



A  
MAN'S  
WAY  
*through*  
THE  
TWELVE  
STEPS

DAN GRIFFIN, M.A.



**A MAN'S WAY THROUGH  
THE TWELVE STEPS**



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THE TWELVE STEPS**

*by Dan Griffin, M.A.*

**Hazelden®**

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*This book is dedicated to  
the memory of my father,  
Dr. Owen Martin Griffin,  
who never got the gift of recovery;  
the men upon whose shoulders I stand;  
those who walk the path with me today;  
and those yet to find their way.*

## ***The Guy in the Glass***

by

*Dale Wimbrow (1895–1954)*

When you get what you want in your struggle for pelf,\*

And the world makes you King for a day,

Then go to the mirror and look at yourself,

And see what that guy has to say.

For it isn't your Father, or Mother, or Wife,

Whose judgement upon you must pass.

The feller whose verdict counts most in your life

Is the guy staring back from the glass.

He's the feller to please, never mind all the rest,

For he's with you clear up to the end,

And you've passed your most dangerous, difficult test

If the guy in the glass is your friend.

You may be like Jack Horner and "chisel" a plum,

And think you're a wonderful guy,

But the man in the glass says you're only a bum

If you can't look him straight in the eye.

You can fool the whole world down the pathway of years,

And get pats on the back as you pass,

But your final reward will be heartaches and tears

If you've cheated the guy in the glass.

\* pelf — riches, gold

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## PREFACE

In 1995, at the age of twenty-three, I was just over a year sober and my father had just died from complications due to chronic alcoholism. At the wake, some men from one of my father's AA meetings invited me to attend a recovery retreat, even paying for my airfare and registration.

The disappointment started as soon as the men picked me up. One of the men immediately started complaining about his wife and then told a derogatory joke about women. Laughter filled the car like smoke and I laughed, too, though hesitantly. The conversation went on to span relationships, sports, recovery—from the mundane to profane to the inane. As we arrived at the retreat center, I could see water from a small lake in the distance with tall trees quietly swaying back and forth, welcoming us and promising solitude. Shortly after we arrived one of the men told an offensive and racist joke. This time I did not laugh. Walking away down toward the water, I thought to myself, “Is this the best we can do as men? Is this what I have to look forward to in my relationships with men in recovery?” That day I made a commitment to myself that I would not cheapen my recovery by compromising my values just so that I could fit in. Easier said than done.

The path to who we can become is rocky and full of mistakes, but recovery offers us the opportunity to learn from



those mistakes, to grow, and to change how we live. When we need guidance on our path, we learn to look to others in recovery for help. Those who actively work the Twelve Steps know that when we challenge each other according to the principles of the program, we support each other in becoming the best that we can be.

As a man reading this book, you will ask questions about who you have been, who you are, and who you will become in recovery—and you will find that the answers are embodied in the principles of the Twelve Steps. You will see that some of what you have been told, learned, and even thought about men has been inaccurate. You will also see that there is no resource greater than the Steps to help affirm what is best about our masculinity and about being men. What we are experiencing in the Twelve Step culture is much bigger than the very personal transformation that we experience and witness in others. Every time we take a risk and share honestly from our hearts, we create an opportunity for others to do the same and transform how men live as men—one man at a time.



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Huberty: you lit the lantern, carried the lantern, and then gave me the lantern and because of that I am no longer in the dark.

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Bill, you are the father I never had; Ben, you are the older brother I never had; and Eric, you are the sponsor I needed because you led me to myself.

Finally, they say that behind every successful man is a great woman. I am truly blessed to have three: My mom, Sherry, who never gave up on me; Dr. Stephanie Covington, I honor you for your courage in blazing the trail and your generosity in inviting me to walk with you—this book would not exist without you—thank you for believing in me; Nancy, my partner and soul mate, you are my love, my life. Thank you for loving me for who I am and teaching me how to do the same. My love always, LB.



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Each man put a part of his heart and soul in my hands, and I thank you for that. I hope that I have honored your life experience. Your collective experience, strength, and hope gave this book life. Thank you.

In memory of Ryane Frank, a young man who changed my life forever.

For all of the young boys in this world, that you may find peace and the courage, support, and love to be yourselves. Let nobody stand in your way.



## INTRODUCTION

Regardless of your background and previous experiences, when you come into treatment or a Twelve Step program, you immediately experience a culture in which people communicate. You too are asked, even expected, to communicate in ways with which you as a man are probably neither familiar nor comfortable. Thus begins the most exciting and rewarding journey you will ever take on this earth: a man's journey through the Twelve Steps.

This book is written to all men in Twelve Step recovery. The “we” and the “you” I speak to in this book are all of us men charting the courses of our lives by the shining light of the Twelve Steps.

Many of us have never thought about what being a man has to do with our recovery. Unlike our female counterparts, we have not spent the last twenty years looking at what we need, taking care of ourselves, and learning to live full lives. Even the Twelve Step community has been reluctant to discuss the freedom of expression for men inherent in the philosophy of the Twelve Steps. Many still assume that “men are the way they are,” and they don't see the pain, struggles, and limitations of men suffocating in the “box of masculinity” as it's been defined by our society.

So it is that *A Man's Way through the Twelve Steps* has

some history in the Women's Movement, a time when women began to look at their lives and the effect society's "rules" had on how they were raised. Because of that important and historical work, women today have a deeper and clearer sense of what it means to be female and how social messages have limited and restricted them. The concept of gender and the socially created roles for males and females have evolved. The rules and expectations for men have changed. Today it's easier to recognize how the ways we are raised create limitations for *both* men and women.

*A Man's Way* also has its history in the Men's Movement. When women began looking at their lives through the lens of gender, some courageous men concluded that we needed to do the same. Far less work has been done on the impact of gender on men's lives, particularly in relation to addiction and recovery. This book helps to fill that void. *A Man's Way* is about creating gender awareness for men in recovery. It will help you look more closely at the realities of your life, and address and respond to the challenges we face as men in Western society.

