

Steps Eight & Nine for the Adult Child

Adult Children of Alcoholics · The Recovery Files

The Amends Journey: Accountability, Protection & Repair

Step 8: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all." Step 9: "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

Your progress 0 of 5 parts done · THE FIVE AMENDS CATEGORIES · Standard Amends · Harm through addiction · Complex Amends · People who also harmed me · Protected Amends · Too dangerous to approach · Self-Amends · Myself & inner child FIRST · Living Amends Daily changed behavior — the amends that never ends

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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

Step Eight: Making the List — Who Did I Harm and Who Harmed Me?

Step Eight states: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all." In traditional SUD recovery, this step is relatively straightforward — review your Fourth Step inventory, identify the people you harmed through your addiction, and build the willingness to face them. For the ACoA in substance use disorder recovery, Step Eight is anything but straightforward. It is a minefield of complexity that requires wisdom, discernment, and protection.

THE SUD PERSPECTIVE: ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACTION

In traditional SUD recovery, Step Eight builds on the self-examination of Steps Four and Five. Your inventory revealed the people you lied to, stole from, manipulated, neglected, endangered, and emotionally damaged during active addiction. Step Eight asks you to compile a concrete list and develop genuine willingness to take responsibility.

The willingness component is equally important. Step Eight does not ask you to rush out and make amends — it asks you to become WILLING. This willingness develops as you honestly face the damage your addiction caused and recognize that living with unresolved harm poisons your recovery.

THE ACoA COMPLICATION: THE DUAL LIST

This is where Tony A.'s warning becomes essential. Tony A., the founder of ACoA, believed that the traditional AA-adapted Steps Eight and Nine created what he called "gross vulnerability" for the adult child. His concern was specific and profound: the adult child could be sent to make amends to violent or abusive parents still in denial about the harm they had inflicted upon the adult child.

Think about this carefully. The traditional Step Eight asks: "Who did I harm?" For the ACoA, many of the people on that list are ALSO people who harmed them — often severely, during the most vulnerable period of their lives. Your mother may be on your amends list because you stole from her during active addiction. But she may also be the person who neglected you, who chose alcohol over your safety, who created the very conditions that set you on the path to addiction.

The ACoA's Step Eight requires a dual awareness:

- What harm did I cause this person? (Accountability)
- What harm did this person cause me? (Context)
- How do these two realities coexist without canceling each other out? (Integration)

TONY A.'S ALTERNATIVE STEP NINE

Tony A. wrote an alternative version of Step Nine specifically for adult children: "We made direct amends to those we had harmed, and forgave either directly, or in our hearts, those who had harmed us except when to do so would injure them or others. We began with ourselves."

Three revolutionary additions:

1. FORGIVENESS is introduced alongside amends — not just "who did I harm?" but "who harmed me, and can I forgive?"
2. "IN OUR HEARTS" acknowledges that some forgiveness or amends cannot be done face to face
3. "WE BEGAN WITH OURSELVES" — the first amends is to yourself, to your inner child

THE SELF ON THE LIST

This is perhaps the most important addition ACoA brings to the amends process. In ACoA recovery, self-amends is foundational. You must make amends to the person you harmed most consistently, most severely, and over the longest period of time: yourself.

You harmed yourself through years of active addiction. But before that, you harmed yourself by abandoning your own needs, silencing your inner child, betraying your own truth, accepting relationships and conditions that you deserved to refuse, and repeating the very patterns of neglect and abuse that were done to you — but this time, doing them to yourself.

The ACoA Step Eight list begins with your name. Not as an afterthought. As the foundation.

Reflection Questions

1. When you consider making an amends list, do you notice a pull toward either extreme — taking ALL the blame (ACoA over-responsibility) or assigning ALL the blame to others? Where are you on this spectrum?

2. Are there people on your potential amends list who are ALSO people who harmed you? Name them and describe both sides honestly.

3. What is your reaction to the idea of putting yourself FIRST on your amends list? Does it feel selfish? Necessary? Unfamiliar?

4. Tony A. warned that Steps 8 and 9 create "gross vulnerability" for adult children. Can you identify specific ways this vulnerability applies to your situation?

