

## WHAT ARE THE TOOLS OF RECOVERY? WHEN DO WE USE THEM? HOW DO THEY WORK?

Most of us first learned how to practice these simple, commonsense strategies for staying sober (and sane) when we first came into the rooms. All of these healthy habits are part of working a thorough First Step.

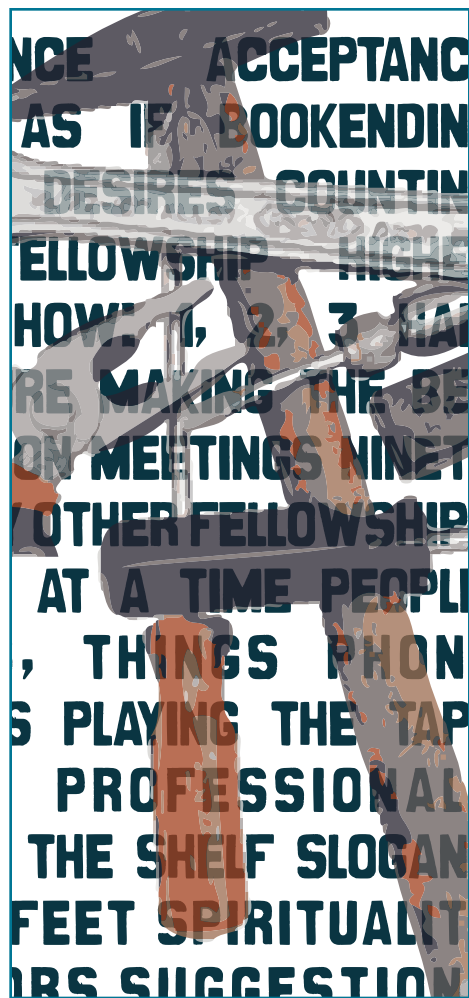
**Thirty-two fellows of Crystal Meth Anonymous explain what the tools mean to them—and why they still work today.**

## BACK TO

# BASICS

**A** **ABSTINENCE** It's a word we frequently used around Lent in my Catholic upbringing. Abstinence implied something sacrificed. It meant giving up something I liked—like candy or meat on Fridays. In early sobriety, abstinence from drugs felt exactly like that, and on some level I was hoping it would only last forty days—like Lent. Then I learned that I only had to abstain for today. I could do that. I could always pick up tomorrow. And tomorrow came and I thought, I can abstain for another day. And days kept coming and going like that. Somewhere along the way a shift occurred—abstinence became a gift. Maybe I never have to use again. Maybe the nightmare I was living in is over for good. And there was a bold promise made to me: "If you never pick up, you will never get high." (Makes sense in hindsight, but it was eye-opening at the time.) The implication there was that if I never got high, I never had to relive the horrors that were tied to it. And now, for nearly five years, I have made a daily choice to abstain...just for today. —Michael A.

**ACCEPTANCE** Acceptance is a simple and amazing tool that has made every area of my life more manageable. In the face of all of life's challenges, I am able to practice this tool in order to gain peace and serenity. It's one of the most practical solutions in my toolbox.



Once I become willing, it's as simple as making a decision and allowing my higher power to take over the results of any situation. When I exercise acceptance, it spares me from the need to control the outcome of every situation — good and bad. Most of all, it allows me to get out of the way long enough to relish all the rewards life has to offer. —Harley M.

**ACTING AS IF** One week at fellowship after a Tuesday meeting, I remembered that it was my father's birthday and had no desire to do anything about it. I nonchalantly mentioned to my CMA fellows at the table what day it was. They strongly "suggested" that I call him then and there to offer birthday wishes. I balked at this. My resentment toward the man is a part of my very fiber and to make even a quick call would feel like "defeat" on my part—nearly an act of conceding ground. "Act as if," my fellows urged me. "Just call him to say 'Happy Birthday,'" they said, as cell phones appeared in front of me. Not altogether willing, I used my own cell to wish my father a happy birthday. Thankfully, no one answered and I left my greetings (as sincerely as I could possibly muster) as a message. I felt relief having done something I absolutely did not want to do.

When I returned home from fellowship, my mother called. She was elated at my last-minute "concession" to my father, and he was

also very happy to have heard from me. As my fellows had noted, he wouldn't "be around forever," and I would be the one who would ultimately feel awful if I'd let that opportunity go by. —Jon N.

**B** **BOOKENDING** When I got the call, I knew I had to pay my respects. After all, he was my mentor when I was an activist. But if I went, I'd also have to face two ghosts from my past: a former best friend with whom I desperately wanted to be back on speaking terms, and another good friend to whom I really wanted to make amends. Both relationships had been damaged by my drug use. So I called my sponsor. I told him all about my mentor's death and about my two friends. My sponsor understood my desire to repair these friendships, but he reminded me that there really was only one thing I had to do at the memorial: pay my respects. He also told me to call after the service because he understood something else—whether or not I attempted these reconciliations, I was going to be face-to-face with people I'd hurt; they could react adversely at just seeing me. And any negative outcome could potentially lead me back to using, especially because I had expectations of what would occur.

On my way home, I gave my sponsor a call. The second friend had come right up to me and started talking like it was old times. We caught up on each other's lives, and it felt absolutely right; I made my amends on the spot and it was graciously received. However, when my former best friend and I found ourselves standing next to each other, he turned away; nothing was said. I was disappointed with this outcome, but happy that I'd been able to repair one relationship. Most of all, I felt serene knowing I had been present to honor my mentor's life. Though in the end I was not tempted to go out and lose my six months of sobriety, I was glad my sponsor had me call after the service. That call allowed me to debrief and process what did occur, and that was just as important as the call I made before I went. —David H.

**BURNING DESIRES** When I first came to CMA, there was a lot in my head and in my chest that I needed to talk about. But I was too ashamed and didn't have the strength to express what I was dealing with. When they called for a burning desire in meetings, I almost felt as if they were calling on me to express what I needed to say to stay sober. When I

took one for the first time, I discovered when I walked out of that meeting that I felt relieved, lighter, and perhaps even peaceful. These new comforting feelings encouraged me to take other burning desires during my first few months when I needed to. Today, I am sober for 10 months, and I'm grateful for having CMA and this useful tool in meetings. —Ricardo S.

**C** **COUNTING DAYS** I didn't announce my day count at my first meeting, but I remember thinking, I have three days today. I want to come back next week and say I have ten. Counting days kept me sober that first week and got me back to another meeting. Having ninety days as my goal helped me to stay focused and keep things simple. All I have to do is stay sober, I thought. If I don't pick up, today is a success. This tool helped me acknowledge what a great challenge it was to stay sober for just one more day. —Bruce C.



**F** **FELLOWSHIP** For me, going to fellowship is almost as important as attending the meeting itself. My sponsor told me "the meeting after the meeting" is essential, because I had isolated myself for years using crystal meth. Though I'm able to both give and get phone numbers before and after meetings, there isn't really enough time then to have meaningful conversations; and during the actual meeting, of course, there are no conversations at all. In the beginning, fellowship provided a safe place for me to practice reintegrating into the real world, and it still gives me a chance to develop relationships with fellows, which makes phone calls afterward much more natural and comfortable.

When I first got sober, I didn't have much money, so instead of skipping fellowship because I thought I couldn't afford it or was embarrassed, I'd eat before the meeting and have coffee and maybe dessert after. On weekends,

we'd often go to the movies after dinner, which I know helped me stay away from bars and other triggering places. By going to "the meeting after the meeting" consistently—after every meeting—I've gotten a chance to make lifelong sober friends. —Paul B.

**H** **HIGHER POWER** "God is a Verb," a fellow in the program recently told me. "An Understanding that grows as I grow; an Action that I take." That stopped me in my tracks. Literally, I was crossing Atlantic Avenue on a Tuesday morning and I stopped on the median. The statement rang true in my soul. I have a soul now; the program led me to it. I kind of knew a soul was always in me, but the program has made hearing it and feeling it respond so much clearer, so much easier.

When I came in to CMA, it was coming to believe in a Higher Power that stopped me in my tracks. And I came across Higher Power a lot. Six of the steps mention it, using those dreaded capital letters. And there were even more capitals in the "Big Book." I heard about Higher Power in meetings, where fellows would talk about God. But each time I read, heard, or talked about Higher Power, there was a big red stop sign inside. I'm not one of those well-meaning but misguided saps.

"Pray. Every day. On your knees," my sponsor told me week after week. "Have you tried it yet?" he'd ask.

"No," or "I tried once," I'd say.

"Pray. Every day. On your knees," my sponsor would tell me again.