*Who am I?* When you ask that question at the beginning of your recovery journey, you are probably able to say with total honesty: "I don't know."

*What does it mean to be a man?* As a man, you may accept certain ways of thinking, talking, and acting as just who you are. You probably don't see that our culture has a set of rules for being a man. You may not realize you are following a kind of script. You put on your costume and act out the

script. Your addictions to drugs, gambling, sex, rage, or relationships are part of the fabric of your costume that allows you to hide your true self.

This book is meant in part to be a wake-up call. My hope is that, as a result of reading this book, you will think about your ideas of what it means to be a man and about your life as a man in recovery. *A Man's Way* will not address all of the challenges and issues men face today, but it will help you confront the changes you need to make in your life. You will find parts of yourself that you had long forgotten, had tried to get away from, and that you never knew existed.

Throughout the book I will look at how men are raised—some of these discussions will apply to you and some will not. However, my hope is that you will begin to form better ideas of who you are as a man. How you see yourself as a man affects how you see the Steps, how you engage in your recovery, and what you see as problems. These perceptions also can limit how much you grow in your recovery, especially in your relationships with other men and women.

*A Man's Way* has the book *A Woman's Way through the Twelve Steps* as a core part of its foundation. In this groundbreaking book, Dr. Stephanie Covington looked at the Twelve Steps and their impact on women's lives. She was able to stay true to the principles in the Twelve Steps while broadening the canvass upon which women paint their recovery. I have attempted to do the same for men by borrowing her model of using interviews and discussions of each Step to

help you better understand how each Step relates to your life and to the lives of men in general.

As men in recovery, we have addiction and the destruction it has caused in common. We also share a common solution: the Twelve Steps. With every step we take toward loving ourselves and shedding parts of our costume, we begin to see the limitless possibilities for who we can be and how we can live our lives. With that vision comes the freedom to be who we are, regardless of society's box of masculinity. By being true to ourselves, we automatically become the best men we can be.

I begin this book by looking at what is often one of the most difficult issues men have to deal with in sobriety: recognizing and expressing our feelings. How we come to terms with our emotions has a big impact on how effectively we are able to work a Twelve Step program. I then explore each Step with a focus on the unique cultural, social, and personal challenges and perspectives that men bring to understanding and applying that Step in their lives. Finally, I cover four topics—grief, relationships, violence and trauma, and difference—that deserve their own chapters because of their complexity and how vital they are for men in achieving quality, long-term sobriety.

Throughout the book you will discover stories from others who have been on this journey for some time. Draw on their insights and experiences to find the strength and hope to carry you through difficult moments. Explore the many questions raised in the discussions, and envision the limit-



less options available to us as men. I hope that as you read this book, you will look deeply at who you are and the life you want to live.

Take what you want and leave the rest. As my first sponsor always told me, misery is optional.



## FEELINGS

*I came into recovery with the mind-set  
that you have to deny all feelings;  
feelings were the enemy.*

— PETER —

Shortly after my father's funeral, I was helping my mom clean the house when I found some notes my father had written while in treatment. As I looked through them, I realized that he didn't think anybody could help him, felt alone a lot of the time, and didn't think he could talk to anyone. I had not known that he had those struggles or that he felt lonely, insecure, or fearful. He always acted as though everything was under control and that he didn't need anything from anyone. He always seemed quite self-assured. Something led my father to believe that the only way he could survive those feelings was to drink them away. He was not going to open up about them, even if shutting down killed him. And it did. Tragically, far too many men are walking the same path. Don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel—it's the unwritten code by which many men live their lives.

The most compelling responses I received from the men I interviewed focused on how recovery has given them awareness of the many feelings they actually had and the ability to accept, appreciate, and, most important, communicate the degree to which, as men, they experience the range of human emotion. If men who are not addicts ignore their feelings, they miss the fullness of life and close the door on an essential part of who they are. We addicts ignore our feelings at our own peril. Being aware of how we feel is a matter of life or death for us. Our feelings are both essential parts of who we are as men and the foundation of our recovery, and this chapter explores how we are raised to accept and reject our feelings.

### ***Burying the Caveman***

If feelings are a core part of the human experience, then they must be a core part of our recovery, too. I have yet to meet a man who does not feel the whole range of emotions. I have yet to meet a man who grew up knowing how to express what he was feeling, when he was feeling it, without allowing those feelings to mean anything about his masculinity. Andy, a fifty-eight-year-old IT consultant with twenty-six years in Al-Anon, talked about this:

*All men have feelings, whether or not they want to admit it. I came into the program not knowing how to name what I was feeling. Now, after years of practice, I can name them and experience and acknowledge all the feelings that I have, whether or not they are manly.*

Joe H., a forty-two-year-old with five years of sobriety who owns his own insurance agency, talked about the paradox regarding men and our experience of emotion:

*I am emotionally complex like I believed only women were. I've found that I saw them this way because they were the only gender I saw expressing themselves emotionally.*

So long as we perpetuate the lie that men do not have feelings, we will believe this to be true because, as Joe H. said, we will only see women expressing their feelings. Whether or not we are aware of our feelings, we do have them.

Dave, a forty-two-year-old stay-at-home dad with twenty-one years of long-term recovery, described his experience:

*In my youth, emotions ruled my decisions. I couldn't necessarily articulate my feelings surrounding specific decisions, but their rule over me was undeniable.*

Few of us come into recovery knowing how to open up and share what is happening in our lives. It's our task as men to learn how to integrate our feelings into our lives in a meaningful and helpful way. Joe H. verbalizes what many men experience as they come into recovery:

*Prior to recovery I did not have practice in expressing how I felt. Nor did I know how to recognize how I felt. Usually when I did express myself, it was using anger as a result of all the other emotions not being expressed.*

One of the many lies we tell about ourselves on a daily basis is connected with how we feel. We learn to deny many of our feelings, and in doing so we lie to ourselves. We learn to lie from the people closest to us. Then, we become alienated

from our feelings, and that alienation seeps into our relationships and defines them. Joe H. added a little humor to his idea of feelings before he got into recovery:

*If you talk about feelings, you can't be macho. It goes back to the caveman days: go kill your meal, bring it back, and throw it at your woman and you're done. You didn't have to talk about your feelings.*

Today, as a father of two young girls, Joe H. will be the first person to tell you that trying to live this way was killing him and his relationships. Even after five years sober, he knows he's still learning how to express what he's really feeling.

