

There Are No Shortcuts to Recovery

Father Martin's Chalk Talks · The Recovery Files

Stay Off the Grass. Walk the Path.

Embrace, Empower & Evolve · Recovery Made Simple · The Recovery Files

Across the Grass · Saves eight seconds, costs years · The Paved Path · Longer on the map, faster in life

Father Martin would not let patients cut across the lawn when a walking path ran right there. He was not protecting the grass. He was watching an instinct — and he found that the people who looked for the shortcut on the lawn looked for it in treatment, and then for the rest of their recoveries.

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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 6 · READING

The Grass and the Walking Path

At Father Martin's treatment center on the Chesapeake Bay, there was a rule that struck most new patients as trivial to the point of absurdity: do not walk on the grass. There were paved walking paths running everywhere across the property, laid out deliberately to connect every building to every other building. The rule was simply that you used them.

Patients cut across the grass anyway, the way people do everywhere. It saves eight seconds. Nobody is harmed. The grass grows back. And Father Martin would stop them, every time, and he would not let it go as a groundskeeping matter, because to him it was not one. He would point out what had actually just happened: a path had been provided, built by people who knew where you were trying to go, and you had decided that your own route across the lawn was better. Not because you had studied the property. Because it looked faster from where you were standing.

His observation, made over decades of watching people get well and watching people fail to, was blunt. The patients who looked for the shortcut on the lawn tended to look for the shortcut in treatment. And the patients who looked for the shortcut in treatment tended to keep looking for it in their recoveries — through the first year, through the fifth, through relapse after relapse — always convinced that somewhere there existed a version of this that would work faster, cost less, and demand less of them than the version everyone else was doing.

What makes the grass so useful as an example is that cutting across it is genuinely harmless. That is the entire point, and it is the part people miss. Father Martin was not worried about the lawn. He was watching an instinct operate in a low-stakes setting where you could see it clearly — the instinct that says, when a proven route and a faster-looking route are both available, I will take the faster-looking one, and I will not check with anyone first. That instinct does not stay on the lawn. It goes with you into the fourth step you decide to summarize, the sponsor you decide you can do without, the medication you decide to stop early because you feel better, and the ninety days you decide can reasonably be sixty.

So this workbook is not really about grass, and it is not about rule-following for its own sake. It is about noticing the exact moment you decide that the path built for you does not apply to your particular crossing — and understanding that in recovery, unlike on a lawn, that decision has consequences that arrive later, cost more than you expected, and are usually paid by people other than you.

Reflection Questions

1. Where in your life do you cut across the grass — literally or otherwise? What is your reasoning in the moment?

2. When you have been given a rule that seemed trivial or arbitrary, what has your instinct been? What did you do?

3. Father Martin believed the small shortcut predicts the large one. Looking at your own history, was he right about you?

4. What is one place in your current recovery where you have decided the provided path does not apply to your particular crossing?

5. Who built the path you are being asked to walk, and what do you actually know about why it runs where it runs?

YOUR EXERCISE

The Grass and the Path Audit

Finding the instinct in low-stakes places

Why Start Small

Father Martin was not protecting the lawn. He was watching an instinct operate somewhere it caused no harm, because that is where you can see it clearly. This exercise does the same thing — it looks for corner-cutting in ordinary, low-stakes parts of your life first, because those are much easier to admit to than the ones that cost you something.

The Small Ones

Tap the ones that are honestly yours. No score, no judgment — this is just showing you the instinct.

- ☐ Skipping instructions and figuring it out myself
- ☐ Reading summaries instead of the whole thing
- ☐ Cutting across parking lots and lawns
- ☐ Ignoring speed limits I consider unnecessary
- ☐ Starting a

course and not finishing it ○ Assembling something without the manual ○ Skipping the warm-up or the stretch ○ Leaving events before they end ○ Skimming rather than reading ○ Taking the first answer rather than the right one ○ Doing the minimum that will pass ○ Rushing the last ten percent of a task

What is my reasoning in the moment, when I cut the corner?

Not the justification afterward — the thought at the time...

How do I react when given a rule that seems arbitrary or trivial?

Be honest about the internal reaction, not just the outward behavior...

The Same Instinct, Higher Stakes

Where in my recovery am I currently cutting across the grass?

Name the specific instruction and the specific way you have shortened it...

