

Big Book Study Guide

Alcoholics Anonymous

The Recovery Files

"Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon."

Reading Sections

- **The Foundation** — Doctor's Opinion · Bill's Story
- **There Is a Solution** — Fellowship · The Real Answer
- **The Disease Concept** — Insanity · Agnostics · Character
- **Steps 1-4** — Surrender · Hope · Decision · Inventory
- **Steps 5-9** — Confession · Amends · Promises
- **Steps 10-12** — Maintenance · Prayer · Service
- **Promises & Principles** — The 12 Promises · 12 Principles

Worksheets & Exercises

- **Big Book Worksheets** — 10 Deep-Work Exercises
- **Study & Application Plan** — Commit · Study · Live

About This Study Guide

A structured, clinically informed companion to the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Not a replacement for reading the Big Book with a sponsor — a tool to deepen understanding, personalize the key concepts, and apply what you are studying to your specific recovery.

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READING SECTIONS

The Foundation

Purpose · Doctor's Opinion · Bill's Story · Who It's For

How to Use This Section

Read each topic alongside the corresponding Big Book sections. Work through the reflection questions with your sponsor — they are designed to move the concepts from the page into your life.

The Purpose of the Big Book

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous — first published in 1939 — was written with one specific and ambitious purpose: to show other alcoholics precisely how the first hundred members recovered. The foreword states clearly: "To show other alcoholics precisely how we have recovered is the main purpose of this book." The word precisely matters. This is not a collection of vague spiritual encouragement. It is a specific sequence of actions — the Twelve Steps — that the authors believed produced a reliable result when genuinely followed. The question the Big Book asks of every reader is not "is this interesting?" but "will you follow it precisely?"

1. Have you read the Big Book cover to cover with a sponsor, taking time to genuinely understand each chapter — or have you read portions, heard it quoted, or read summaries without spending real time with the full text? Be honest about your actual level of engagement.

2. The Big Book claims to show "precisely how we have recovered." What is your current relationship to that claim — do you believe it applies to you specifically, or does part of you hold the claim at skeptical distance? What would it mean to engage with it as genuinely applicable?

The Doctor's Opinion: Allergy and Obsession

The Big Book opens with a letter from Dr. William Silkworth providing the foundational clinical framework: alcoholism as an allergy of the body and an obsession of the mind. The allergy concept describes an abnormal physical reaction to alcohol: once a certain amount enters the body, an abnormal craving is produced that the non-alcoholic does not experience. The obsession describes the equally abnormal mental phenomenon: the inability of the alcoholic's mind, when not drinking, to consistently recall the full truth of what drinking produces. Silkworth's framework removes the problem from the domain of willpower and moral failure. The alcoholic who cannot stop is not simply choosing badly — they are caught in a mechanism that willpower alone cannot address.

1. Do you accept the two-part framework — allergy of the body and obsession of the mind — as an accurate description of your experience? Where specifically have you experienced the allergy (craving that takes over once you start) and the obsession (the mental state that convinces you it will be different this time)?

2. The Doctor's Opinion removes the problem from willpower and moral failure. How does this change your relationship to the shame of your addiction history — and what does it imply about the kind of solution required?

Bill's Story: Template and Mirror

Bill Wilson's story is not just biography. It is a carefully constructed template that serves as both mirror (so the reader sees their own experience reflected) and map (showing the route from bottom to beginning). The descent follows a recognizable pattern: functioning, then managing, then managing the consequences, then losing everything. Bill's intellectual pride — his sense that he was too sophisticated for the simple spiritual solution — is also characteristic. The Big Book is written partly for the person sitting where Bill sat: capable of understanding the problem but resistant to the specific vulnerability the solution requires.

1. Reading Bill's story as a mirror: where does your story most closely resemble his? What are the specific points of recognition — moments in his narrative where you found yourself thinking 'that was exactly what it was like for me'?

2. Bill's story includes a period of intellectual resistance to the spiritual solution — too smart, too sophisticated for something so simple. Do you recognize that resistance in yourself? How specifically has intellectual pride functioned as a barrier to the complete surrender the program requires?

The First Hundred: Why Their Stories Matter

The Big Book is built on the testimony of approximately one hundred people who worked the AA program and found recovery. When the Big Book says "rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path," it is making an empirical claim based on their collective experience. It is the accumulated testimony of people who were in your situation, followed this path, and found it worked. The authority of the text comes from the practical reality that it has produced recovery across eight decades, dozens of countries, and virtually every demographic context imaginable.

1. Do you approach the Big Book as a text written by people in your situation who found something that worked — and that therefore deserves genuine engagement? Or do you approach it primarily as a cultural artifact, to be respected nominally but not read carefully? Be honest.

2. Whose story in the Big Book, or whose share in a meeting, has most closely mirrored your experience in a way that produced genuine recognition? What did that recognition produce?

Who the Big Book Is Written For

The Big Book has a specific intended audience: people who cannot reliably control their drinking despite genuine desire to do so, and who have come to recognize that willpower and self-management have proven insufficient. Three pertinent ideas emerge: (a) that we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives; (b) that probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism; (c) that God could and would if He were sought. For people in SUD treatment, the qualification question is usually already answered by the circumstances that brought them there. The more pressing question is not whether the book applies — it is whether the person is willing to follow it completely.

