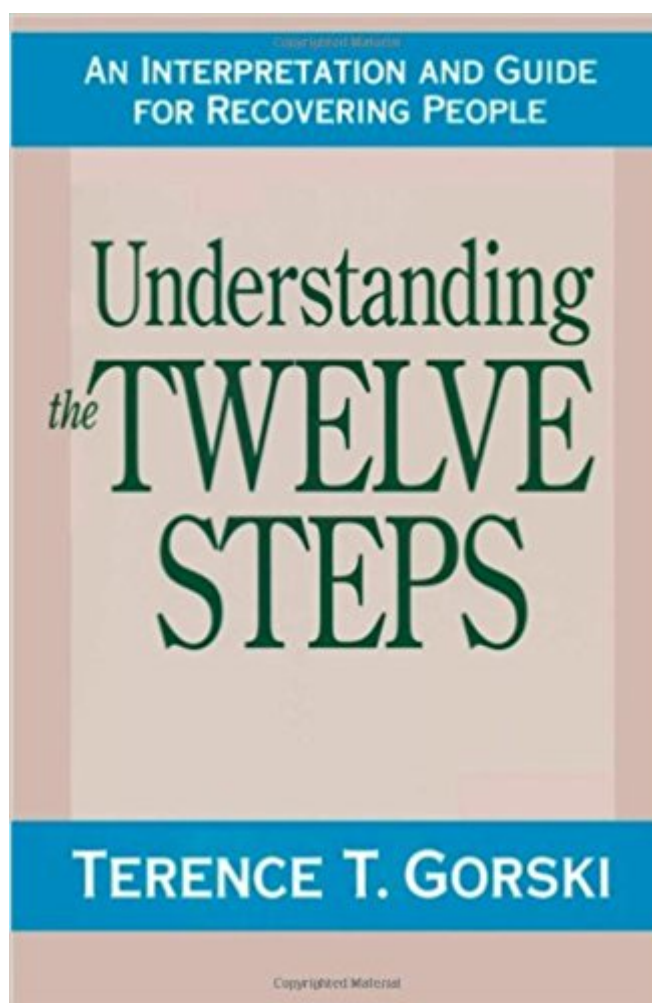


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# Understanding The Twelve Steps: An Interpretation And Guide For Recovering



## Synopsis

Millions of people have transformed their lives by working the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Their success has come from their ability to truly understand these principles and to apply them in their daily lives. Yet for many embarking on the road to recovery, the Steps can seem vague, even confusing. This practical, no-nonsense guide takes the mystery out of the Twelve Steps, presenting a straightforward explanation of what each step means, as well as examples of how it translates to real life. Written by a certified alcoholism and drug abuse counselor with more than twenty years of experience, it offers a wealth of wisdom, knowledge, and genuine support for anyone in recovery. Understanding the Twelve Steps features: Clear, easy-to-understand interpretation of the Twelve Steps -- the vital building blocks of recovery Checklists that summarize the tasks and objectives of each step The Twelve Promises -- the positive changes you can expect in your life if you follow the Twelve Steps What happens at Twelve Step meetings and why it is important to have a sponsor The experiences, strength, and hope of other recovering people

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## Customer Reviews

Terence T. Gorski is the president of The CENAPS Corporation, a training and consultation firm specializing in recovery from addictive disease and relapse prevention therapy. He is a popular speaker and conducts training and workshops in more than twenty different cities each year. Mr. Gorski is the author of numerous books, audio, and video tapes, including *Passages Through Recovery -- An Action Plan for Preventing Relapse*, *Staying Sober -- A Guide for Relapse*

Prevention, The Staying Sober Work-book, and How to Start Relapse Prevention Support Groups. He is the clinical director of the National Relapse Prevention Certification School, which trains counselors and therapists in relapse prevention therapy methods.

