

"We admitted that we were powerless over gambling - that our lives had become unmanageable."

A "first" of anything is a beginning, and so it is with the steps. The First Step is the beginning of the recovery process. The healing starts here; we can't go any further until we've worked this step.

Some Gamblers Anonymous members "feel" their way through the First Step, by intuition; others choose to work Step One in a more systematic fashion. Our reasons for formally working Step One will vary from member to member. It may be that we're new to recovery, and we've just fought – and lost - an exhausting battle with gambling. It may be that we've been around awhile, abstinent from gambling, but we've discovered that our disease has become active in some other area of our lives, forcing us to face our powerlessness and the unmanageability of our lives once again. Not every act of growth is motivated by pain; it may just be time to cycle through the steps again, thus beginning the next stage of our never ending journey of recovery.

Some of us find a measure of comfort in realizing that a disease, not a moral failing, has caused us to reach this bottom. Others don't really care what the cause has been – we just want out!

Whatever the case, it's time to do some step work; to engage in some concrete activity that will help us find more freedom from our addiction, whatever shape it is currently taking. Our hope is to internalize the principles of Step One, to deepen our surrender, to make the principles of acceptance, humility, willingness, honesty and open-mindedness a fundamental part of who we are.

First we must arrive at a point of surrender. There are many different ways to do this. For some of us, the road we travelled getting to the First Step was more than enough to convince us that unconditional surrender was our only option. Others of us start this process even though we're not entirely convinced that we're compulsive gamblers or that we've really hit a bottom. Only in working the First Step do we truly come to realize that we are addicts, that we have hit bottom, and that we must surrender.

Before we begin working the First Step, we must become abstinent – whatever it takes. If we're new in GA and our First Step is primarily about looking at the effects of gambling addiction in our lives, we need to get gamble free. If we've not gambled awhile and our First Step is about our powerlessness over some other behaviour that's made our lives unmanageable, we need to find a way to stop the behaviour so that our surrender isn't clouded by continued acting out.

The Disease of Addiction

What makes us addicts is the disease of addiction – not the gambling, not the behaviour, but our disease. There is something within us that makes us unable to control our gambling. This same "something" also makes us prone to obsession and compulsion in other areas of our lives. How can we tell when our disease is active? When we become trapped in obsessive, compulsive, self-centred routines, endless loops that lead no-where but to physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional decay.

- What does "the disease of addiction" mean to me?
- Has my disease been active recently? In what way?
- What is it like when I'm obsessed with something? Does my thinking follow a pattern? Describe.

- When a thought occurs to me, do I immediately act on it without considering the consequences? In what other ways do I behave compulsively?
- How does the self-centred part of my disease affect my life and the lives of those around me?
- How has my disease affected me physically? Mentally? Spiritually? Emotionally?

Our addiction can manifest itself in a variety of ways. When we first come to GA, our problem will, of course, be gambling. Later on, we may find out that addiction is wreaking havoc in our lives in any number of ways.

- What is the specific way in which my addiction has been manifesting itself most recently?
- Have I been obsessed with a person, place, or thing? If so, how has that gotten in the way of my relationships with others? How else have I been affected mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally by this obsession?

Denial

Denial is the part of our disease that tells us we don't have a disease. When we are in denial, we are unable to see the reality of our addiction. We minimize its effect. We blame others, citing the too-high expectations of families, friends, employers. We compare ourselves with other compulsive gamblers whose addiction seems "worse" than our own. We may blame one particular kind of gambling. If we have been abstinent from gambling for some time, we might compare the current manifestation of our addiction with our gambling, rationalizing that nothing we do today could be as bad as that was. One of the easiest ways to tell that we are in denial is when we find ourselves giving plausible but untrue reasons for our behaviour.

- Have I given plausible but untrue reasons for my behaviour? What have they been?
- Have I compulsively acted on an obsession, and then acted as if I had actually planned to act that way? When were those times?
- How have I blamed other people for my behaviour?
- How have I compared my addiction with others' addiction? Is my addiction "bad enough" if I don't compare it to anyone else's?
- Am I comparing a current manifestation of my addiction to the way my life was before I got clean? Am I plagued by the idea that I should know better?
- Have I been thinking that I have enough information about addiction and recovery to get my behaviour under control before it gets out of hand?
- Am I avoiding action because I'm afraid I will be ashamed when I face the results of my addiction? Am I avoiding action because I'm worried about what others will think?

Hitting Bottom: Despair and Isolation

Our addiction finally brings us to a place where we can no longer deny the nature of our problem. All the lies, all the rationalizations, all the illusions fall away as we stand face-to-face with what our lives have become. We realize we've been living without hope. We find we've become friendless or so completely disconnected that our relationships are a sham, a parody of love and intimacy. Though it may seem that all is lost when we find ourselves in this state, the truth is that we must pass through this place before we can embark upon our journey of recovery.

- What crisis brought me to recovery?
- What situation led me to formally work Step One?
- When did I first recognise my addiction as a problem? Did I try to correct it? If so, how? If not, why?