1. Apply the Big Book's practical tests: Have you found you cannot stop once you start, that promises to moderate have consistently failed, and that self-management has proven beyond your capacity? What does the honest answer confirm about who this book was written for?

2. Of the three pertinent ideas — (a) I was alcoholic and could not manage my own life; (b) no human power could relieve my alcoholism; (c) God could and would if sought — which is most challenging for you to accept right now? Why?

READING SECTIONS

There Is a Solution

The Real Problem · Fellowship · Spiritual Experience · Identification

Chapter Two: The Heart of the Matter

Chapter Two establishes both the precise nature of the problem and the precise nature of the solution. Study it carefully — understanding why willpower fails is essential to understanding why the spiritual solution is necessary.

The Real Problem: The Mental Obsession

Chapter Two opens with the most important insight: the problem of the alcoholic centers in their mind rather than in their body. The phenomenon of craving — loss of control once alcohol enters the body — is not the deepest problem. The deepest problem is the specific mental blank spot: the inability of the alcoholic mind in the dry state to consistently access the full truth of what drinking produces. It is the specific mental phenomenon of the obsession overriding all evidence — the internal certainty that this time will be different, with no rational basis for that certainty. The solution proposed must produce a change in thinking deep enough that the mental obsession loses its power.

1. Can you identify the mental blank spot — the specific moments when, sober, you became convinced this time would be different despite all evidence? What did that mental state feel like, and what made it so convincing?

2. If the problem "centers in the mind," what does that imply about the solution required — and why does that rule out willpower and self-discipline as the primary tools?

The Fellowship as Evidence

Chapter Two presents the fellowship of AA as evidence that recovery is possible — not theoretically but as a demonstrated reality. "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." The Big Book identifies two categories who don't recover: those constitutionally incapable of honesty, and those unwilling to follow the path completely. The key word is "thoroughly" — not partially, not in selected areas, not in the parts that feel comfortable while managing around the parts that feel threatening. The promise is conditional on thorough, honest, complete engagement.

1. Do you believe the Big Book's claim that the program works when thoroughly followed? What evidence supports that belief? And where does your skepticism live — what part of you doubts it, and why?

2. The Big Book identifies two categories who don't recover: constitutionally incapable of honesty, and unwilling to follow the path completely. Which is the more relevant risk for you? Where are the areas of incomplete engagement in your current program?

The Spiritual Solution

At the heart of Chapter Two is a claim many find both compelling and uncomfortable: the solution to the alcoholic's problem is spiritual in nature. The Appendix clarifies what the authors mean: not necessarily sudden conversions, but a "transformation of the personality" — what William James called an "educational variety" — a gradual shift in values, perspective, and fundamental orientation through sustained engagement with the program. This shift is the mechanism through which the obsession is addressed. It cannot be produced by willpower, intellectual conviction, or behavioral modification alone.

1. What is your current relationship to the spiritual component of the solution? Do you understand it as a genuine mechanism through which the obsession can be addressed — or do you hold it at arm's length as a cultural feature you can work around?

2. The Appendix describes the "educational variety" of spiritual experience — gradual character change rather than sudden transformation. Can you identify any gradual changes in your character, values, or fundamental orientation since entering recovery? Name them specifically.

Identification: Why Stories Work

One of the most important clinical functions of the Big Book is identification — the process through which a reader recognizes their own experience in another's and thereby overcomes the isolation and uniqueness the addiction mind uses to resist the program. The function of

identification is not simply emotional comfort — it is the dismantling of terminal uniqueness, the conviction that one's situation is different enough that the solution for others cannot apply here. Terminal uniqueness is one of the most reliable defenses against the program's requirements.

1. Where has terminal uniqueness — the conviction your situation is specifically different enough to make the standard program less applicable — appeared in your recovery? Where have you used the uniqueness of your circumstances to maintain distance from complete program engagement?

2. What specific identification experience has most powerfully challenged the terminal uniqueness defense — the moment someone else's story described your experience so accurately that the uniqueness argument became impossible to maintain? What did that produce?

The Hopeless State as the Beginning

Chapter Two introduces a paradox central to the recovery model: the hopeless state is not the end of the story — it is the precondition for the beginning of the real story. From the program's perspective, it is precisely at the threshold of genuine hopelessness — the complete failure of the management strategy — that the specific condition required for recovery becomes available: complete openness. The defeat is not the end of the person — it is the end of the strategy that was preventing the solution.

1. Have you arrived at genuine hopelessness — the full experiential acknowledgment that no human management strategy is sufficient — or are you working the program while maintaining a backstop belief that willpower or circumstances might eventually solve it without complete surrender?

2. The Big Book reframes hopelessness as "seemingly hopeless" — the specific condition in which recovery becomes possible. How does this reframe your lowest point and your current recovery? What does your specific bottom represent in the trajectory of your story?

READING SECTIONS

The Disease Concept

Insanity · Types of Drinkers · We Agnostics · Character

Chapters Three and Four

These chapters build the case for why the specific spiritual solution is necessary — not as religion, but as the only approach sufficient to address the mental and character dimensions of the problem.

