

# Step Five for the Adult Child

Adult Children of Alcoholics · The Recovery Files

From Secrets to Freedom: An Integrated Approach to Disclosure in Recovery

ACoA Step 5: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

Your progress 0 of 5 parts done · SUD Recovery · Accountability for harm caused · ACoA Healing · Compassion for wounds received · Integrated Liberation · Both truths spoken, witnessed, and healed

## In this workbook

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Each reading is followed by its check-in questions and exercises, in the same order as the app. Your scored results are shown in the app.

## PART 1 OF 4 · READING

## Understanding Step Five: The Dual Journey of ACoA and SUD Recovery

Step Five states: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." For someone navigating both substance use disorder recovery and the wounds of growing up in an alcoholic or dysfunctional family, this step carries a complexity that is rarely acknowledged in traditional treatment settings.

In standard SUD treatment, Step Five is often presented as a straightforward disclosure: you completed your Fourth Step inventory, now you share it with another person. The focus is typically on admitting the wrongs you committed — the lies, the manipulation, the harm caused during active addiction. This is valid and essential work. But for the Adult Child of an Alcoholic (ACoA) who also struggles with substance use, Step Five involves a much more intricate emotional landscape.

Here is the central tension: as Tony A., the founder of ACA, observed — the traditional AA steps were designed for perpetrators. They were designed for people who had done harm and needed to take accountability. But Adult Children of Alcoholics are also victims. They were harmed as children — through abuse, neglect, chaos, emotional abandonment, or the pervasive unpredictability of an alcoholic home.

When an ACoA with substance use disorder sits down to do Step Five, they face a unique challenge: they must simultaneously own the wrongs they committed during active addiction AND acknowledge the wrongs that were committed against them in childhood. They must hold both truths without using one to cancel out the other.

"I was neglected as a child" does not erase "I neglected my own children during active addiction." But neither does "I hurt people when I was using" erase the reality that "I was hurt profoundly by people who were supposed to protect me."

This dual-lens Step Five requires a both/and approach rather than an either/or. You are both a person who has caused harm and a person who was harmed. You are both accountable for your choices in addiction and deserving of compassion for the childhood that preceded your addiction.

For many ACoAs, the family system taught a powerful unspoken rule: "We don't talk about what happens in this house." The alcoholic family operates on secrecy, denial, and image management. Children learn early that honesty is dangerous, that truth-telling is punished, and that the appearance of normalcy must be maintained at all costs.

Step Five directly challenges this foundational programming. It asks you to do the exact thing your survival instincts tell you never to do: tell the truth about your family, about yourself, and about what really happened.

Understanding this dual dimension — the SUD recovery need for accountability and the ACoA need for witnessed truth — transforms Step Five from a dreaded obligation into a profound act of integration. It becomes the moment where the addiction story and the family story finally meet, where both halves of your experience are held together and spoken aloud, and where genuine

healing of both wounds can begin.

### Reflection Questions

1. Do you identify as both someone who has caused harm AND someone who was harmed? How has holding both truths been challenging for you?

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2. What "family rules" about secrecy and silence were you taught growing up? How do those rules affect your willingness to do Step Five?

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3. Have you noticed that your fear of disclosure feels more like a child's fear than an adult's rational concern? What does that tell you?

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4. In your recovery work so far, has the focus been primarily on YOUR wrongs or have you also been given space to acknowledge what was done TO you? Which has been neglected?

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5. What would it mean for your recovery if Step Five could address both your addiction accountability and your childhood wounds in an integrated way?

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### CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 5

#### Step Five Readiness & Willingness

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I have identified a specific person I trust enough to hear my Fifth Step

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I understand that the purpose of Step Five is freedom, not punishment  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I am willing to include both my wrongs AND what was done to me in my disclosure  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I believe that bringing secrets into the light can reduce their power over me  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I am willing to experience discomfort in order to achieve genuine relief  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I understand that Step Five is about the "exact nature" of my wrongs, not a list of every wrong act  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I am prepared to be honest about patterns — not just incidents  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I have some hope that sharing my truth will contribute to my recovery and healing  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

#### YOUR EXERCISE

### Dual-Lens Inventory

Wrongs Done AND Wrongs Received

#### Honesty & Deception

SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

What lies did I tell during active addiction? Who did I deceive and how?

ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

When did I learn that lying was necessary for survival? What truths was I punished for telling as a child?

SUD Accountability: What lies/deceptions during addiction...

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ACoA Context: What shaped this pattern in childhood...

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Integration: How do you see the connection between what happened to you and what you did?

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## Relationships & Intimacy

### SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

How did my addiction damage my relationships? What trust did I break?

### ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

What healthy relationship models did I have growing up? How did the alcoholic home teach me to do relationships?

SUD Accountability:

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ACoA Context:

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Integration:

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## Emotional Expression

### SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

How did I use substances to avoid feeling? What emotions am I most afraid of?

### ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

What emotions were allowed in my home growing up? What happened when I cried, got angry, or expressed need?

SUD Accountability:

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ACoA Context:

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Integration:

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### **Control & Powerlessness**

SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

Where did I try to control what I could not control? What was the cost?

ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

Did I develop controlling behaviors as a way to manage the chaos of my childhood? What was I trying to control then?

SUD Accountability:

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ACoA Context:

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Integration:

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## PART 2 OF 4 · READING

## The Laundry List Connection: How ACoA Traits Shape Your Step Five

In 1978, Tony A. wrote what would become known as "The Laundry List" — 14 characteristics commonly observed in Adult Children of Alcoholics. These traits were survival adaptations: brilliant strategies that helped a child navigate the chaos, unpredictability, and emotional danger of an alcoholic home. But carried into adulthood and recovery, these same traits become significant barriers to honest disclosure and authentic connection.

"We became isolated and afraid of people and authority figures." Step Five requires approaching another human being — often a sponsor, counselor, or clergy member who may represent authority — and making yourself completely vulnerable. For the ACoA, this can activate profound fear.

"We became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process." ACoAs may approach Step Five not with the goal of honest disclosure but with the goal of managing the listener's perception. This "performance disclosure" — telling a carefully managed version of your truth — is one of the most common ways ACoAs unconsciously sabotage their own Step Five.

"We are frightened by angry people and any personal criticism." If your Fifth Step listener asks probing questions or reflects back patterns you haven't acknowledged, the ACoA may interpret this as criticism and shut down.

"We either become alcoholics, marry them, or both." This trait reveals the direct pipeline between ACoA experience and substance use disorder. Step Five must address this connection explicitly: how the family dysfunction created the conditions for addiction.

"We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and it is easier for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves." In inventory and disclosure, this manifests as taking responsibility for everything — including things that were never yours to own.

"We get guilt feelings when we stand up for ourselves instead of giving in to others." The act of telling your truth — especially the parts that implicate family members — can trigger overwhelming guilt. The ACoA may feel that speaking honestly about parental alcoholism or abuse is a betrayal, not recognizing that the original betrayal was the parent's, not the child's truth-telling.

Each Laundry List trait represents a potential filter that can distort your Step Five experience. Awareness of these filters doesn't eliminate them, but it does allow you to notice when they are operating and make conscious choices about how to proceed.

### Reflection Questions

1. Which Laundry List traits do you most identify with? How have they specifically affected your willingness or ability to be honest about your life?

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2. Have you ever engaged in "performance disclosure" — sharing a managed version of your truth rather than the raw reality? What were you trying to protect?

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3. Do you notice a pattern of over-owning responsibility for things that were not your fault? Can you identify specific examples?

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4. Does the idea of speaking honestly about your family of origin trigger guilt? What "family loyalty" programming is activated?

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5. How has your ACoA experience directly contributed to your substance use? Can you trace the pipeline from childhood adaptation to adult addiction?

