
A Guide for Beginners

Produced by the Eugene SAA fellowship



Eugene S.A.A. Intergroup

From Shame to Grace

This pamphlet is not yet approved by either the SAA Literature Committee or the SAA Conference Fellowship, but many of our members have found it helpful

Welcome to the Fellowship

As a beginner in this recovery fellowship, you have stepped onto a path that can eliminate the painful, destructive behaviors that brought you here. But more importantly, it will open you to positive changes you cannot even begin to imagine at this point. If you steadfastly follow this path, it will fundamentally change your life for the better. The members of this fellowship are fellow sojourners on this path of recovery, helping each other along the way with support, encouragement, compassion, and hard-earned knowledge and wisdom. In a sense, we are a family—brothers and sisters in a common endeavor to recover from our addiction.

You are most welcome to join us on this journey of recovery. Every individual brings a certain unique “something” to the fellowship—a new perspective, a different avenue of insight, their unique sense of humor, a particular strength, their own story—and the fellowship is always enriched by each new contribution.

But as a beginner, there are great pitfalls immediately in front of you that can easily derail your progress along this path. Often, we fall into these pitfalls because we are initially unable to see them for what they are. And, needing to maintain its control over us, our addiction (our behavior compulsions) will try everything possible to undermine our recovery by either sabotaging our commitment or by taking control of our efforts and corrupting them to serve its own ends. We provide here a list of common pitfalls so that you may become aware of them and, hopefully, with the help of others in the fellowship, side-step around them.

Common Pitfalls

1) I'm not convinced there is such a thing as sexual addiction. Isn't addiction about drugs or alcohol, biochemistry and genetics?

In the 1930's, Alcoholics Anonymous made an enormous contribution when it demonstrated convincingly that alcoholism wasn't just a failure of self-will. From that breakthrough, many speculations arose about the true nature of alcoholism and addictions in general, with the conventional wisdom settling on the idea that there must be some sort of physical component. A kind of “allergy” to alcohol was proposed and has endured as a useful model that helps relieve alcoholics of the guilt and low self-esteem created by their inability to manage their drinking on their own.

Since that time, science has found indications of a neurological basis to both opiate and alcohol addiction, and has gathered genetic evidence of a tendency for alcoholism in some family lines. So the evidence is mounting that there may indeed be a physical component to some addictions.

However, after a few decades of applying the 12-step approach to behavioral compulsions such as gambling, over-eating, uncontrollable anger, and co-dependency, it has also become clear that such compulsions operate in our minds and in our lives in a manner that is essentially identical to chemical addictions, even if we can't identify a physical basis. Furthermore, in the case of sexual compulsions, it is plausible that we actually do become physically addicted to our own hormones of sexuality and endorphins of pleasure, or to the adrenaline of acting out in risky ways.

At this point, no one has solid answers to these kinds of questions, but they are actually irrelevant from the standpoint of 12-step recovery. Our experience has been that the 12-step approach can work miracles in the lives of people who suffer from compulsive sexual behaviors.

2) *Is this fellowship really where I belong? I'm not convinced I am actually an addict.*

Many people come into the fellowship unsure whether the term “addict” really applies to them, unsure if the 12-step process is appropriate for them. Such doubts are perfectly natural. But there is one excellent way to find the answer: get a sponsor (a 12-step coach) and proceed with Step 1.

There are certain hallmarks of addictive compulsions that become quite clear as we complete Step 1. We see a recurring pattern of serious problems created by our behavior, followed by commitments and promises to stop and serious attempts to do so, sometimes followed by a period of success, but eventually the compulsive behaviors return, often in new forms, and with them the serious problems that they generate.

So you needn't wonder. Just do the initial work and you will find the answer.

3) *Now that I've been hit by “the cosmic 2x4,” I think I've finally found the strength to beat this problem on my own.*

As with the previous pitfall, it is best to at least do the initial work with a sponsor and see whether this fellowship makes sense for you—that is, whether your life pattern includes recurring failure of the self-will based approach.

Larger “2x4s” may look like the apparently missing help in the short run, but that kind of thinking is actually part of the addiction mentality. We find that, left to our own devices, the pattern of self-will based failure always returns in the end. The productive way to use of the cosmic 2x4's impact is for motivation to promptly and diligently work the SAA program.