The Insanity of the First Drink

Chapter Three introduces one of the most clinically significant concepts in the Big Book: the insanity of alcoholism. The usage is precise and limited. It identifies one specific form of insanity — repeating the same action expecting a different result — that operates specifically around drinking. Neither Jim (who puts whiskey in his milk) nor Fred (a successful businessman convinced things are different now) are stupid. Both experience the specific mental phenomenon the Big Book calls insanity — the inability before the first drink to accurately access the full truth of what that drink will produce. This "mental blank spot" cannot be addressed through more information, more willpower, or more severe consequences.

1. Name a specific instance of the insanity of the first drink from your history — a moment when, despite full knowledge of what would follow, you took the first drink and genuinely believed it would be different. What was the mental state that made that belief feel credible?

2. "The main problem centers in the mind, rather than in the body." How does Step Two — "came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" — specifically address the insanity Chapter Three describes?

The Types of Drinkers

Chapter Three includes a taxonomy of drinkers that helps the reader locate themselves accurately on the spectrum. The distinction between the heavy drinker and the real alcoholic is practical, not shaming. The heavy drinker may address the problem through ordinary means. The real alcoholic — whose allergy and obsession have created the specific mechanism Silkworth describes — will not be helped by these means durably, because the problem is not primarily behavioral or social. The Big Book also notes that for the real alcoholic, "no easy geographic cure" exists — no change of circumstances, relationships, or geography has produced permanent recovery, because the problem is internal.

1. Have you settled the question of whether you are a "real alcoholic" in the Big Book's sense — not as a label but as a practical determination about what kind of help your situation requires? What specific evidence most clearly answers that question for you?

2. Where in your history have you attempted the geographic cure — trying to manage the problem through external change — and what happened? What does the pattern reveal about where the problem actually lives?

We Agnostics: The Higher Power Question

Chapter Four directly addresses the barrier the authors identified as the most common reason people couldn't engage with the spiritual solution: difficulty with the God concept. The chapter's purpose is not to persuade the reader to accept a specific theology. It is to help the person blocked by the God concept find a version of the Higher Power concept that is genuinely their own. The argument is practical, not theological. The only thing the Big Book will not accept as a Higher Power is the person's own addicted mind — specifically because that mind has been the source of the problem.

1. Where do you currently stand on the Higher Power question — what is your genuine, working concept of a Power greater than yourself, and how did you arrive at it? Is it genuinely your own, or is it borrowed, nominal, or held at arm's length?

2. "We found that as soon as we were able to lay aside prejudice and express even a willingness to believe in a Power greater than ourselves, we commenced to get results." Have you experienced this — results that came from willing engagement with the concept even before full conviction? What happened?

The Jumping-Off Place

Chapter Three's "jumping-off place" passage accurately describes the internal state of a person whose addiction has progressed to where the prospect of continuing using is as intolerable as the

prospect of stopping. The jumping-off place is the moment when the pain of continuing exceeds the perceived pain of stopping — when the management strategy has failed so completely that even the addicted person cannot maintain the conviction it is still working. The Big Book's observation is that this moment, as terrible as it is, is the moment of maximum potential: the specific moment when genuine openness to a different approach becomes available for the first time.

1. Can you identify your specific jumping-off place — the moment when the pain of continuing exceeded the perceived pain of stopping? What happened in that moment, and what did it produce in terms of genuine willingness to engage with a different approach?

2. "We were in a position where life was becoming impossible." Is that description accurate for your experience at your worst point? What does the fact that you survived that point and are now in recovery tell you about what became available exactly when the situation seemed most impossible?

Selfishness and Self-Centeredness as the Root

Chapters Three and Four together build the case for a specific claim: alcoholism is not simply a problem of drinking, but a symptom of a deeper problem in character and thinking. The Big Book is explicit: "Selfishness — self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles." The "selfishness" in question is a specific orientation of the addicted person's thinking that places their own comfort, security, and approval-seeking at the center of every calculation. Stop the drinking without addressing the underlying character structure, and the same thinking patterns will continue to generate the same distress.

1. Do you recognize the "selfishness and self-centeredness" the Big Book describes — the specific way your thinking has been organized around your own comfort, security, and approval to the detriment of genuine relationship and genuine responsibility? Where does this most clearly show up in your Fourth Step inventory?

2. "The alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so." What are the specific ways your self-will — your insistence on managing outcomes, relationships, and circumstances according to your own plan — has produced the consequences the Big Book describes?

READING SECTIONS

Steps 1-4: The Foundation

Powerlessness · Hope · Decision · Inventory

How It Works: Steps 1-4

Steps 1-4 establish the foundation of recovery: honest acknowledgment of the problem, opening to a solution, the decision to proceed, and the self-examination that makes genuine change possible. Work through these with your sponsor, not alone.

Step One: The Complete Admission

"How It Works" opens with what many consider the most important sentences in the Big Book: "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." Step One — "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable" — is the foundation on which every subsequent step rests. "Unmanageable" does as much work as "powerless." The Big Book does not ask only for the admission that drinking was out of control. It asks for the admission that life itself became unmanageable as a result — that the addiction's reach extended into every domain.

1. Write a brief Step One summary: In what specific ways were you powerless over alcohol or substances? And in what specific ways did your life become unmanageable — in relationships, work, finances, health, legal situations, and spiritual life?

2. "Half measures availed us nothing." Where in your current program are you at risk of half-measures — where the admission of powerlessness has been made verbally but the program engagement reflects a residual belief that partial self-management might still be possible?