I couldn't do it. Not even alone in my bedroom. It felt weird. Then I realized what was holding me back: My ego was so BIG that I was embarrassed to pray all by myself. I thought, If praying doesn't mean anything, why do I care if I do it? When I was a kid, my dad told me, "Don't die of embarrassment." So I took action in the place I felt the most at ease and at one with myself: I tried praying, on my knees, in the shower. I said the Serenity Prayer, the Third Step Prayer and the Seventh Step Prayer.

Very quickly, serenity began seeping into my everyday life. I learned to turn things over. I learned humility. I learned to accept the many things I cannot change. I found the courage to

**What if I want to write an article for the newsletter?** Contact a member of the NYCMA Literature Committee. You may also send an e-mail to [newsletter@nycma.org](mailto:newsletter@nycma.org).

change myself as I can. This power to learn, accept, and change was the Higher Power that everyone was talking about. A Higher Power I found by praying every day, on my knees, in the shower.

Finding my Higher Power was like learning to ride a bike. I didn't understand balance before I tried. I just got on and pedaled. It took a while, but I got it. Now I ride without thinking. I still really don't understand balance, but I know what it is and that I have it. I didn't understand God before I started to pray. I still don't understand Higher Power, but I know what it is and that I found it.

I still take showers every day, and I still pray every day. I can't define my Higher Power for you; I can only describe what it feels like today. And right now Higher Power is the act of pushing through procrastination and fear to write this. Right now God is the next right action. God is a Verb. —Jim F.

**HOW: HONEST, OPEN, WILLING (OR 1, 2, AND 3)** Honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness have probably been the three most helpful words in my recovery over these past few years. Often we hear people relate them to the first three steps. This makes sense to me now. When I came to CMA and had a hard time dealing with the subject of faith in God, someone suggested I consider honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness as a path to faith. They pointed out that the literature calls these “indispensable spiritual principles,” and said that no one was referring to religion as I had known it. I could see that if I was hon-

est with myself, I had to admit I had a problem with addiction and my life was frequently unmanageable. Then I could be honest in meetings about my sometimes overwhelming desire to use, which prompted suggestions from my sponsor and fellows.

That's where open-mindedness came in: Some suggestions that seemed off-the-wall at the time actually worked—like “easy does it” in

## SOME SUGGESTIONS THAT SEEMED OFF-THE-WALL ACTUALLY WORKED.

my approach to others and to life's problems; and taking my recovery “one day at a time.” When I became willing to take even a few of these suggestions, my life started to change. More important, my mind started to change. Suddenly, what others were saying had worked for them started to work for me, too. I could see that this Twelve Step program might actually help me in the way people had said it helped them. —John H.

### HALT: HUNGRY, ANGRY, LONELY, TIRED

I first heard about this tool—“Don't let yourself get too hungry, angry, lonely or tired”—in a meeting. I was a broken soul, counting days, had been in the program maybe two weeks, hearing but almost unable to comprehend.

Someone said, “When you're hungry, eat,” and suddenly something clicked. Hunger, anger, tiredness, loneliness—these things underlie a lot of my moods. But back then, my moods fluctuated so much, along with my speedy mind, I wasn't in the habit of pausing, breathing, and analyzing how I felt. I used this tool the next time I felt scattered and said to myself, “Oh my god! I'm just hungry!” Then I acted simply—I had a meal and felt better.

I'm still very aware of hunger and tiredness. Especially tiredness. Back when I used crystal meth, coming down, I'd feel exhausted. But still tweaking, I was unable to fall asleep. So my moods were just insane. It was horrible. Well, today I take better care of myself. I'll come home after a long day of working, a social activity, a meeting, and maybe the gym. By around 11:00 p.m. I feel tired, but if I push myself to stay up later I start to become melancholy. So I turn off the lights and go to bed. It's really that simple!

For some reason anger and loneliness are trickier for me. My sponsor has suggested I take time out to breathe when I get angry. Meditation and writing it out are good, too. Early on in recovery I had a few relapses. I used to medicate myself with street drugs and surrounded myself with other using buddies. Loneliness played a large part in those relapses, along with anger that I couldn't use any more. Later, I made the connection that meetings, fellowship, and staying in touch with my new sober friends—this was the way to overcome my loneliness and anger. It was taking the contrary action that led me to an amazing



Get ready for the **2010 NYCMA SHARE-A-DAY**  
This year's conference will be held  
**OCTOBER 2, 2010, 9AM to 3PM** in New York City at

**THE 15TH STREET MEETING HOUSE**  
**SOCIETY OF FRIENDS**  
**15 RUTHERFORD PLACE, NEW YORK, NY 10003-3705**

**ALL MEMBERS OF CMA ARE ENCOURAGED TO ATTEND,  
SO PLEASE JOIN US!!**

**WHAT IS CRYSTAL METH ANONYMOUS?** Crystal Meth Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other, so they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from addiction to crystal meth. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop using. There are no dues or fees for CMA membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. CMA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; and neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to lead a sober life and to carry the message of recovery to the crystal meth addict who still suffers. —from the CMA General Service pamphlet “What Is Crystal Meth Anonymous?”

result. And pretty soon I stopped relapsing. That was seven and a half years ago. OMG! I have a life, it's summer and I am blooming, thanks to you all and your tools. —Ronen M.

**L** **LITERATURE** The first time I read *Alcoholics Anonymous*, I found its language stilted and the god talk off-putting. I'd come to CMA because I knew I had a drug problem, so why was I reading about alcohol? But reading two pages at a time and talking about them with my sponsor, I learned how to read the book. I took a suggestion and substituted *thinking* for *drinking* while reading, and that made a lot of sense. Gradually, I learned I had a problem, an "ism" which the "Big Book" describes to a tee. I most definitely could not read and understand this book alone—and I'm a smart guy. Smart didn't keep me from destructive drug use, and it didn't do much for me trying to grasp the usefulness of the literature. I needed help with that. I'm continuing to learn from it today. —Rick S.



**M** **MAKING THE BED** Basically, I was a very undisciplined person. I couldn't show up—I might have known what to do, but I'd lost the ability to do it. I was so undisciplined I couldn't do it. This was just a by-product of my unmanageable life.

I was in detox—they wouldn't let you out of your room unless you made your bed. And so, the best thing I learned in rehab was to make my bed every day. I have made my bed every single day of sobriety since March 1, 1988. I do not move without doing it—it's nonnegotiable.

If you want to change your life, making the bed is an amazing thing to do. Because then you build on that. It was a contrary action, the first tangible one I took. I could see the effect. I learned that it works. It creates a new energy when you take a contrary action. And it all starts with making the bed. And maybe capping the toothpaste. —Ava L.

**MEDITATION** The tools of the program not only help keep me sober, they also allow me to find a place within myself to go when the world around me is spinning uncontrollably. One of the gifts I've found in sobriety is meditation. In early sobriety I went to a meditation workshop led by a CMA fellow. It changed my life and the way I handle it. I learned to create a daily practice called a 5/5 and 5: Five minutes of

reading a book relating to spirituality, five minutes of meditation, and five minutes of journal writing. When I first started, I found my mind making many excuses why I shouldn't do it or how I could put it off—I was too busy, didn't have enough time, had bigger things to worry about, and so on and so on. Once I committed to this practice and made time to do a 5/5 and 5 every morning before my day started, I slowly found that I looked at things that frustrated me differently. I started to find a center within me that was calming and serene.

## IF YOU WANT TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE, MAKING THE BED IS AN AMAZING THING TO DO.

Every morning, I set the timer on my cell phone and did my fives. At first I found it difficult to meditate for five minutes: My mind would not shut off, my thoughts seemed to just take over. I learned to listen to my breathing, feel and hear my surroundings, and focus on being in the moment. I was able to calm my mind for only a minute or two at first. As weeks passed, I found myself being able to stay in the moment for longer periods.

Journaling played a huge part in this practice as well. At first my writing was short and shallow. Often I did not know what to say. Soon I found that writing a letter to my higher power and letting it write back to me changed my thinking and gave me peace. Having your higher power write a letter to you may sound strange—but once I write, I put the pen down, close my eyes, and take in a deep breath and slowly let it out. Then I pick up my pen and start. I don't worry about grammar or spelling—I just write whatever comes to mind without

second-guessing the thoughts that pop up.

As time moved on and I continued my daily practice, I increased the time—to 10/10 and 10, and when I was ready, to a 20/20 and 20. Meditating has not only helped me stay sober; I've also discovered who I am, what makes things work or not work for me. I'm able to focus on solutions and not ponder the problem. From time to time I lose my way and neglect doing my morning routine. When I restart my 5/5 and 5, my problems, fears, and concerns are not instantly solved, but I know there are ways to work toward solutions. I learn that I cannot control the world, just how I handle life on life's terms. —Keith V.