### ***From Day One***

As soon as we are born it starts. Baby boys, identified by their cute little blue blanket, are held less. Soothed less. Handled a little more roughly. Pay attention, and you'll see six-year-old boys who are well on their way to learning the rules of masculinity. That's heartbreaking. Juan, a forty-three-year-old sales and marketing consultant with eighteen years of long-term recovery, remembers vividly how he responded to his parents' divorce as a young boy:

*My parents divorced when I was very young, and I remember very clearly a conversation that I had with God and saying, "I will never let anybody fucking hurt me again." I remember [creating] a wall . . . I was eight years old at the time . . . And I remember that tape playing as the years went on. I remember a girlfriend calling me "The Ice Man" because I would shut down my emotions. That plagued me for years.*

Young boys everywhere are having experiences like this! The young boy left to comfort himself as his parent coldly walks away from him, telling him to “be a big boy.” The boy who learns that being tough means using force to get what he wants. The young man who thinks he shouldn’t hug Dad anymore, and as a result comes to see his body only as a sexual object. These are just some of the messages we hear as we grow up. Rejecting how we feel and teasing or shaming others for how they feel become part of who we are without our realizing it.

### ***Nothing More than Feelings***

Most of us are taught from a very young age to focus on our thoughts and ignore our feelings. As men in recovery, this is something we cannot afford to do if we value our sobriety. “At the beginning of my recovery, I learned from my sponsor that addiction is a feelings disease,” said Joe P., who has twenty years of long-term recovery and is the executive director of a treatment center for individuals with co-occurring disorders.

As soon as we begin recovery, we are expected to learn how to be more open and honest about how we are feeling. Many men come into meetings scared to death, even though they’re often unaware of how afraid they are. Rob, a twenty-seven-year-old financial advisor with five years of sobriety, commented on this:

*Being a man in the Twelve Step program means that I have to be able to identify and reveal my feelings and secrets to other*

*men. In our culture, men are often expected to keep their emotions and difficulties to themselves. Not only is the program itself challenging, but developing deeply emotional relationships adds to it.*

Discovering our feelings in sobriety is an amazing process. Many men who are more “sensitive” have spent their lives feeling ashamed for having feelings and being teased, punished, and abused for showing them—first, by others; then, by themselves. Peter, a fifty-seven-year-old IT consultant with ten years of long-term recovery, said:

*I spent an entire lifetime one way or another abusing some aspect of my behavior or my personality to avoid feeling. The only goal of my life was to not feel the way I did. Anything was better than feeling.*

You may have felt this way, too. Is it any surprise, after years of keeping all of those feelings to ourselves and judging ourselves for having them, we would do everything in our power to avoid them?

We may have a difficult time admitting that we feel experiences in our lives deeply—given how most of us were raised, this doesn't seem to be a positive quality for men. Feelings seem to be the domain of women . . . at least that's the idea society has reinforced for almost two centuries now.<sup>1</sup> At most, we allow ourselves only certain emotions. Paul, a fifty-year-old service professional and union steward with twenty-four years of long-term recovery, said:

*Before sobriety, I used to think I had only two feelings—anger and depression. Now I can really experience life and all of the emotions that go with it.*

Jo, a fifty-nine-year-old pastor of a church for people in recovery, has fourteen years of long-term recovery. He talked about this issue at length:

*Never let anyone know the real you. Never trust anyone to know what you are feeling unless it's a positive or a real masculine type of feeling such as "I've got control or power over this," "This isn't going to get me down," "I'll never run away," and so on. I can share those [kinds of] feelings easily. If I've got my shit together, then it's all good, but when I'm falling apart or when I'm really feeling vulnerable, afraid, or I don't have it under control . . . I could never share that.*

What freedom you gain when you realize that being an emotional and sensitive man has nothing to do with your masculinity! Being sensitive is like having brown hair, brown eyes, or being six feet tall. You are not better or worse than anyone else. You are not any less of a man. Dan J., a thirty-eight-year-old architect with five years in sobriety, speaks to this issue poignantly:

*I am a sensitive person. I feel things very strongly. I think the most important thing I have learned from my recovery is that it's okay for me to feel this way. I don't have to be tough to be a man. I can show my true feelings and still be okay. At the same time, I do not have to wear my emotions on my sleeve—not everything I feel is real.*

Learning how to feel safe enough to experience our feelings and to not judge ourselves takes time. For some of us, the discovery of our feelings grows out of finally finding a safe and supportive environment to learn emotional awareness and to talk about how we feel.



### ***Feelings Aren't Facts***

Becoming aware of our feelings and developing the language to communicate them does present a danger of sorts: we can begin to worship or get stuck in our feelings. When Dan J. said “not everything I feel is real,” he was referring to the ways our feelings can dramatically affect our perception of reality. Feelings are neither good nor bad; they simply are what they are—emotions.

We learn in recovery that we are very accustomed to letting our emotions define our perception of the world. Even though we are mostly unaware of them, our feelings affect almost everything we do.

Sadly, our alienation from our feelings causes other problems. Most of us have long struggled with our emotional awareness and how to acknowledge exactly what we are feeling without recognizing this. This struggle takes an immense toll on our health, relationships, and quality of life. Before recovery, we kept our feelings to ourselves, and we ended up believing that only we felt such intense fear, inadequacy, and loneliness. We let those feelings control our behavior despite having no awareness of what was happening to us. While we spent a lot of our time trying to control our emotions, in the end they controlled us. We hurt many people because we rejected core parts of who we were. We did not know how to take care of ourselves and meet our own needs. Whether we were acting out in anger or isolating ourselves in depression, we found ourselves caught in a vicious cycle: because we felt unsafe and fearful, we responded with anger

and control. As a result, we frightened, hurt, and alienated those who cared about us. When we went to them looking for help and safety, they did not feel safe and were not able to comfort or help us. Not understanding the reasons for their response, we felt rejected and alone and we acted out again. And the cycle continued.