Step Two: Came to Believe

Step Two — "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity" — is the step that makes recovery possible for the person who has genuinely worked Step One. The phrase "came to believe" is a description of a process, not an event. The word "willingness" is the threshold requirement — not certainty, not conviction, not intellectual agreement. A person who cannot yet believe but who is willing to believe has enough to proceed. The restoration to sanity refers specifically to the insanity of the first drink — the mental blank spot, the obsession that overrides all evidence.

1. "Came to believe" is a process. Are you in the early stages of that process — actively coming to believe? Or has a genuine, working belief in a Power greater than yourself become part of how you navigate daily life? Describe where you actually are.

2. Where in your recovery has the willingness to believe — acting as if it were true even before being sure — produced results that conviction alone had not yet provided? What happened when you acted as if?

Step Three: The Decision

Step Three — "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him" — is described in the Big Book as "the keystone of the whole arch." The key word is "decision." Step Three does not ask for the completed act of turning will and life over — it asks for the decision to do so. The Third Step prayer: "God, I offer myself to Thee — to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will." The specific request is relief from the bondage of self — from the self-centeredness the Big Book identifies as the root of the alcoholic's troubles.

1. Have you made a genuine Step Three decision — not a recited prayer but a genuine turning point in how you approach your will and your life? Describe what the decision meant for you and how it has changed — or is changing — how you navigate daily circumstances and relationships.

2. "Without reservation" — the Big Book says Step Three must be made this way. Where are your current reservations — the areas of your will and life you are not yet genuinely willing to turn over? Be honest about the specific domains where the decision remains incomplete.

Step Four: The Searching Moral Inventory

Step Four — "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" — is the first action step, and the Big Book devotes more space to its instruction than to any other single step. The resentment inventory is particularly important: "resentment is the 'number one' offender. It

destroys more alcoholics than anything else." The inventory asks the person to list every resentment and then to examine their own part: where they were selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, or frightened. The Fourth Step is not designed to produce shame. It is designed to produce clarity.

1. Where are you in the Step Four process — completed, currently working, or deferred? If deferred, what is actually getting in the way: fear of what you will find, shame about specific material, insufficient sponsor guidance, or the avoidance that protects the most shameful material?

2. From your inventory: what are the two or three most powerful fears that have most consistently driven your behavior? What does each fear reveal about an underlying belief about your own adequacy, safety, or worth?

The Four Columns: Reading Your Part

The Fourth Step resentment inventory uses a specific four-column format. Column One: the person being resented. Column Two: the cause. Column Three: what part of the self was affected — self-esteem, personal relationships, sex relations, ambitions. Column Four — the most difficult — examines the person's own part: "where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, and frightened?" The fourth column is where the inventory moves from a list of grievances to genuine character examination. The purpose of Column Four is not to excuse others or assign fault symmetrically. It is to identify the patterns the person brought to the situation that, when addressed, will change the future.

1. Choose one significant resentment and work through all four columns: name the person (Column One), describe specifically what they did (Column Two), identify what was affected in you (Column Three), then — most importantly — describe honestly your part: where were you selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, or frightened (Column Four)?

2. "A life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness." Which active resentments in your current life are most directly costing your recovery — consuming the most emotional real estate, most distorting your perceptions of the present, most blocking access to genuine serenity?

READING SECTIONS

Steps 5-9: Into Action

Confession · Character Work · Amends · The Promises

Into Action: Steps 5 Through 9

Steps 5-9 convert the awareness of Steps 1-4 into genuine changes that recovery requires. The Big Book is clear: it is not enough to understand the principles. They must be acted on, thoroughly, with support.

Step Five: Full Admission to Another Person

Step Five — "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs" — is the step the Big Book identifies as essential to the relief the Fourth Step was designed to produce. The Big Book describes what happens when Step Five is genuinely completed: "We can look the world in the eye. We can be alone at perfect peace and ease. Our fears fall from us." Step Five is the experience of being fully known — including in one's worst — and being met with compassion rather than rejection.

1. Have you completed a genuine Step Five — "withholding nothing" — or have you managed the disclosure, sharing what felt safe while protecting the most shame-generating material? Be honest about the quality of your Fifth Step.

2. What did Step Five produce in you? The Big Book promises specific relief. Did you experience it? If not, what prevented it — was the disclosure incomplete, the relationship not safe enough, or is the freedom still ahead in the work?

Steps Six and Seven: The Character Work

Steps Six and Seven — "Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character" and "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings" — are among the most misunderstood in the program. Step Six does not ask for the character defects to be gone — it asks for the readiness for them to be removed. Being "entirely ready" requires genuinely understanding how each defect has functioned and genuinely wanting to live without its protection. Step Seven's humility is not self-deprecation. It is the accurate assessment of one's actual condition — recognition of dependence on a Power greater than oneself and genuine willingness to ask for help.

1. Which character defects from your Fourth Step inventory are you most genuinely ready to have removed — the ones you have stopped defending, stopped finding useful, and genuinely want to be free of? Which are you not yet entirely ready to release, and why?

2. "The spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it." How specifically are you living the Step Six and Seven work — noticing when character defects are operating in specific situations and asking, in those specific moments, for the grace to respond differently?