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#### CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 5

#### Distorted Responsibility & Self-Blame

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I take responsibility for things that happened to me as a child as though I caused them

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I struggle to distinguish between my wrongs and the wrongs done TO me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I feel guilty for being angry at my parents or caregivers, even when the anger is justified  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I minimize the abuse, neglect, or dysfunction I experienced growing up  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I tend to over-own my part in conflicts while letting others off the hook  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. When doing inventory, I focus almost exclusively on what I did wrong and skip what was done to me  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I believe that admitting I was hurt is the same as making excuses or playing the victim  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I confuse being accountable for my behavior with being responsible for everything that happened in my family  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

**CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 5****Inner Child Wounds in Step Five**

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. When I think about sharing my story, I feel like a scared child rather than a capable adult  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I notice that certain topics trigger an age-regression — I feel small, helpless, or frozen  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I have grief about my childhood that I have never fully acknowledged or processed  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I notice that my adult relationships repeat patterns from my family of origin  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I struggle with an inner critic that tells me I am fundamentally defective  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I have difficulty identifying what I actually feel versus what I think I should feel  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I use the same survival strategies I developed as a child (people-pleasing, isolation, control, humor)  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I have never been truly witnessed — no one has heard my full story from childhood through addiction  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

**YOUR EXERCISE**

## Laundry List & Step Five Connection Map

How ACoA Traits Filter Your Disclosure

### **"We became isolated and afraid of people and authority figures."**

SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

In traditional Step Five, this trait may not be explicitly addressed.

ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

Fear of approaching a listener, especially one who represents authority. Avoiding Step Five altogether by isolating.

How strongly does this trait operate in your life (1-5)?

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How has it affected your honesty or disclosure in recovery?

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How might you counteract it during Step Five?

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### **"We became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process."**

SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

The focus is on your wrongs and your disclosure.

ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

"Performance disclosure" — editing your truth to maintain the listener's approval. Sharing what sounds good rather than what is real.

How strongly does this trait operate?

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How has it affected your honesty?

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How might you counteract it?

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**"We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility."**

SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

Accountability for your part in harms.

ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

Over-owning in inventory — claiming wrongs that were actually survival responses or someone else's dysfunction.

How strongly does this trait operate?

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How has it affected your honesty?

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How might you counteract it?

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**"We get guilt feelings when we stand up for ourselves."**

SUD RECOVERY PERSPECTIVE

Owning your part requires standing up for honest truth.

ACoA / FAMILY DYSFUNCTION PERSPECTIVE

Feeling guilty for telling the truth about family members. Experiencing disclosure about parental alcoholism as "betrayal."

How strongly does this trait operate?

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How has it affected your honesty?

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How might you counteract it?

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### **Laundry List Summary**

Which three traits are most active in YOUR life? How do they work together to block honest disclosure?

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Can you see how these traits were originally survival strategies? What purpose did they serve?

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Write a statement acknowledging the traits while committing to honest disclosure: "I notice [trait] operating, AND I choose to [honest action] anyway."

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### **YOUR EXERCISE**

## **Family Rules That Block Disclosure**

## Identifying the Invisible Rules You Still Obey

### "Don't Talk"

Family problems stay in the family. What happens here stays here. Never air dirty laundry.

IMPACT: Step Five directly violates this rule by asking you to talk about everything.

How was this rule enforced in YOUR family? What happened when it was broken?

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Do you still obey this rule today? How does it show up in your recovery?

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Write a counter-statement: "I choose to talk, even though my family taught silence because..."

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### "Don't Trust"

People will hurt you if you let them in. Never depend on anyone. Keep your guard up. IMPACT:

Step Five requires trusting another person with your most vulnerable truths.

How was this rule enforced?

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Do you still obey it today?

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Counter-statement:

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**"Don't Feel"**

Emotions are dangerous. Stay strong. Don't cry. Don't be angry. Don't need anything. IMPACT: Step Five surfaces intense emotions and asks you to sit with them in another's presence.

How was this rule enforced?

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Do you still obey it today?

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Counter-statement:

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**"Loyalty Above Truth"**

Family comes first. You never betray family. Telling the truth about us IS betrayal. IMPACT: An honest Step Five may include truths about family members that the loyalty rule says you must never speak.

How was this rule enforced?

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Do you still obey it today?

