

Procrastinators Anonymous

Step Guide

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over compulsive procrastination, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 1 is about fully recognizing the consequences of compulsive procrastination in our lives, and also defining what form it takes for us – fully understanding the scope and nature of the problem.

First, write about all the significant instances of procrastination throughout your life, when you felt powerless to make another choice, and how this compulsive avoidance made your life unmanageable. Start at the beginning. How old were you when you first started procrastinating? Can you recall the first time it showed up as a problem?

The goal is to deeply understand how seriously procrastination has harmed us – the lost opportunities and damaged relationships – so we become willing to go to any lengths to stop doing it. Addicts tend to minimize the negative impact of their compulsive behaviors to justify continuing to do them. E.g. “I play a lot of computer games (or spend a lot of time on social media), but it’s not really harmful.”

So make an inventory of your life as a procrastinator. Be specific. Don’t pull any punches.

After you've written your inventory, define some "bottom lines" – that is, what recovery in procrastination looks like for you. We all procrastinate in different areas and in different ways, but for all of us, procrastination is "compulsive avoidance" – avoiding tasks and situations that feel bad to us in some way (make us sad, self-recriminating, anxious, fearful of failure, or whatever). Procrastination is running away from the negative feelings that arise when we do particular tasks. So what are these tasks? What tasks do we avoid doing? Based on this, what does recovery look like for you?

A "bottom line" is a thing we will not do when we are not procrastinating. For example, if we put off opening mail or doing the dishes, a bottom line might be failing to open the mail and do dishes every day. Routines are often a part of recovery for procrastinators – things we do each morning (e.g. make the bed, handle mail, etc.), each day (e.g. walk, devote x hours to work, etc.), each evening (e.g. tidy up, wash the dishes, brush teeth, etc.). These are just examples – you have to decide what recovery looks like for you, and what things – if you fail to do them – would constitute a slip.

Be careful not to get too rigid when you set your bottom lines.

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

Step 2 is about HOPE – believing there is a way out of the mess, being able to ENVISION that way out.

First we need to understand in what ways we are insane (which means “self-sabotaging”, for procrastinators). Mostly this is your Step 1, but with a slightly different spin. In Step 1 we think about our procrastination in terms of making our life unmanageable. In Step 2, we come to realize that doing this is insane - understanding the insanity of self-harm.

Write out a list - very specific - of all the things you are currently failing to do and how it is harming you. For some people these things are financial or work-related - e.g. not paying bills on time, not filing tax returns. Or it may be issues around cleaning and clutter - isolation because of a dirty/messy home (not wanting to invite people over), quality of life issues. Or the procrastination (self-harm) may be around health issues or practices. Write a very thorough list of “insane” things you’ve been doing (or not doing) as a procrastinator.

Then you need to figure out what makes sense as a Higher Power for you. Some people believe in God, and for them this is easy. But more and more people today are agnostic or atheist. You don’t have to believe in God, but you do have to think there is something in the Universe that’s more powerful than YOU are, and that isn't too hard. I once heard someone named Steve qualify at a meeting, and he said his Higher Power was Higher Steve - the part of him that knows better. I loved that. My view of a Higher Power is somewhat Taoist - a force for good in the Universe (not dissimilar to Higher Sheryl). This fits well for me with Step 3, because “turning my will and my life over to the care of God” (which makes no literal sense to me) can translate to “doing the next right thing, no matter how scary or hard”. But I’ll write about Step 3 separately.

For Step 2, list ways you have been “insane”, then think very deeply about what form of Higher Power makes sense to you and you can really believe in as a path to sanity. It even can be the PA group, if you want. For me, I feel the wind beneath my wings when I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing, even when it’s scary and hard. That’s my experience of Higher Power. You have to figure out what it is for you - write it out.

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

This is the step in which you have to figure out what "God" or "Higher Power" means to you. If you believe in the Judeo-Christian version of God (an anthropomorphic or "personal" God), then this step is easy. If you don't, the language has to be understood in a different way.

You can be an atheist and still do this step. For example, if you understand Higher Power in a Taoist sense, as a force for good in the universe, then you can interpret "turn your will and your life over to the care of God" as "let truth and integrity guide your actions, turning the outcome over to the universe." My shorthand for this is "do the next right thing" (rather than whatever my compulsive impulses would have me do), and let go of the outcome. Higher Power is in charge of outcomes, not us. We're just responsible for doing the next right thing.