Step Eight: The List and the Willingness

Step Eight — "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all" — is the step that most directly confronts the specific harm the addiction years produced. The Big Book is clear about scope: "all persons we had harmed." Not the ones harmed most severely. Not the ones most likely to be receptive. All persons. Step Eight is distinct from Step Nine: the list is made in Step Eight, the amends are made in Step Nine. This distinction allows the person to approach the list honestly — without the immediate pressure of action.

1. Have you made a complete Step Eight list — genuinely including all persons harmed, not only those you are willing to approach? Who are you most tempted to leave off, and what is the specific resistance to including them?

2. "Became willing to make amends to them all." For whom on your list is willingness most incomplete — and what specifically is the fear, resentment, or rationalization blocking it? What would it take to move toward genuine willingness for that specific amends?

Step Nine: Making Direct Amends

Step Nine — "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others" — is the step that brings the internal transformation into the external world. The amends process is not simply an apology tour. It is a specific, thorough, honest process of acknowledging harm, accepting responsibility, making restitution where possible, and

demonstrating through changed behavior that the amends is genuine. Living amends — the ongoing demonstration through consistent changed behavior — are understood as the completion and continuing of the amends process for harms that cannot be directly addressed.

1. What is the current state of your Step Nine work — how many amends have been made, and what remains? Which specific amends are you most consistently deferring, and what is the honest reason?

2. The amends you have deferred — what is their ongoing cost to your serenity, your relationships, and the authenticity of your recovery? The Big Book says the freedom Step Nine produces grows as the amends are made. What freedom are you missing because of deferred amends?

The Promises: What Ninth Step Work Produces

The Promises of Alcoholics Anonymous — found on pages 83-84 — describe the natural outcome of the painstaking work the steps require: "We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace... We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves." The Big Book adds: "Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them."

1. Which of the Promises have you already experienced in your recovery — even partially, even in early form? Name them specifically, describe what the experience has been like, and identify what specific step work seems to have produced them.

2. Which Promises are most absent from your current recovery — which describe an experience you have not yet had and most want? What does the Big Book suggest about what work is required to produce those specific experiences?

READING SECTIONS

Steps 10-12: Living the Program

Daily Inventory · Prayer & Meditation · Service · A Vision

The Maintenance Steps

Steps 10, 11, and 12 are not the end of the program — they are its ongoing daily practice. The Big Book treats them as a way of life, not a checklist.

Step Ten: Continued Daily Inventory

Step Ten — "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it" — is the first maintenance step. The Big Book describes three forms: the spot-check inventory, the daily inventory, and the longer-period inventory. The "promptly admitted it" clause is as important as the inventory itself. The addict who identifies a wrong but defers acknowledgment is already engaged in the disease's management strategy rather than the program's transparency requirement.

1. What is your actual Step Ten practice on a typical day? Is it a genuine daily review that catches the disease's thinking before it accumulates — or has it become nominal, the pro forma acknowledgment that the step exists while actual daily examination has ceased?

2. Where in your recovery is the promptness most consistently absent — where do you most commonly identify a wrong and defer the admission? What makes the deferral feel safer than prompt acknowledgment, and what is the cost of that deferral?

Step Eleven: Prayer and Meditation

Step Eleven — "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out" — is the daily spiritual practice step. The Big Book provides specific and practical guidance: on awakening, review the day ahead; ask for knowledge of what to do and for the power to do it. The evening practice: review the day honestly — what was done right, what was done wrong, what could have been done better — without the self-criticism the Big Book explicitly warns against.

1. What does your Step Eleven practice actually consist of — on a typical morning and evening? Is there a genuine, regular practice of prayer and meditation, or has this step been the one most consistently allowed to lapse in the face of daily demands?

2. The Step Eleven prayer is "only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." What is the difference between this and prayer that asks for specific outcomes? And how consistently are you practicing the former rather than the latter?

Step Twelve: The Spiritual Awakening

Step Twelve — "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs" — is the culminating step. The spiritual awakening is not necessarily the dramatic kind. The Appendix clarifies that for most people, the awakening is of the "educational variety": a gradual change in personality, character, and point of view through sustained engagement with the steps and the fellowship. The step has three components: the awakening, carrying the message, and practicing the principles in all affairs.

1. Can you identify a spiritual awakening in your recovery — not dramatic, but the gradual change in character, values, and orientation that the Big Book describes? What specifically is different about how you see yourself, other people, and your place in the world?

2. "Practice these principles in all our affairs" — in work, family, finances, parenting, citizenship. Where is the gap most significant between the person you are in the meeting room and the person you are in the rest of your life? What does that gap reveal about the Step Twelve work still ahead?

Working With Others

Chapter Seven — "Working With Others" — is the Big Book's practical guide to carrying the message. The chapter's central observation is that the recovering person's greatest asset is their specific experience — the credibility and identification that comes from having been where the suffering person is. The final observation is among the most important in the book: "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with

other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail."

1. What service work are you currently doing that involves sharing your recovery experience with others who are suffering — sponsorship, speaking, volunteering, peer support? And how does this work affect your own recovery? Have you experienced the specific immunity from drinking that working with others produces?

2. "An alcoholic who has recovered has something precious to give." What specifically is precious about your experience that you have to offer? Have you fully identified and begun to offer that specific gift?

READING SECTIONS

The Promises & Spiritual Principles

12 Promises · 12 Principles · The Gifts of the Program

What the Program Produces

The Promises and spiritual principles are specific, identifiable changes in character, thinking, and experience that the program produces when thoroughly worked. This section asks how present they are in your specific recovery.