You can become lost in the discovery of your feelings and think that everything you do is related to how you feel. Once you are sober and working the Steps, you may find yourself flipping from one extreme to the other—from shut down and confused to an intense and uncontrolled expression of emotion.

Sometimes in recovery we let our feelings run our lives by using the excuse that we are addicts, or sensitive, or emotional when in fact we've experienced an inability to process our feelings. We've believed for years that feelings are bad and we are bad or weak for having them. As a result, we often simply don't know what we are feeling and spend much of our time reacting to life. Remember this—you are 100 percent responsible for how you respond to the events in your life. Yes, it's important that you allow yourself to feel, but don't let those feelings define how you live your life. Your emotional sensitivity is not an excuse for bad behavior.

I spent the first four years of my relationship with my partner unable to tell her when my feelings were hurt—which, as a sensitive (and somewhat immature) man, was quite often. Instead, I would feel hurt, take her actions personally, ascribe negative motives to them, feel alienated and

shut off from her, and then turn my hurt into anger that I took out on her. Or, I would simply shut down and isolate in the basement. I responded similarly to much of my shame, fear, sadness, insecurity, and other feelings that I did not think I could express to her because they were not manly. Then, when I looked for a safe place to share how I was feeling, it was not to be found. I felt abandoned and unloved. Jo talked about this:

*It's been a long-term process in therapy and in the Twelve Step program to discover how to get over my fear of intimacy and to share how I'm really feeling. I was in the program for a long time before I really came to grips with that—through divorces and failed relationships. I was sober but I was still very hesitant and reluctant to share who I was.*

Charlie, a forty-five-year-old bus driver with twenty-three years of long-term recovery, talked about how he has learned to deal with his feelings:

*I used to be a slave to my ever-changing emotions. Recovery has allowed me to stop running, to feel my feelings, and to learn that I've created them through my thoughts and choices. I lived as a victim to emotions and to the mental tapes that created them. Now my feelings are beloved guides that reveal my thinking and remind me I can choose again.*

When you realize that consciously experiencing all of your feelings is okay, your life as a man will change because you will be able to be honest with yourself—about what you are really feeling.

Try not to force this process. Like everything in your recovery, let it happen. As the old AA saying goes, “Don't

worry about getting in touch with your emotions; they will get in touch with you.” Trust the process. Let others give you their support. Let the wise elders of recovery guide you. Share your feelings in meetings. Talk about them with your sponsor. Then, share them with the important people in your life in a spirit of intimacy—not in manipulation, blame, or an attempt to get someone to take care of you. If what you’re feeling is really intense, it’s especially advisable to give yourself some breathing room before you unload on someone and say something you might regret. Take some time to cool down; talk to a neutral party to get some perspective. Then, once you’ve sorted out what you’re really reacting to, share your feelings with the relevant people.

### ***Emotional Sobriety***

Eventually you will realize that your recovery is limited unless it includes emotional sobriety. You are emotionally sober when you are aware of how you are feeling, able to express your feelings, able to be responsible for your feelings, able to respond and not overreact to those feelings, and to let them go. I have spoken to many men who, long into recovery, still feel hopeless about ever being able to truly feel good about themselves and their lives. They smile and tell you everything is great. They can quote the Steps and the literature. They know how to sound good. Yet they have not developed emotional sobriety. They are still little boys in men’s bodies.

In *As Bill Sees It*, Bill Wilson talked about emotional sobriety:

*If we examine every disturbance we have, great or small, we will find at the root of it some unhealthy dependency and its consequent unhealthy demand. Let us, with God's help, continually surrender these hobbling liabilities. Then we can be set free to live and love; we may be able to twelfth-step ourselves, as well as others, into emotional sobriety.<sup>2</sup>*

Rich, a former lawyer with seven years of sobriety, said:

*The change for me today is that I can more accurately recognize my feelings. In the past, fear, grief, or pain was usually masked by a veneer of anger, but today I can more often identify the actual emotion or feeling that is in play.*

The process of discovering our feelings often proceeds like this: First, we become aware that we have feelings. Next, we learn how to talk about our feelings, a more intellectual process. For me, that meant talking about feeling hurt and afraid while coming across as angry or while laughing when I spoke. While I could correctly identify a given feeling, my behavior didn't match. Next, we learn to actually feel the feeling and identify that feeling. We learn how to express and feel all our emotions including pain, sadness, fear, and shame. Finally, we learn how to experience our feelings in the moment and let them pass through us. Men in this stage of awareness are living in the moment, unafraid to express how they feel. The process of getting there is often messy, and we will make mistakes. Thankfully we have the Steps to guide us, and we have our recovery community of both men and women and our Higher Power to show us the way!



## STEP ONE

*We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—  
that our lives had become unmanageable.*

***When I grew up, I learned two things  
about what it takes to be a man.  
Number one, I learned to fight and  
number two, I learned to drink.***

— JO —

The following statement begins the discussion of Step One in the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*: “Who cares to admit complete defeat? Practically no one, of course. Every natural instinct cries out against the idea of personal powerlessness.”<sup>1</sup> As men, feeling powerless is the opposite of feeling in control, and from a very early age as a man, you were probably taught (though you didn’t realize it) that you should try to be the master of your world as best you could. Brandon said:

*Powerlessness at first seems to be unmanly. In fact, I don’t know if I see powerlessness ever to be manly, but it doesn’t bother me now to lack that manly quality. The first three Steps have*

*challenged my desire for manliness in general. It's about coming to terms with self and being okay with having it clash with stereotyped manliness.*

When I was writing my master's thesis, in which I looked at masculinity in the Twelve Step community, a friend brought me a magazine ad. In the ad was a very masculine arm outstretched with the palm open ready to shake the reader's hand. There was a bottle of liquor neatly tucked in at the bottom of the page. The caption read: Get in touch with your masculine side. The message was clear: real men drink. Another message could easily be inferred, too: if you do not drink alcohol, you are not a real man. And so, when you stand at the cliff of despair because your use of alcohol and other drugs has gotten out of control, you face not just the foreign territory of sobriety but very possibly surrendering a core concept of your masculinity.