I rewrote the 3rd step prayer in the AA Big Book to align with this view of a Higher Power (that I, personally, hold). Each of the 4 sentences is converted, line by line.

Original 3rd Step Prayer:

1. God, I offer myself to thee – to build with me and do to me as thou wilt.
2. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do thy will.
3. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of thy power, thy love, and thy way of life.
4. May I do thy will always!

Rewritten 3rd Step Prayer:

1. I commit to trying my best every day to be productive and useful.
2. I surrender my pursuit of self-sabotaging compulsions, short-term pleasures, and willful ignorance.
3. I will do the next right thing even when it's difficult or scary, leading others by example.
4. I will make integrity my aim in all that I do, turning outcomes over to the universe.

Basically, the idea in Step 3 is to stop acting on your own short-term impulses, and let something bigger than yourself – a Higher Power – guide your actions. For me, this is acting with truth and integrity, one moment at a time, to the best of my ability, even when it's painful or inconvenient or I'm scared about the outcome. I don't try to manipulate outcomes; Higher Power is in charge of outcomes. I just try to do the "next right thing" at every decision point throughout the day, and I trust that if I do this, the outcome will be as good as it **can** be. That's not to say that I'm guaranteed a good outcome. I don't believe in a personal God that takes care of me if I'm good. I believe that the outcome – even if not what I want – will be as good as it **can** be if I'm doing the next right thing. And that if I don't act with integrity, the ultimate result will be worse, sometimes in ways I can't anticipate. For example, I might be able to manipulate what I want short-term, but it will backfire long-term.

This is my version of faith. Yours may be different and that's okay. Each of us has to come up with our own understanding of Higher Power and act in accordance with this, rather than acting on our own short-term impulses.

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

The purpose of making this inventory – ultimately – is to make peace with ourselves, make a new beginning. Serious procrastination is a form of addiction – compulsive avoidance. All addiction has the purpose of taking us out of our lives, escaping bad feelings. The first three steps are about letting go of worry about outcomes, turning that over to a Higher Power. The next four steps (4, 5, 6, and 7) are about making peace with ourselves – letting go of self-loathing and committing to better behavior.

The AA Big Book suggests writing Step 4 as a list of resentments, and then noting your part in each resentment. I don't like this approach of making everything your fault. For people with codependency issues, it can actually be harmful. Here is another way to work Step 4.

Write a list of 50 events in your life that made you feel less-than, bad about yourself. Start in childhood. Make 2 columns: the event, then your feelings or beliefs around the event. For example (you'd write in more depth – this is just to give a flavor):

Negative Event: Not invited to party

Feelings/Beliefs: Unlovable, alone

Negative Event: Fired from job

Feelings/Beliefs: Worthless, not capable

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

When you have finished your list, it's very important that you share it with another human being who can help you to process it. This is not something you can do alone. That's where Step 5 comes in.

Your defects of character arise from the erroneous beliefs triggered by the negative events. When you share your Step 4 list with another person (hopefully someone who has done all 12 steps in some program, if not PA), you will see themes in your feelings and beliefs, and how these lead to unhelpful behaviors. These are your defects of character.

List these belief themes, then write the character defect that arises from these beliefs. For example (again, very abbreviated):

Belief: Alone, on my own, others won't help.

Character Defect: Push others away, don't ask for help when needed.

Belief: Unloved, unlovable, worthless.

Character Defect: Not authentic with others, pretend to be what I'm not.

Belief: Failure means disgrace, shame.

Character Defect: Avoid risks, don't try to do my best.

Belief: Can't deal with bureaucracy.

Character Defect: Avoid bureaucratic problems or deal with them badly.

Belief: Nothing I do is enough.

Character Defect: Don't do anything at all.

Filter the list down to about 5 core beliefs. Focus on ones that feel painful, unresolved.

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

Go through your Step 5 list, and think about how these defects of character actually serve you. Character defects always have a pay-off. For example:

- Yelling when you're frustrated or angry can get people to do what you want, though it's not how people should be treated and may be coercive. Letting go of yelling means trusting HP with the outcome.
- If you think failure means disgrace and shame, you'll avoid taking any action (the character defect) to protect yourself from failure. To let go of this character defect and risk failure, you have to think about failure in a different way, as a natural part of the learning process.