5. What do you need in place (support, guidance, safety) before you can construct an honest amends list without either minimizing your harm OR punishing yourself unfairly?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 5

Harm Awareness & Accountability

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

1. I can clearly identify specific people I have harmed through my addictive behaviors
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I can distinguish between harm I caused through my own choices and harm I caused because of patterns inherited from my family
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I take responsibility for my actions during active addiction without minimizing or rationalizing
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I can acknowledge the emotional harm I have caused (not just financial or physical)
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I understand that making a list of harms requires honesty, not self-punishment
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I recognize that some of my harmful behaviors toward others were learned in my family of origin
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I can see how my survival traits (people-pleasing, control, emotional withdrawal) harmed those closest to me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I understand that harm is defined by its impact on the other person, not by my intentions
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 5

Self-Amends & Inner Child Recognition

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

1. I recognize that I have harmed MYSELF through addiction, self-neglect, and self-abandonment
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I understand that the first and most important amends I may need to make is to myself and my inner child
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I can identify specific ways I abandoned, silenced, or harmed my own inner child through my behavior
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I recognize that self-punishment is not the same as self-amends — genuine self-amends requires compassion
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I am willing to apologize to myself for the years of self-destruction and self-betrayal
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I understand that making amends to myself is not selfish — it is foundational to making amends to others
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I can see how my parents' harm to me created patterns that I then repeated against myself
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I am willing to commit to treating myself differently going forward as a living amends to my inner child
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

The First Amends

A Letter to Your Inner Child — "We Began With Ourselves"

Why Self-Amends Comes First

ACoA's alternative Step Nine says 'We began with ourselves.' The person you have harmed most consistently, most severely, and for the longest time is YOU. Before you can genuinely make amends to others, you must first acknowledge what you have done to yourself.

Part 1: Acknowledging the Harm to Yourself

1. How did you harm yourself through active addiction? Be specific — your body, your mind, your relationships, your potential, your safety.

2. Before addiction, how did you harm yourself through ACoA patterns? (Accepting abuse, silencing your needs, choosing toxic relationships, abandoning your own dreams)

3. How did you continue your family's harm AGAINST yourself? (Repeating the same self-criticism, choosing partners like your parent, neglecting yourself the way you were neglected)

4. What did your inner child lose because of your addiction and self-abandonment? (Years, innocence, trust, joy, safety, health)

Part 2: Write Your Self-Amends Letter

Write a letter to your inner child. Include: introduce yourself as the Loving Parent, apologize for the specific harm, commit to specific changed behavior, and promise protection going forward.

Dear Little One, // I need to tell you something I should have said a long time ago... // I am sorry for... // You deserved... // From this day forward, I promise you... // I will protect you by... // With love, / Your Loving Parent

Part 3: Concrete Self-Amends Commitments

1. What I will STOP doing to myself (specific harmful behaviors, self-talk, patterns):

2. What I will START doing for myself (specific self-care, boundaries, nurturing acts):

3. How I will respond when I catch myself reverting to self-harm patterns:

4. One daily practice that represents my living amends to myself:

YOUR EXERCISE

Five-Category Amends Sorting Tool

Place Each Person in the Right Category Before Taking Action

DO NOT begin making amends until you have sorted your entire list and reviewed it with your sponsor or counselor. The wrong approach to the wrong person can cause severe harm — to them and to you.

Person 1

Name (or initials for privacy):

Category:

- ☐ 1: Standard ☐ 2: Complex (also harmed me) ☐ 3: Protected (too dangerous) ☐ 5: Deceased/Unreachable

What specific harm did I cause this person?

What type of amends is appropriate?

Any safety concerns or special considerations?

Person 2

Name (or initials for privacy):

Category:

☐ 1: Standard ☐ 2: Complex (also harmed me) ☐ 3: Protected (too dangerous) ☐ 5: Deceased/Unreachable

What specific harm did I cause this person?

What type of amends is appropriate?

Any safety concerns or special considerations?

Person 3

Name (or initials for privacy):

Category:

☐ 1: Standard ☐ 2: Complex (also harmed me) ☐ 3: Protected (too dangerous) ☐ 5: Deceased/Unreachable

What specific harm did I cause this person?

What type of amends is appropriate?

Any safety concerns or special considerations?