**Chapter 1 WHAT IS A TWELVE STEP PROGRAM?** This book describes the single, most effective program for the treatment of alcoholism. That program, of course, is Alcoholics Anonymous, best known as A.A. Alcoholics Anonymous is a worldwide fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other in an effort to recover from alcoholism. It is a voluntary fellowship. No one is forced to belong, but millions of voluntary members benefit greatly from their involvement. If you want to make Twelve Step programs work for you, you need to understand the fellowship of A.A. and how to work with it. This book is intended to help you do just that. Many people find the miracle of sobriety by working the Twelve Steps. Since nothing else has worked for them, many believe that the Steps are mystical and magical, and, as a result, these same persons fail to search for and identify the underlying principles that make them work. Working the Steps can create the miracle of sobriety, but the miracle isn't magic. The miracle occurs because working the Twelve Steps allows people to use powerful principles of recovery. Those who are willing to dig beneath the surface and truly understand the principles upon which the Steps are based are better able to use the principles in their lives. The primary purpose of A.A. is to help alcoholics stop drinking. It was never intended to be all things to all people; however, A.A. recognizes that the Twelve Steps can help people with other problems. Thus, it allows organizations such as Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Marijuana Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and others to use its Steps and principles. These related fellowships are developing as separate organizations so that A.A. can keep its primary focus on helping alcoholics to stop drinking. A.A. is based upon a program of Twelve Steps to recovery that act as a personal guide to sobriety, and Twelve Traditions that act as guiding principles or bylaws for A.A. as a whole. Knowledge of the Twelve Steps is of critical importance to all recovering people for two reasons: (1) The Steps work if you work them, and (2) Twelve Step programs are inexpensive and readily available in most communities. As a result, they are the most widely used lifeline for people recovering from chemical dependence, codependence, and other compulsive or addictive disorders.

**A.A. AS A NONPROFESSIONAL GROUP** As a result of the Traditions, A.A. is and shall forever remain nonprofessional. There are no medical professionals, as such, involved in designing or running A.A. or other Twelve Step programs. Although medical professionals do join as members, they have no more or no less influence on the organization than other members. Twelve

Step programs do not provide medical or psychiatric treatment or psychotherapy. If you are involved in any Twelve Step program that has a psychotherapist in charge who runs it like a therapy group, be cautious. You are probably not at a Twelve Step meeting. This situation rarely, if ever, occurs in A.A.; however, it does happen in some of the newer Twelve Step programs. If you are attending a Twelve Step meeting that is run by a psychotherapist who individually counsels the members, it is not a Twelve Step meeting; it is a therapy group. It is important to learn the difference, because Twelve Step meetings are based on the Twelve Steps of A.A. and the leaders act in a nonprofessional role. A.A. members help themselves and others to stay sober. Members can be assured that they are not going to be solicited for donations or asked to get involved in anything else. Individual members of A.A. do have the right to participate in any religion, political forum, or cause that they wish. There are no restrictions. But they are not allowed to present themselves as A.A. members or to bring the name of A.A. into any controversy.

### LEVELS OF TWELVE STEP INVOLVEMENT

Nobody is forced to do anything in A.A. It is one of the few organizations I know that supports the inherent constitutional right to do what we want. There is no coercion to participate on any level. If you want to belong, that's fine. You are welcome to attend meetings and work the Steps. If you don't want to belong, that's also fine. For most members, however, their involvement progresses through a number of levels. At the first level, they attend meetings. At the second, they read Twelve Step literature and discuss it with other members of the program. At the third level, they get a sponsor who can show them how the program works. At the fourth level, they start working the Twelve Steps. As members start to grow and change -- a result of attending meetings and working the Steps -- they are ready to move to a fifth level of involvement and begin sponsoring others. After they gain experience as sponsors, they are then ready for the sixth level of involvement, general service work, guided by A.A.'s Twelve Traditions, the set of principles that act as bylaws. General service work is designed to benefit A.A. as a whole. Notice the progression: Individuals help themselves first, then they help other people in the program, then they help the program as a whole. In summary, the levels of involvement are as follows:

1. Attending meetings
2. Reading and discussing A.A. literature
3. Getting a sponsor
4. Working the Twelve Steps
5. Sponsoring others
6. Service guided by the Traditions

**Attending Meetings** You start working a Twelve Step program by regularly attending meetings. In A.A. it is said, "If you bring the body, the mind will follow," because the Twelve Step program rubs off on people if they hang around long enough. Attending meetings isn't a passive process. Working a program means you need to get actively involved, participating at the meetings you attend. The easiest way to take part is to say, "I pass" -- a perfectly acceptable remark. No one in a Twelve Step program is obligated to say more. Most people, however, want to

say more because they find it both enjoyable and beneficial. The more open and honest your comments, the faster you get well. There is a joke that asks, "What is the difference between a drunk and an alcoholic?" Answer: "A drunk doesn't have to go to meetings; an alcoholic does!" A.A. stresses the importance of attending meetings, especially during the first three months of sobriety. Many members suggest attending ninety meetings in ninety days. By doing "ninety in ninety," beginners receive an intense exposure to the Twelve Step program and the people who use it. The principle that underlies doing "ninety in ninety" is a simple one -- the more meetings you attend early on, the greater your chances of long-term recovery. There is no rule, of course, that you have to attend exactly ninety meetings in the first ninety days; go as often as your lifestyle allows. But keep in mind that the more meetings you attend, the faster you will get well. Many members complain about having to attend meetings, but those who recover keep going even when they don't feel like it. You don't have to like going to meetings, you just have to keep going. Meetings are the lifeline to sobriety. When you attend meetings, you take a needed time-out from an alcohol- and drug-centered world and remind yourself that you are an alcoholic, cannot safely use alcohol and other drugs, and that you need the fellowship of other sober alcoholics to stay sober.

**Reading Twelve Step Literature** The second level of involvement is to read Twelve Step literature and discuss your reactions, both positive and negative, with other members. The early members of A.A. identified the basic principles needed to get sober and stay that way. They compiled that information in two books -- *Alcoholics Anonymous* (often called the Big Book) and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. Both books are available from the central office of Alcoholics Anonymous in New York City. These books provide the basic principles needed to begin living the sober life.

**Getting a Sponsor** After you feel comfortable going to meetings, making comments, and reading the basic literature, the third level of involvement is to get a sponsor. A sponsor is another member of the Twelve Step program who has more experience at recovery than you do. In order to get a sponsor, you must have participated in the program long enough to get to know people. Listen to the comments of others. Try to find someone you respect and admire, someone who knows more than you do about the program and can show you the ropes. In the business world, a sponsor is called a mentor. When you find such a person and ask him or her to be your sponsor, you are in essence asking, "Would you be willing to spend time with me and teach me how you work the program?" There's a slogan in the Twelve Step program: "If you want what we have, you do what we did." And it's primarily in the sponsorship relationship that this principle comes alive. You find a sponsor who has the type of recovery you would like to have, ask him to teach you what steps he took, and then try to do those things in your recovery. A therapist does not take the place of a sponsor. You need a

Twelve Step sponsor even if you have the best therapist in the world. A good therapist will encourage recovering people to become involved in Twelve Step programs and to get a sponsor. As a therapist, I don't mandate Twelve Step attendance, but I do strongly encourage it. If someone refuses to attend even one meeting to see what the organization is all about, I may say, "If you're not willing to go to Twelve Step meetings, I'm not willing to treat you. Why? Because if you're not willing to go and find out what Twelve Step programs involve, I don't think you really want to do what's necessary to recover." I base this attitude on an A.A. slogan: "We must be willing to go to any lengths to get sober." If you are not willing to clear a few evenings and attend some meetings, I question your willingness to do what is necessary to recover.