Make a list of all the pay-offs you get from your character defects, and think about whether you are willing to let these go, what your life would feel like if you let go of them.

Fear is the basis of most defects of character. As fear fades, through trust in a Higher Power, you become willing to do the work, versus fighting with yourself about actions you're not taking.

Step 7: Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.

In Step 7, you write your list of character defects, then affirmations of the opposite behavior. For example:

Character Defect: Push others away, don't ask for help when needed.

Affirmation: Trust those who are trustworthy, and ask for help when needed.

Character Defect: Not authentic with others, pretend to be what I'm not.

Affirmation: Be honest about who I am, what I need, and how I feel.

Character Defect: Avoid risks, don't try to do my best.

Affirmation: Know failure is a part of striving – learn from failure without shame.

Character Defect: Avoid bureaucratic problems or deal with it badly.

Affirmation: Keep doing the next right thing and problems can be resolved.

Character Defect: Don't take small steps, afraid to even try.

Affirmation: Celebrate all my accomplishments, however small.

Spend some time thinking about this. As you list your character defects and what it would mean to let go of them, you may add some things that were not on your previous lists. For example, when I was working on my 7th step, I realized I had a pattern of feeling that nothing I did was ever enough, which made me not want to do anything at all (the character defect). The affirmation is to celebrate every accomplishment, however small.

Once we've done this, we need to pray (humbly ask Higher Power) for our shortcomings to be removed now. AA has a 7th Step prayer. I rewrote it to conform to my view of a Higher Power. You can use my rewrite or write your own version. In your own way, ask for help from your Higher Power – God, your Higher Self, the Universe, or however you view your Higher Power (see Step 2).

Original 7th Step Prayer:

1. My Creator, I am now willing that You should have all of me, good and bad.
2. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows.
3. Grant me strength, as I go out from here to do your bidding.

Rewritten 7th Step Prayer:

1. I understand and accept all that I am, good and bad.
2. I pray to be free of every defect of character that blocks me from acting with integrity, and being a productive member of society.
3. I pray for the strength to do the next right thing, always.

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

In Steps 4, 5, 6, and 7 we made peace with ourselves. In Steps 8 and 9, we make peace with others.

Step 8 is not meant to be an inventory of every person you've ever wronged in your life. The focus is on who you've harmed with your compulsive procrastination. Since procrastination is self-sabotage by definition – not doing what you need to be doing for your own well-being – the first person on your 8th step list has to be yourself.

Next think about everyone else who has been harmed by your procrastination. Go back to your Step 1 inventory of all the serious ways you have procrastinated throughout your life, and think about who else was impacted in each of these instances. Make a list. If you're married, this list will probably include your spouse. If you have children, they'll probably be on the list. Employers, co-workers, parents, and friends all may be on the list.

People procrastinate on all sorts of things. The most common areas are:

- (1) financial (work, savings, bookkeeping, tax returns)
- (2) school work (studying, homework, writing papers)
- (3) housework (clearing clutter, cleaning, dish washing)
- (4) health (seeing dentist and doctors, diet, exercise)
- (5) being late all the time

Think about how your behavior in each of these areas has affected other people.

Make a list of everyone who has been harmed by your procrastination, and *how they've been harmed*. Clarity about *how* you have harmed others is how you become willing to make amends. The amends may not take the form of a verbal

apology. It may just mean doing better going forward. The form of the amends is the subject of Step 9.

If you live alone, you may be the only one on your 8th step list. That's okay.

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

Every amends must include a commitment to stop engaging in the harmful behavior, whether or not you verbally apologize. Apologizing for a behavior that is harmful to others – for example, being late all the time – means nothing if you continue to be late all the time. Of course, we recover one day at a time, and some days will be better than others. But if our effort to change is consistent and obvious, we are making a true amends.

In some instances, a verbal apology also is appropriate. For example, if we live with someone and never clean up after ourselves, it's appropriate to own this behavior and commit to doing better (and then actually do better). If we're not pulling our weight financially, we may want to apologize to whoever is supplementing us, and commit to resolving our financial problems. Obviously we can't do it overnight, but we can resolve to work on it – for example, by taking appropriate next steps.