Person 4

Name (or initials for privacy):

Category:

☐ 1: Standard ☐ 2: Complex (also harmed me) ☐ 3: Protected (too dangerous) ☐ 5: Deceased/Unreachable

What specific harm did I cause this person?

What type of amends is appropriate?

Any safety concerns or special considerations?

Person 5

Name (or initials for privacy):

Category:

- ☐ 1: Standard ☐ 2: Complex (also harmed me) ☐ 3: Protected (too dangerous) ☐ 5: Deceased/Unreachable

What specific harm did I cause this person?

What type of amends is appropriate?

Any safety concerns or special considerations?

YOUR EXERCISE

Comprehensive Harm Inventory

By Life Area — What I Did and Who Was Affected

Romantic Partner(s)

1. How did my addiction harm my partner(s)?

2. How did my ACoA patterns (emotional unavailability, control, people-pleasing) harm them?

3. What specific actions do I need to take responsibility for?

Children

1. How were my children affected by my addiction?

2. How have I repeated my parents' patterns with my own children?

3. What did my children miss because I was unavailable, chaotic, or self-absorbed?

Parents / Family of Origin

1. What harm did I cause my parents or family through my addiction?

2. NOTE: This does NOT erase harm they caused me. Both truths exist. What is MY side?

3. How much of this harm was driven by ACoA survival patterns vs. addiction behavior?

Friends & Community

1. Which friendships did I damage or destroy through addiction?

2. How did I use, betray, or abandon friends?

3. How did my ACoA patterns (isolation, distrust, people-pleasing) affect my friendships?

Employers & Finances

1. What financial harm did I cause? (Theft, debt, lost income, fraud)

2. How did my unreliability or dishonesty affect employers or colleagues?

3. What restitution, if any, is appropriate and possible?

Myself & My Inner Child

1. What did I do to my own body, mind, and spirit?

2. How did I betray my own values, dreams, and potential?

3. What would my 8-year-old self say about how I treated us?

PART 2 OF 4 · READING

Step Nine: Making Amends — The Three Paths for the Adult Child

Step Nine states: "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others." The final clause — "except when to do so would injure them or others" — is where the ACoA must exercise the most careful discernment of any step in recovery.

THE SUD PERSPECTIVE: RESTORATION, RESOLUTION, RESTITUTION

In traditional SUD recovery, Step Nine involves three dimensions: Restoration (rebuilding what was damaged — trust, reputation, relationships), Resolution (finding answers and laying problems to rest), and Restitution (returning what was taken — money, time, peace of mind).

The three types of amends:

- Direct Amends: Face-to-face acknowledgment of specific harm
- Indirect Amends: When direct contact is impossible or harmful
- Living Amends: The ongoing demonstration of changed behavior

THE ACoA PERSPECTIVE: FIVE CATEGORIES OF AMENDS

CATEGORY 1: PEOPLE I HARMED THROUGH ADDICTION (STANDARD AMENDS)

People who were not part of your childhood dysfunction — friends, employers, acquaintances, strangers — whom you harmed purely through your addictive behavior. Standard SUD amends process applies.

CATEGORY 2: FAMILY MEMBERS I HARMED WHO ALSO HARMED ME (COMPLEX AMENDS)

This is the minefield Tony A. identified. Your parents, siblings, or family members who were both victims of your addiction AND perpetrators of your childhood harm. A wise amends to someone in this category addresses only YOUR side — not theirs. The amends conversation is not the place to address what they did to you.

CATEGORY 3: PEOPLE TOO DANGEROUS OR SICK TO APPROACH (PROTECTED AMENDS)

ACoA literature is explicit: "Some parents are too dangerous or too sick to approach." The "except when to do so would injure them or others" clause includes injuring YOURSELF. Options include: writing a letter you never send, making a living amends by breaking the cycle of dysfunction, symbolic amends through therapy or ceremony.

CATEGORY 4: YOURSELF AND YOUR INNER CHILD (SELF-AMENDS)

"We began with ourselves." The self-amends is the most overlooked and potentially the most transformative amends the ACoA makes. This involves apologizing to your inner child for the years of self-abuse, self-neglect, and self-betrayal — and then committing to treating yourself differently going forward.