Father Martin believed the small shortcut predicts the large one. Looking at my history, was he right about me?

Give evidence either way...

Who built the path I am being asked to walk, and what do I actually know about why it runs where it runs?

If the honest answer is that you do not know, say that...

One place I will stay on the path this week, specifically:

One instruction, followed as given, with a day attached...

PART 2 OF 6 · READING

The Weight of One Word: Thoroughly

The chapter "How It Works" in Alcoholics Anonymous opens with a sentence that recovering people have been repeating to each other for the better part of a century: "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path." It is worth slowing down on that sentence, because almost everyone hears it and almost nobody hears the word doing the actual work.

The word is thoroughly. Not followed. Not tried. Not agreed with, appreciated, or attended. Thoroughly. The claim being made is not that the path works for everyone who steps onto it. The claim is much narrower and much harder: it works for people who follow it completely, and it has very little to say about people who follow it partially. That is not a loophole in the promise. It is the condition of the promise, stated openly in the first line, before anything else is offered.

This matters because partial following is by far the most common way people relate to a recovery program, and it almost never feels like partial following from the inside. It feels like participation. You went to the meetings but did not get a sponsor. You got a sponsor but did not call. You did the inventory but left three things out. You did steps one through three sincerely and treated four through nine as optional advanced coursework. You took the medication but stopped when you felt better. You went to therapy but managed what you disclosed. Every one of those is a person who would say, truthfully and without any intent to deceive, that they are working a program.

And here is what makes it genuinely painful rather than merely disappointing: when the partial version fails, as it usually does, people do not conclude that they followed it partially. They conclude that it does not work. They walk away saying they tried and it did not take, and they carry that conclusion into the next attempt, and sometimes into a decision to stop attempting. A great many people have written off a path they never actually walked, on the basis of an experiment they never actually ran.

Thoroughness is not perfectionism, and this distinction is worth holding onto. Perfectionism is about performing without flaw and is usually another form of hiding. Thoroughness is about leaving nothing deliberately out — no reserved topic, no unmentioned resentment, no step quietly skipped, no instruction privately downgraded to a suggestion. You will do all of it imperfectly. Everyone does. Doing it imperfectly and doing it partially are not the same thing, and the difference between them is most of the difference between recovering and not.

Reflection Questions

1. Where are you currently following your program partially while describing it, honestly, as following it?

2. What have you left out — of an inventory, a disclosure, a conversation with a sponsor or prescriber — that you know you left out?

3. Have you ever concluded that something "did not work for you" that you had not actually done thoroughly?

4. What is the difference, in your own life, between doing something imperfectly and doing something partially?

5. If someone reviewed your program with complete access to the truth, where would they say the gaps are?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 1 OF 5

Thoroughness Capacity

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

1. I finish things I start even after the initial motivation has passed

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I tell my sponsor, therapist, or prescriber the truth including the parts that embarrass me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I follow a sequence in the order given even when I do not see why

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I keep doing what works after I start feeling better

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I can name one person who has walked this path and is guiding me on it

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I take action before I fully understand or agree with the reason for it

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I go to meetings and appointments on the days I do not feel like going

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. I have completed something difficult in recovery all the way to the end

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

The Thoroughness Test

Twelve honest yes-or-no questions

The Word Doing the Work

The promise at the opening of "How It Works" is conditional, and the condition is the word thoroughly. It does not claim the path works for everyone who steps onto it — it claims it works for people who follow it completely. This test is a plain audit of whether you are one of them right now. There is no partial credit, on purpose.

Thoroughness: 0 of 12 yes0%

I have chosen one specific path and can name it

☐ Yes ☐ No

I have a named person guiding me who has walked it themselves

☐ Yes ☐ No

I am following the sequence in the order it was given

☐ Yes ☐ No

I contact my guide regularly, not only in crisis

☐ Yes ☐ No

There is nothing I am deliberately withholding from that person

☐ Yes ☐ No

I attend and participate, rather than attending only

☐ Yes ☐ No

I take medication exactly as prescribed, or have none prescribed

☐ Yes ☐ No

I keep appointments on schedule rather than by mood

☐ Yes ☐ No

I disclose in therapy without managing how it makes me look

☐ Yes ☐ No

I do something that helps another person in recovery

☐ Yes ☐ No

I have a daily practice I keep on days I do not feel like it

☐ Yes ☐ No

I have kept doing what works even after I started feeling better

☐ Yes ☐ No

Working the Gaps

List every item I answered No to:

All of them, without softening any...