The amends to oneself is the most important, and in some ways the most difficult. Compulsive procrastination is about avoidance, fear of fully engaging in life. When we check out with procrastination, it's like we're on a bus with no driver, and many things can go wrong. When you stop procrastinating and start to become fully conscious of the damage that procrastination has done to your life, it can be devastating: lost careers, financial ruin, divorce, unfinished degrees, reaching retirement age with no savings.

We cannot change the past, but we can change our futures – build where we stand. The Serenity Prayer helps:

*God, grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change, the
courage to change the things I can, and the
wisdom to know the difference.
Amen.*

We have to forgive ourselves. There is no other choice. What is done is done – we can't go back. We may have made some serious mistakes, but we were doing the best we could at the time. We get it when we get it.

Our amends to ourselves is a promise to never harm ourselves in that way again, to be our own good parents – encouraging ourselves through the hard times, making sure our critical tasks are done, and rewarding our successes, however small.

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

Steps 10-12 are about living the steps ongoing, so as to maintain our recovery.

Even with our best intentions and effort, we will continue to fall short at times and make mistakes. When that happens, we need to acknowledge it and make amends as soon as we are able.

The Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius suggested doing a review of your day each evening, asking yourself 3 questions:

1. **Good:** What did I do well today, where did I succeed?
2. **Do better:** What could I have done better today?
3. **Mistakes:** Where did I fall short today? Do I owe any amends?

Some people do a daily inventory of this type or similar, and turn it over to a sponsor every evening.

I do it by journaling in the morning after meditation and prayer. What did I do yesterday? Did I use my time well? Did I take next right actions, or was I procrastinating by doing something less challenging than what I really needed to be doing? How will I use my time today?

However you do it, the idea is to review your day every 24 hours, promptly make amends as necessary, and commit to next right actions in the coming day.

Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.

The best way to work Step 11 is by establishing a daily spiritual practice. This can mean breath-focused meditation, guided meditation (there are zillions on the internet), or a practice of your own devising. I know someone who stares at a candle, then writes "next right actions" on a pad next to him. That's not how I meditate, but it works for him.

When you pray to your Higher Power, refrain from asking for specific things like "Please let me get this job" or "Please let me do well on this test". Those kinds of prayers don't work. Pray to know your next right actions (aka "God's will for you") and the power to carry that out. Simply praying for help also works.

Journaling after meditation and prayer is a good practice. This is an excellent time to review your previous day, and plan for the day ahead of you – that is, work Step 10.

A daily practice of meditation, prayer, and journaling doesn't have to take a lot of time – you can do it in 30-40 minutes. More isn't necessarily better. Sometimes people mistake the *road* to recovery – meditation, prayer, to-do lists, step work, meetings – as recovery itself. If you're spending so much time on day plans, meditation, and meetings that you don't have time to do your work, something is wrong.

That said, everyone has 30 minutes a day to give to meditation, prayer, and journaling because we make up the time with enhanced productivity. Also, a spiritual practice is necessary to maintain your recovery after you've finished your step work.

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

Step 12 is about doing service in Procrastinators Anonymous. Because of the nature of compulsive procrastination, people in this fellowship are especially reluctant to make commitments and do service – chair meetings, etc. This has been a problem since the launch of the fellowship in 2005. But it's not just an obstacle to the growth of the fellowship; it's also a lost opportunity for individual recovery.

Recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous means sobriety – not drinking or drugging. Recovery in Overeaters Anonymous means abstinence – not eating addictively. Since procrastination is compulsive avoidance, recovery in Procrastinators Anonymous means moving *towards* rather than *away*. Recovery in Procrastinators Anonymous means **engagement** in our lives, taking responsibility and meeting our obligations, "driving the bus" of our own lives.

When we are procrastinating, no one is "driving the bus" so our life becomes chaos, and there can be dire consequences – failures in school and work, lost relationships, clutter, financial problems. When we are engaged, life can be managed. It is safe to make commitments because we can trust ourselves to meet them. With recovery, committing to service isn't a problem. We can be sure that we'll be available at the specified time, or able to devote the time needed to complete a task when it's due.

Doing service in PA is a way to practice **engagement**, and – by our example – share our experience, strength, and hope with others struggling to recover from compulsive procrastination. When we make commitments and show up reliably, we demonstrate – to ourselves and others – that recovery is possible. Carrying the message in 12-step programs is as much about what we do as what we say.