Powerlessness

As compulsive gamblers, we react to the word “powerless” in a variety of ways. Some of us recognize that a more accurate description of our situation simply could not exist, and admit our powerlessness with a sense of relief. Others recoil at the word, connecting it with weakness or believing it to indicate some kind of character defect. Understanding powerlessness – and how admitting our own powerlessness is essential to our recovery – will help us get over any negative feelings we may have about the concept.

We are powerless when the driving force in our life is beyond our control. Our addiction certainly qualifies as such an uncontrollable, driving force. We cannot moderate or control our gambling or other compulsive behaviours, even when they are causing us to lose the things that matter most to us. We cannot stop, even when to continue will surely result in irreparable physical damage. We find ourselves doing things that we would never do if it weren't for our addiction, things that make us shudder with shame when we think of them. We may even decide that we don't want to gamble, that we aren't going to gamble, and realize we are simply unable to stop when the opportunity presents itself.

We may have tried to abstain from gambling or other compulsive behaviours - perhaps with some success - for a period of time without a program, only to find that our untreated addiction eventually takes us right back to where we were before. In order to work the first step, we need to prove our own individual powerlessness to ourselves on a deep level.

- Over what, exactly, am I powerless?
- I've done things while acting out on my addiction that I would never do when focusing on recovery. What were they?
- What things have I done to maintain my addiction that went completely against all my beliefs and values?
- How does my personality change when I'm acting out on my addiction? (for example: Do I become arrogant? Self-centred? Mean-tempered? Passive to the point where I can't protect myself? Manipulative? Whiny?)
- Do I manipulate other people to maintain my addiction? How?
- Have I tried to quit gambling and found that I couldn't? Have I quit gambling on my own and found that my life was so painful without gambling that my abstinence didn't last very long? What were these times like?
- How has my addiction caused me to hurt myself or others?

Unmanageability

The First Step asks us to admit two things: One; that we are powerless over our addiction; and two, that our lives have become unmanageable. Actually, we would be hard pressed to admit one and not the other. Our unmanageability is the outward evidence of our powerlessness. There are two general types of unmanageability: outward, the kind that can be seen by others; and inner, or personal, unmanageability.

Outward unmanageability is often identified by such things as arrests, job losses, and family problems. Some of our members have been incarcerated. Some have never been able to sustain any kind of relationship for more than a few months. Some of us have been cut off from our families, asked never again to contact them.

Inner or personal unmanageability is often identified by unhealthy or untrue belief systems about ourselves, the world we live in, and the people in our lives. We may believe we're worthless. We may believe that the world revolves around us - not just that it should, but that it does. We may believe that it isn't really our job to take care of ourselves; someone else should do that. We may believe that the responsibilities the average person takes on as a matter of course are just too large a burden for us to bear. We may over or under react to events in our lives. Emotional volatility is often one of the most obvious ways in which we can identify personal unmanageability.

- What does unmanageability mean to me?

- Have I ever been arrested or had legal trouble as a result of my addiction? Have I ever done anything I could have been arrested for if only I were caught? What have those things been?
- What trouble have I had at work or school because of my addiction?
- What trouble have I had with my family as a result of my addiction?
- What trouble have I had with my friends as a result of my addiction?
- Do I insist on having my own way? What effect has my insistence had on my relationships?
- Do I consider the needs of others? What effect has my lack of consideration had on my relationships?
- Do I accept responsibility for my life and my actions? Am I able to carry out my daily responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed? How has this affected my life?
- Do I fall apart the minute things don't go according to plan? How has this affected my life?
- Do I treat every challenge as a personal insult? How has this affected my life?
- Do I maintain a crisis mentality, responding to every situation with panic? How has this affected my life?
- Do I ignore signs that something may be seriously wrong with my health or with my children, thinking that things will work out somehow? Describe.
- When in real danger, have I ever been either indifferent to that danger or somehow unable to protect myself as a result of my addiction? Describe.
- Have I ever harmed someone as a result of my addiction? Describe.
- Do I have temper tantrums or react to my feelings in other ways that lower my self-respect or sense of dignity? Describe.
- Did I gamble or act out on my addiction to change or suppress my feelings?
- What was I trying to change or suppress?

Reservations

Reservations are places in our program that we have reserved for relapse. They may be built around the idea that we can retain a small measure of control, something like, "Okay, I accept that I can't control my gambling, but I can still go to those places, can't I?" Or we may think we can remain friends with the people we used to gamble with. We may think that certain parts of the program don't apply to us. We may think there's something we just can't face gamble free - a serious illness or financial trouble, for instance, or the death of a loved one - and plan to gamble if it ever happens. We may think that after we've accomplished some goal, made a certain amount of money, or been gamble free for a certain number of years, then we'll be able to control our gaming. Reservations are usually tucked away in the back of our minds, we are not fully conscious of them. It is essential that we expose any reservations we may have and cancel them - right here, right now.

