all intents and purposes, you are asleep until such a time as you have this awakening. When you're asleep, you may not notice what's happening around you. But you certainly notice the alarm clock that's waking you up.

The world outside doesn't change. What changes is the way you experience it. From feeling powerless and victimized, you now feel more at peace with the world. This is a different perspective, a much broader one.

There are still many things you'll feel powerless about. But you'll have less of a tendency to take the things you are powerless about as a personal insult. You'll tend to get less mired into what frustrates you. And you'll direct more of your energy in directions where you have some power to get what you want.

In other words, you feel better about yourself.
Staying on course

Implicit in the idea of feeling better about yourself is the notion that this will motivate you to stay on course.

Let's say you start a program of physical exercise "to get fit". You won't stay fit unless you keep exercising. And chances are you'll keep exercising if you actually enjoy the exercising itself, as opposed to feeling it's something you have to do only as a means to an end.

This process is not about acquiring anything, other than habits. It's about practicing these habits, one day at a time.

Reaching out

You reach out to others out of altruism... but there is a benefit to yourself as well. Sharing your experience is not about dealing with others from a one-up position ("I know all the answers, and I have to educate others who are less fortunate than I am"). It makes you feel more connected when you to associate with other people who experience similar problems.
Control what you can...
Stop trying to control what you can't.

I seek
the serenity to accept what I cannot change;
the courage to change what I can;
and the wisdom to know the difference.

*Original wording (Reinhold Niebuhr):*
God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things
I cannot change,
Courage to change the
things I can, and the
wisdom to know the difference.
Control is not a dirty word. The problem is when we keep trying to control what we have no business controlling.

This quest is not just about Serenity, it's also about Courage and, most importantly, Wisdom.

It is not just about learning to let go and learning courage. It is about knowing when to fight for change, and when to learn to live with what is.

In other words, blind acceptance of everything is not a virtue any more than indiscriminate fighting is. There is a time and place for each.

Wisdom is not something that is magically, suddenly imparted on us. It is a process.

We acquire wisdom by making decisions. Some of them work out well; some don’t. We learn through trial and error.

Part of the process is granting ourselves the permission to make the mistakes through which we may learn.
The essence of the twelve steps approach is to take our focus away from a specific problem that seems unmanageable, and to bring it to another dimension. This powerful shift is like the "jump into hyperspace" in science-fiction movies.

In traditional twelve steps wording, this "other dimension" is described as "letting God" (or a Higher Power) guide you.

These proactive 12 steps are written without any reference to God or a Higher Power. In this case, the "other dimension" consists in connecting with a larger sense of who you are.

This is not meant to alienate people who see God or Higher Power as a key part of the process, as will also be explained below.

Why remove any mention of God / Higher Power from the Steps?
One reason is that a secular approach is more likely to be understood by people who are not accustomed to turning to God or a Higher Power.

If this were the only reason, it would be a very weak one. These proactive 12 steps would only be some kind of a "lite" version of the "real" steps, and they would only be relevant to those people who "can't stomach the real thing".

What I have found in rewriting the steps is that eliminating the faith element (faith in God or a Higher Power) forced me to pay more attention to describing what actually happens in the process of personal growth (or, at least, my view of it).

The process I describe is one of letting go of dysfunctional habits and ways of thinking, and progressively focusing on the more positive forces within ourselves.

In the steps I describe, there is still a leap of faith. It is faith in the basic resiliency and strength of human nature. All you have to do is think of our basic goodness as a working hypothesis, and be willing to test this hypothesis. Try it, and see if it works for you.
While this approach requires no religious belief, you are of course free to think of this "basic goodness" in divine or religious terms.

If you are religious, I believe you will find these down-to-earth steps a very useful perspective, just the way as a down-to-earth description of the world need not negate, and will often enrich, a religious outlook.

In fact, there can be a convergence of views.

The process I describe is one in which you progressively experience a sense of feeling that you are more than your little ego. This experience is what gives you the strength to overcome the dysfunctional habits and be pulled toward fulfilling your life-affirming needs.

This experience can be described as feeling one's Inner Power... but it could also be described as feeling one's Higher Power. All it takes is thinking of Higher Power as a state that we experience, as opposed to a being that is outside of ourselves.
about

Serge Prengel helps people make the changes they need, in their life, work and relationships. He engages your creativity: your ability to see things in a different way, and to turn insight into action. He works from his office in New York City, or by phone.

website

All the contents of this e-book are on the web:
www.ProactiveChange.com/12steps

The website also provides:
- Frequently Asked Questions
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