CATEGORY 5: PEOPLE WHO ARE DECEASED OR UNREACHABLE (SYMBOLIC AMENDS)

Some people on your list cannot be reached. These amends require creative approaches: writing letters, speaking at their graveside, making donations in their name, or living the changed life that honors what was lost.

THE AMENDS THAT SHOULD NEVER BE MADE

Amends should NOT be made when:

- The amends would cause the other person more harm than healing
- The amends would endanger your physical safety
- The amends would result in your re-victimization
- The amends is driven by your need for the other person's validation
- You have not yet done sufficient work on your own ACoA patterns

A WORD ABOUT TIMING

Step Nine says "wherever possible" — it does not say "immediately." Some amends require years of recovery before they can be made wisely. The ACoA who rushes to make amends to an abusive parent in the first months of recovery is likely acting from people-pleasing, approval-seeking survival traits rather than from genuine accountability.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of the five amends categories do you find most people on your list fall into? Which category feels most challenging?

2. Is there someone on your list who falls into Category 3 (too dangerous to approach)? What alternative amends approach might honor both your accountability and your safety?

3. Write a brief self-amends to your inner child. What would you say to the part of you that was harmed before you ever harmed anyone else?

4. Have you felt pressure (internal or external) to make amends before you were truly ready?
Where did that pressure come from?

5. What is the difference between an amends driven by genuine accountability and one driven by the ACoA need for approval? Can you tell the difference in yourself?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 5

Re-Victimization Danger Awareness

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

1. I understand that some people on my amends list are also people who harmed ME, creating a complex dynamic
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I can identify people who are too dangerous, sick, or abusive to approach with direct amends
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I understand that making amends to an abuser is NOT required and could cause further harm
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I recognize the danger of using the amends process to seek validation or approval from people who hurt me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I can distinguish between genuine accountability and the ACoA pattern of taking blame for everything
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I am aware that my tendency to over-apologize or assume responsibility for others' behavior may distort my amends list
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I understand that Tony A. specifically warned that Steps 8 and 9 create "gross vulnerability" for adult children
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I have a sponsor, counselor, or trusted advisor who understands ACoA dynamics to guide my amends process
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 5

Willingness to Make Amends

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

1. I am willing to make amends to the people I have harmed, even when doing so is uncomfortable
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I understand that amends involve more than saying "I'm sorry" — they require changed behavior
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I am willing to make financial restitution where appropriate and possible
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I understand the difference between direct amends, indirect amends, and living amends
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I am willing to face people who may reject my amends or respond with anger
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I understand that the outcome of amends is not in my control — I am responsible for my side only
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I am willing to forgive MYSELF even if others do not forgive me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I understand that some amends cannot be made directly and require alternative approaches
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

The Dual Truth

When the Person I Harmed Also Harmed Me

Holding Both Truths

You must hold TWO truths simultaneously: 'I caused harm to this person through my behavior' AND 'This person caused harm to me.' Neither truth cancels the other. The amends process addresses only YOUR side.

Work through this exercise WITH your sponsor or counselor. Do not attempt complex amends without professional guidance.

Complex Relationship 1

Person (name or initials):

Who?

WHAT I DID TO THEM (My accountability)

Focus only on YOUR behavior and its impact — not their role in it.

WHAT THEY DID TO ME (My wound — for therapy, not the amends conversation)

This is real and valid — but it belongs in your own healing work, not in the amends conversation.

What I did to them — my specific harm:

My behavior, my responsibility...

What they did to me — my wound (for therapeutic processing, NOT for the amends):

Acknowledge this truth for yourself...

Is direct amends SAFE with this person? What could go wrong?

Assess honestly...

What is the wisest amends approach for this specific person?

Direct? Indirect? Living? Letter never sent? No contact?

Complex Relationship 2

Person (name or initials):

Who?

WHAT I DID TO THEM (My accountability)

Focus only on YOUR behavior and its impact — not their role in it.

WHAT THEY DID TO ME (My wound — for therapy, not the amends conversation)

This is real and valid — but it belongs in your own healing work, not in the amends conversation.

What I did to them — my specific harm:

My behavior, my responsibility...

What they did to me — my wound (for therapeutic processing, NOT for the amends):

Acknowledge this truth for yourself...