**MEETINGS** Meetings have played an essential and evolving role in my recovery. I still remember that feeling of complete wonder and amazement which accompanied my first meetings, where I began to

realize that every single thought, feeling, and action I'd believed to be uniquely mine were shared with someone else in the rooms. I learned that while I was quite special, I was not at all unique.

Next, meetings provided an important series of stepping stones as I began to navigate my way through early recovery. I could remain sober another 24 hours knowing I had just left my last meeting and seeing the next one on the horizon. Weekends were tough at first, so I would load them with meetings, often going from one group to fellowship to another and fellowship again, until I found myself safely in bed at the end of the day.

I learned quickly to listen closely to the speaker and each share in a meeting, looking for suggestions from another's program that might work for me. Eventually, I found myself listening closely when something in a meeting irritated me, knowing that the source of my irritation was actually inside me—and this was an opportunity to face it honestly and learn more about my own nature.

Later, as I completed my Step work and my recovery began to mature, I reduced the number of meetings I attended each week. This was an intentional step—removing the "training wheels" as I began to take greater personal responsibility, opening myself up to a level of intimacy with friends and family I'd previously avoided out of fear, and even relying on them



for some of the support I could initially only find in the fellowship. —Barry L.

**NINETY IN NINETY** My first thought when I heard this suggested was, I will try my best, but I didn't know if I could find the time. Truth be told, doing anything consistently for ninety days was a foreign concept to me when I joined the fellowship of CMA. My day-to-day life had little consistency and I liked it that way. I was excited by not making plans too far in advance and just living spontaneously, energized by using and my unpredictable circumstances. For me, of course, that way of living quite often led to hospitals and institutions.

But having finally given up, I thought, Fine—rather than crawl along “existing,” I will surrender to these people, guided by my sponsor, and turn it over. At Day 12, I was back in the rooms, just released from yet another rehab. Still paranoid, I was willing to do anything, and that included attending ninety meetings in ninety days. Not having much work at the time, most days I attended two a day, a morning meeting and an evening meeting. Doing this relieved me of the loneliness I felt, and helped me foster new friendships where there had been none. And practically, going to so many meetings helped me develop a structure and “smart feet.” I'll never forget Day 67: I was going through some terrible stuff, and life got really hard. I know I'd have never stayed sober if I hadn't been so committed to showing up at a meeting. But Day 73 or so came, and I was okay. It works, it really does! —Anonymous

## **O** ONE DAY AT A TIME

I'm a worrier, not a warrior, by nature. There was never enough drama and apocalyptic thoughts to fill one day, so I used to burrow into future years' worth of creepy nightmares. At 24 years old, I was convinced I had destroyed my life beyond repair. Tina had won and I was damaged goods. Then came recovery and its message of hope, and slowly the old tape has been erased.

All I ever have is today. Instead of being paralyzed with the fear of what has yet to come, I can start to put one foot in front of the other, step by step into the next right action. All I used to know was self-sabotage, but within these twenty-four hours, I am able to reach out to the men and women trudging the road ahead of me. At

times I walk gracefully, at times I have to be gently dragged back to the moment. As long as I live in this one day, the molehill doesn't become Mt. Everest—I am safer in this instant than I can ever be inside my own head.

The first time (in the United States) my addiction took me to the hospital, Bobby McFerrin had just won a Grammy, and every time I heard “don't worry, be happy” from the nurse's station, I screamed. Today I smile, knowing I have found the peace and happiness that eluded me then. —Fabrice C.

**OTHER FELLOWSHIPS** Like many of my fellows in CMA, I identify myself as both an addict and alcoholic. Although crystal was a huge part of my story—fourteen years of episodic binge use, and one year of daily use—I was introduced to AA first, by my sister and two other friends. They were also addicts, but had found a solution in those rooms. I had the gift of desperation and wanted what they had. I like to think that my first eight months in AA cemented the foundation of my sobriety. I immediately related and realized there was a solution to what they called my “soul sickness.”

Despite this, I wasn't always comfortable sharing my experience, because so much of it revolved around drugs, specifically crystal. Soon, I met a fellow who told me about CMA.

I attended my first meeting in January 2006, and have been an active member of the fellowship since. Through this collective experience I was able to see I had other issues that ultimately led to my alcohol and drug use. A few years ago, I attended my first Al-Anon meeting, looking for a solution to my codependency issues. Today I draw on the strength of all these fellowships to help lead a healthy sober life, happy to consider myself a gratefully recovering addict and alcoholic. —Anthony L.

## **P** PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS

When I had almost six months sober, my phone rang at 2:00 a.m. I was sleeping, but I answered—it was a “friend” inviting me out with him. Almost without hesitation, I was in a cab and diving headfirst into a relapse. After that painful experience, I realized I needed to put up what I call “firewalls” between the drugs and myself in order to stay sober.

People: Obviously, as the phone facilitated my relapse, it was the first thing I sought to change. I immediately began taking my phone off the hook at night to avoid being placed in that vulnerable situation ever again. For at least the first five years of sobriety I did that. (Only recently have I begun to leave my phone on at night, fearing I might miss a call from my parents in the event of an emergency.) Doing that simple, yet difficult, task of taking the phone off the hook helped me stay sober by inhibiting the contact I had with people I'd used with during my active addiction. I could have accomplished the same thing by changing my phone number—in hindsight, that might have been easier!

Places: I didn't go to places where I'd used (such as bathhouses) during early sobriety. I recall not even walking down the streets they were on—I thought even proximity was threatening. Meanwhile, I created new places in sobriety that made me feel safe (like meetings and church). I also “reclaimed” my apartment, which felt very tainted to me after getting sober. A priest friend came over and blessed each room with holy water and prayers. It was very healing for me and helped me feel more relaxed at home. Today, I take care of myself and treat myself to things that make my space more comfortable: I buy nice soaps, good candles, and fresh flowers periodically. This is part of the living amends I make to myself, to care for the



## THE TWELVE STEPS OF CMA

1. We admitted that we were powerless over crystal meth and our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of a God of our understanding.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with a God of our understanding, praying only for the knowledge of God's will for us, and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to crystal meth addicts, and to practice these principles in all of our affairs.

*The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous have been reprinted and adapted with the permission of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. (A.A.W.S.). Permission to reprint and adapt the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous does not mean that Alcoholics Anonymous is affiliated with this program. AA is program of recovery from Alcoholism only—use of AA's Steps and Traditions, or an adapted version of its Steps and Traditions in connection with programs or activities which are patterned after AA, but which address other problems, or in any other non-AA context, does not imply otherwise.*

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. 2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him. 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. 5. Admitted to ourselves, to God, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings. 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. 9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. 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. 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

spirit and body I abused for so many years.

Things: Another lesson I learned from my relapse is that the computer was a people-place-and-thing that I needed to get away from to stay clean. The literature speaks about “going to any lengths,” and I was now willing to do that. (I’d tried without success to stay clean the first time using my own ideas.) In those days, I had a desktop—I disconnected it and placed it on the back floor of my closet until I had almost a year of sobriety.

Individually, each of these actions was helpful. And using these firewalls in conjunction with my other tools—calling my sponsor every day, ninety meetings in ninety days, calling three sober people a day, etc.—enabled me to have a life today that is truly beyond my wildest dreams. As a result of taking the suggestions, I’m preparing to celebrate eight years of continuous sobriety from all mind-altering drugs. I am so grateful to the fellowship of CMA for my recovery.

—Carmine N.

**PHONE NUMBERS** I’ll never forget the first time someone in the program offered me his phone number. It was my third meeting and I had seven days clean. After I announced my day count, the guy sitting next to me gave me a little piece of paper with his name and phone number on it, with a smile. I panicked. I thought, Oh no, this guy wants to pick me up and I’m not attracted to him at all.

Not only was he not trying to pick me up, but I actually was attracted to him—to his sobriety. He had what I wanted! As I became more experienced and knowledgeable about the tools of recovery, I learned that phone numbers really could save my life. “Dial them, don’t file them,” people told me. The only problem was, I didn’t have a phone! Cell phones weren’t really around yet and I hadn’t had a home phone in years. (Why pay the phone bill? I thought. That only takes away money I can spend on drugs!) Imagine how isolated I was. So I got into the habit of carrying around a pocket full of quarters and used the pay phones that used to be on every corner.

The phone nearest to my apartment played a very important role in my sobriety. I called my sponsor from that phone every day. And I regularly called other fellows from that phone. One time, I awoke at about 5:00 a.m. and had an incredible urge to use. I knew the after-hours club I used to go to was open and the dealer would be more than willing to oblige. Within a few minutes I found myself dressed and heading out to get high. As I crossed the street, there it was—that phone

booth. By then I had made a habit of using phone numbers to connect with people in the program—when I felt good or when I felt bad. I didn’t even think about it, I just put the quarter in the phone and called my sponsor. Of course I woke her up, but she was glad I called. I ended up going to her place instead of getting high, and then I went to my morning meeting.