4) *I am uncomfortable with identifying myself as “an addict” in meetings. Isn't that actually giving in to the problem, or giving it power? Doesn't that reinforce the problematic mentality, the thoughts and behaviors from which I'm trying to get relief?*

It is important to understand that no one is required to say anything in particular (or anything at all, for that matter) in meetings. Nor is anyone required to think or believe particular things about themselves or others. This isn't a program of belief or dogma on any topic; it's a program of fellowship, action, and assistance that results in sustainable relief from compulsive behaviors.

However, the addiction mentality usually includes an element of denial—denial that it even exists, or that it's a problem for oneself or others, or that it is out of control and unmanageable by one's unaided efforts. As a way of contradicting such denial, many of us find it helpful to regularly state out loud that we are addicts. It is a shorthand way of saying “everywhere I go, I carry a compulsive behavior pattern that tends to ruin my life, so I need to be conscious of it and attend to the necessary countermeasures.” Making that statement shines a light on the compulsive behavior pattern and forces it out of the shadowed corners of our consciousness, where it prefers to hide.

If someone who suffered from such compulsions were to somehow come to a point where their temptation to act out completely and permanently vanished, never again to be triggered under any circumstances, then this kind of statement would no longer be useful. (In fact, their 12-step work would essentially become irrelevant, except as service work or as a form of living amends.) But no such people are known to exist, and the long history of failure to eliminate addiction through any medical or psychological treatment or therapy program suggests that such an absolute cure is impossible at this time.

And, to be clear, our program is not one of “cure” either; rather it is a way to

gain sustainable relief from the *symptoms* of the “disease.” That is, we gain relief from our acting-out behaviors. Plus, as a result, we also gain substantial freedom from the obsessive thoughts and feelings that tempt us to act out.

5) *I shouldn't need a crutch to get by in life. Only weak people need crutches.*

One of the enormous lies of addiction thinking is that there's something wrong with us if we can't manage our lives independently of others. We often have grandiose notions that we're better than others because of our highly developed skills of independence and self-reliance. Needing and asking for help is experienced as weakness. But what is actually true of human beings is that we are human by virtue of our rich, complex, social interdependence.

The addiction needs us to get and stay isolated in order for it to control us and live our lives for us. Recovery is actually impossible without the crutch of help from others (the fellowship) and the crutch of a specific program of recovery work. We have found that the only way to get and stay sober is to go to meetings, get a sponsor, work the 12-step program, and do service work. These are the crutches that help us succeed, but they work only to the degree that we utilize them.

6) *I don't need to go to regular meetings. I'll just go when I feel like it or when I'm struggling.*

Isolation is one of the main mechanisms by which addictive compulsions maintain control. Many of our modes of acting-out require isolation for a sense of safety, so isolation itself becomes associated with the pleasurable feelings of acting-out and, as a result, we are always more vulnerable to the compulsions when alone.

What is true is that isolation itself is hurtful and actually begins to feel bad once we're able to separate it from the pleasurable feelings of false safety or of acting-out. Furthermore, isolation prevents us from learning from others how to get and stay sober, separating us from those who actually know how to do that. And lastly, isolation feeds our sense of helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness, and shame, all of which fuel our addiction.

Connection with others through fellowship meetings is a powerful contradiction to the lies we live out in our addiction. In meetings we experience real compassion from others, sometimes for the first time, and that helps distance us from our negative feelings and thoughts about ourselves. We learn to feel and express compassion for others, which is one of the most potent medicines for the spiritual illness of addiction. And it is in fellowship meetings that we hear the stories of how to succeed at recovery.

If you want to get and stay sober, go to meetings, the more the better in the beginning. Some of us make a commitment to attend a meeting every day for a month, or even three months. That is one of the most powerful choices you can initially make—emphatically choosing recovery over the self-destruction of addiction. It can super-charge your recovery process.

If truly unyielding life-circumstances prevent you from doing something like that, then go to as many meetings as you possibly can. Also, members of any 12-step program are welcome at “open” AA meetings, of which there are often many available each week. Be flexible, make room for your meetings, get up early. If appropriate, ask friends or family for logistical help such as childcare or transportation. Take charge of your recovery. It is your life that is at stake!