Is direct amends SAFE with this person? What could go wrong?

Assess honestly...

What is the wisest amends approach for this specific person?

Direct? Indirect? Living? Letter never sent? No contact?

Complex Relationship 3

Person (name or initials):

Who?

WHAT I DID TO THEM (My accountability)

Focus only on YOUR behavior and its impact — not their role in it.

WHAT THEY DID TO ME (My wound — for therapy, not the amends conversation)

This is real and valid — but it belongs in your own healing work, not in the amends conversation.

What I did to them — my specific harm:

My behavior, my responsibility...

What they did to me — my wound (for therapeutic processing, NOT for the amends):

Acknowledge this truth for yourself...

Is direct amends SAFE with this person? What could go wrong?

Assess honestly...

What is the wisest amends approach for this specific person?

Direct? Indirect? Living? Letter never sent? No contact?

YOUR EXERCISE

The Safety Assessment

Amends That Should NOT Be Made — Protecting the Inner Child

'Except when to do so would injure them or others' — 'others' includes YOU. An amends that re-traumatizes you is not a healing act. Some amends must NEVER be made directly.

RED FLAGS — Do NOT make direct amends if:

The person is actively abusing substances and behaves unpredictably

The person has a history of physical violence toward you

The person consistently denies, minimizes, or gaslights your experience

You are seeking their VALIDATION or APPROVAL rather than taking accountability

Your body has a strong fear response when you imagine the conversation

The person would use your vulnerability as ammunition against you

Making the amends would reveal information that harms innocent third parties

You are not yet stable enough in recovery to handle potential rejection or attack

Your sponsor or counselor advises against it based on their knowledge of the situation

The amends is really an attempt to re-establish a toxic relationship disguised as accountability

Apply Safety Assessment to a Specific Person

1. Who is the person you are considering making amends to that raises safety concerns?

2. Which red flags above apply to this person? Be honest.

3. What does your BODY tell you when you imagine sitting across from this person?

4. What would a wise, loving parent say to you about approaching this person?

5. What is the alternative? (Letter never sent, living amends, symbolic release, therapeutic processing)

YOUR EXERCISE

Amends Scripting & Rehearsal

What to Say, How to Say It, What to Prepare For

The Anatomy of a Genuine Amends

A genuine amends has four parts: (1) I acknowledge what I did — specifically, without minimizing. (2) I acknowledge the impact on you. (3) I take full responsibility — no excuses, no 'but.' (4) I tell you what I am doing differently. What an amends is NOT: seeking forgiveness, explaining your addiction, or telling them what they did to you.

Amends Script Template

TEMPLATE

"[Name], I asked to speak with you because there is something I need to take responsibility for. During my [addiction/period of dysfunction], I [specific behavior]. I know that this [specific impact on them]. That was wrong, and I am sorry. I cannot undo what I did, but I want you to know that I am [specific changed behavior]. I am not asking for anything from you — I just needed to own my part."

Now write your own amends scripts for up to three people. Practice saying them aloud.

Amends Script #1 — Person:

Name/initials

What is the worst thing they could say? How will you respond?

Prepare for the hardest response...

Amends Script #2 — Person:

Name/initials

What is the worst thing they could say? How will you respond?

Prepare for the hardest response...

Amends Script #3 — Person:

Name/initials

What is the worst thing they could say? How will you respond?

Prepare for the hardest response...

PART 3 OF 4 · READING

The Neuroscience of Repair: How Amends Change the Brain

Making amends is not merely a moral exercise — it is a neurobiological event that changes both the person making the amends and, potentially, the person receiving it.

THE WEIGHT OF UNRESOLVED HARM

Unresolved guilt and shame are not just psychological states — they are physiological burdens. Research demonstrates that carrying unacknowledged harm activates the brain's threat detection system chronically. The amygdala stays in a state of heightened arousal, cortisol levels remain elevated, and the prefrontal cortex is suppressed.

For the person in SUD recovery, this chronic physiological burden is a direct relapse risk. The brain that is constantly flooded with shame-based cortisol is a brain that is desperately seeking relief. This is why Steps Eight and Nine are clinically described as relapse prevention steps.

