

## **Steps 4 and 5 from *Progressive Recovery Through the Twelve Steps* Excerpted from “Fact Finding and Truth Telling”**

### Step Four

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

### Step Five

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

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First, here’s a quick reframe of these steps. The Fourth Step states we’re going to make a fearless and searching moral inventory. And the Fifth says further that we’re going to tell ourselves, the Progressive Power and another human being all about it.

Let’s start with the facts—and nothing but the facts—by looking differently at this idea of a moral inventory. While we may have begun by looking at our behaviors and our morals, a Progressive Inventory is not about morality but seeks to become increasingly nonjudgmental. While blaming others will never produce a solution, self-condemnation is devastatingly damaging to our recovery since it merely increases our sense of guilt or shame. Guilt is the product of finding fault with our actions; shame comes from believing we are fundamentally flawed.

We’ve heard it said that shame and guilt can make us thirsty—for alcohol, or something. It is not uncommon for people solidly in recovery to find their way back to their addiction or to a new one because of unresolved guilt or shame. And once someone slips in their recovery, the downward spiral can be unrelenting. We may never see them again, or they may never again find recovery.

There is an interesting twist in the language of the Big Book. It does not say we are looking for what is bad or wrong in order to turn it into that which is good or right. It also does not tell us we are sick trying to get well. Instead, it proposes we are seeking to discover what blocks us off from Higher Power. Then it proposes we are to look for causes and conditions which block us off from the power.

Of course! If lack of power is our problem, and there is power available, we are asked to examine through personal inventory what blocks power from flowing. The purpose of the Steps is not self-improvement, nor is it behavioral modification, rather it is restoration of power and through that to experience a restoration of sanity. That is not to say that efforts to improve ourselves or our behavior are to be shunned, rather to understand that is not the point and purpose of the Steps, which aim toward more fundamental matters.

Then we find two key phrases often repeated though not always well understood.

- “Many of us have tried to hold onto our old ideas and the result was nil until we let go absolutely.”
- “Invariably we find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which have placed us in a position to be harmed.”

Progressive Recovery uses personal inventory to examine our underlying beliefs and perceptions, some of which run quite deeply within us.

Let’s look at a fairly common example to explain this approach, after which we’ll explore the means by which such an inventory can be conducted.

Consider Jennifer. She's long-time sober, works the Twelve Steps on an ongoing basis, talks regularly to her sponsor, actively sponsors several women, involves herself in her home group, and attends several meetings a week. Jennifer has also had trouble with relationships with men. Granted they are much improved as a result of recovery, but they are still far from functional or fulfilling. She just can't seem to find the right guy—in the rooms of recovery or outside them.

While Jennifer has included all the broken relationships in her life in her previous inventories, she's never really explored her earliest experiences with men, those that include her birth father and two stepfathers. None of them were bad men, though addiction was involved in some cases. However, they were all emotionally unavailable to Jennifer, either because of addiction or simply a lack of emotional capacities.

With deeper exploration via a personal inventory with her sponsor as well as professional therapy, Jennifer discovers that as a child she came to believe that men were simply unavailable, that they would neglect or ignore her needs. She also realized that in her heart, she believed she was somehow unlovable, which to a child fully explains the unavailability of these men. Worse still, she determined that the only way to get their attention was to do things for them, which as she grew older came to include taking care of their needs in exchange for their attention.

With this lens, she could see that she repeatedly had found her way to men who were simply unavailable. With few exceptions she would try to win their affections by providing for them in any number of ways, including being the primary breadwinner, a caretaker for their emotional and physical needs, and of course, a sex partner. Invariably the relationships proved to be unsustainable.

Let's now put Jennifer's experience in the context of the Big Book's four-column inventory with a little bit of Progressive Recovery embellishment. At the end of the chapter we'll present a fuller version of that approach to inventory.

- Column 1—Who or what do we have a grievance against, or a problem?
  - » Jennifer: A man in particular or men in general.
- Column 2—What happened, i.e., what's the story behind it?
  - » Jennifer: The backstory as described above, i.e., unavailable men and her need to take care of them and their needs.
- Column 3—How does it affect us? What's the emotional impact?
  - » Jennifer: Frustration, discouragement, lack of fulfillment.
- Column 4—What have we brought to this situation? What old ideas or decisions based on self are involved?
  - » Jennifer: A belief that men are unavailable. An old idea that she is unlovable. A decision that she must do something for men to gain and hold their attention.

- Note: In cases such as fear or lack of fulfillment, where there are not obvious items for Column 1 or 2, simply start with Column 3.

Jennifer is unable to engage in a satisfying relationship with a man. She lacks the power to find a guy with whom she is well-suited, and she has demonstrated no ability to sustain such a relationship if she found one. She is blocked off by the beliefs, old ideas and decisions based on self.