Everywhere in our culture we see and hear messages like this that tell us what it means to be a man, and nearly all of them are the opposite of what Step One teaches us. Following is an example:

**Being a man** = *The consumption of alcohol*  
*Believing "Real men don't get out of control" coupled*  
*with "Real men know how to party" (i.e., get drunk)*  
*Believing men are powerful*  
*Believing men are in control*  
*Keeping your thoughts and feelings to yourself*

*Always keeping up a good front—“never let them see you sweat”*

*Being fiercely independent; relationships are not a priority*

**Being a man** ≠ *The absence of alcohol*

*Embracing powerlessness and acceptance*

*Letting go of control*

*Admitting or confessing—allowing yourself to be known to another; unmanageability*

*Being part of the group and in close relationship with others*

Each of these concepts is explored in Step One, though you may not recognize them or use the same words to describe them. Step One—admitting powerlessness and unmanageability—may not seem like a very manly Step to you. It may surprise you to hear, though, that Step One will actually enhance your ability to live your life as powerfully as possible. Brian, a psychiatrist with twenty-one years of sobriety said it very well:

*Admitting and accepting powerlessness at face value challenges the notion that men are strong, self-sufficient, and should not admit weakness. Paradoxically, recognizing and admitting powerlessness takes incredible courage and honesty, and is more manly than living in the fantasy world of denial.*

The word *powerless* often has a negative connotation. Being powerless over alcohol and other drugs means that



you are unable to control what happens to you when you put these substances in your body. (While I reference alcohol and other drugs throughout this book, I encourage you to apply these principles and ideas to whatever addiction you are struggling with and whatever Twelve Step community you are a part of at this time.) We've all tried to control our addiction. We've made statements such as, "I need to cut back" or "I just need to moderate." "Maybe just drink beer." "Only smoke pot." "Snort cocaine, but not inject it." "Look at porn only once a day." "Eat only twice a day." How many people have told you to cut back? Your attempts to control your addiction failed, and now you find yourself in a strange new situation.

Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is a cunning and baffling brain disease, which the founders of AA were quite aware of, if only intuitively, many decades ago. They were also aware of the physical (allergy) and mental (obsession) components of the disease:

*. . . Once he takes any alcohol whatever into his system, something happens, both in the bodily and mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to stop . . . These observations would be pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.<sup>2</sup>*

Throughout your sobriety you will face that insane urge to use. Much of this urge is caused by the physical impact that alcohol and other drugs have had on your body, particularly your brain. You will face numerous times in your life when you contemplate giving up on some part of your recovery, or

on your recovery as a whole. When you have been successful in the past, it's because you refused to give up. You were powerful—not powerless! This quality of perseverance—a valuable quality that is traditionally considered masculine—will ultimately serve you in your recovery.

But taken to an extreme, this character trait of fierce determination and “no retreat, no surrender!” tells you that if you admit defeat you are not a man. Chances are you have fought the good fight with your addiction. You have tried everything you could think of. But now you must accept the reality that defeat is okay, and that it doesn't mean you're any less of a man. Instead, by admitting defeat and surrendering, you win. Out of defeat comes victory.

Once you have admitted that you are powerless over your addiction, you will see that you have the power to work the Steps and recover. Step One gives you the opportunity to see the areas of your life in which you have no power and those in which you do. Knowing the difference—the essence of the Serenity Prayer<sup>3</sup>—is critical to finding happiness in your recovery. For example, you do not have power over the inevitable cravings to use again—no matter how much you try. But you do have the power to go to a meeting or pick up the phone and call your sponsor when those cravings kick in. The better your understanding of this difference, the more powerful you will be. The more you can approach powerlessness without judgment and emotion, the more you will be able to accept the many people, places, and things you can't control.

### ***From Powerlessness to Acceptance***

Some of us coming into recovery are all too familiar with feeling powerless. Many of us come from abusive backgrounds where the experience of powerlessness was literally beaten into us as children. Any attempt to find power today could reinforce how powerless you felt as a child. That pain may also explode into your awareness, and you'll find yourself reacting in ways that surprise or shock you. On the other hand, you may believe that the way you were treated was acceptable, that you deserved what you got, or that this was just how boys are supposed to be raised. Accepting and even embracing powerlessness is a delicate Step, and one that promises clarity. Getting care from a professional would be a good healing step to take.

Larry, who has twenty years of sobriety and is a professional psychologist, offered another way of talking about powerlessness. Larry believes admitting you are powerless is essentially the deep acceptance of a situation. If the word *powerless* bothers you, think of it as *acceptance*—a more neutral word. At some point, you will learn what you cannot control, and you will be able to take responsibility for those things you can change.

Once you can get past the idea that powerlessness and acceptance somehow challenge your manhood, you can begin to see the wisdom of powerlessness and acceptance in many of your day-to-day interactions. Are you worried about how a coworker perceives your job performance? Remind yourself that you are powerless over what other people think.

Complaining about your job and its lack of adequate pay? Accept that you cannot change your situation right now, get back to work, and make a plan for addressing the issue. As Kit said, “I need to always remember that though I am powerless, I am not helpless.” And Jo said:

*You don't need the Steps if you have the power to take care of something . . . If you don't have the power—then work the Steps.*

A man in one of my meetings always prefaced his comments by saying: “My name is Rich, and I am powerless and with the help of my Higher Power I am truly empowered, and for that I am grateful.”