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Counter-statement: "Speaking the truth about my family is NOT betrayal because..."

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**YOUR EXERCISE****Inner Child Letter**

What the Child Needs to Say — And What the Child Needs to Hear

**Part 1: Letter FROM Your Inner Child**

Close your eyes for a moment. Remember yourself as a child in your family home. Picture the child you were — the age when things were hardest. Now let that child speak. Write a letter from that child to someone safe.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_, I need to tell you what it was like. I need you to know that... (Let the child speak freely — about what happened, how it felt, what they needed, what they never got, what they're afraid of...)

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**Part 2: Letter TO Your Inner Child**

Now write back to the child. As your compassionate adult self, respond to what the child said. Provide the witnessing, validation, and protection that the child never received.

Dear little one, I hear you. I want you to know that... (Acknowledge the child's pain. Validate their experience. Tell them what they needed to hear. Promise them safety now.)

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**Part 3: What the Child Needs Included in Step Five**

What parts of the child's story have NEVER been spoken aloud to another person?

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What does the child need the Step Five listener to understand about what happened in your family?

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What is the child most afraid will happen if these truths are spoken?

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Write one sentence the child has been carrying alone that MUST be part of your Step Five.

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#### YOUR EXERCISE

### ACoA to Addiction Pipeline

Tracing the Patterns from Childhood to Substance Use

#### Emotional Neglect → People-Pleasing → Substance Use

Childhood: Emotional neglect / invisibility. Adaptation: People-pleasing, approval-seeking, losing identity. Addiction: Using substances to fill the emptiness, to feel something, to become someone.

Does this pattern apply to your life? Describe YOUR version of this pipeline: "In MY childhood... I adapted by... I used substances to..."

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#### Chaos & Unpredictability → Hypervigilance → Substance Use

Childhood: Chaos and unpredictability. Adaptation: Hypervigilance, control, or addiction to excitement. Addiction: Using substances to manage anxiety or replicate familiar chaos.

YOUR version of this pipeline:

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#### Abuse/Trauma → Dissociation → Substance Use

Childhood: Physical or emotional abuse. Adaptation: Hypervigilance, dissociation, rage, fawning. Addiction: Using substances to numb trauma responses, manage flashbacks, or access emotions.

YOUR version of this pipeline:

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### **"Don't Talk, Don't Trust, Don't Feel" → Isolation → Substance Use**

Childhood: The family rules of silence. Adaptation: Isolation, emotional suppression, distrust of others. Addiction: Using substances as the only way to feel, the only "trusted" companion.

YOUR version of this pipeline:

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### **Shame-Based Identity → Self-Hatred → Substance Use**

Childhood: "You're the problem." Adaptation: Self-hatred, perfectionism, chronic guilt. Addiction: Using substances to escape the unbearable weight of feeling defective.

YOUR version of this pipeline:

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Overall: What is the most important connection you see between your ACoA experience and your substance use?

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## PART 3 OF 4 · READING

## The Science of Disclosure: What Happens When Secrets Are Spoken

The therapeutic value of Step Five — disclosing your truth to another person — is not merely spiritual or philosophical. It is supported by substantial neuroscientific and psychological research that demonstrates measurable changes in the brain, the body, and the immune system when secrets are shared.

Dr. James Pennebaker's research demonstrated that actively concealing significant personal experiences requires sustained physiological effort. The body treats secret-keeping as a form of chronic stress — maintaining inhibition requires constant neurological work, elevating cortisol levels, suppressing immune function, and maintaining the autonomic nervous system in a state of low-grade activation. In simple terms: keeping secrets is physically exhausting, even when you don't consciously feel the effort.

Pennebaker's research further demonstrated that disclosing these experiences — in writing or to another person — produced measurable improvements in physical health, including enhanced immune function, decreased physician visits, improved liver enzyme function, and reduced blood pressure.

When you do Step Five and speak these experiences aloud to another person, you initiate a neurological process that Dr. Matthew Lieberman's research at UCLA has called "affect labeling." Lieberman's fMRI studies showed that the simple act of putting feelings into words — saying "I feel ashamed" rather than simply experiencing undifferentiated distress — decreased activation in the amygdala (the brain's threat-detection center) and increased activation in the prefrontal cortex. Naming the emotion literally calms the alarm system.