More than a decade later, I still walk by that old pay phone every day. It’s a constant reminder that using the number of another addict in recovery really can help me stay sober! —Craig S.

**PLAYING THE TAPE** Playing the tape—all the way through to the end—means something different to me now than it did when I first became sober. Early in sobriety, it meant the horror and powerlessness of my last hit. It meant the handcuffs and self-hate and shame. When I came into the rooms, I obviously remembered my last hit quite well. The words carried great meaning for me then.

After several months, I began to understand that the tool was meant to keep me “sweetly reasonable,” as the “Big Book” says. The pain of my previous life would dim with time; indeed, the bite and humiliation was evaporating with every clean month. How was I to keep the memory of the suffering in the forefront of my mind? The goal of the Twelve Steps is to have a spiritual awakening, so playing the tape wouldn’t be the only thing keeping me sober. Living the Twelve Step life—trusting in my higher power and cleaning house on a daily basis, would keep me safe.

I began to think of the consequences of moving from the path of the Twelve Step life instead of only trying to remember the pain. As I said, remembering the pain would only go so far. Now when I thought of relapse, I didn’t think of the act of hitting the pipe as the first part of a slip. I thought instead of the eroding of my connection to my higher power, of detaching from the rooms of recovery and the isolation that must surely precede using. I began to believe taking a hit was the last of a litany of things I would do on my way to relapse. I also formed the idea that, if I did nothing to reconnect to the program when I was in trouble, then at some level I was embracing the idea of relapse—and I would be the last one I’d tell the truth to.

My “tape” now (what happened to digital?) sounds something like this: Track 1. I’m losing my compassion and I don’t care. 2. I’m too tired to go to a meeting. 3. I don’t need to do service any-

I WAS ATTRACTED TO HIM—  
TO HIS SOBRIETY.  
HE HAD WHAT I WANTED!

more because I got this thing, right? 4. I haven't been to a meeting in two years, but I'm still sober so who's kidding who? 5. The waitress gave me change for a twenty when I only gave her a ten but I'm not saying anything. 6. It's Sunday and I'm bored, so who's to know that I took the Vicodin just for fun? 7. It's just a glass of wine at Thanksgiving. 8. Weed is legal in California now. 9. Here comes the glass pipe... 10. I can make better dope than this, so let's set the lab up again. 11. What lovely handcuffs, Officer. 12. Hi, my name is...

This might seem funny, but I've been around for a few years and most of the people I've seen relapse have gone through just this journey on their way out. My particular tape works for me. Make your own as the years go by and make sure it keeps you sweetly reasonable. —Rick B.

**PRAYER** I found my way to recovery as the direct result of a desperate cry for assistance. I couldn't go on living in such unbearable agony, yet I wasn't able to imagine a life without meth. Awakening from that all too familiar blackout that followed my final binge, I remember uttering one simple request: "Help." That's all. One word. Yet this time it seemed unconditional. For once, I had no reservations.

I wasn't making this request to anyone or anything in particular. I just put it "out there"—to the universe—to something with more power. My own had failed me. And that very night, I was carried to my first Twelve Step meeting, in the fellowship of CMA. I didn't understand it then, but my first prayer in recovery had been answered.

The Steps don't even mention the word *prayer* until Step Eleven, thank God. And I knew it would be a long time (if ever) until I'd reach that milestone, so I didn't let my prejudice toward religious people and their small-minded practices stand in my way of coming to meetings and sharing.

Others shared prayers they found helpful in their own daily lives. The Third and Seventh Step Prayers come to mind. And, of course, the Serenity Prayer. I came to understand that this prayer thing could exist entirely outside of a traditional religion or system of structured belief. It was simply a way for me to tap into the natural energy of the world surrounding me. Prayer helped me stop swimming irrepressibly upstream and instead move gently with the flow of things as they are.

Nearly eight years later, and still sober, my prayers remain as uncomplicated as they were when I began. I start most days asking



for "help," and, when I remember, I say "thank you" before the day ends. Occasionally, a few more words follow: "help me be useful," "help me know the right thing to do," "thank you for guiding me," and "thank you for one more day clean." —John T.

**PROFESSIONALS** For a long time I didn't take good care of myself. To be honest, I didn't know how. I tried to do things my way, all alone, faking and fumbling through. Life was filled with chaos, fear, and anxiety. I was afraid and embarrassed to let anyone know, including myself, that I needed help and didn't know where to begin. I remember closing my eyes and thinking, Please help me, wishing for someone to come to my rescue and assist me in managing my life. For a long time using crystal meth was my solution. It encouraged me to fool myself, convincing me any help needed was unavailable, but that all my worries could suddenly disappear. The predictable reality was that crystal never alleviated my fears. I was socially and interpersonally handicapped. Not knowing how to admit I needed and wanted help, I became a pro at transforming a simple situation into an unmanageable mess.

At 40 years old, I am just beginning to understand how to take care of myself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. From opening the mail and paying my bills to scheduling doctors appointments and showing up for commitments, it's all new for me. When it comes to working the Steps I have the fellowship and my sponsor. But for life's many other challenges, I have taken the obvious but excel-

lent suggestion to seek outside aid. Today I am not afraid to call in the pros and ask them for help. I have put together a great team and now have the assistance I desperately wished for. When I don't feel well or have a health concern, I have a great doctor I can call. He wants to help me. When my depression gets the better of me or my medications don't seem effective, I call my psychiatrist. He wants to help me. There are days that just remaining sober and keeping a positive frame of mind are daunting. Those days I lean on credentialed therapists and drug and alcohol counselors, not just myself and fellow recovering addicts. The pros on my team only desire to assist me in achieving sobriety and learning how to live a sound life. They all want to help me!

Having no medical insurance to pay for all these necessary services, though, felt like an unsolvable problem. The solution was to follow the direction of my case manager and keep all the appointments with professional agencies that she set up for me. I had full health care coverage in a short time. If the calls from the creditors, banks, and other institutions become too much to deal with for today, I have access to good legal help, courtesy of New York state. I am learning there is always a solution to my challenges, and usually a professional who is waiting for me to just ask for help. An important lesson I continue to learn: They really do want to help! I believe it is our nature as human beings to want to be needed. I always feel proud when someone reaches out to me and trusts me for help. All any of us ever

**Continued on Page 10**

# Failing & Succeeding

A FIRST STEP STORY  
BY MARK L.

I WAS A COMPLETE FAILURE AS A DRUG ADDICT.

When I hear people come in to the rooms and share these long drawn-out sagas of addiction to this chemical or that, I'm mystified. I couldn't drink more than four beers before I was desperately searching for someone—anyone—to take me home. Martinis and margaritas were worse: two or three and I would be collapsed in your lap, pawing at your crotch whether you wanted me there or not. A few tokes of pot and, after a fit of giggling or whoring, I would be passed out, begging off dinner or the guests or my date even, so I could just *lie* down.

Ecstasy was just despondency for me—I had maybe one good trip in my life, otherwise it made me deeply paranoid and depressed. Ketamine sent me into frightening out-of-body nightmares at least every other time I did it. Cocaine was the worst disaster of all. I remember the first night I did it: I prowled the village like a haggard hunter—full of myself but totally hopeless at the same time—until I ended up at some sleazy club in a sub-basement. I went home at dawn still unable to sleep, thinking, I cannot do this again, and, Where can I get some more? Now that club is a shi-shi restaurant and I'm sober over ten years. Things change.

The first time someone offered me crack I was so clueless I tried to shove the pipe in my nose. There was nothing cool or sophisticated about me in pursuit of a high. The first time I did crystal I found myself flat on my face begging a totally bored, almost robotic stranger to have sex with me. Within a week I'd come down with a bad case of shingles (this was before staph infections, but the shingles was bad enough); by the end of a month I was searching desperately to find some more, to find some guy who would do more with me—shingles be damned.

You hear a lot about orgies. I didn't do too many orgies. I am too self-centered for an orgy. I found guys on the phone lines or god-knows-where whom I could take hostage for a weekend at a time. Guys I could get drugs from, guys who wanted someone for 24 hours. There were a few really dysfunctional couples I used. There was a very troubled hustler, P. If he showed up on Friday night without crystal, I'd slyly suggest he go find some—usually by turning a trick or two. When he came in at three or four and

woke me from my “nap,” I'd say, “Oh honey, you didn't have to...” But believe me, *he had to*. The drug dealer who would give me crack called it “rock.” He had been in AA and labels were important. Q. wanted someone to listen to his song lyrics and hear about his dreams; I just wanted sex. I didn't care if he couldn't keep it up (he smoked a lot of “rock”).