For the ACoA, the burden is compounded. They carry not only the guilt of harm they caused during addiction, but the unresolved pain of harm done TO them in childhood. The nervous system is processing two streams of unresolved material simultaneously: "I hurt people" AND "I was hurt."

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF THE APOLOGY

When a genuine amends is made, research suggests several neurological shifts occur:

1. **Prefrontal Cortex Activation:** Organizing an honest amends requires the same executive functions that recovery builds — self-awareness, impulse control, perspective-taking, and planning.
2. **Shame Circuit Interruption:** Dr. Brené Brown's research identifies shame as "I am bad" versus guilt: "I did something bad." Making amends specifically addresses this distinction — it says "I did something harmful AND I am the kind of person who takes responsibility for it."
3. **Social Bonding Restoration:** Interpersonal ruptures activate the same neural circuits as physical pain. Genuine repair activates the brain's reward and bonding circuits (oxytocin, dopamine), creating what researchers call "repair euphoria."
4. **Vagal Tone Improvement:** Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory describes how unresolved interpersonal conflict keeps the nervous system in fight-or-flight. Genuine repair activates the ventral vagal system (safety, connection, calm). This explains why people often describe feeling physically lighter after making an amends.

WHY SELF-AMENDS IS NEUROLOGICALLY ESSENTIAL FOR ACoAs

The ACoA's nervous system was shaped by early relational trauma. The circuits for self-punishment, self-criticism, and self-abandonment were installed by the family system and then reinforced through years of addiction.

Dr. Kristin Neff's research on self-compassion demonstrates that self-compassion activates the mammalian care system (oxytocin, vasopressin, opioids) rather than the threat system (cortisol, adrenaline). For the ACoA, self-amends is not a luxury — it is the neurological foundation upon which all other amends are built.

WHY SOME AMENDS MUST NOT BE MADE: THE NEUROSCIENCE OF RE-TRAUMATIZATION

When an ACoA makes amends to an abuser who responds with denial, blame-shifting, gaslighting, or rage, the neurological effect is the opposite of repair. Instead of shame circuit interruption, the shame circuit is reinforced. Instead of vagal tone improvement, the nervous system is driven deeper into survival mode.

This is why the "except when to do so would injure them or others" clause is not just a moral guideline — it is a neurological safety boundary.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you feel the physiological weight of unresolved harm in your body right now? Where do you carry it — chest, stomach, shoulders, throat?

2. Have you experienced the relief of a genuine apology (given or received)? What did it feel like in your body?

3. Does the concept of "shame circuit interruption" — moving from "I am bad" to "I did something bad and I am taking responsibility" — feel accessible to you?

4. How would it change your approach to self-amends to know that self-compassion literally activates different brain circuits than self-punishment?

5. Can you identify a situation where making an amends to a specific person would likely RE-traumatize you rather than heal you? What does your body tell you about that person?

YOUR EXERCISE

The Forgiveness Inventory

Forgiving Those Who Harmed Me — "In Our Hearts"

ACoA's Revolutionary Addition

Tony A.'s alternative Step Nine adds: 'and forgave either directly, or in our hearts, those who had harmed us.' Forgiveness of those who harmed you is not about excusing their behavior — it is about releasing the hold that resentment has on YOUR nervous system. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.

Forgiveness is NOT: condoning what was done, pretending it didn't happen, reconciling with dangerous people, or forcing a feeling you don't have. It IS: releasing the wish that the past could have been different and choosing not to let it poison your present.

Your Mother / Primary Female Caregiver

1. What do you need to forgive — or begin the process of forgiving? What does forgiveness look like here?

Where are you on the forgiveness spectrum?

☐ Not ready ☐ Willing to try ☐ In process ☐ Mostly there ☐ At peace

Your Father / Primary Male Caregiver

1. What do you need to forgive? Is direct forgiveness safe, or must this happen "in your heart"?

Where are you on the forgiveness spectrum?

☐ Not ready ☐ Willing to try ☐ In process ☐ Mostly there ☐ At peace

Yourself

1. What do you need to forgive yourself for? What guilt or shame are you still carrying that needs to be released?

Where are you on the forgiveness spectrum?