The presence of another person during disclosure adds an additional neurological dimension. Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory explains that the human nervous system is profoundly regulated by social engagement. When you share vulnerable experiences with a safe, attuned person — someone who listens without judgment, maintains warm eye contact, and responds with acceptance — your nervous system receives signals of safety.

For ACoAs, this co-regulation is especially powerful because many grew up without it. In the alcoholic home, the child's distress was often met with dismissal, punishment, or the parent's own dysregulation. The nervous system never learned that sharing distress with another person could result in comfort rather than danger. Step Five, done in the presence of a safe listener, provides what many ACoAs never received: the experience of being fully known and not rejected.

The research also illuminates why partial disclosure provides only partial relief. The brain recognizes when inhibition is still active. As long as significant material remains concealed, the physiological cost of secret-keeping continues. The more specifically and completely the truth is spoken, the more complete the neurological and physiological release.

### Reflection Questions

1. Have you noticed the physical cost of secret-keeping in your own body? What symptoms do you experience — tension, insomnia, digestive problems, fatigue, chronic pain?

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2. Does understanding the neuroscience of disclosure change how you think about Step Five? Does it feel less like a spiritual obligation and more like a health necessity?

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3. Have you ever experienced the relief that comes from telling someone a truth you had been holding? What happened in your body when the secret was released?

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4. As an ACoA, did you grow up with a safe person who could receive your distress? If not, how has this affected your ability to trust the Step Five process?

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5. What childhood secrets are still being held in your nervous system as unprocessed threat? What would it mean to finally speak them aloud?

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#### CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 5

### Secret-Keeping & Shame Burden

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I carry secrets about my past that I have never told anyone

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I believe that if people knew the real me, they would reject me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I learned in childhood that family business stays in the family — no exceptions  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I feel physically ill or anxious at the thought of sharing my deepest truths  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I have things I did during active addiction that I have never spoken aloud  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I believe some of my experiences are too shameful to share with another person  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I carry guilt about things that happened TO me as a child, as though they were my fault  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I have constructed a "public self" that is significantly different from my private reality  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

### YOUR EXERCISE

## Shame Versus Guilt Inventory

Separating What You Did from Who You Are

### Understanding the Difference

Guilt says "I DID something bad." Shame says "I AM something bad." Guilt is about behavior. Shame is about identity. Guilt motivates repair. Shame motivates hiding. You confess guilt. You heal shame.

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### Addiction Guilt (What You Did)

Guilt #1: "I did \_\_\_\_ " (specific action during addiction)

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Guilt #2: "I did \_\_\_\_ "

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Guilt #3: "I did \_\_\_\_ "

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### **Addiction Shame (Who You Believe You Are)**

Shame #1: "I am \_\_\_\_ " (identity belief)

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Shame #2: "I am \_\_\_\_ "

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Shame #3: "I am \_\_\_\_ "

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### **Childhood Shame — What Was Absorbed**

What messages about your worth did you receive in your family of origin?

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Did you learn that you were "too much" or "not enough"? How was this communicated?

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Can you identify shame beliefs you carry that were installed BEFORE your addiction ever started?

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How has childhood shame contributed to your substance use?

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Write a corrective statement for each shame belief: "I was taught that I am [shame belief]. The truth is [correction]."

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#### **YOUR EXERCISE**

### **Body-Based Disclosure Readiness**

What Your Body Tells You About Step Five

#### **Throat / Voice**

Do you feel a lump, tightness, or constriction when you think about speaking your truth? The throat holds unsaid words.

What do you notice in this area when you think about doing Step Five?

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What specific topic or memory triggers the strongest response here?

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#### **Chest / Heart**

Do you feel heaviness, tightness, or racing when you imagine disclosure? The chest holds grief and fear.

What do you notice here?

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What triggers the strongest response?

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### **Stomach / Gut**

Do you feel nausea, churning, or knots? The gut often holds dread and anticipatory anxiety about vulnerability.