Which single No costs me the most?

And why that one...

What would it take to convert that one to a Yes, in specific and countable terms?

Not an intention — a set of actions with dates...

Am I confusing thoroughness with perfectionism anywhere here?

Perfectionism performs without flaw and is usually hiding. Thoroughness leaves nothing deliberately out.

Who will I review this list with, and when?

Name and date...

PART 3 OF 6 · READING

The Shortcuts We Take

Shortcuts in recovery rarely announce themselves. Nobody stands up and declares that they intend to do less than what is asked. The shortcut arrives as efficiency, as maturity, as a reasonable adaptation to a busy life — and it is worth naming the common ones out loud, because they are much easier to spot in a list than in your own week.

The geographic cure: moving cities, jobs, or relationships in the belief that the problem is situational. It buys a few weeks of relief and takes you with you. The white-knuckle: stopping the substance without changing anything else, holding on by willpower alone, and mistaking abstinence for recovery. The selective inventory: doing the honest work on everything except the one or two things you have never told anyone, which are almost always the things that actually run the show. The credential shortcut: reading everything, understanding the theory better than most people in the room, and treating comprehension as though it were the work.

There are more, and they are equally ordinary. Meeting attendance without meeting participation — the body in the chair, the phone in the hand, out the door before the coffee. Sponsorship in name only, where you have a person to point to but no conversation you would be embarrassed to have overheard. Stopping medication the moment you feel stable, which is the moment it is working. Substituting one compulsion for another and calling it a hobby. Doing the steps out of order, or doing four without doing five, which is the most common place people stop and the exact place the relief was going to come from.

What every one of these has in common is that it removes the specific element that was uncomfortable, and the discomfort was doing the work. Recovery does not ask you to suffer for its own sake, and any program that does should be questioned. But it does ask you to tolerate exposure — being known, being seen, being told something you did not want to hear, sitting in a feeling you would rather medicate. The shortcut is almost always the route that avoids exposure while preserving the appearance of effort.

The cruelest arithmetic in all of this is that the shortcut takes longer. A person who works the whole path over eighteen difficult months is usually further along than a person who has spent nine years cycling through partial attempts, each one abandoned around the same point, each one followed by a period of decline and another entry back at the beginning. Time spent on the path is cumulative. Time spent looking for a faster path is not — it resets, over and over, and the resetting is what people mistake for bad luck.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of the shortcuts named above have you personally taken? Be specific rather than general.

2. What discomfort was each shortcut removing? Name the actual feeling you were avoiding.

3. Where in your history have you stopped at the same point more than once? What lives at that point?

4. How much cumulative time have you spent on the path versus looking for a faster one?

5. What is the shortcut you are most tempted by right now, this month?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 2 OF 5

Shortcut Seeking

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

1. I look for the fastest version of things rather than the proven version

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I skip steps in instructions when I believe I already understand the point

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I have started a program, treatment, or practice and stopped before completing it

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I look for the option that requires the least discomfort from me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I believe there is probably a more efficient way to recover than what I have been shown

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I find rules that seem arbitrary hard to follow even when I agreed to them

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I would rather find a better method than commit fully to an adequate one
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. When something is working, I start looking for what I can safely reduce
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 3 OF 5

Half-Measures & Partial Effort

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

1. I attend meetings or appointments without really participating in them
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
2. There are things I have never told my sponsor, therapist, or prescriber
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
3. I have a support person I rarely actually contact
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
4. I have done part of a step, inventory, or assignment and left parts out
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
5. I manage what I disclose depending on how it will make me look
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
6. I have said a program did not work for me when I had not fully done it
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
7. I stop doing what helps as soon as I start feeling better
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5
8. I do the parts of my plan I like and quietly drop the parts I do not
☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

My Personal Shortcut Catalog

Naming them is most of the work

They Are Easier to See in a List

Shortcuts never announce themselves. They arrive as efficiency, as maturity, as a reasonable adaptation to a busy life. That is why they are far easier to recognize on a list than in your own week — the list removes the justification that came attached to each one at the time.