**Work the Steps** Once you have a solid relationship with a good sponsor, you move to the fourth level: working the Twelve Steps. Step work under the guidance of a sponsor is literally the heart and soul of most Twelve Step programs, and the bulk of this book deals with how to work the Steps. Members who go to meetings but refuse to work the Steps are not really working the program. To quote the Big Book, "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." People who genuinely want to recover do more than just go to meetings: They work the Steps under the guidance of their sponsor. Those who are not serious about recovery don't work the steps. It's just that simple.

**Sponsoring Others** By attending meetings, reading Twelve Step literature, talking frequently with sponsors, and working the Steps, you begin to grow and change. The program will start to transform you. As you learn and grow, you need to reach out and start giving back to others what has been given to you so freely. In short, it is time to move onto the fifth level and begin sponsoring others.

**Sponsorship** has two purposes: to help yourself and to help the person you sponsor. It is important to remember that you sponsor others in order to help yourself. You are in no way responsible for the recovery or relapse of the people you sponsor. The primary goal is to share freely your own experience, strength, and hope, and by doing so, you help yourself and may help the person you are sponsoring. But there are no guarantees.

A.A. is a selfish program: Recovering people help others in order to help themselves. This attitude is clearly summed up in an A.A. slogan: "In order to keep it, you have to give it away." By pairing with someone who is less experienced with the Twelve Steps than you are, and by trying to help him or her, you gain new insights into your own recovery. When I first started teaching courses on counseling, I realized how much I didn't know. I became motivated to learn more. The same is true in sponsorship. When you try to answer the questions of a newcomer, you become aware of your own ignorance. You gain the courage to stretch and to grow. When someone you are sponsoring asks you a question and you don't know the answer, it is time to go to your own sponsor. By helping others, we have been forced to learn. The formula is simple: Attend meetings, work the Steps, have

a sponsor, and sponsor others.

**Service Guided by the Traditions**

The sixth level of involvement is service guided by the Traditions. Every organization needs bylaws, and Twelve Step programs are no exception. The twelve fundamental bylaws that govern the operation of Twelve Step programs are called the Traditions. There is a need to maintain the organization of a Twelve Step program in order to make sure that the program continues to be available to help others. It is important to keep first things first. Service work is secondary to working the Steps and learning how to stay comfortable in recovery. But once A.A. members have a firm handle on their own recovery, service work is important to ensure the survival of the organization as a whole.

**IN ORDER TO KEEP IT, YOU HAVE TO GIVE IT AWAY**

Father Joseph Martin, the creator of the film Chalk Talk and cofounder of the Ashley treatment center in Havre de Grace, Maryland, told me this story of A.A.'s cofounder, Bill Wilson. Bill tried to stay sober all by himself for a long period of time, but he could never manage more than a few weeks of sobriety. Then he had this crazy notion that maybe he could help himself stay sober by helping other people to stay sober. The first approach Bill tried was what I call the "scrape them off the bar stool" approach. He talked to all of his friends with drinking problems and tried to convince them to stop. Basically, he went on a crusade to sober up drunks. Six months later, he told his wife, Lois, "I've failed. I've been trying to help alcoholics now for six months, and I haven't helped one person to get sober." Lois looked at him and said, "Bill, you're wrong. You have helped someone. You haven't had a drink in six months." Thus, one of the first principles of A.A. was born. It is summarized in the slogan, "In order to keep it, you have to give it away." The benefit of A.A. is that its members, recovering people in Twelve Step programs, get well by helping others to get well. By trying to help others, people in recovery transcend their own selfishness; they interrupt the self-centeredness that is central to most addictions and compulsions. By trying to help others, addicts no longer remain the central part of their own personal addictive network. They begin to expand their world beyond the tip of their nose. In doing so, they find new values to govern their lives.

**A.A. provides a number of crystal-clear guidelines:** Don't drink, go to meetings, get a sponsor, work the Steps. Beyond these basics, there is a lot of ambiguity. After reading A.A. literature or attending a meeting, it is common for a member to scratch his or her head and ask, "What does that mean?" Part of the power of A.A. lies in this ambiguity, which forces people to provide their own meaning when working the program. Recovering people must make up their own minds and decide what the A.A. principles mean for them. One of the hallmarks of A.A. is that it's a "selfish" program. Members decide for themselves what they take out of the meetings. Nobody tells them what their experience is. They take what fits them and they leave the rest.