### ***Power, Privilege, and Entitlement***

***I have trouble separating my strong sense of being special as a person from my deeply rooted sense of being special because I am a man.***

– DAVE –

We need to understand how our culture views power in order to understand powerlessness in our recovery and relationships. Most power in Western societies is power over someone or something—a masculine form of power. We can also think of power as power with or power for—a more feminine expression. Most professional offices are organized with masculine power structure—a hierarchy with one person having control and power over his or her staff. The service structure of Twelve Step communities is based on a

more feminine concept of power in which individual members are accountable to the group conscience. Neither type of power is better than the other, and both have a place in our lives.

Few men in our culture were raised to understand or use much of anything feminine, let alone a feminine type of power. Men are supposed to have power over everything . . . or so we think. Before recovery, most of us tried to apply masculine power—the only kind we were “allowed” to use—to every area of our lives. The results were far from effective.

Using masculine power, or “power over,” in your personal relationships doesn’t work particularly well. No one wants to be treated as inferior. People may do what we want but only out of fear of our reaction or, at the extreme, fear for their safety. Sometimes we use power to get what we think we deserve or are owed—to be taken care of or waited on, for example. Do you expect your partner to take care of you? Do you use a raised voice, criticism, or even violence to force your partner into doing what you want done? How has this affected your relationships?

At this point you may be saying, “No matter how I act on the outside, I still don’t feel at all powerful. I have spent most of my life trying to feel strong and powerful, but instead I’ve felt abandoned, unloved, and rejected in every relationship I’ve had.” Brian talked about this exact concern:

*This is a hard topic for someone who has faced as much insecurity and self-doubt during life as I have. For much of it, I have felt that I've been undeserving of things because I was not man enough.*

Brian's comments lead us to still more questions: How do you act when you are afraid of being abandoned, of being unloved, or rejected? Who is responsible for your situation? I used to spend so much time focusing on how I felt that I never noticed how I was treating others.

As long as you are using your power to control and dominate your relationships, you will never have the closeness and love you seek. Remember, you are 100 percent responsible for the way you treat others. Treat others badly and your relationships will not give you what you're looking for, and you'll feel sad, frustrated, angry, and afraid as a result. If you want to have more loving relationships, love. As the saying goes, "as you give, so shall you receive." If you can't do this on your own, get help. If you choose not to, know that the consequences you experience are always the result of the choices you make.

Recovery offers you the chance to experience true and appropriate power—power that is not used to control or frighten others. Without specifically addressing masculine or feminine power, Quinn talked about how his experience with power has changed as a result of his involvement in AA:

*When I was young, I thought of power as additive. By that I mean the more I took, the more I had. Kind of like money. The program has helped me see that the more I take, the less I have. Being powerful enough to experience my powerlessness is being awake and fully alive.*

### *Because You're a Man*

Have you ever thought you deserved special treatment just because you're a man? Have you ever received special

treatment just because you're a guy? Chances are you have whether or not you realized it. The special treatment we're talking about is related to two important concepts we'll be exploring next: privilege and entitlement. Privilege is the benefit you get from society simply because you are a man. Entitlement, in Twelve Step language, is a destructive defect of character. We experience entitlement when we believe we have a right to certain things and privileges, and that our needs are more important than the needs of others.

### *The Privilege Not to See*

Those who benefit from privilege rarely recognize the privileges they have. For example, how often do you think about the fact that you are highly unlikely to be a victim of sexual assault? Most men don't come to this awareness on their own. I didn't realize that I never really thought about sexual assault until I sat in a college class and heard women talk about their fear of, or experience with, rape and sexual abuse. Quinn, who has worked hard to look at these issues, said:

*Of course I feel privileged. Every time I walk down the street unafraid of being mugged or raped, I feel privileged.*

Larry talked about a wake-up call that came in one of his AA meetings:

*My home group was a noon meeting with a number of women. The safety I felt allowed me to really hear what their experience in recovery was like. I heard and saw the effects of abuse, most of it done by men. I began to see the effects of power over others and that I was someone with that same power just because I was a male.*

You can often express yourself differently than women, whether in public or private. Dave touched on this idea when he said:

*I feel comfortable talking loudly, taking up physical space without asking, and speaking over someone else. My behavior is often tolerated because I am a man.*

What advantages or benefits do you see yourself having just because you're male? What privileges have you been given over the years because you're a man?

### *Sexism*

The term *sexism* is emotionally charged for many men. It often raises defenses (and shame), and we often simply ignore the issue. We do so, in part, simply because we can. We're being sexist, for example, when we act as though what we say, think, value, and do is more important than what women say, think, value, or do—just because we're men. One way some boys and men make fun of one another is to use derogatory feminine names or phrases. Think about these insults: “Sissy!” “You throw like a girl!” “Pussy!” “Momma’s boy!” Masculinity is often defined as anything “not feminine.” What message about girls and women do such insults give to boys? How do you think they affect the way girls and women think of themselves? The message that women are somehow less than men, or little more than a sex object for men, is still commonly found in our society. You may think that there’s no reason for you, as a guy, to pay attention to such stereotyping, but you do. We all do because those



messages influence how *we* think about, value, relate to, and care for girls and women in our lives.

Men seldom hold one other accountable regarding how we talk about or act toward women. We may hide hurt and confusion from past and present relationships with women behind sexist comments. As Dan J. said:

*In recovery, most of my prejudices have been reduced or have disappeared. I try to be open-minded when it comes to these issues. Sexism is still my biggest defect of character. I have been working at understanding how my resentments toward my mother affect my relationships with women.*

You are not necessarily a bad person if you have sexist attitudes. Perhaps this is the first time you've ever examined these attitudes. But here's the question to ask yourself: do they represent or reflect the man you want to be now . . . in recovery?

### *Homophobia*

Homophobia is deeply rooted within many men in many cultures. Dan J. spoke about some of his experiences in the military. "I saw two medics get beat up for allegedly being gay and two cooks outcast for sharing a bunk after a wild night of partying." We often live a rigid masculine life—doing everything we can to not be too emotional or affectionate with other men.