Shortcuts I Have Taken

- ☐ The geographic cure — moving, changing jobs, changing relationships ☐ White-knuckling — stopping the substance and changing nothing else ☐ The selective inventory — honest about everything except one or two things ☐ The credential shortcut — understanding the theory instead of doing the work ☐ Attending without participating ☐ A sponsor in name only ☐ Substituting one

compulsion for another ○ Doing four without doing five ○ Doing the steps out of order ○ Meetings only when I am struggling ○ Managing what I disclose in therapy ○ Working the program alone, from books ○ Waiting for the right time to start properly ○ Cross-addiction disguised as a healthy hobby ○ Helping others as a way to avoid my own work

Others, in my own words:

Your own versions...

Shortcut 1 — in depth

The shortcut

What it saved me at the time:

Time, discomfort, exposure, embarrassment, money...

What discomfort was it removing? Name the actual feeling.

Every shortcut routes around a specific feeling. Which one?

What it eventually cost me:

And how long it took for the bill to arrive...

Am I still taking this one? If so, what would putting it back look like?

Shortcut 2 — in depth

The shortcut

What it saved me at the time:

Time, discomfort, exposure, embarrassment, money...

What discomfort was it removing? Name the actual feeling.

Every shortcut routes around a specific feeling. Which one?

What it eventually cost me:

And how long it took for the bill to arrive...

Am I still taking this one? If so, what would putting it back look like?

Shortcut 3 — in depth

The shortcut

What it saved me at the time:

Time, discomfort, exposure, embarrassment, money...

What discomfort was it removing? Name the actual feeling.

Every shortcut routes around a specific feeling. Which one?

What it eventually cost me:

And how long it took for the bill to arrive...

Am I still taking this one? If so, what would putting it back look like?

The Pattern

Where in my history have I stopped at the same point more than once?

The same step, the same month, the same kind of conversation...

What lives at that point? What is waiting there that I keep turning away from?

This is usually the most important question in the workbook...

The shortcut I am most tempted by right now, this month:

Present tense, not past...

YOUR EXERCISE

The Half-Measures Ledger

What I started and did not finish

Partial Is Not Imperfect

Doing something imperfectly and doing something partially are not the same thing. You will do all of this imperfectly — everyone does, and that is not the problem this exercise is about. Partial means something was deliberately left out: a topic not raised, a step not taken, an instruction privately downgraded to a suggestion.

Half-measure 1

What I started

THE PART I DID

THE PART I LEFT OUT

What did I tell myself, and other people, about why I stopped?

What was actually true?

What would finishing this look like — and what would it cost me?

Half-measure 2

What I started

THE PART I DID

THE PART I LEFT OUT

What did I tell myself, and other people, about why I stopped?

What was actually true?

What would finishing this look like — and what would it cost me?

Half-measure 3

What I started

THE PART I DID

THE PART I LEFT OUT

What did I tell myself, and other people, about why I stopped?

What was actually true?

What would finishing this look like — and what would it cost me?

Half-measure 4

What I started

THE PART I DID

THE PART I LEFT OUT

What did I tell myself, and other people, about why I stopped?

What was actually true?

What would finishing this look like — and what would it cost me?

Half-measure 5

What I started

THE PART I DID

THE PART I LEFT OUT

What did I tell myself, and other people, about why I stopped?

What was actually true?

What would finishing this look like — and what would it cost me?

Ledger Review

1. Looking at the right-hand columns, is there a pattern in what you leave out?

2. Have you ever concluded that something "did not work for you" when the left-out column explains the outcome?

3. Which single unfinished item, if finished, would change the most?

4. What has stopped you from finishing that one before now?

5. Who would you have to tell in order for finishing it to become real?

YOUR EXERCISE

Shortcut Warning Signs

Catching the exit before you take it

Write the Responses Now

Every shortcut has a moment where it becomes visible before it becomes a decision. Write the responses while you are calm, because when the sign appears it will not feel like a warning sign — it will feel like a reasonable conclusion you have just reached on your own.

Signs I Recognize In Myself

○ I start feeling like I have got this ○ I begin reducing meetings or appointments ○ I stop calling unless something is wrong ○ I skip the daily practice on a busy day, then a second day ○ I start comparing my program to other approaches ○ I decide a suggestion does not apply to my situation ○ I begin managing what I disclose ○ I think about stopping medication because I feel stable ○ I start looking for a different sponsor, group, or provider ○ I get impatient about how long this is taking ○ I feel like the basics are beneath me now ○ I stop being able to name what step or stage I am on

My own early warning signs, in my own words:

What did the last drift look like at the very beginning?