☐ Not ready ☐ Willing to try ☐ In process ☐ Mostly there ☐ At peace

Other Family Members

1. Are there siblings, grandparents, or extended family members you need to include in your forgiveness inventory?

Where are you on the forgiveness spectrum?

☐ Not ready ☐ Willing to try ☐ In process ☐ Mostly there ☐ At peace

The Disease Itself

1. Can you forgive the disease of alcoholism/addiction for what it took from your family? What would that release feel like?

Where are you on the forgiveness spectrum?

☐ Not ready ☐ Willing to try ☐ In process ☐ Mostly there ☐ At peace

PART 4 OF 4 · READING

Living Amends: The Amends You Make Every Day for the Rest of Your Life

Of all the forms of amends, the living amends is the most powerful, the most difficult, and the most relevant to the ACoA in SUD recovery. A living amends is not a conversation — it is a transformation. It is the daily, sustained demonstration that you have changed.

WHY LIVING AMENDS MATTERS MOST FOR THE ACoA

The ACoA grew up in a world where words meant nothing. Promises were broken routinely. "I'll never drink again" was said on Tuesday and broken by Thursday. "I'm sorry" was followed by the same behavior the next week. Apologies were tools of manipulation rather than expressions of genuine remorse.

Given this history, the ACoA's most trustworthy amends is not what they SAY but what they DO. A living amends says: "I know that words have been empty in our family. So instead of telling you I have changed, I will show you. Every day. Through my behavior. For the rest of my life."

FORMS OF LIVING AMENDS

To Your Children: The most powerful amends is to break the cycle. Being emotionally present rather than emotionally absent. Being consistent rather than unpredictable. Being honest rather than maintaining family secrets. Being the parent you never had.

To Your Partner: Sustained behavioral change: honesty after years of deception, presence after years of emotional absence, vulnerability after years of emotional walls, consistency after years of chaos.

To Yourself: The living amends to yourself is the daily practice of self-care, self-respect, and self-compassion. Every time you set a boundary, you are making an amends to the child who was never allowed to say no. Every time you express a genuine emotion, you are making an amends to the child who was punished for feeling.

To Your Family of Origin: When direct amends is not possible or not wise, the living amends is the most powerful alternative. You break the cycle. You do not pass the dysfunction to the next generation.

BREAKING THE GENERATIONAL CYCLE AS THE ULTIMATE AMENDS

The ACoA literature frames recovery as fundamentally about breaking generational patterns. The dysfunction did not start with your parents — it was passed to them by their parents, who received it from theirs.

Making a living amends, for the ACoA, is building a dam. It is saying: "The pain stops with me. The secrets stop with me. The silence stops with me. The neglect, the rage, the addiction, the emotional suppression — it all stops here, in my generation, because I am willing to do the work that my parents could not or would not do."

The living amends is the longest amends. It never ends. It is the amends you make when you wake up sober and present. When you ask your child how they feel and actually listen. When you tell the truth even though it is uncomfortable. When you allow yourself to be vulnerable rather than armored.

It is the amends that says: the family dysfunction ends here. The addiction ends here. The silence ends here. A new pattern begins with me.

Reflection Questions

1. What specific living amends are you already making, perhaps without recognizing them as amends? (Staying sober, being present, being honest)

2. Who in your life most needs to see sustained behavioral change rather than hear another apology?

3. What would "breaking the generational cycle" look like in your specific family? What pattern are you most committed to stopping?

4. Write a living amends commitment statement: "Every day, I demonstrate my change by..."

5. How does the concept of living amends address the ACoA wound of empty promises? Why is showing more powerful than telling for someone who grew up in a dysfunctional home?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 5

Steps 8 & 9 Integrated Readiness

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

1. I have completed Steps 4 through 7 and have a clear inventory to work from
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. I have discussed my amends list with my sponsor or counselor before taking action
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I understand the ACoA principle: "We began with ourselves" — self-amends comes first
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I can distinguish between amends for harm I caused and amends that would actually re-victimize me
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I have a plan for protecting my inner child during the amends process
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I understand that "except when to do so would injure them or others" includes injuring MYSELF
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I have the emotional stability and support system needed to begin making amends
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I trust that the amends process, done with wisdom and guidance, will bring freedom rather than further harm
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

My Living Amends Blueprint

The Daily Demonstration of Changed Behavior

The Amends That Never Ends

Living amends are ongoing demonstrations of changed behavior. For the ACoA who grew up with empty promises, the living amends is the most trustworthy form of repair — not words, but sustained action.