The Twelve Promises: Reading Them as Evidence

The full text of the Promises, read slowly, is worth examining not as a recitation but as a series of specific, falsifiable claims about what the program produces. They are not guaranteed by attendance or by verbal endorsement of the program. They are described as the natural outcome of painstaking work — specifically the Ninth Step work. The most important word in the Promises passage is the final qualifier: "if we work for them." The Promises are not given; they are earned through the specific work the program describes.

1. Go through each of the Promises and honestly rate your current experience of each one (1-10). Which are most present in your recovery? Which are most absent? What does the pattern reveal about where the work is incomplete?

2. "We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it." This is one of the most striking Promises. What would it mean for you specifically to neither regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it? What would need to happen in the step work and in your relationship to your own history for this specific Promise to become your experience?

Steps 1-4: Honesty, Hope, Faith, Courage

The Twelve Steps are each associated with a spiritual principle. Step One requires honesty — for many people, the first genuinely honest act in years. Step Two is associated with hope — the return of the genuine possibility that things could be different. Step Three is associated with faith — not theological belief but the practical faith of acting as if a Power greater than oneself is available. Step Four is associated with courage — the specific courage required to examine oneself honestly, to look at the resentments, the fears, the conduct, and the harms without the defenses that had been keeping them out of awareness.

1. Which of the first four spiritual principles — honesty, hope, faith, or courage — is most fully developed in your current recovery? And which is most underdeveloped — where the step is nominally completed but the corresponding principle is not yet genuinely operative in daily life?

2. "We beg of you to be fearless and thorough from the very start." Fearlessness is the willingness to examine oneself without the protections that fear insists on maintaining. Where in your program is the fearlessness most complete — and where is fear still governing the depth of your engagement?

Steps 5-7: Integrity, Willingness, Humility

Steps Five, Six, and Seven are associated with integrity, willingness, and humility respectively. Integrity in Step Five is the willingness to bring the full truth into the specific vulnerability of disclosure to another person. Willingness in Step Six is the readiness to relinquish the character defects that the inventory revealed. Humility in Step Seven is accurate assessment of one's actual condition — recognition of one's dependence on a Power greater than oneself and genuine willingness to ask for help rather than manage alone.

1. How genuine is your current practice of Step Five integrity — are you bringing the full truth of your inner life to your sponsor and therapist, or are you managing the disclosure, sharing the safe portion while protecting what generates the most shame?

2. The Big Book's humility is accurate self-assessment — neither grandiosity nor self-loathing. Where is humility most complete in your program — and where is pride or self-sufficiency still resisting the genuine recognition of dependence on something beyond individual will?

Steps 8-10: Brotherly Love, Justice, Perseverance

Steps Eight, Nine, and Ten are associated with brotherly love, justice, and perseverance respectively. Brotherly love in Step Eight is the willingness to approach people one has harmed with genuine care for their wellbeing — making amends not primarily for the relief of the person

making them but for genuine benefit to those harmed. Justice in Step Nine is the commitment to making things right. Perseverance in Step Ten is the quality that sustains the ongoing inventory practice against the natural tendency to relax vigilance as recovery becomes comfortable.

1. The principle of justice in Step Nine requires concrete making-right of harms — financial restitution, direct acknowledgment, behavioral change. Where is the justice principle most fully expressed in your amends work? And where is the reluctance to pay the full price of justice still present?

2. Perseverance in Step Ten is the ongoing commitment to honest self-examination that does not relax when recovery becomes comfortable. Where in your current program is complacency quietly replacing perseverance? What specific indicators tell you the daily inventory has become less genuine than it needs to be?

Steps 11-12: Spiritual Awareness and Service

Steps Eleven and Twelve are associated with spiritual awareness and service — the two qualities the Big Book presents as the fullest expression of what the program produces when genuinely worked. Spiritual awareness in Step Eleven is the ongoing, active cultivation of conscious contact with a Higher Power. Service in Step Twelve is the natural outflowing of the recovery the program has produced. The Big Book's argument is that the person genuinely transformed by the steps is not performing service as an obligation — they are engaging in the natural expression of who they have become.

1. Is your Step Eleven practice producing genuine spiritual awareness — a qualitative change in how you navigate the day, make decisions, respond to difficulty, connect with others — or is it primarily nominal, satisfying the step requirement without producing the specific guidance and serenity the step promises?

2. Is your Step Twelve service the natural expression of who you have become — the genuine desire to give back what you received — or is it more obligation-driven, performed because it is expected? What would it look like for the service to become as natural as the Big Book says it should be?

WORKSHEETS & EXERCISES

Big Book Worksheets

10 Deep-Work Exercises for Serious Program Engagement

How to Use These Worksheets

Work these with your sponsor — not alone. The Big Book was not written to be understood in isolation, and these worksheets are not designed to be completed in isolation. Bring each completed worksheet to your sponsor before moving to the next.

Worksheet 1 — My Step One Documentation

1. POWERLESSNESS INVENTORY: List every specific instance where you tried and failed to control your use — every promise to moderate or stop, every attempt at a different rule, every time the first drink or use took over despite genuine intention to stop. Be exhaustive.