7) *Okay, I'll do the 12-step program, but I'll just do it on my own, in my own way.*

Again, this is the addiction trying to keep us isolated and separated from the

recovery wisdom of others. It doesn't work. It will be extremely difficult to stay sober for long by doing it on your own. Through hard experience, we have learned that total sobriety requires getting a sponsor, and the sooner we do so, the sooner the program begins to work for us.

8) *Though I can see my compulsive behavior might someday ruin my life, it hasn't yet. And the rest of my commitments—my job, my family, my education—are so important. Aren't they necessarily the higher priority?*

Think of your addiction as that obnoxious, self-centered “friend” who is nice to you (flatters you, gives you gifts, does favors, offers help, makes you feel smart or witty) but only in order to get what he or she wants. And every time you come to the table of your life to enjoy the feast laid before you, your “friend” sits down at your place and gobbles it up—over, and over, and over again.

The only way to banish this “friend” is to make recovery your number-one priority. Your other life-commitments literally depend on it, for you are no good to your family or business or self-improvement goals when you are dysfunctional or are incapacitated through divorce, incarceration, getting fired, expelled, or dead by way of disease, vengeance, or suicide.

When we placed our addiction first, many of us lost very important people and relationships from our lives. When we put our recovery first, the reverse happens—we gain valuable and supportive connection with others, and experience all the positive benefits that come from that.

For many of us, putting recovery first is like brushing our teeth and taking care of basic personal hygiene. It's just what we have to do for things to go well—to live a decent, productive life filled with friendship, love and joy, which is what everyone deserves, including you.

9) *I'll do this for my wife/husband/partner/children. Or, I'll do this just to save my relationship.*

Outside motivations are often what push us through the door to our first meeting and keep us going for a while. Whatever it is that keeps you coming back is a useful thing while it lasts, but beware: placing our ongoing motivation for success outside ourselves is often a recipe for long-term failure. Though our addiction undoubtedly affects others in very negative ways, it is *our* life that it destroys most thoroughly. And the hard truth is that sometimes our connection to others will die out or be damaged to the point that external motivations begin to fail us for that reason.

Don't do this to be a hero to others or to prove to them that you're actually okay; do it for yourself. This is one place where a motivation of genuine self-interest is a healthy thing for everyone.

10) *I am uncomfortable with all this “God” and “higher power” talk. I don't believe in God. I think religion is just a manipulation, or a kind of magical thinking. I'm not sure I can hang out with people who think like that.*

As mentioned above, no one is required to believe anything in this program, and that includes religious beliefs and dogmas. The path is truly “wide enough for everyone who wishes to walk it.” Many of us come into the program with similar reservations about its spiritual aspects and terminology. And yet some of us work the program very effectively as staunch atheists throughout, finding a spiritual path that doesn't require belief in a deity.

Independent of any religious or spiritual framework, what is undeniably true is that there is a way that the universe works. The physical sciences have discovered

countless aspects of that “way” in the physical world, and the social sciences have identified many key truths about how the human mind and emotions are tightly interwoven with our social processes, our innate “way” of being human.

But the recurring dysfunctionality of our addiction reveals that it is fundamentally misaligned with how the world works. Our compulsive, socially inappropriate behaviors are akin to repeatedly stepping off cliffs because we are unable to see/accept/believe that gravity will break our legs on the rocks below. But that *is* how the world works whether we accept it or not. This program’s spiritual aspects are, in essence, a method for getting realigned with how things actually work.

For some of us, it is helpful to think of the references to “God” or “higher power” as shorthand for “how the world actually works,” or “whatever it is that makes the universe the way it is.” By doing that mental translation we are able to fully engage in the program and the sharing at meetings.

For others, our “higher power” can be things as straightforward and pragmatic as the 12-step program itself, or the particular fellowship of which we are a member. Or it can be something or someone who deeply inspires us, a commitment to be lived up to. For example, the possibility of a decent life, or the possibility of actually being that person our children think we are. (But beware of pitfall number 9 above.)

And, of course, many of us come into the program with a very robust and active relationship with a higher power, or God. But even those members often discover that the process of recovery clarifies, enhances, and deepens that relationship.

It is important to understand that you don’t have to figure out your relationship to a higher power in order to begin working the program. That can, and will, come with time. Just do the work and this question will sort itself out.