I didn't need much. Just all of your drugs, all of your attention, and all of your time. And you couldn't ask me to give anything back. That was also part of the deal. I had the same relationship with work. I came to the city to be an actor; I'd been the lead in all the plays in school and I think I assumed it would be easy to step into edgy roles on Broadway. When a few years went by and I still hadn't been discovered, I devoted more and more time to a pursuit I had mastered: sex. I wasn't the hottest thing in the world but I was young and smart and that will always get you far in the city.

So I failed as an actor. Who cares? I temped and tutored and spent my nights at various bars. I was focused on what my friend Charlie called “Charm School”: learning to be a “professional homosexual.” But soon I failed Charm School, too. I tested positive for HIV when I was 26 years old. Believe me, this particular failure felt like a catastrophe at the time: There was as yet no AIDS cocktail, and besides, I was of the generation that was supposed to know better.

I kind of got my act together, cutting down on my drinking and getting the first full-time job I could find, as a financial editor on Wall Street. (If you know Melville's story “Bartleby Scrivener,” where the clerk eventually vanishes into his desk, that will give you an idea.) Bottom line: I had health insurance and life insurance. I was trying to do the right thing. One problem—the money was good. Soon I was doing a share on Fire Island and drinking again and smoking a lot of “medical” marijuana and experimenting. What did I have to lose?



My coke/crack/crystal career was relatively short-lived. Maybe three years. Like I said, I was bad at it. I was a classic weekend binger, dragging angrily through my weekday life, working at a job I hated, barely showing up to the gym, to dinners with friends, to therapy, to clean my room; then shutting myself away in some dark room for the weekend with one or two other lonely, angry people, and getting as high as possible with whatever you had.

Things began to fall apart around the millennium. I started to unravel, had a harder and harder time getting through Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. I sobbed my way through therapy sessions, saying at the end, "But I'll be fine, I'm just fine, things will be fine," and running off. My shrink offered to check me in to a top dual-diagnosis ward in the city, but I begged off. I was close to suicidal, unable to make it through a few hours without a crying jag—but I had friends coming in from California for the Big Night, so I was going to muscle through.

In the end, though my two best pals had crossed the continent to hang out with me, I passed the millennium with hustler P., alone in my apartment begging for sexual punishment. Once again, failure. Even my kinkiest fantasies were farces: See, P. had his own baggage—he spent the night (the whole weekend) talking and talking and talking, about his family, about his plans, about his regrets. He was the chatty type of tweaker. I was punished that weekend, all right. We made a lovely New Year's Eve tableau.

A few months later I was at last trying something called harm reduction counseling, both in one-on-one sessions and in a group. And it helped a little bit. I was at least talking at length about how I wanted to stop. But I didn't stop, just yet. A stylist came in for fashion week to stay with my roommate (my roommate back

me to a dealer of my own, after cautioning me that I "was sounding a little bit like a junkie..." And within a week of at long last having my own dealer I was in a hospital. What more evidence do I need of my total ineptitude as a drug addict?

I'd reached that awful point where nothing I understood—sex, crystal, Clonipin, Rolling Rock—could fix me anymore. I couldn't be with people, couldn't be alone, couldn't stop crying, couldn't imagine how it was going to end. One night toward the very end I was masturbating mechanically, staring in a mirror and thinking, This wasn't supposed to happen to me.

So I landed in the ER again, but this time it was just the right moment. I surrendered completely one Monday morning. The second I lay down on the hard little hospital bed, my crying stopped, my shaking stopped, and I slept. Within a few hours I had been transferred upstairs to the psych ward. That day was possibly the first successful day of my adult life.

I spent five days there. A very kind counselor, John, handed me the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, and said, "Just read the stories..." I had kind of been knocked clear—it really was a spiritual awakening, though I wouldn't understand it as such for many weeks—so I did everything he and the doctors told me. On the third day or so I went to an AA meeting in the ward. A man who had been sober about nine months came in and talked to four of us for half an hour. He was late, and to be honest, his life sounded like kind of a mess, but there were two things about him that really moved me: He was helpless before alcohol (before drugs), had realized it and was accepting it and trying to stay sober. And even more moving, he was there. He had come into the hospital despite having a crazy job and all kinds of family problems and given us his time.

From the hospital I went to a rehab in Pennsylvania. I detoxed



*I didn't need much. Just all of your drugs,  
all of your attention, and all of your time.*

then was a "fabulous" person who worked for a leading cosmetics company), and the three of us stayed up every night for days snorting plate after plate of coke. It wasn't crack, it wasn't crystal, so I guess I thought it was harmless—yet at the end of the week I went to my doctor convinced I was having a heart attack. He had me check in to the ER. They kept me overnight, diagnosing cocaine psychosis. It was maybe two weeks before I was back to hanging out with M. and smoking crystal. The cocaine was the problem...

In March of that year I quit my job. Someone I worked with had started talking to me about possibly joining his Internet startup. No official offer, mind you, just some talk—but I marched into my boss's office and quit in a huff. I wasn't thinking clearly by this time. Without a job, I was basically just home at my computer smoking, smoking, smoking. Hour after hour tugging on the pipe. Who gives a damn? The last man I partied with finally introduced

for one week at one facility, and then spent another two weeks in a halfway house in another town. I felt extremely unique out there. My ego started to rebel a bit—the facility was full of teenage heroin addicts, rural alcoholics and inner city crack addicts. I was a goddamned Ivy Leaguer, a professional Manhattan homosexual, rooming with a middle-aged Army NCO named Willy. I knew I had a problem, but in this context, the meetings (we went every night or one came to us) seemed like a clique for ignorant Jesus freaks. I was just at the point of leaving for some fancier place; I was in touch with my folks, and they had offered to spend their all of their savings if they had to. I had some outburst or other in group with a counselor who I was sure was homophobic, and Willy told me, "Mark, you are the judgmental one. You are the most judgmental person I've ever met."

That moment I had a core realization: Getting sober was not about anyone else but me. The program was not about anyone

Continued on Page 14



#### BACK TO BASICS from Page 7

have to do is ask. The help surrounds us. One of the most profound spiritual lessons I have learned on my journey is that we are never meant to do any of “this thing called life” alone. My solution is to continue to have the willingness to put my hand up, swallow my ego, and ask for help. We can all be pros while remaining in service to each other. —Bill B.

**S**ERVICE Service was a great way to shore up my self-esteem, especially when I was first rebuilding my life in sobriety. Setting up chairs, arranging literature, and maintaining meeting contact lists led me to elected service positions. I felt connected as a member of and contributor to our fellowship. But somewhere along the way, my ego and indomitable self-will stepped in. The home group I was secretary of became *my* meeting—a meeting that belonged to me and depended on me to function. I began to question the catchphrase we use in Program: “Service keeps you sober.” After three years in CMA, in which I’ve done lots of service as a meeting secretary, chair, GSR, committee member, etc., how can I explain why I’m counting days again? Is it possible to do too much service, especially if the service is motivated by ego and accompanied by resentments?

At my sponsor’s suggestion, I looked up the definitions of the words *trusted* and *servant*. A trusted servant is a person relied upon to be of assistance to, or to promote the interests

**IT'S NICE TO KNOW I  
CAN DO THAT TODAY,  
BE GENTLE ON MYSELF.**

of, another—in this case, the group. This is in contrast to being a *leader*, or one who directs. Because I’ve been a leader in my professional life for many years, the concept of trusted servant can be tricky for me. What I’ve discovered through my relapse is that doing service doesn’t mean “leading.” It can be as simple as showing up to a meeting and sharing authentically how difficult it is to come back from a slip. If one person hears the experience I’ve shared, and it helps keep him sober today, then I’ve done service.

Going forward, I hope to be a “worker among workers,” focusing on service that I can do behind the scenes that both serves the group and is meaningful to me. Not holding an elected position, yet still contributing by preparing materials, taking notes, and helping to set up meetings, helps me to build humil-

ity while remaining engaged and a part of the group. And learning to focus on the principles of the program, rather than the personalities in the rooms, frees me of resentments. I contribute what I can, and trust the group to make decisions, not me. So I’ll keep doing service, as a way to give back to this Program I love, which keeps me sober, one day at a time. —Jeff S.

**THE SHELF** When I first came into program and began the process of getting sober, I was overwhelmed by the awareness of all the problems I was running away from by escaping with meth. Credit card debt, broken relationships, inappropriate sexual behavior, unfinished projects, unrealized dreams, no sense of spirituality, lack of direction in my life, difficulty forming healthy romantic relationships—those were just the tip of the iceberg. In typical addict fashion, I wanted to solve all these problems at once and change my whole life immediately. I didn’t like the person I’d become and I wanted out.