Dave talked about how he has grown as a result of sponsoring gay men:

*I learned that their struggles with romantic relationships are strikingly similar to my own. I also became more aware of the pressure of being a gay man in a homophobic culture. I found myself*

*listening to my jokes differently and staying quiet more often when opportunities to label other men and their behaviors as gay arose.*

Why, when we want to make fun of boys and men who are emotional or who express affection for one another, do we imply that they are homosexuals? Why is that even considered an insult? Are gay guys the only men who have feelings or express their emotions? Hardly. We've already talked about how many men view expressions of emotion as feminine or weak. By implying that gays aren't real men because of this, we're both belittling women and reinforcing the negative stereotype of men as hard, unfeeling, and cold.

Try for a moment to imagine what it's like to live as a gay man in a world of men who don't accept who you are, and dislike or even hate you for it. Gary said he did not feel entitlement as a gay man:

*Even though I am a man, I am a gay man, and being a gay man is the worst of both worlds. I am seen as a predator, weak, dangerous, sick, and as the "other" all at once by the same people.*

Imagine how you'd feel if in every meeting you attended everyone assumed you were gay and all of the topics focused on gay relationships and sex? What if every time you went out to fellowship all of the men made fun of straight guys and pretended to be straight in disparaging ways? Imagine this happening a lot! It's more likely, of course, that nothing like this will ever happen to you—and again, that is privilege. So again, ask yourself whether your judgments, beliefs, and behaviors represent the person—the man—you want to be in recovery.

### *A Solution to the Inequities of Entitlement and Privilege*

The Twelve Steps can be part of the solution. Below are a few examples of ways you can see how these issues play out in your life:

- *Read about entitlement and privilege, and talk to other men whom you respect.*
- *Do Step Four inventories about how you treat gays and women.*
- *Talk to women about your experiences—and theirs.*
- *Volunteer at a domestic violence shelter or a domestic abuse program.*
- *Speak up in meetings or fellowship when you see unacceptable behavior or hear unacceptable comments.*
- *Lovingly confront men who are being homophobic or sexist.*
- *Reach out to gay men, and help them to feel comfortable in meetings.*
- *Notice your language—do not use “chick,” “bitch,” and “girl” or other belittling words when speaking about women.*
- *Pray for guidance, and ask each day for increased awareness.*

Juan talked about using the Steps to deal with these issues and how he came to peace with his brothers' homosexuality:

*I found a real acceptance of who they are and [how they've] been freed of the fear of the stigma of homosexuality. In the early days, their homosexuality threatened my masculinity. I used to think that because they were homosexuals, then I had to be one as well.*

Juan has since made amends to both of his brothers. He talked, too, about making amends for his behavior toward women, his old girlfriend in particular:

*I had no business being a part of her life. At the advice of my sponsor, I wrote a letter to God and made a donation to a battered woman's shelter.*

Miguel talked about recovery allowing him to let go of the fear of being less of a man or being perceived as gay, a defect of character that haunts a lot of men long into their recovery:

*I look at flowers and I think they are pretty. Is that okay? It is now. I like flowers. I've been watching this dance show—the athleticism is awesome and the talent is incredible. Would I have been caught watching that show back when I was drinking? Even if I liked it, I doubt it.*

Every man I spoke with in writing this book told me that he is more comfortable with himself and cares less what other people—especially men—think about him.

Juan now understands the important role women must play in our growth:

*Women need to be a part of this or we are in big trouble. They can help us evolve.*

You are responsible for looking at how these issues affect your life and the lives of those you love. Remember that you are not alone. If you ask, help is available. It may not be with your sponsor or in the meetings you go to—but you will find what you need. As Larry said:

*I'm mindful of privilege. If I don't address my power and privilege issues, I run the risk of discounting other people's experiences.*

*Certainly this is in line with the principles of AA. Maybe it should be written somewhere that the only requirement for membership is the desire to be human.*

### ***Unmanageability***

Step One also addresses the idea of unmanageability. Unmanageability means that because of the destructive impact of alcohol and other drugs you are not doing the best job of running your life. Do you believe that you are the one who should be guiding your life? Does it feel like an assignment you have always had? You can't protect the women-folk and children if your life is unmanageable, right? You can't be a man if you are not in charge . . . right? Or can you?

Here is one of recovery's wonderful paradoxes: life is manageable so long as you recognize its unmanageability. By accepting the unmanageability of your life, you will be able to accomplish much, creating a life you never dreamed possible. You will have a greater sense of peace knowing that you don't have to be life's manager. Instead, you can be the worker bee and follow life's guidance one day at a time.

### ***We***

The first word in Step One is *we*, one of the most powerful and significant words in all of the Twelve Steps for men in recovery. Men are great at acting as if we are part of the crowd, especially when we are using. We can be the life of the party once we have enough social lubricant inside of us. But at the same time, we can never fully escape our feelings

of loneliness. Take away the drugs, and we find ourselves struggling to connect with others. We are not sure how to be a part of the group without drugs propping us up.

Most of us were not raised to see ourselves as part of a larger community—the We. Even in our closest relationships, we often had much difficulty being part of the We. The Twelve Step community would say it is almost impossible to live disconnected from others and stay sober. West, a forty-two-year-old with twenty years of sobriety and the CEO of a national organization, refers to the Twelve Step community as “The Tribe.” As members of The Tribe, we always belong, and we get what we need when we ask for it. Dave’s words reflect the power of The Tribe to heal a man’s loneliness:

*As fate would have it, there was a conference in a neighboring town. I dragged my pain along to the event. Arriving early to a meeting, I sat alone in my sorrow. Soon, the sound of AA happiness penetrated my self-inflicted exile. I looked around just at the point when the 3,000 people were joining hands to open the meeting with the Serenity Prayer. God sent the voices of 3,000 other alcoholics to answer my fear of loneliness.*

Thanks to the guidance and wisdom of Step One, we get to reconnect—really connect—with the other people in our lives. We learn that others can help comfort the wounds created by our addiction and the absence of the drugs. We do not have to experience powerlessness in isolation. We can let others get close to us and help us.

When we sit in the rooms with one another and are joined by the elders of The Tribe and hear men talking about both their struggles and the progress they are making, we sit

in a circle of profound fellowship. We are given hope that we, too, can succeed in this journey.