To My Partner/Spouse

1. What specific behaviors will I practice daily to demonstrate that I have changed as a partner?

To My Children

1. What does breaking the cycle look like in my daily parenting? What will I do differently than what was done to me?

To My Family of Origin

1. Whether or not direct amends is possible, how will my changed behavior demonstrate healing?

To My Friends & Community

1. How will I show up differently in my friendships and community?

To Myself & My Inner Child

1. What is my daily living amends to the person I harmed most — myself?

To the Next Generation

1. What family pattern ends with me? What new pattern begins with me?

YOUR EXERCISE

Breaking the Generational Cycle

My Family Legacy Map — What Stops With Me

The River Stops Here

Family dysfunction is generational. The pain did not start with your parents — it was passed to them. Your recovery is the dam that stops the river. This exercise maps the patterns that were transmitted to you and identifies which ones you are committed to stopping in your generation.

The Generational Pattern Map

Addiction / Substance Use

1. What was the pattern in previous generations?

2. How was it passed to you?

3. What are you doing to stop it?

Emotional Unavailability / Suppression

1. How was emotion handled in your family?

2. How did you inherit this pattern?

3. What does emotional availability look like in your life now?

Rage / Violence / Verbal Abuse

1. Was anger expressed safely in your family?

2. How does anger show up in your behavior?

3. What is your commitment for handling anger differently?

Secrets / Denial / "Don't Talk" Rules

1. What were the family secrets?

2. How did silence become your default?

3. What truth are you willing to tell?

Neglect / Parentification / Role Reversal

1. Were you expected to be the parent?

2. How did this affect your own parenting or relationships?

3. What does healthy responsibility look like?

My Cycle-Breaking Declaration

Write a declaration of the patterns that END with you. This is your ultimate living amends to the next generation.

In my family, the pattern of ____ has been passed down for generations. It stops with me. I commit to ____ instead. The next generation will inherit ____ rather than _____. This is my living amends to every child who comes after me.

YOUR EXERCISE

The Freedom Inventory

Life After Amends — The Promises Fulfilled

The Ninth Step Promises

The Big Book describes the 'Ninth Step Promises' — a remarkable list of transformations that occur as the amends process unfolds. For the ACoA, these promises describe the precise opposite of the Laundry List traits. Where there was fear, there is freedom. Where there was self-pity, there is purpose. Where there was isolation, there is connection.

Before Amends — Where I Am Now

1. What unresolved guilt or shame am I carrying right now that weighs on my recovery?

2. What relationships remain damaged because I have not yet taken responsibility?

3. How does the weight of unresolved harm affect my daily life — my sleep, my mood, my capacity for joy?

4. What ACoA patterns (over-apologizing, avoidance, people-pleasing, self-punishment) are distorting my relationship with the amends process?

After Amends — The Freedom I Am Moving Toward

1. What will it feel like to live without the weight of unacknowledged harm? Describe that freedom in your body.

2. Which relationships have the potential for genuine repair if amends are made wisely?

3. What becomes possible in your recovery when you are no longer weighed down by guilt and shame?

4. How does making self-amends — treating yourself with the compassion you deserved as a child — change what is possible in your life?

5. Write your freedom statement: "Through the work of Steps Eight and Nine, I am moving toward a life where..."

My Amends Journey Commitment

I commit to the amends journey knowing that it requires courage, wisdom, and protection. I will begin with myself. I will seek guidance for complex amends. I will protect my inner child from re-victimization. I will make living amends every day. I will break the generational cycle. The patterns of my family stop with me. A new chapter begins here.

Remember

You are a person who was harmed as a child, who then harmed others through addiction and ACoA patterns, and who is now brave enough to face both truths simultaneously. You are taking responsibility for YOUR side without abandoning the child who was hurt before you ever hurt anyone else. This is not weakness — it is the most courageous thing a person can do. The amends journey does not erase your past. It frees you from it. We began with ourselves. We end with freedom.