At meetings I kept hearing people say “I’m putting it on the shelf...” when talking about issues that were troubling them. As an addict I had no clue how to slow down, focus on the most important thing first—staying clean—and worry about other problems later. I began to adopt this slogan early on and found it to be one of the most comforting tools of the program. For some issues, you can actually wrap things up, like bills, to-do lists, or certain amends, put them in a shoe box, and set it on a shelf in your apartment until you are ready to deal with them. Other difficulties were harder for me to grasp, though, so I visualized myself putting these problems in a box and placing them on the shelf. This really helped to simplify things for me and put my mind at ease. There will always be time later to deal with the wreckage of my past, as long as I stay sober one day at a time. Keeping certain things on the shelf helps me do this, and puts the seeming urgency of my issues in true perspective. I have taken things down a few times only to find that I was still not ready to deal—so I put them back up. It’s nice to know I can do that today, be gentle on myself, and have patience that my higher power will further prepare me to handle life’s challenges. —Bike Mike

**SLOGANS** “Easy does it.” “Progress, not perfection.” “One day at a time.” You don’t have to spend much time in CMA before you become acquainted with slogans such as these. Speakers often refer to them; they are commonly bandied about in individual shares; and you

can find them everywhere you turn in the literature. Sometimes they're even plastered to the wall or otherwise visible in meeting spaces. So what do you make of all of these sayings? What should they mean for you?

The first thing to understand is that slogans are nothing more than distilled bits of wisdom and experience that have survived over time because they reflect common thoughts and feelings that addicts often share as they go through recovery. The meanings of some of these sayings are pretty self-evident. Many can refer to various things. Take "One day at a time," for example, which is one of the most commonly used phrases in all the Twelve Step fellowships. At the most basic level, it reminds me that all I need to focus on is staying sober this one day. That was especially important when I was starting out and the thought of staying away from drugs for weeks or months, let alone years, just seemed too daunting. But beyond that meaning, "One day at a time" also reminds me of the need to work on my recovery every day one way or another, through meetings, journaling, calls to my sponsor or other fellows, you name it. Even more generally, the same saying can help me focus on living as fully in the present as I'm able, rather than rehashing the past or projecting my fears into the future.

Slogans help me when they act as touchstones that remind me of why I'm in recovery, of the things I need to avoid along the way, and of the things I hope to find. Each person can identify the sayings that are most meaningful for him or her, based on his or her own experience. I try not to think of them as instructions that are handed down from on high, but rather as individual tools that I select—if I wish. They're not empty catchphrases that substitute for real thought and reflection. You might even come up with some personal slogans of your own. Remember, this is your recovery, no one else's, and you can always fall back on yet another favorite slogan: "Take what you need and leave the rest behind." —*John R.*

**SMART FEET** When I first came around, especially when I *first* came around, before any relapse, getting to the door of a meeting was much easier than walking through it. Many times, I got to the door and froze. Sometimes I'd walk around the block or even just go past the meeting. Walking through those doors was one of the first simple actions I took on my journey toward surrender. Every time I walked into a Twelve Step meeting, I took an action

that acknowledged my powerlessness over the substance, and in early sobriety, that was demoralizing. But each time I walked through the door, I also found a little bit more courage and freedom. It got easier to do the next time, and after a while, I saw that walking through the door was an act of self-love. That took a while! But it was the start of "smart feet," which in any given situation have the power to take me away from the substance and toward recovery.

Which door my feet took me to often become my point of resistance. So many meetings: CMA, AA, NA, CA, gay, straight, men's,

**I BELIEVE WE ACT  
OUR WAY INTO  
RIGHT THINKING.**



women's, beginner's, book study, topic. I was comparing and trying to figure out rather than just letting my feet do the walking. If I went to a meeting that didn't work for me, regardless of the reason, all I had to do was "go where it's warm," and find one that did work. Go to the meeting that's easiest to get to and most comfortable to sit in. Just walk through that door! That is training smart feet. When I had about two years, I'd gotten a little fat and had lost seven teeth. I didn't feel comfortable in what seemed at that time to be fabulous Chelsea CMA. The problem was my ego more than the CMA meetings, but the solution was to decompress in AA, where I didn't have to confront my ego problem. It was the warm place to go.

Eventually, identification with CMA stories and the warmth of the fellowship brought me back. (And yes, I got some dental implants!)

Today my smart feet keep me from walking down the block where the dealer lives, or the ex-boyfriend, or past the bathhouse, the bar, or the bookstore. Today my smart feet take me to responsibilities and frivolities well-lived and well-loved. Today my smart feet give me freedom beyond my wildest dreams. They help me show up for friendships, for dates, for job interviews, for doctor's appointments, for myself, for sponsees and others in the kind of giving that expects no reward and receives so much in return. —*John U.*

**SPIRITUALITY** I've always had faith that some sort of Greater Power was out there, watching over me. Spirituality to me is the connection to that Power through dy-to-day living. I come from a deeply religious and spiritual background, so it's something that has always been important to me, but at the same time very painful. There were times when I felt abandoned and alone, especially when I reached my bottom. I was spiritually bankrupt. At these times, I grew spiritually, learning again to put my trust in something greater than me.

My views of a Higher Power were constantly changing when I first came in to the program. I was trying to connect with a Power that everyone liked and had respect for, which was impossible. Gladly, I've learned that it isn't about what anybody else likes or disapproves of—in order for it to work for me, it has to be something I have faith in. I've also learned not to judge other people's spiritual lives that I may not agree with. That lesson in acceptance has been great for the growth of my spiritual life.

Recently, my spirituality helped me get through the drama of losing my apartment while I was barely working and trying to obtain rental assistance. This brought on a lot of fear that made me want to give up on life and to pick up. Because using wasn't an option, I remember saying the Serenity Prayer often, especially after things would go wrong, which they continually did. The prayer calmed my fears, and helped me have faith that I would be taken care of. This experience was extremely rough for me—I realized how powerless I was and had to turn my will over. Through prayer, I began to see the situation with a different mind-set; and even though the things I had tried to make happen fell through, I was ultimately taken care of and my spiritual connection to life has grown stronger. —*W. M.*

**SPONSORS** I walked into my first CMA meeting having had no experience with recovery or rehab and was confused about many things I heard, including the word sponsor. Who was this person and why did some people have them? Was it like a patron of the arts or something along those lines? Going to more meetings, I soon learned that a sponsor is another addict in recovery, that sponsorship is two addicts working their program together, and that a sponsor could help me through the “Steps” of the program.

Everyone’s experience of finding a sponsor is different. It took me about sixty days to have the nerve to ask somebody. He was the person who introduced me to CMA and the person I had become the most connected to...but that wasn’t saying much! In my early days of sobriety I was shy and quiet. I felt fearful, confused, and sad, and my self-esteem was very low. It was not easy to open up to people, although I tried to take suggestions, including sharing at meetings. Somewhere deep inside was the willingness to open up to people and come out of my shell. I feared rejection, so asking Mark to be my sponsor felt like a huge risk. I was drawn to his confidence, his happiness and sense of humor, his serenity, and the ease with which he seemed to handle himself (these were things I wanted!). And his one year of clean time, which seemed like an eternity. I was relieved that he said yes! We began talking on the phone each night and I gradually opened up to Mark more and more. I shared what I was feeling. This included some doubts that I was really an addict, and that I felt phony for having one foot in the door and one foot out the door. He helped me through this period.

He guided me through my First Step—in which I gained greater acceptance of my addiction—and my Second Step, in which I came to believe more firmly that the program could help me. Over the next year we went on to work Steps Three, Four, and Five—all part of my journey in recovery.

Geographical circumstances created the need to change sponsors, and I’ve had several since Mark. But my first year of sobriety was the true turning point of my life, and working with Mark was a huge part of that. I learned to trust him, to share, and to ask for help. This was a whole new way of having a relationship with another person. I learned how to let many qualities into my life that hadn’t been there in years: gratitude, open-mindedness, and acceptance, just to name a few. None of this felt like a “white light experience” at the time it was

happening. But I realize now that through the tool of sponsorship I really did experience a spiritual awakening! —Mike L.

**SUGGESTIONS** When I was asked to write about suggestions, my first thought was, Don’t tell me what to write about! This has been my knee-jerk response to suggestions 90 percent of the time since beginning my sober journey (seven years, eleven months ago, and still counting, to give you an idea of how fast I change). When I came in, I was thrilled the only requirement for membership in CMA was a desire not to use. I interpreted this as not having to do anything except bitch that I couldn’t use anymore. Finally, people who understood my pain!