At this point, it is useful to notice that the Big Book uses a particular idea that is worth examining. It describes two kinds of alcoholic, one that is “more demanding” and one that is “more gracious.” The former is often described as the part of some alcoholics’ personalities which is “being an asshole.” In contrast, Jennifer has never acted that way, instead she self-compromises by what is often described as people-pleasing behavior. This makes for a remarkably different inventory—rather than looking for “bad” behavior that injures others, one must look for “good” behavior that injures oneself, while simultaneously injuring others. Of course, each of us has some mix of both within us, though most seem to lean significantly in one direction or the other.

That said, we can readily demonstrate varying themes within any person. We can also look more deeply into all our behavioral or emotional challenges. As it turns out, many of our behaviors and the patterns that underlie our lives are symptomatic of underlying beliefs, old ideas and decisions based on self. However, many of us have never looked thoroughly enough via personal inventory to understand ourselves. And far too many of us have rejected the idea of professional assistance even though it is strongly recommended in the Big Book.

Note that the particulars of any one person’s underlying psychology, while comparable to those of others, are always unique to that individual’s experience. While we can learn from the understanding others gain, their exact story will never quite fit ours. We often hear our problems in recovery are not unique, which is certainly true in a general sense, but it turns out our personal experience is always unique to us. Thus, our recovery work must have unique aspects as well.

Let’s be clear that it is quite common for our initial inventories in recovery to reflect less depth. And that’s a perfectly good way to gain recovery. Start with issues and concerns that are obvious, clean them up in every way one can via the Twelve Steps, but don’t stop there. Work more deeply over time in a sustained way with personal inventory. It is our experience that recovery will always reveal still more opportunity to deepen our understanding.

Sometimes we will hear that one need only do a single personal inventory. If that suffices to move one into a steady and growing spiritual recovery, or at least enduring sobriety, we find no disagreement. However, for many of us there will necessarily be a long and steady process of Steps Four and Five over time. Said Patrick K., an elder in recovery, “Anytime you have a major change in your life, especially if it is an upset, it’s probably time for another personal inventory. Regardless, one a year is a good practice to continue your growth.”

## The Ladder of Inference

Within each of our psychological makeup is a pattern that drives our actions. It is known as the Ladder of Inference, and it's implications are embedded in a Progressive Fourth and Fifth Step.

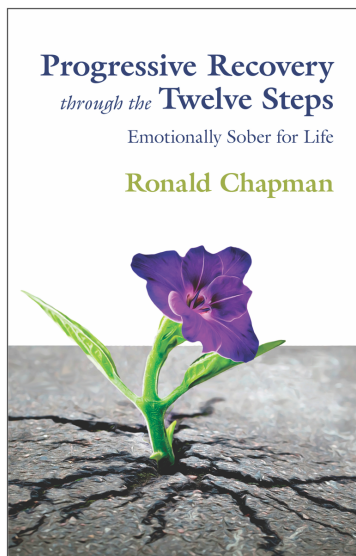
- **Beliefs and Perceptions:** Based on the earliest experiences in our lives as they affected the personality traits with which we were born, each of us forms beliefs through which we interpret the world. The Big Book calls these “old ideas” and “decisions based on self.”
- **Daily Living:** Each of us encounters the world in a myriad of ways: physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. Often those experience are unconscious.
- **Interpretation or Story Telling:** When we encounter the world, we translate it through what we believe to be true. We tell ourselves a story of what it means. That story may or may not be accurate, but it will seem and feel true to us. Once again, it is often unconscious.
- **Emotional Response:** Every human is built to have an emotional response to the interpretations we make. Without awareness of what preceded those emotions, we are triggered by them.
- **Actions Based on Emotions:** We then act based on those emotions. Fight, freeze or flee is the general characterization though our particular action can be unique to us.

To reverse this framework in order to better understand, think of it along these lines. Every action is the result of feelings that we experience. Those feelings are the result of the interpretation we make of the world and ourselves in the world. Those stories are created based on what we believe and how we perceive. Beliefs create interpretations which creates emotions which drive action.

Often our stories are not true. Therefore, actions will be driven falsely.

For the most part this process is unconscious and instantaneous.

For an in depth look at this story-making part of our beings, here is a community workshop.  
<https://www.seeingtrue.com/blog/unstopped>



For more information and extensive free content, visit [www.ProgressiveRecovery.org](http://www.ProgressiveRecovery.org)

In addition, a twelve-step-based curriculum can be found at:  
<https://schooloftransformation.teachable.com/p/progressive-recovery-through-the-twelve-steps>