

# The 12 Spiritual Principles (Virtues) of AA and the Meaning Behind Them

The 12-steps are the cornerstone of a popular approach to treating addiction, first popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous decades ago. The steps and the 12-step process more generally have a spiritual component. However, the spiritual components of each step are not always apparent. In addition, the wording behind the steps often stresses practical concerns over spiritual ones. Bill W., one of the two founders of AA, stressed the spiritual side of the program and wished to make that element more explicit. The program ultimately aims to replace destructive tendencies and addiction with a healthier and more sustainable way of life. Therefore, he envisioned a spiritual program that would be incorporated into all facets of day-to-day life.

## The 12 Spiritual Principles of AA

Every one of the 12-steps is designed to replenish the soul and fill the emptiness we have filled with addiction and self-destruction. In the 12 Spiritual Principles of AA, Bill W. lays bare the fundamental spiritual basis behind every one of the steps.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable

*The Spiritual Principle of step 1 is Honesty:* The 12-step program requires that we practice basic honesty with others and ourselves. We accept our flawed spiritual states and are honest about our powerlessness.

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 2 is Hope:* Spirituality cannot be practiced without the hope that we and the world around us will improve. Similarly, recovery is impossible without hoping that the 12-step program can improve things.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 3 is Faith:* Faith is the next step up from hope. While the principle of hope represents the general idea that things can improve, faith is the direct belief in a power that knows better than us where our spiritual truth lies.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 4 is Courage:* The 4<sup>th</sup> step requires fearless self-examination. And few things are more frightening than facing one's failings and shortcomings. Yet, courage is also needed to meet every day with an eagerness to improve ourselves.

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

*The Spiritual Principle of step 5 is Integrity:* No one is perfect. However, a person with integrity is willing to face their failings and do all they can to remedy them. In step 5, we practice integrity before God and begin to bring it to our relations with others.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 6 is Willingness:* Accepting a Higher Power into our lives and recognizing its plan for us is a crucial start. But we must also be enthusiastically willing to follow that path to fight the perils of addiction.

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 7 is Humility:* In step 7, we ask for a Greater Power to remove our worst shortcomings. This undertaking requires humility on two levels. First, to recognize our failings. Second, to admit we cannot remedy them with spiritual help.

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 8 is Love:* Love is the unselfish deep concern for others. In addiction, we hurt others and do things to them; we would never wish upon ourselves. We practice love in 8 by taking responsibility for the harm we have done to others and cultivating the willingness to make it right.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 9 is Brotherly Love:* Though traditionally used as brotherly love, perhaps compassion would be a better and less gender-specific term. When we make amends to those we have harmed, we sympathize with others for the pain we have caused. We also apply compassion by seeking a remedy that will improve their lives.

Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 10 is Perseverance:* Many recovering addicts enter the program with a blaze of enthusiasm and lose motivation. However, a profound spiritual application of the

12-steps requires perseverance. No matter how long you have been in the program, you must take it “one step at a time” and apply the spiritual principles daily with renewed vigor.

Step 11: 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.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 11 is Self-discipline:* The last steps are about maintaining spirituality and deepening it through regular behavior. In step 11, we engage with this while practicing discipline in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, we pray and meditate regularly. Second, we do not pray for our selfish gain and reinforce our willfulness. Instead, we seek to remain steady on the spiritual path.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and practice these principles in all our affairs.

*The Spiritual Principle of step 12 is Service:* Spirituality requires a connection with a higher power. But the 12-step program isn't one of quiet self-reflection. Instead, it stands on principles that should be shared with addicts in need. As we apply spirituality to our lives, our journey is not complete until we help others do the same.

### Final Word on The Spiritual Principles

The 12-steps work because they help us live a more fulfilling spiritual life. By the time you are done with the steps, you will have revitalized your inner spiritual life, connection to a Higher Power, and bonds with those around you. All of those outcomes are intentional and highly beneficial. So, as you work the steps, pay attention to the spiritual principles behind each step. It will improve your life immeasurably.

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