And pain it was. The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are suggested tools of recovery. Without taking these Steps, I was going to stay in pain. So when it was suggested to me to do some “work,” I did, but only out of spite—to prove that it wouldn’t work for me. I guess I didn’t hear “work it, it works” at the end of every meeting. By taking suggestions, I got out of my way and out of pain.

When my actions changed, my feelings changed. Suggestions are vital to my recovery and spiritual condition. Some suggestions are more powerful than others; I had to find the ones that worked me for.

I once heard in a meeting, “Everything we

need to know to stay sober we learn in the first thirty days: Get a sponsor and call them, go to meetings, do the Steps, fellowship, get numbers, do service...” These are suggestions, but they are the big ones; they saved my life. I thought the sayings around the rooms were corny at first, then I found them comforting. Many come from the “Big Book.” These suggestions and the readings at meetings are the things that have the most impact on my life and sobriety. If am open, I can hear them. —Amy H.

**SURRENDER** My understanding of what it has meant to surrender in the program has certainly evolved over the years, as I have evolved in sobriety. In my first week in CMA, a little over five years ago, I made what I thought was my formal surrender to the program. This was a crucial commitment to the process, but little was I aware that the action of walking through the doors into that first meeting had been my first big surrender. I had the gift of desperation and was willing to do what it took to end the chaos of drugs and alcohol. I was able to make it to four months without using or drinking but couldn’t let go of the fantasy of getting high, and slipped. I am grateful for that nine-day relapse—it showed me the party was really over. I walked into the Monday night Relapse Prevention meeting with one day back and again had the gift of desperation. But this time, I understood more and found myself more committed. Fortunately, I haven’t used since.

As the years went on, I learned that surrendering is not a one-time event. I can practice surrendering to whatever my obstacle may be whenever I have awareness and am willing to take action. Two and a half years into sobriety, I realized I needed to readdress my definition of my higher power—the God issue. All my adult life I had refused to believe in God because I had issues with organized religion. But I was not happy in sobriety and realized that it had a lot to do with my struggling spiritual program. I needed to set aside my hard-headed know-it-all thinking, essentially my will. Again I found myself with that gift of desperation and wanted relief. I told my sponsor that I saw the importance of believing in God and wanted to—but didn’t know how to believe in something that I didn’t know if I believed in. He suggested that maybe I should start “developing a relationship” with my higher power. I said to myself, “A relationship? Hmmm... Well, I have talked to myself all my life. Why don’t I just say I’m talking to God?” And that was the beginning of that.



My entire life I'd been needing to surrender to the "God issue," and life in sobriety since has done nothing but get better and better. The greatest liberation I experience is when I practice surrendering to something greater than myself. Today when I notice that gift of desperation for change I know what action to do next: Turn it over. I can tell you from my experience, it works. —*Jamie M.*

**T**HE TWELVE STEPS In almost nine years as a member of CMA, I've been given the gift of having two sponsors who believed the solution was the practice of the Steps and living by their principles. I came in to get away from using

drugs and wasting my life, and found a program of recovery that changed my world. The Steps lay the foundation for a new way of thinking and acting.

In the very beginning, like most of us, I didn't understand what the Steps meant—or really care—I just went along so I wouldn't have to use anymore. But as time went by, and with the help of my sponsor, that new design for living which is mentioned in the "Big Book" started to take shape, without me even noticing. The Steps are very clear and simple, and our sponsors' directions are usually clear, too, so why do so many of us find them difficult? The problem for me didn't lie with the Step work, but with my resistance to do it. The first

three Steps were easy. At the beginning, I was done, I needed to let go. But the rest of them required a little more work and a hard look at what I had done to myself and others. The last three describe a whole new way of facing life on life's terms.

In the literature, I found a list of the principles behind each step, and it has been a great help for me to know them. In the list I read, Step One corresponds to honesty; Two, hope; Three, faith; Four, courage; Five, integrity; Six, willingness; Seven, humility; Eight, brotherly love; Nine, justice; Ten, perseverance; Eleven, spiritual awareness; and Twelve, service. When I'm in pain, it is without a doubt because I am not practicing these principles in all of my affairs. How many times a day do I do the exact opposite? And how much pain and discomfort does it cause me? I believe there's more to this than carrying the message of recovery and remaining sober myself. Living these principles to the best of my ability is what makes the difference between just being dry or being a new man. —*Fernan R.*

**THE TWELVE TRADITIONS** When I first came into CMA and all the other As, I could just barely comprehend the Steps. As for the Traditions—who cared!? In reality, the most valuable tool I had as a newcomer was the Third Tradition: "The only requirement for CMA membership is a desire to stop using." I worried a lot at the beginning that I hadn't sunk low enough, hadn't lost enough, hadn't been in jail yet—that my story wasn't sad enough to make me a real addict. Someone explained this simple principle to me in the plainest words imaginable, asking, "Was it bad enough for you? Do you really want to stop?" The answers were yes and yes.

Another important tool throughout my recovery has been Tradition Twelve: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities." Addicts everywhere mouth along to this one long before they know where it comes from. I have to use it all the time, because, hard as it may be to believe, I don't always like all of my fellows. Sometimes you bug the shit out of me! (And I'm sure I bug some of you.) A few people—including a couple of my sponsors—have even let me down. But I have never doubted the Steps. And I've learned that even someone who works my last nerve, if he sincerely has a desire to stop using, probably has something to teach me. —*Mark L.*






---

**FAILURE from Page 9**


---

else but me. My difficulties in the world (what I would soon learn we called “resentments”) were not about my parents, my classmates, my lovers, my fellows in the rooms, my sponsors—this was about me. My disease is not even about crystal or alcohol or pot. It’s about my need to say no to challenges or opportunities, to close myself to the universe rather than open up, to run away. I have running away disease.

I began mouthing a little prayer to myself at meetings: “Please let me be teachable.” I still do. In the halfway house, my attitude was a lot better, and I began to reach out to all these men and women I had “nothing” in common with, who were reaching out to me. I came to believe my solution might just be spiritual, not medical, as I had assumed. When I was overwhelmed by my first intense cravings—it was my last night there; I was terrified of returning to the city—I made another surrender. There was a thunderstorm raging (seriously). I went out on the smoking porch, got down on my knees and said the Lord’s Prayer. It was the only prayer I could remember, and I said it over and over. And when the storm passed, my heart was beating normally again and I knew I’d be okay. I’d go to a meeting in the city, I’d find a sponsor, I’d get into an outpatient program... As I lay down to sleep I heard a train whistle far off in the valley. It was like the Universe was telling me, “See? You are going somewhere, I told you so.”

In other words, I got sober and I started to succeed. I started to treat my running-away disease by standing still. Standing still,

things were a lot less complicated. I could actually do things, take instructions, get better. It was like I had been staring at the world rushing by on a highway and now I was really looking at it. Challenges always seemed to be coming at me too fast, and dreams rushing away behind me. But now I was not flying along anywhere—I was in the world. And it wasn’t so scary any more. It was beautiful.

Among the many wonderful things that have happened to me over the last nine and half years: I went back to acting. It’s funny—when you actually show up for auditions, mail things to casting directors, and prepare for your callbacks, you work. Soon I had an agent, I was working in regional theater and doing little projects off-off-Broadway. Eventually I landed a lead in big musical out of town. While I was there I met a composer who asked me to write lyrics for him; we’ve since written three shows, one of which was named “Best Musical” at a festival last year. I’ve never come close to making the money I earned on Wall Street, but I’ve actually enjoyed artistic success—nothing off-the-charts, but it’s sweet as hell considering how embittered I was back in my using days.

Even sweeter has been the success of my life in recovery. I have had the pleasure of working the steps with several wonderful men. I’ve gone on to sponsor a few dozen guys myself. I’ve done lots of service, particularly in Crystal Meth Anonymous, which has grown from one meeting in NYC with half a dozen fellows to about thirty meetings with hundreds upon hundreds of recovering tweakers. I helped start a bunch of those meetings and the

area intergroup, and have even written some CMA literature. I’m not “stuck” in the rooms by any stretch—my theater friends are hardly abstemious, and I do a share on Fire Island with a group of “civilians”—but I make sure to prioritize my recovery and do what I can to help other men who are seeking sobriety.

I show up for my family and friends today, and I share my whole life with them, not just glimpses of one compartment or another. I’m a conscientious employee and a caring collaborator. When I screw something up, I promptly apologize and do my best to make it right. I take care of a lovely little shade garden and keep the smartest dog in Manhattan out of trouble. I am happy.