**THE TRADITIONS**

Knowledge of the Traditions is important because these simple bylaws protect A.A. as

a whole. The First Tradition reads: "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." If the Fellowship of A.A. is destroyed, nobody gets sober. So when any decisions are made about A.A. as a whole, the common welfare of the organization is the primary concern. The Second Tradition is: "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority -- a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern." There are no leaders of A.A. Each group is governed by group conscience, the consensus of the group. The leaders in A.A. are but trusted servants of this group conscience. Since there is no centralized leadership, anyone who chooses to become active can influence the group. The organizational structure has but one purpose: to determine what the group conscience is and to act accordingly. The Third Tradition is: "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking." Anyone who says, "I want to stop drinking" can get in. That's the only requirement. The Fourth Tradition reads: "Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole." Each group is autonomous and operates based upon its own group conscience. If you attend an A.A. meeting and don't like what is going on, you can call a group conscience meeting and discuss the situation. If you are in a minority and nobody else wants to do what you want to do, you have a right to go and start your own A.A. meeting someplace else. The Fifth Tradition states: "Each group has but one primary purpose -- to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers." Notice that the Tradition specifies "alcoholic

A great book for newcomers to the AA program. As a therapist working with recovering people, I find this book to be a tremendous asset in explaining the dynamic of the 12 steps as the author sees them. In addition his anecdotes and humor make this a great read. My clients all report enjoying this book as well as gaining insights from it. I highly recommend it.

As an alcoholic, I have the book "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions", but that book simply states what these concepts ARE, not how to work them or apply them to your life. This book proved to be a great workbook and a handy reference. My favorite part of the book is the explanation of the Twelve Promises, in the back. The first time I read the promises I thought they were total bunk - I couldn't see how they could ever apply. Well, after reading the explanation of the promises in this book, the light went on and it inspired not only me but others I have shared this with. I scanned a copy of just the promises and gave it to a newcomer, and she sought me out at the next meeting to tell me that it was perfect - it reminded her of just what she really wanted in her life and what she was working towards. Inspiring, to say the least.



Anyone in recovery knows the 12 steps can be interpreted with many different twists. Having the insight of a well known and well respected addiction therapist on what is required for each of the 12 steps is very helpful. There is a chapter devoted to each step and at the end there is an itemized list of what makes up a successful step. I found that very helpful.

Terence T. Gorski, an internationally recognized expert in the field of addiction treatment, has written numerous books on recovery and the disease of addiction. He is renowned for his groundbreaking research in relapse prevention, and he is a terrific educator. In "Understanding the Twelve Steps," Gorski delivers clearly defined, rational, effective instruction for anyone who is in recovery. No matter whether you are three days or thirty years sober, this book will educate you, motivate you, and inspire you to get the absolute most out of your life in recovery. I first read this book at fourteen years sober, and I learned valuable lessons that thrilled me. I have given this book as a gift to friends who are in early recovery, and they enthusiastically tell me how much it helped them to ground themselves in sobriety and to create a new lifestyle. Thank you Terence Gorski for writing this book! From Marti MacGibbon, ACRPS, CADC-II, author of the memoir, "Never Give in to Fear: Laughing All the Way Up from Rock Bottom."

Thank you

The Kindle edition on my ipad is ideal for travel.

My grandson is recovering from drug addiction. I had read the 7 step book but wasn't sure what to expect until I read this book. Helps you understand what is expected at each step.

This book helped me link much closer with my spouse. I read it first, and made many notes of things I could change, or begin. Then she read it. Wow! Did our dedication to each other increase! We have been married for 39 years, and have finally been able to sit down and discuss things each of us can change in order to have another 39 years making each other happier!

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