What do you notice here?

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What triggers the strongest response?

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### **Jaw / Shoulders**

Do you clench your jaw or carry tension in your shoulders? These areas hold words bitten back, secrets carried alone, and emotions held in.

What do you notice here?

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What triggers the strongest response?

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### **Grounding Plan for Step Five Day**

Based on your body scan, which areas hold the most activation? What does this tell you?

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What grounding techniques do you already use that could help during disclosure? (breathing, feet on floor, holding an object, taking breaks)

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What signal will you give your listener if you need a pause?

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What self-care will you do AFTER Step Five to help your nervous system settle?

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## PART 4 OF 4 · READING

## The Integrated Fifth Step: Accountability, Compassion, and Liberation

The integrated Fifth Step for the ACoA in substance use disorder recovery moves beyond the traditional "confession" model into something more nuanced, more complete, and ultimately more healing. It requires holding three threads simultaneously: accountability for the harm you caused, compassion for the child who was harmed, and the willingness to let both truths exist without canceling each other out.

### THREAD ONE: ACCOUNTABILITY — THE SUD RECOVERY WORK

This is the traditional Step Five work. You have inventoried the harm you caused during active addiction — the lies, the broken promises, the emotional damage to people who loved you, the financial wreckage, the betrayal of trust. Accountability is not punishment — it is the foundation of integrity. When you say "I did this" without excuse, rationalization, or blame-shifting, you reclaim the agency that addiction stole.

### THREAD TWO: COMPASSION — THE ACoA HEALING WORK

Alongside your admission of wrongs, there is a parallel truth that must also be spoken: the truth of what happened to you. Not as an excuse. Not as blame-shifting. But as honest accounting of the conditions that shaped you. The child who grew up in an alcoholic home did not choose that environment. The child who learned to lie, manipulate, people-please, suppress emotions, seek chaos, or numb with substances — that child was adapting to survive.

Tony A. recognized this when he observed that the AA steps direct the adult child away from looking at the family system — the very system that created the conditions for the behaviors being inventoried. Your integrated Step Five makes space for statements like:

"I became a liar. I also learned to lie because honesty in my home was punished."

"I neglected my children. I also was neglected as a child and had no model for consistent parenting."

"I used alcohol to numb my feelings. I also grew up in a home where feelings were either explosive or forbidden."

These are not excuses. They are context. And context matters enormously in healing.

### THREAD THREE: LIBERATION — THE INTEGRATED HEALING

When accountability and compassion are held together, something remarkable happens: liberation. The secrets lose their power. The shame — both the addiction shame and the childhood shame — begins to dissolve in the light of honest witness.

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous describes the experience after Step Five: "We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall from us." For the ACoA, this experience is even more profound, because many Adult Children have never experienced this kind of peace. They have lived their entire lives — from childhood through active

addiction — in a state of vigilance, performance, and concealment. Step Five, done with this integrated awareness, may be the first time they have ever been fully seen and fully accepted.

The Fifth Step is the doorway. It is the moment you choose to stop hiding — from others, from yourself, and from the truth of your complete story.

### Reflection Questions

1. Can you hold both accountability for your actions AND compassion for the child you were without one canceling the other?

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2. Write one statement that includes both threads: "I [specific wrong in addiction]. I also [what happened in childhood that contributed]." How does it feel to hold both truths?

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3. What parts of your "false self" — the persona built for survival — are you most afraid to let go of? What is underneath it?

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4. Have you ever been "fully seen" by another person? What was that experience like? If not, what do you imagine it would feel like?

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5. What would genuine liberation look like in your daily life? How would you live differently if you were no longer hiding?