Warning sign 1 — response plan

The sign

What it will feel like from the inside (it will not feel like a warning)

My response — one action, and who I tell

The rule I am setting now, in advance

Warning sign 2 — response plan

The sign

What it will feel like from the inside (it will not feel like a warning)

My response — one action, and who I tell

The rule I am setting now, in advance

Warning sign 3 — response plan

The sign

What it will feel like from the inside (it will not feel like a warning)

My response — one action, and who I tell

The rule I am setting now, in advance

Warning sign 4 — response plan

The sign

What it will feel like from the inside (it will not feel like a warning)

My response — one action, and who I tell

The rule I am setting now, in advance

PART 4 OF 6 · READING

Time Cannot Be Compressed

Some things in recovery respond to effort, and some things only respond to time. Confusing the two is one of the most reliable ways to get hurt in the first two years, and it is a confusion that intelligent, capable, hardworking people are especially prone to — because effort has solved most of their previous problems.

The brain heals on its own schedule and does not consult you about it. After sustained substance use, the systems governing reward, motivation, sleep, stress response, and impulse control need time to recalibrate, and that recalibration is measured in months and years rather than days and weeks. Post-acute withdrawal — the low mood, the flat affect, the poor sleep, the sudden waves of craving arriving without a trigger, the sense that everything is grey — is not a sign that recovery is failing. It is a sign of a nervous system in repair. The same is true in mental health recovery: medications frequently need weeks to reach full effect, therapy works through repetition rather than insight, and the stabilization of mood is a process rather than an event.

This is where a specific and dangerous distortion enters. Around sixty to ninety days, many people feel genuinely good — clearer, more energetic, more themselves than they have felt in years. And the feeling produces a thought: I have got this. I do not need this much structure. The meetings, the medication, the appointments, the check-ins were for the person I was in the first month, not the person I am now. That thought is not arrogance. It is the honest report of an improving nervous system that has not yet finished improving, and it arrives precisely because the plan is working. The plan produced the feeling that argues for abandoning the plan.

Trust is the other thing that only time can rebuild, and this one people find even harder to accept. You can be entirely sincere, entirely changed, and entirely committed, and the people you harmed will still not trust you yet — because trust is not rebuilt by sincerity, it is rebuilt by consistency observed over a duration. There is no gesture, no letter, no conversation, and no amount of visible effort that compresses that duration. Demanding to be trusted on the basis of how much you have changed is itself a shortcut, and it usually costs more ground than it gains.

None of this means you are powerless or that effort is wasted. It means that effort and time do different jobs. Your effort determines whether you are on the path. Time determines how far along it you are. You can control the first completely and the second not at all, and a great deal of unnecessary suffering in early recovery comes from people applying enormous effort to the thing that only answers to time, and then concluding that they must be doing it wrong.

Reflection Questions

1. Where are you trying to apply effort to something that only responds to time?

2. Have you felt the "I have got this" moment yet? What did it argue for cutting?

3. What have you expected other people to feel toward you faster than they were able to?

4. What does it stir up in you to accept that some of this is simply not on your schedule?

5. What would change if you assumed this was a five-year process rather than a ninety-day one?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 4 OF 5

Impatience with the Process

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

1. I feel I should be further along than I am

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I get frustrated when progress cannot be accelerated by working harder

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I expect people I harmed to trust me faster than they are able to

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I have reduced structure because I was feeling good

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I compare my timeline to other people's and find mine too slow

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I have stopped a medication because I felt stable rather than because a prescriber advised it

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. Waiting without visible progress is very difficult for me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. I have wanted to be finished with recovery rather than practicing it

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Effort vs. Time Sorter

Two different jobs, constantly confused

They Do Different Jobs

Your effort determines whether you are on the path. Time determines how far along it you are. You control the first completely and the second not at all.

A great deal of unnecessary suffering in early recovery comes from people applying enormous effort to the things that only answer to time, and then concluding they must be doing it wrong.

Sort the List

First, tap everything from the list below that responds mainly to your effort — things you can decide to do today.