2. UNMANAGEABILITY INVENTORY: For each domain of your life — relationships, finances, legal, work, health, housing, parenting, spiritual life — describe specifically how the addiction made that domain unmanageable. Be concrete.

3. THE EVIDENCE: Looking at both inventories together — what does the complete evidence show about the thoroughness and finality of the failure of the self-management strategy? Can you honestly maintain that you are not powerless, given this specific evidence?

4. MY STEP ONE: Write your personal Step One statement — the specific, unmanaged, honest admission of what powerlessness and unmanageability have meant in your specific life. This is not for the group — it is for you and your sponsor.

Worksheet 2 — My Higher Power Concept

1. What specifically blocks your access to a working Higher Power concept — previous religious experiences that were harmful, unanswered prayer during active addiction, intellectual resistance, or specific betrayals? Name each barrier honestly.

2. What is your current working Higher Power concept — the specific understanding of a Power greater than yourself you can genuinely use? Describe it in honest, personal terms, not in program-conventional language.

3. Where have you seen this concept produce results — the specific moments in your recovery when acting as if it were true produced something that self-reliance alone did not produce? Name the specific instances.

4. How has your Higher Power concept evolved through recovery? If it has not evolved, is it because it is genuinely settled or because the question has not been actively engaged?

Worksheet 3 — The Resentment Inventory Deep Work

1. List your five most active current resentments. For each: name who or what (Column 1), describe specifically what they did (Column 2), identify what part of you was affected — self-esteem, relationships, security, ambitions (Column 3).

2. Now work Column Four for each of the five resentments: Where were you selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, or frightened in each situation? This is not self-blame — it is honest self-examination. What was your part, however small?

3. Which of your five resentments is currently doing the most damage to your recovery — consuming the most psychological space, most distorting your perceptions of the present, most blocking access to genuine serenity?

4. What specific step work — inventory, amends, ongoing prayer for the person resented — is required to address your most damaging resentment? What will you commit to doing about it this week?

Worksheet 4 — The Fear Inventory

1. List every significant fear currently operating in your life. Do not filter for rationality. Simply list everything generating genuine fear, anxiety, or avoidance behavior.

2. For each fear: What underlying belief about your own adequacy, safety, worth, or the reliability of others does this fear reveal? The Big Book says fears reveal the self-reliance underlying the self-centered orientation.

3. What would turning each of your most significant fears over to a Higher Power look like in practice — what specific behavioral and cognitive changes would constitute the Big Book's approach to fear?

4. Which fear is most directly threatening your recovery right now — most consistently driving the self-protective or isolation-seeking behavior that relapse risk requires? What specific step work or clinical action is required to address it?

Worksheet 5 — My Amends Inventory

1. Write your complete Step Eight list: every person harmed through your addiction — family, intimate partners, friends, colleagues, employers, institutions. Do not filter for approachability or willingness. This step only asks for the list.

2. For each person on your list: describe specifically how they were harmed. Be concrete — not "I hurt my marriage" but the specific harms to this specific person.

3. Categorize your list: Who has been fully approached? Who has been approached but the amends is incomplete? Who has not yet been approached, and what is the specific reason for the deferral?

4. What is the single most important amends you have not yet made — the one whose completion would most significantly free you from weight you currently carry? What prevents you from making it, and what would it take to make it this month?

Worksheet 6 — The Promises Progress Inventory

1. Go through each of the Twelve Promises and rate your current experience of each one (1 = not present, 10 = fully present). List them and rate each: New freedom/happiness; No regret for past; Comprehend serenity; Experience benefits others; Uselessness/self-pity disappearing; Interest shifting to others; Self-seeking slipping away; Attitude/outlook changing; Freedom from fear; Intuitive handling of baffling situations; Realization God is doing what we could not.

2. Which three Promises are most fully present in your current recovery? Describe specifically what each one looks like in your daily life — not as abstract quality but as concrete, observable experience.

3. Which three Promises are most absent? The Big Book says they will always materialize if we work for them. For each absent Promise, what specific step work does the Big Book suggest is required to produce it?

4. The Promise you most want and do not yet fully have is a clinical indicator of where the work is most urgently needed. Name that Promise and write specifically what the Big Book suggests you need to do to pursue it.

Worksheet 7 — My Daily Practice Design

1. Design your complete Big Book-based daily practice for Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve. For the morning: what specific prayer, meditation, or reflection will you practice? How will you implement the Big Book's morning guidance — reviewing the day ahead, asking for knowledge and power, maintaining calm and trust?

2. For the evening: what specific Step Ten inventory will you conduct? What three questions will you honestly answer each night? How will you address instances where you were wrong — who will you promptly admit it to, and when?

3. For the Step Twelve dimension: what specific, regular service commitment will be part of your practice — not occasional speaking but consistent daily availability to carry the message?

4. What accountability structure will support this daily practice — who knows what it consists of, who will notice if it lapses, and who will you report to regularly?

Worksheet 8 — The Character Defects Deep Work

1. From your Step Four inventory: list the character defects that appear most frequently across resentments, fears, and conduct inventory. Which patterns — specific forms of selfishness, dishonesty, self-seeking, or fear-driven behavior — show up most consistently?

2. For your top two character defects: describe exactly how each one operates in your current life. What specific situations activate it? What does it feel like from the inside? What behavior does it produce? What consequences does it generate?