It’s not all roses and streamers. Understanding at long last what success really means has made those areas where life still beats me up seem more frustrating. I struggle mightily with depression; when I am in one of my chasms, I’m prone to wallow in self-pity and procrastination. My finances are disastrous, going from boom to bust regularly. And, hardest of all, perhaps, I still haven’t really dated too seriously since I cleaned up. So for all my newfound confidence and comprehension, I’ve still got many rows to hoe. Being sober has given me tools to tackle all of my problems and the perspective to believe I will eventually succeed in areas where I’m floundering. But it has also taught me acceptance, and if I am never a chipper, wealthy man with a beautiful guy on my arm, that will be okay. It’s okay now, right?

It’s more than okay, because I’m not running from anything. ■

# Reflections on Step One

By Lee L. and Paul B.

CRYSTAL METH THOROUGHLY DEFEATED US.\* With all our power of will we attempted to regulate our drug use but inevitably wound up still using—feeling even less in control and more hopeless than ever. With heads hung low and egos shattered,

we were baffled by the realization that drugs controlled us. Suffering from an existence devoid of dignity, our lives became a vicious and terrifying cycle: living to use and using to live. We failed to understand that we were not cursed with moral weakness or flawed ethics. We were afflicted with a disease, an obsession of the mind, manifested in the urge to use, and a compulsion of the body, marked by a phenomenon of craving. In the end we sacrificed almost everything to crystal meth with unquestioning devotion—our health and homes, our families and friends, our professions and finances, and our sanity and spirit.

Our every instinct demanded that we try and try again to control our using. Every vain attempt ultimately led only to failure, our old familiar nemesis. We dared to believe that one day we would “figure it out.” But this abnormal existence became our everyday experience. Rationalization, justification, and obsession were our reality; darkness, desperation, and violence overcame our spirit; misery, loneliness, and isolation were our constant companions.

We were often physically compromised by run-down, sleep-deprived, and undernourished bodies; infectious diseases; lost or disfigured teeth; mutilated and scarred skin; or psychotic brains. Remorse, regret, shame, guilt,

despair, and everpresent hopelessness—this was our mental and emotional landscape.

Reaching this point, however, bullied and battered us into a state of reason. Shaken to the core, we enjoyed no pretense of power or choice about our using. We could no longer manage our own affairs and carry out our responsibilities. We were finally convinced that we had to consider other solutions to our seemingly unsolvable problems.

Consumed by self-centeredness, we saw that our own willpower had completely failed us. Self-knowledge availed us nothing. Fear of consequences offered us no benefit. We had been overwhelmed. Crystal meth, a one-time friend, had become our master. Perhaps for the first time, we acknowledged the damage, injury, disappointment, and sorrow that we created in ourselves and in the lives of those around us. With new eyes, we could at last concede the wreckage of our meager existence. In utter humiliation, our denial was transformed into honesty. ■

\* We/us in this essay refers to the authors, not the fellowship of CMA as a whole.



# MEETINGS

THIS LIST IS UPDATED REGULARLY AT NYCMA.ORG

## SUNDAY

- 11:30 AM **Sunday Solutions (c)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 6:00 PM **Step Meeting† (o)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 7:30 PM **Beginner's Basics (c)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center

## MONDAY

- 7:45 AM **Good Morning, Higher Power (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 6:00 PM **Relapse Prevention (o)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 8:00 PM **NA Book Study (o)** Realization Center  
 8:00 PM **59th Street Bridge Back to Life (c)** 2061 32nd Street, Astoria, Queens

## TUESDAY

- 7:45 AM **Good Morning, Higher Power (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 12:15 PM **Step-Writing/Discussion Workshop (C)** Roosevelt Hospital  
 6:00 PM **Recovering Together (o)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 7:30 PM **Beginners Meeting†† (o)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 8:00 PM **Long-Term Sobriety (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis

## WEDNESDAY

- 7:45 AM **Good Morning, Higher Power (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 7:45 PM **Solutions in Recovery (c)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 8:00 PM **Conscious Contact/11th Step (o)** Gay Men's Health Crisis

## THURSDAY

- 7:45 AM **Good Morning, Higher Power (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 12:30 PM **Serenity on Tenth (o)** Roosevelt Hospital  
 6:30 PM **CMA Agnostics (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 8:00 PM **Big Book Study (o)** Gay Men's Health Crisis

## FRIDAY

- 7:45 AM **Good Morning, Higher Power (c)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 6:15 PM **Living With HIV (c)** Hudson Guild Fulton Center  
 8:00 PM **Crystal Clear†† (o)** Gay Men's Health Crisis  
 8:30 PM **The O'Toole Meeting (c)** French Church

## SATURDAY

- 8:30 AM **Saturday Morning Peir Meeting††† (c)** End of Christopher Street Pier  
 11:15 AM **Saturday Solutions†††† (c)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 5:00 PM **CMA Promises Meeting (o)** Manhattan Plaza Health Club  
 8:00 PM **Meditation Meeting††††† (c)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center  
 9:30 PM **Intimacy, Relationships & Sex in Sobriety (c)** Lesbian & Gay Community Center

## MEETING DETAILS

(o) **Open Meeting:** Welcomes anyone interested in the CMA program. In addition to regular CMA members, this can include friends and family members seeking information for a loved one, or those curious about the program and not sure if it is right for them. (c) **Closed meeting:** Welcomes anyone who has, or thinks he or she might have, a problem with crystal meth.  
 †The last Sunday of every month is a Traditions meeting. ††Meeting lasts 1½ hours.  
 †††Meetings run until end of October. ††††Meeting lasts 1hr 15min. †††††Please try to arrive on time so as not to interrupt the silent-meditation portion of the meeting.

## DIRECTIONS

- **French Church** 128 W. 16th St., Ground Floor
- **Gay Men's Health Crisis** 119 West 24th Street, between 6th and 7th avenues. Check at front desk for room number.
- **The Hudson Guild Fulton Center** 119 9th Avenue, between 17th & 18th Streets. Check at front desk for room number.
- **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Community Services Center** 208 West 13th Street, between 7th and 8th avenues. Check listings at front desk for room number.
- **Manhattan Plaza Health Club** 482 West 43rd Street, Conference Room Minnesota 1
- **Realization Center** 25 East 15th Street, 7th Floor
- **Roosevelt Hospital** 1000 Tenth Avenue, Room 8-G-41, 8th Floor

## How is CMA different than other Twelve Step programs?

We have found that we relate best to other crystal meth addicts because they understand the darkness, paranoia and compulsions of this particular addiction. The Twelve Steps of CMA were adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous. We do not believe we are better or worse than those in other Twelve Step programs. At the same time, many of us fail to fully identify with "a falling-down drunk" or, in the case of a heroin addict, "a nodding-off junkie." The hyper-extended length and intensity of crystal meth's effects, be it compulsive cleaning or sexual activity, were unique. Many of us have attended other Twelve Step programs, but the feeling of identification in the Rooms of CMA has helped us to keep coming back. After all, who but another meth addict understands the insanity that accompanies the high and, finally, that seemingly bottomless drop into depression that makes us desperate to use still more?

—Excerpted from the new CMA General Service pamphlet titled "What Is Crystal Meth Anonymous?" Copies may be downloaded free of charge at [crystalmeth.org](http://crystalmeth.org).



© 2010, New York Crystal Meth Anonymous. Submissions and Comments: CMA members are encouraged to submit essays and other original nonfiction writing for publication in Crystal Clear. Interested parties may contact a member of the NYCMA Literature Committee or NYCMA Intergroup for more information. Inquiries and comments may also be sent to [newsletter@nycma.org](mailto:newsletter@nycma.org). By submitting material for publication, members affirm that it is comprised solely of original content or that references to other works are credited properly. The writer also assumes all liability for any damages that may result from the publication of his or her article. Crystal Meth Anonymous is a Twelve Step fellowship for those with a desire to stop using crystal meth. Crystal Clear is published periodically by NYCMA Inc., a not-for-profit corporation located in New York City. NYCMA, or its designee(s), reserves the right to refuse submissions and to edit them, including for clarity and space and to avoid triggering the reader. Submissions become property of NYCMA. No compensation is paid. According to our Tenth Tradition, NYCMA has no opinions on outside issues. Opinions expressed in articles are solely those of the writers and do not speak for NYCMA as a whole. This policy was created by the NYCMA Literature Committee at the request of NYCMA Intergroup members. We also suggest that writers keep in mind our Eleventh Tradition: "Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films and all other media." The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of CMA have been adapted with permission from AA World Services Inc. NYCMA is not affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous. Visual materials are printed with permission.

New York Crystal Meth Anonymous  
 P.O. Box 1517, Old Chelsea Station • New York, New York. 10113