- ☐ Rebuilding trust with my family
- ☐ Getting a sponsor
- ☐ Sleeping normally again
- ☐ Feeling motivation return
- ☐ Making amends
- ☐ Craving intensity decreasing
- ☐ Working the steps
- ☐ My prescriber finding the right medication
- ☐ Attending meetings
- ☐ Emotional stability returning
- ☐ Telling the truth today
- ☐ Being believed by people I lied to
- ☐ Concentration and memory improving
- ☐ Building a sober social circle
- ☐ Feeling like myself again

Now tap everything that responds mainly to time — things that will arrive on their own schedule regardless of how hard you push.

- ☐ Rebuilding trust with my family
- ☐ Getting a sponsor
- ☐ Sleeping normally again
- ☐ Feeling motivation return
- ☐ Making amends
- ☐ Craving intensity decreasing
- ☐ Working the steps
- ☐ My prescriber finding the right medication
- ☐ Attending meetings
- ☐ Emotional stability returning
- ☐ Telling the truth today
- ☐ Being believed by people I lied to
- ☐ Concentration and memory improving
- ☐ Building a sober social circle
- ☐ Feeling like myself again

Some items will honestly belong in both. Note which ones — those are usually where effort creates the conditions and time does the rest.

Where I Have Been Pushing

Where am I applying effort to something that only responds to time?

And what has that effort cost me in frustration?

Have I had the "I have got this" moment yet? What did it argue for cutting?

Around sixty to ninety days for most people...

What have I expected other people to feel toward me faster than they were able to?

Trust is rebuilt by consistency observed over duration, not by sincerity...

What comes up in me when I accept that some of this is simply not on my schedule?

Name the feeling honestly...

What would change if I assumed this was a five-year process rather than a ninety-day one?

Think about what you would stop rushing...

PART 5 OF 6 · READING

The Path Is Already Blazed

An enormous amount of energy in early recovery goes into designing a personal program, when the far harder and far more useful work is following an existing one. The path already exists. It was cut by people who went first, tested by millions who followed, and corrected over decades by everyone who found out the hard way where it does not hold. You are not the first person to stand at this trailhead, and nothing about your situation requires a new route.

In the twelve-step tradition, that path takes the form of a set of steps worked in order with someone who has worked them — a sequence that moves from admitting the problem, through examining your own conduct honestly and disclosing it to another human being, through repairing what can be repaired, into a maintained daily practice and the responsibility of helping the next person. It is deliberately ordered. Steps four and five are placed where they are because the ones before them build the willingness required, and the ones after them depend on what those two produce. Reordering it, or extracting the parts you like, does not give you a customized program. It gives you the parts that were never load-bearing.

Other traditions have their own blazed paths, and they are legitimate. SMART Recovery offers a structured cognitive and behavioral sequence. Refuge Recovery, LifeRing, Celebrate Recovery, and others each provide an established route with people who know it. In mental health recovery the instructions are equally established and equally unglamorous: medication taken as prescribed for long enough to evaluate, therapy attended on a schedule rather than by mood, sleep protected, movement maintained, contact with other people sustained, and a written safety plan built before it is needed rather than during a crisis.

The dialects differ. The structure is remarkably consistent: an ordered sequence, a guide who has walked it, honesty with at least one other human being, action taken before understanding arrives, and continued practice after you feel better. Any path with those five features will work if followed thoroughly. No path lacking them works reliably, no matter how personalized or how intelligently designed.

So the question worth asking is not which path is best — that debate has consumed years of many people's lives and settled nothing. The question is: which path have I actually chosen, who is guiding me on it, and am I on it thoroughly or partially? A well-chosen path walked partially loses to a moderately-chosen path walked completely, every time. The choosing is the easy part, and people spend years there because it is more comfortable than the walking.

Reflection Questions

1. Which path have you actually chosen? Name it specifically rather than describing a general intention.

2. Who is guiding you on it — a person who has walked it, by name?

3. Which of the five features is missing from what you are currently doing: order, a guide, honesty with another person, action before understanding, or practice after feeling better?