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### CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 5

#### Trust & Vulnerability Barriers

Scale: 1 = Not at all · 2 = A little · 3 = Somewhat · 4 = Quite a bit · 5 = Very much

1. I find it extremely difficult to trust another person with personal information  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. When I begin to open up, I immediately regret it and want to take my words back  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I was taught that being vulnerable is dangerous — emotionally, physically, or both  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I do not believe anyone can truly hear my story without judging me  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I have been betrayed by someone I trusted with personal information  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I would rather handle everything alone than risk depending on another person  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I test people repeatedly before revealing anything real about myself  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. The idea of sitting with someone and sharing my full inventory feels impossible  
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

#### YOUR EXERCISE

### Choosing Your Step Five Listener

Trust Assessment for ACoAs

#### Why This Matters for ACoAs

For the Adult Child whose trust was shattered in childhood, choosing a Step Five listener is not a casual decision — it is a critical therapeutic choice. The wrong listener can retraumatize. The right listener can provide the corrective emotional experience of being fully known and fully accepted.

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#### Potential Listener #1

Name and relationship:

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Does this person understand both addiction AND family dysfunction?

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Can they listen without immediately offering advice or judgment?

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Will they respect confidentiality absolutely?

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What are you most afraid this person will think or do when they hear your full truth?

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### **Potential Listener #2 (Alternative)**

Name and relationship:

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Strengths of this person:

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Concerns about this person:

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Overall assessment:

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### Trust Reflection

Based on your assessment, who is the strongest candidate and why?

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Is there anything you would need to communicate BEFORE the Step Five to feel safe? (e.g., "I need you to not interrupt" or "I need you to understand this includes childhood experiences")

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Would a professional counselor be a better choice given your ACoA wounds? Why or why not?

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What do you need from the listener to feel safe enough to be completely honest?

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### YOUR EXERCISE

## Disclosure Rehearsal

Practicing Your Truth Before Step Five

### The Hardest Things to Say

Write the 5 things that are hardest for you to imagine saying aloud to another person. These are the sentences that make your stomach tighten, your throat close, or your mind go blank.

Hardest thing #1: Write the exact sentence you struggle to say...

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Hardest thing #2:

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Hardest thing #3:

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Hardest thing #4:

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Hardest thing #5:

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### Your Opening Statement

Write how you would like to BEGIN your Step Five. This sets the tone and can include what you need from the listener. For ACoAs, naming the dual dimension upfront can help.

Example: "I need to share my Step Four inventory with you. I want you to know that my story includes both wrongs I committed during my addiction AND things that happened to me growing up. I need you to hear both parts..."

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### Practice Round 1 — The Bare Facts

Choose ONE difficult truth from your list above. Write it as bare facts — just say what happened.

Keep it simple — just state what happened.

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### Practice Round 2 — With Feeling

Write the same truth again, adding what you felt then and feel now.

Add the emotional dimension...

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### Practice Round 3 — With Context

Write it one more time, integrating the ACoA connection — what drove this.

Integrate the childhood context without using it as excuse...

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## YOUR EXERCISE

### Liberation Plan

Envisioning Life After Step Five

#### Who Am I Before Step Five?

Describe the person you are right now, carrying everything you carry. What is life like under the weight of concealment?

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What energy do you spend managing your image, hiding your truth, or performing a version of yourself that is not real?

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What relationships are being limited by what you cannot say?

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What does your inner child believe will happen if you are fully known?

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### **Who Could I Become After Step Five?**

Imagine completing an honest, integrated Step Five. What changes? What weight is lifted?

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How might your relationships change if you were no longer performing a false self?

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What would your inner child feel if someone finally heard the full truth and responded with acceptance?

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What becomes possible in your recovery when you are no longer managing secrets?

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Write a vision statement for the liberated version of yourself — the person you are becoming through this work.

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## My Step Five Commitment

Write your personal commitment to Step Five. Include: who you will share with, when you will do it, what you will include (both SUD accountability and ACoA healing), and what support you need.

I commit to completing my Step Five by [date], with [person]. I will include both my wrongs in addiction AND my childhood experiences. I need [specific support]. I am doing this because...

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## A Final Word

You are not broken. You are a person who adapted to impossible circumstances, developed an addiction that created its own trail of damage, and now has the courage to speak the full truth of both experiences. Step Five is not punishment — it is liberation. The child within you who was taught to never tell the truth is about to be freed. Both truths matter. Both truths heal. You are ready.

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