The We of the program is also our valuable and incredible connection to humanity. Suddenly, The Tribe has the possibility of being as big as we wish it to be. I have heard the common bond of recovery spoken by men from all over the world—Ireland, Mexico, Russia, India, China, and more. It's amazing to realize that the man who is sponsoring you can trace his AA roots back to 1935 when two men in Akron, Ohio, were desperately searching for a way out of their own suffering. Imagine that the men who you will sponsor will sponsor other men who in turn will sponsor others many decades from now. Incredible, isn't it? The founders of AA were neither saints nor heroes; they were just two men talking to each other about recovery, staying sober the best they could, and passing that message on to others. Today, that message encircles our planet.

### ***Do You Want to Live, or Do You Want to Die?***

Maybe this is an exaggeration, but an old-timer I know, when talking about Step One, said that at the end of the day your sobriety comes down to life and death: do you want to live, or do you want to die? Men are raised to fantasize about our self-destruction—to burn out rather than fade away; to laugh in the face of death. Well, staring death in the face is not nearly as romantic as the movies make it seem. Chris, a thirty-one-year-old artist with nine years of sobriety, talked about his experience with Step One:

*I knew for a long time that I was a mess, and I knew that I was going to commit suicide. I didn't understand that this was the disease talking until much later when it almost killed my mother. Tragically, it's still slowly killing my father, and it almost killed me. I didn't know addiction was so powerful—that it ruins lives and families. The first step for me was realizing that I didn't know what the hell the First Step was! At some point, I just knew I wanted to stay alive . . . that's what the First Step is—do you want to live or not?*

I have been in recovery long enough to have buried two spouses and attended many more funerals of others I have known in recovery—many died sober and others as a result of relapse. Every time a member of the recovery community dies, his death reminds those of us who are paying attention that our sobriety is very grave business indeed and should not be taken lightly. Your sobriety is not to be taken for granted regardless of how many years in the program you might have. Once you have been sober for a while, it may be difficult to remember how bad your life had been when you were still using. The out-of-control using. The paranoia. The suicidal thoughts. The alienation, depression, and anxiety. Remember those experiences. You will meet men who tell of years—even decades—spent sober, who relapse and self-destruct. We have to remember how bad our lives could be again if we stop taking care of ourselves. Addiction is the disease, sobriety is the medicine, and the Twelve Steps are the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. Like other chronic diseases such as diabetes, addiction requires constant maintenance and attention. You



are never cured! Eventually, though, taking care of yourself becomes a natural part of your life. Monitoring your stress level, the biggest trigger for any addict, becomes the essential practice of your life.

As Chris points out, Step One is essentially saying, “I do not want to die. I give up. I surrender.” As if admitting this reality isn’t hard enough, who would actually choose to live in a way that may seem rather unmanly? A man who chooses life. The remaining Steps are the solution because they show us how to live—that’s why they’re often referred to as a design for living. By living them, you’ll discover what masculine power really is.

### ***Always a Newcomer***

Every man in recovery faces a critical danger: losing touch with being a newcomer. Think of the desperation and excitement so many of us feel early in our recovery. Everything is new. We don’t know much about how to stay sober, let alone how to live, but our minds are open and the pain is raw. But after six months or so, we don’t want to be seen as a newcomer at all. We talk confidently about how we have worked all twelve of the Steps, and we refer to our first month in recovery as “back when I was new”—as if we now have all of the answers. We don’t like not having answers. We don’t like being newcomers because we’re low man on the ladder—or so we think.

West was struck by a simple truth he rediscovered as he began working the Steps again. “I am a flawed human being,”

he said. West laughs when he remembers how humbling it feels to notice fear, judgment, or any of the other bedevilmments that still arise in him on a daily basis at twenty years sober:

*It is who I am and there is nothing wrong with that. The danger is losing sight of this fact. The danger is thinking that I am somehow normal or cured. Things do not go well for me when I think that way, and it has taken me twenty years to learn this. There is freedom in admitting this on a daily basis. Every day that starts with this admission is a day when I am freer in all of my relationships.*

In the end, if you lose touch with what it means to be a newcomer, if you forget that you are always a newcomer because you will always have more to learn, then you won't be able to learn what Step One can teach you. West continued, "It is amazing—twenty years later and everything that kept me sober is what keeps me sober today." As you mature in your recovery day by day, week by week, and year by year, you will learn that the surrender of Step One is the foundation of recovery—and of life. You have the opportunity to surrender on a daily basis. As it unfolds, each moment is an opportunity for surrender. You do not know what that moment will bring or where it will take you. Hence, you are always a newcomer because life is always new. You come to each moment new, and you have no answers. That is Step One. That is freedom.

*“A wonderful guide for men that reveals how to transform pain, confusion, and mixed messages into a deeper and richer sobriety through the Twelve Steps.”*

—CRAIG NAKKEN, M.S.W.,  
author of *The Addictive Personality*

*“With candor and compassion, Dan Griffin expands the power and significance of the Twelve Steps by providing a deeper understanding of what they mean to men in recovery.”*

—STEPHANIE S. COVINGTON, Ph.D.,  
author of *A Woman’s Way through the Twelve Steps*

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In *A Man’s Way through the Twelve Steps*, author Dan Griffin uses interviews with men in various stages of recovery, excerpts from relevant Twelve Step literature, and his own experience to offer the first holistic approach to sobriety for men. Readers work through each of the Twelve Steps, learn to reexamine negative masculine scripts that have shaped who they are and how they approach recovery, and strengthen the positive and affirming aspects of manhood. This groundbreaking book offers the tools needed for men to work through key issues with which they commonly struggle, including difficulty admitting powerlessness, finding connection with a Higher Power, letting go of repressed anger and resentment, contending with sexual issues, and overcoming barriers to intimacy and meaningful relationships.

*A Man’s Way through the Twelve Steps* offers practical advice and inspiration for men to define their own sense of masculinity and thus heighten their potential for a lifetime of sobriety.



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