4. Where have you extracted the parts you liked and left the load-bearing parts behind?

5. How much time have you spent choosing or comparing paths versus walking one?

CHECK YOURSELF · CHECK-IN 5 OF 5

Building My Own Path

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

1. I have assembled my own approach from parts of several different programs

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2. I decide for myself which suggestions apply to me and which do not

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

3. I have changed the order of a sequence because my order made more sense to me

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

4. I spend time comparing approaches rather than committing to one

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

5. I do not currently have one named person guiding me through a defined path

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

6. I trust my own read on my recovery more than I trust anyone else's

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

7. I have left a program or provider and started over somewhere new more than once

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

8. My plan contains nothing that I genuinely dislike doing

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

YOUR EXERCISE

Naming the Path I Am Walking

Which one, guided by whom, how thoroughly

The Choosing Is the Easy Part

A well-chosen path walked partially loses to a moderately-chosen path walked completely, every time. People spend years comparing routes because comparing is more comfortable than walking.

Any path with five features will work if followed thoroughly: an ordered sequence, a guide who has walked it, honesty with at least one other human being, action taken before understanding arrives, and continued practice after you feel better.

The Path

The path I have chosen (name it specifically)

Twelve-step fellowship, SMART, Refuge, an outpatient program, a treatment plan...

My guide on it, by name

Sponsor, therapist, facilitator, prescriber...

Where I currently am in the sequence

Be specific rather than approximate...

The next thing in the sequence, and what is actually stopping me from starting it:

Not what I plan to do eventually — the next thing, and the real obstacle...

The Five Features

For each feature, describe honestly how it is or is not present in what you are actually doing.

1. An ordered sequence I am following in order:

Present, absent, or modified? Describe...

2. A guide who has walked it themselves:

Present, absent, or in name only?

3. Honesty with at least one other human being:

Including the parts that embarrass me?

4. Action taken before understanding arrives:

Or am I waiting to agree before I act?

5. Continued practice after I feel better:

What has my history been on this one?

Which feature is most missing, and what is the first step to installing it?

One step, with a date...

What I Have Extracted

Where have I taken the parts I liked and left the load-bearing parts behind?

Be specific about which parts...

How much time have I spent choosing or comparing paths versus walking one?

Honest estimate...

What does my current plan contain that I genuinely dislike doing?

If the answer is nothing, that is the finding — say what it means.

PART 6 OF 6 · READING

The Long Way Is the Short Way

There is a paradox at the center of all of this that only becomes visible from a few years out, which is exactly why it has to be told to people rather than discovered by them: the long way is the short way. Doing recovery thoroughly, at the pace it actually requires, gets you to a stable life faster than any of the routes that look faster from the trailhead.

The arithmetic is not complicated once you write it down. A shortcut does not fail immediately — that is what makes it attractive and what makes it dangerous. It works for a while. It buys weeks or months of apparent progress at reduced cost. Then it fails, and the failure is rarely a graceful return to the starting line. It usually involves a period of decline before the failure is even acknowledged, then the acute event, then the wreckage, then the re-entry, then the slow rebuilding of trust and stability that had already been built once. Add that cycle up three or four times and you have spent five years covering ground that eighteen thorough months would have covered.

The person who takes the long way looks, in month four, like they are behind. They are going to more meetings than seems necessary. They are still calling a sponsor about small things. They are still taking the medication they feel fine without. They are still doing the boring maintenance that everyone else appears to have graduated from. In month four this looks like inefficiency, and people around them sometimes say so. In year four it looks like the only thing that worked.

There is a second dividend that almost nobody anticipates. What you build on the long path is not just abstinence or symptom stability — it is a set of capacities you did not have before. The ability to tell the truth when it costs you something. The ability to ask for help before a crisis. The ability to tolerate a feeling without acting on it. The ability to keep an agreement after the mood that produced it has passed. These are not side effects of the path; they are what the path is for, and they are precisely what every shortcut removes, because every shortcut is a route around the discomfort in which those capacities are built.

So this is the case for the paved walkway, and it is a practical case rather than a moral one. Nobody is asking you to walk the long way because it is virtuous or because rules are good. You are being asked to walk it because it is genuinely faster, because the people who have measured this have measured it many thousands of times, and because the eight seconds you save cutting across the lawn are the most expensive eight seconds available to you.

Reflection Questions

1. Add up your own history honestly: how many months or years have partial attempts cost you?

2. What have you been doing that looks like inefficiency to other people but you suspect is the work?

3. Which of the four capacities — truth-telling, asking early, tolerating feelings, keeping agreements — is weakest in you?