3. For the same two defects: where did each one come from? What early experience or survival strategy produced this specific pattern? What was it originally protecting you from? (This is not an excuse — it is the understanding that makes genuine willingness for its removal possible.)

4. Write a Step Six and Seven practice for your top character defect: what does "entirely ready" look like in relation to this specific defect — what defending, finding useful, or secretly valuing must stop? And what does the Step Seven prayer look like when applied specifically to this defect?

Worksheet 9 — Big Book Passage Study

1. Choose one passage for deep study and bring it to your sponsor: the "How It Works" reading (pp. 58–60), the Ninth Step Promises (pp. 83–84), the resentment discussion in Chapter Five, or the daily practice in "Into Action." Write the passage out in your own words — not the group-standard interpretation, but your specific, personal understanding of what it means.

2. What does this passage say about the problem? What does it say about the solution? What does it say about what you specifically need to do?

3. Where does this passage most directly challenge something you are currently doing, avoiding, or believing? What is it asking you to change, and what is your honest resistance to that change?

4. How would you explain the core insight of this passage to a newcomer — someone in their first week of recovery — in language that is honest, accessible, and free of jargon? Write that explanation as if speaking directly to that person.

Worksheet 10 — Letter to a Newcomer

1. Write a letter to someone who is where you were at your worst — in the "seemingly hopeless state" the Big Book describes. Draw on what the Big Book has taught you, on what you have experienced in recovery, and on what you most wish you had known at the beginning.

2. In this letter, be honest about both the difficulty and the possibility. Do not minimize what lies ahead, and do not perform a positivity that doesn't match the reality of the program. Tell the truth — about what is required, what it costs, and what it produces.

3. Close the letter with the single most important thing the Big Book has given you — the one truth or practice or transformation that most clearly demonstrates the "great fact" the Big Book claims in its final chapter: that the program works, it works for people as lost as the person reading this letter, and willingness to follow it is the only requirement.

WORKSHEETS & EXERCISES

My Big Book Study & Application Plan

Study · Work · Apply · Share

From Reading to Living

The Big Book says 'the spiritual life is not a theory — we have to live it.' This section converts your Big Book study into a specific, sponsor-accountable plan for living the program. Share this with your sponsor before the end of this week.

My Honest Program Audit

An unfiltered assessment of the gap between your Big Book knowledge and your Big Book application.

1. Rate your current program engagement on three dimensions: Knowledge (how well do you understand the Big Book's key concepts?), Step Work (how thoroughly — not nominally, but actually — have you worked each step with a sponsor?), and Daily Practice (how consistently are you maintaining Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve as a genuine daily practice rather than an aspiration?)

2. What is the single most important gap between your Big Book understanding and your Big Book living — the place where you know more than you are doing? Name it as specifically and honestly as possible.

3. "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." If your recovery went through its hardest test tomorrow — a major trigger, a significant loss, a period of sustained difficulty — how confident are you that the program you have actually built would hold you? What does your honest answer reveal?

The Priority Step Work to Complete

The single most important step work to complete or deepen in the next 90 days.

1. Based on your assessment: which step is most incomplete — where required work has been deferred, managed around, or done only partially? Name it specifically and be honest about what "thoroughly" would require that your current engagement has not provided.

2. What specifically will you do to complete or deepen this step — what is the concrete first action, what is your sponsor's role, and what is the specific timeline?

3. Who will hold you accountable? Commit to sharing this plan with your sponsor — when will you do that? Name the day and the context.

My Big Book Study Commitment

A specific, regular Big Book study practice that goes beyond hearing it quoted.

1. Design your Big Book reading and study plan for the next 90 days: which chapters will you read or re-read? How often? With your sponsor alone, in a study group, or both? What does genuinely studying — as opposed to simply reading — the Big Book mean specifically for you?

2. What is your early warning system for program drift — the specific indicators that will tell you your engagement with the Big Book and the steps is becoming nominal rather than genuine?

3. What is your response when you detect program drift — the specific AA actions you will take to return to genuine engagement before the drift becomes chronic erosion?

Protecting the Work

The specific changes that genuine Big Book application requires right now.

1. What specific honest disclosure — a truth about your current recovery, a step you have been managing around, a resentment or fear you have been protecting — do you commit to bringing to your sponsor in the next 30 days? Name it specifically.

2. What specific amends — the most consistently deferred one — do you commit to addressing in the next 60 days? What preparation is needed, and who will support you in making it?

3. What specific daily practice — morning, evening, or service — will you implement or strengthen this week? What will it consist of, when will it happen, and how will you know you are actually doing it rather than planning to do it?

My Program Commitment Statement

A personal commitment to the genuine, thorough program the Big Book describes.

1. What is the single most important insight from this study guide — the one Big Book concept or practice that most directly addresses the gap between the program you are currently maintaining and the program the Big Book says produces genuine, durable recovery?

2. Write your personal Program Commitment Statement: what you are committing to studying, what step work you are completing, what daily practices you are maintaining, and why — in your own words, from your own honest engagement with what the Big Book asks. This is not a meeting-room commitment — it is a commitment between you, your sponsor, and whatever Higher Power you have come to believe in.

3. When will you share this statement with your sponsor? Name the date and context, and specifically what you are asking your sponsor to hold you accountable to. The Big Book was not written to be worked alone, and this commitment is not designed to be kept alone.