11) I am angry with God for doing this to me. Why would I choose to rely on a power that has condemned me to this nightmare?

As addicts, we become very skilled in the art of being a victim, blaming others for our problems so that we don’t have to take responsibility for them, and using our victim identity as entitlement to act out. For some of us, a remote, manipulative, callous or vengeful God becomes the perfect target for such blaming and entitlement.

Though it may be true that we received our compulsions through some accident of genetics or as a result of emotional hurts inflicted as youngsters, all of which was beyond our control, as adults we are nevertheless responsible for dealing with those compulsions appropriately. This is a great opportunity to finally grow up and take responsibility for the hand we’ve been dealt, and do something positive with it.

We have found that this 12-step program is far more than a way to stop problematic behaviors. For many, it becomes a training camp in the art of living a good life—a life of connectedness through friendship and partnership, a decent life built on a foundation of positive principles, a life of value through service to others, a life of genuine compassion for others because we know what it is like to hurt so deeply, to be so confused, to feel so victimized, to be so lost.

12) At meetings, I am uncomfortable being around people I’m attracted to. I have a hard time not objectifying them, sexualizing them, flirting with them. My sobriety feels at risk and I’m worried about upsetting them with inappropriate behavior.

Probably all of us struggle with this issue to some degree or another at the beginning, and it can come up again, occasionally, even after years of solid sobriety. But don’t let the fear undermine your recovery. What is true is that the fellowship is the perfect opportunity to begin learning how to behave sanely with people to

whom we're attracted, to learn by practicing sanity.

Some tips: when you look at them, look at their face, notice who they actually are, notice non-sexual aspects of them (there are actually far more of those than sexual aspects). If you are in a social situation, talk with them, ask them about their lives, get to know them as the complete human beings they are. And don't beat yourself up over your failures—just keep at it. It will gradually get easier as you practice. If you do so diligently, you will find that others eventually shift from prospective acting-out partners or acting-out targets to brothers and sisters in your recovery family.

13) *I am uncomfortable with people in the meeting room who seem to be objectifying me. Or, I'm just concerned that they might be secretly doing so. I don't feel safe there.*

It is inevitable that some newcomers will initially be unclear about appropriate boundaries, or how important it is that we maintain a safe environment for all, or their ability to even behave appropriately. Usually, newcomers will move through that phase fairly directly and settle in as solid members of the fellowship.

If someone interacts with you in ways that make you uncomfortable, and it seems to be more than a momentary lapse, let them know that. There is no better place to try on the strength of taking positive action and connecting with people to solve problems. There is no better place to try compassion rather than fear or anger.

If necessary, get help from a more experienced member when dealing with a particularly problematic person. And consider asking someone of the opposite gender to help you. It is good for you and good for them to work together to establish and maintain a safe environment.

The fellowship is the perfect place to begin learning and practicing how to deal with such challenges in new, effective, powerful ways—communicate what you need, proactively ask for help if you need it, expand your sphere of capability and trust.

14) *I don't want to work with a sponsor because I'm afraid to tell anyone the real truth about myself.*

It isn't necessary to lay your soul bare right from the get-go. Learning to open up and be truly honest is a process that can take some time. That is part of the reason the 12 Steps are in the particular order that they are.

But it is important to begin practicing honesty right away, and there is no better avenue for that than to begin telling your story to your sponsor, to whatever depth you are currently able. You will find that your sponsor is a compassionate person who has struggled with very similar problems, someone willing to hear your worst. Sponsors are also experts in our tradition of confidentiality and are bound by it, just as everyone else in the fellowship is.

Though addiction thinking would have you believe otherwise, be assured that being relieved of your secrets is actually a great blessing, providing freedom from fear and much peace of mind in the end.

15) *I'm not yet sober enough to work with a sponsor. I'm embarrassed by my inability to stay sober.*

This is putting the cart before the horse. You don't have to be sober to begin the program, you have to begin the program to get sober.

Contact

The Eugene SAA Intergroup, and the ISO of Sex Addicts Anonymous, are committed to reaching out to the sex addict who still suffers.

"Our primary purpose is to stay sexually healthy and to help other sex addicts achieve freedom from addictive sexual behavior."

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