4. What would you tell someone at month four who feels like the long way is too slow?

5. What are you willing to commit to walking thoroughly, starting now, and for how long before you evaluate it?

YOUR EXERCISE

Cost of the Detour

The arithmetic nobody does on purpose

Why Count It

The cruelest arithmetic in recovery is that the shortcut takes longer. Time spent on the path is cumulative. Time spent looking for a faster path is not — it resets, over and over, and the resetting is what people mistake for bad luck.

This is not an exercise in shame, and if it starts to feel like one, stop and bring it to a person rather than finishing it alone. It is an exercise in seeing a number you have never actually added up.

Separate attempts at recovery I have made

Total months lost to relapse, decline, and re-entry

Your best honest estimate

Relapses or major setbacks

Treatment episodes, detoxes, or hospitalizations

Relationships damaged or ended along the way

Approximate money spent on substances, treatment, legal, and lost income

A number, in dollars

What the Number Says

What is my honest reaction to seeing that added up?

Whatever it actually is...

What did each of those attempts have in common? Where did each one end?

The pattern is usually the same point every time...

What did I believe each time about why THIS attempt would be different?

And was the belief about circumstances, or about doing it thoroughly?

What is different this time — in what I am doing, not in how I feel?

Feelings are not evidence here. Name behaviors.

Who am I going to show this number to?

Name and when...

YOUR EXERCISE

Walking the Path Log

7 Days of Staying Off the Grass

The Practice

Each day, take five minutes and answer four questions. You are not fixing anything here — you are building the habit of noticing, close to real time, the moment you decide a corner can be cut. Over a week the pattern usually becomes obvious, and it is rarely the pattern people expect going in.

Day 1

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 2

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 3

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 4

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 5

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 6

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Day 7

Where did I take a shortcut today — in anything, however small?

What did I do thoroughly today, all the way to the end?

Was there anything I held back from someone I should have told?

What did I do today that only time will pay off, and can I let it be slow?

On the path today (1 = cut across everything, 10 = walked it thoroughly)

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

Week in Review

1. Looking at seven days, what kind of shortcut do you take most reliably?

2. Did your rating change over the week? What made the higher days higher?

3. What did you hold back, and did you ever say it? What happened either way?

4. What did you do thoroughly that you would not have done a month ago?

5. Will you keep this log going? If so, when in your day will it live?

YOUR EXERCISE

My Full-Measure Commitment

One page. Say it to a person.

The Long Way Is the Short Way

In month four, walking the whole path looks like inefficiency. People sometimes say so. In year four it looks like the only thing that worked.

Nobody is asking you to walk the long way because it is virtuous. You are being asked because it is genuinely faster, and because the eight seconds you save cutting across the lawn are the most expensive eight seconds available to you.

Write the Commitment

The path I am walking:

Who is guiding me:

The next thing in the sequence:

What I am putting back that I had cut:

What I have not told anyone, and who I will tell:

How long I will walk it before I evaluate:

My first warning sign, and my response:

Who is holding me to this, and when I told them:

My Commitment

THE PATH I AM WALKING

Not yet written.

WHO IS GUIDING ME

Not yet written.

THE NEXT THING IN THE SEQUENCE

Not yet written.

WHAT I AM PUTTING BACK THAT I HAD CUT

Not yet written.

WHAT I HAVE NOT TOLD ANYONE, AND WHO I WILL TELL

Not yet written.

HOW LONG I WILL WALK IT BEFORE I EVALUATE

Not yet written.

MY FIRST WARNING SIGN, AND MY RESPONSE

Not yet written.

WHO IS HOLDING ME TO THIS, AND WHEN I TOLD THEM

Not yet written.

Closing Reflection

1. What would you tell someone at month four who feels like the long way is too slow?

2. Which of the four capacities — truth-telling, asking early, tolerating feelings, keeping agreements — is weakest in you right now?

3. What is the one thing you have been putting off that you now intend to do thoroughly?

4. What will you do the first time this feels too slow to be working?

5. Write the sentence you want to be able to say about yourself two years from now.

Stay Off the Grass

The path was cut by people who went first, tested by millions who followed, and corrected by everyone who found out the hard way where it does not hold. You are not the first person at this trailhead, and nothing about your situation requires a new route. Walk it thoroughly.

A note on what this is

This workbook is educational and reflective. It is not treatment, and it is not a substitute for medical or psychiatric care. Nothing here is a reason to change or stop any prescribed medication — that decision belongs to you and your prescriber together. If you are in crisis, contact your provider or call or text 988 in the United States.