- Have I accepted the full measure of my disease?
- Do I think I can still associate with the people connected with my addiction? Can I still go to the places where I used to gamble? Do I think it's wise to keep gambling incentive cards or information around just to remind myself or test my recovery? If so, why?
- Is there something I think I can't get through gamble free, some event that might happen that will be so painful that I'll have to gamble to survive the hurt?
- Do I think that with some amount of gamble free time, or with different life circumstances, I'd be able to control my gambling?
- What reservations am I still holding on to?

Surrender

There's a huge difference between resignation and surrender. Resignation is what we feel when we've realized we're addicts but haven't yet accepted recovery as the solution to our problem.

Many of us have found ourselves at this point long before coming to GA. We may have thought that it was our destiny to be compulsive gamblers, to live and die in our addiction. Surrender, on the other hand, is what happens after we've accepted the First Step as something that is true for us and have accepted that recovery is the solution. We don't want our lives to be the way they have been. We don't want to keep feeling the way we've been feeling.

- What am I afraid of about the concept of surrender, if anything?
- What convinces me that I can't gamble successfully anymore?
- Do I accept that I'll never regain control, even after a long period of abstinence?
- Can I begin my recovery without a complete surrender?
- What would my life be like if I surrendered completely?
- Can I continue my recovery without complete surrender?

Spiritual Principles

In the First Step, we will focus on the honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, humility and acceptance. The practice of the principle of honesty from the First Step starts with admitting the truth about our addiction, and continues with the practice of honesty on a daily basis. When we say "I'm a compulsive gambler" in a meeting, it may be the first truly honest thing we've said in a long time. We begin to be able to be honest with ourselves and, consequently, with other people.

- If I've been thinking about gambling or acting out on my addiction in some other way, have I shared it with my sponsor or told anyone else?
- Have I stayed in touch with the reality of my disease, no matter how long I've had freedom from active addiction?
- Have I noticed that, now that I don't have to cover up my addiction, I no longer need to lie like I did? Do I appreciate the freedom that goes along with that? In what ways have I begun to be honest in my recovery?

Practicing the principles of open-mindedness found in Step One mostly involves being ready to believe that there might be another way to live and being willing to try that way. It doesn't matter that we can't see every detail of what that way might be, or that it may be totally unlike anything we've heard about before; what matters is that we don't limit ourselves or our thinking. Sometimes we may hear GA members saying things that sound totally crazy to us, things like "surrender to win" or suggestions to pray for someone we resent. We demonstrate open-mindedness when we don't reject these things without having tried them.

- What have I heard in recovery that I have trouble believing? Have I asked my sponsor, or the person I heard say it, to explain it to me?
- In what ways am I practicing open-mindedness?

The principle of willingness contained in the First Step can be practiced in a variety of ways. When we first begin to think about recovery, many of us either don't really believe it's possible for us or just don't understand how it will work, but we go ahead with the First Step anyway - and that's our first experience with willingness. Taking any action that will help our recovery shows willingness; going to meetings early and staying late, helping set up meetings, getting other GA members' phone numbers and calling them.

- Am I willing to follow my sponsor's direction?
- Am I willing to go to meetings regularly?
- Am I willing to give recovery my best effort? In what ways?

The principle of humility, so central to the First Step, is expressed most purely in our surrender. Humility is most easily identified as an acceptance of who we truly are - neither worse nor better than we believed we were when we were gambling, just human.

- Do I believe that I'm a monster who has poisoned the whole world with my addiction? Do I believe that my addiction is utterly inconsequential to the larger society around me? Or something in between?
- Do I have a sense of my relative importance within my circle of family and friends. In society as a whole? What is that sense?
- How am I practicing the principle of humility in connection with this work on the First Step?

To practice the principle of acceptance, we must do more than merely admit that we're compulsive gamblers. When we accept our addiction, we feel a profound inner change that is underscored by a rising sense of hope. We also begin to feel a sense of peace. We come to terms with our addiction, with our recovery, and with the meaning those two realities will come to have in our lives. We don't dread a future of meeting attendance, sponsor contact, and step work; instead, we begin to see recovery as a precious gift, and the work connected with it as no more trouble than the other routines of life.

- Have I made peace with the fact that I'm an addict?
- Have I made peace with the things I'll have to do to stay gamble free?
- How is acceptance of my disease necessary for my continued recovery?

Moving On

As we get ready to go on to Step Two, we'll probably find ourselves wondering if we've worked Step One well enough. Are we sure it's time to move on? Have we spent as much time as others may have spent on this step? Have we truly gained an understanding of this step? Many of us have found it helpful to write about our understanding of each step as we prepare to move on.

- How do I know its time to move on?
- What is my understanding of Step One?
- How has my prior knowledge and experience affected my work on this step?

We've come to a place where we see the results of our old ways of life and accept that a new way is called for, but we probably don't yet see how rich with possibilities the life of recovery is. It may be enough just to have freedom from active addiction right now, but we will soon find that the void we have been filling with gambling or other obsessive and compulsive behaviours begs to be filled. Working the rest of the steps will fill that void. Next on our journey toward recovery is Step Two.