

Step Three

“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of this Power of our own understanding.”

We worked Steps One and Two with our sponsor – we’ve surrendered, and we’ve demonstrated our willingness to try something new. This has charged us with a strong sense of hope. But if we do not translate our hope into action right now, it will fade away, and we’ll end up right back where we started. The action we need to take is working Step Three.

The central action in Step Three is a decision. The idea of making that decision may terrify us, especially when we look at what we’re deciding to do in this step. Making a decision, any decision, is something most of us haven’t done in a long time. We’ve had our decisions made for us – by our addiction, by the authorities, or just by default because we didn’t want the responsibility of deciding anything for ourselves. When we add to this the concept of entrusting the care of our will and our lives to something that most of us *don’t* understand at this point, we may just think this whole thing is beyond us and start looking for a shortcut or an easier way to work our programs. These thoughts are dangerous, for when we take shortcuts in our program, we short-circuit our recovery.

The Third Step decision may be too big to make in one leap. Our fears of the Third Step, and the dangerous thinking to which those fears lead, can be eased by breaking this step down into a series of smaller, separate hurdles. The Third Step is just one more piece of the path of recovery from our addiction. Making the Third Step decision doesn’t necessarily mean that we must suddenly, completely change everything about the way we live our lives. Fundamental changes in our lives happen gradually as we work on our recovery, and all such changes require our participation. We don’t have to be afraid that this step will do something to us that we’re not ready for or won’t like.

It is significant that this step suggests we turn our will and our lives over to the *care of* the God of our understanding. These words are particularly important. By working the Third Step, we are allowing someone or something to *care for* us, not control us or conduct our lives for us. This step does not suggest that we become mindless robots with no ability to live our own lives, nor does it allow those of us who find such irresponsibility attractive to indulge such an urge. Instead, we are making a simple decision to change direction, to stop rebelling at the natural and logical flow of events in our lives, to stop wearing ourselves out trying to make everything happen as if we were in charge of the world. We are accepting that a Power greater than ourselves will do a better job of caring for our will and our lives than we have. We are furthering the spiritual process of recovery by beginning to explore what we understand of the word “God” to mean to us as individuals.

In this step, each one of us will have to come to some conclusions about what we think “God” means. Our understanding doesn’t have to be complex or complete. It doesn’t have to be like anyone else’s. We may discover that we’re very sure what God *isn’t* for us, but not what God *is*, and that’s okay. The only thing that is essential is that we begin a search that will allow us to further our understanding as our recovery continues. Our concept of God will grow as we grow in our recovery. Working the Third Step will help us discover what works best for us.

Making a Decision

As we’ve already discussed, many of us may find ourselves unnerved by the thought of making a big decision. We may feel intimidated or overwhelmed. We may fear the results or the implied commitment. We may think it’s a once-and-for-all action and fear that we won’t do it right or have the opportunity to do it over again. However, the decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of the God of our understanding is one we *can* make over and over again, daily if need be. In fact, we’re likely to find that we must make this decision regularly, or risk losing our recovery because of complacency.

It is essential that we involve our hearts and spirits in this decision. Though the word “decision” sounds like something that takes place mostly in the mind, we need to do the work necessary to go beyond an intellectual understanding and internalize this choice.

- Why is making a decision central to working this step?

- Can I make this decision just for today? Do I have any fears or reservations about it? What are they?

We need to realize that making a decision without following it up with action is meaningless. For example, we can decide one morning to go somewhere and then sit down and not leave our homes for the rest of that day. Doing so would render our earlier decision meaningless, no more significant than any random thought we may have.

- What action have I taken to follow through on my decision?
- What areas of my life are difficult for me to turn over?
- Why is it important that I turn them over anyway?

Self-Will

Step Three is critical because we've acted on self-will for so long, abusing our right to make choices and decisions. So what exactly is self-will? Sometimes it's total withdrawal and isolation. We end up living a very lonely and self-absorbed existence. Sometimes self-will causes us to act to the exclusion of any considerations other than what we want. We ignore the needs and feelings of others. We barrel through, stampeding over anyone who questions our right to do whatever we want. We become tornadoes, whipping through the lives of family, friends, and even strangers; totally unconscious of the path of destruction we have left behind. If circumstances aren't to our liking, we try to change them by means necessary to achieve our aims. We try to get our way at all costs. We are so busy aggressively pursuing our impulses that we completely lose touch with our conscience and with a Higher Power. To work this step, each one of us needs to identify the ways in which we have acted on self-will.

- How have I acted on self-will? What were my motives?
- How has acting on self-will affected my life?
- How has my self-will affected others?

Surrendering our self-will doesn't mean we can't pursue goals or try to make changes in our lives and the world. It doesn't mean we have to passively accept injustices to ourselves or to people for whom we're responsible. We need to differentiate between destructive self-will and constructive action.

- Will pursuing my goals harm anyone? How?
- In the pursuit of what I want, is it likely that I will end up doing something that adversely affects myself or others? Explain.
- Will I have to compromise any of my principles to achieve this goal? (For example: Will I have to be dishonest? Cruel? Disloyal?)

If we are new in the program and just beginning to work Step Three, we will probably end up wondering what God's will is for us, thinking that the step asks us to find this out. Actually, we don't formally focus our attention on seeking knowledge of our Higher Power's will for us until the Eleventh Step, but we do begin the process that will lead us to that point in Step Three.

God's will for us is something we will gradually come to know as we work the steps. At this point, we can come to some very simple conclusions about our Higher Power's will for us that will serve us well for the time being. It is our Higher Power's will for us to stay gamble free. It is our Higher Power's will for us to do things that will help us stay gamble free, such as going to meetings and talking to a member of our group regularly.

- Describe the times when my will hasn't been enough. (For example, I couldn't stay gamble free on my own will).
- What is the difference between my will and God's will?

At some point in our recovery, we may find that we have somehow shifted from trying to align our will with a Higher Power's to running on self-will. This happens so slowly and subtly that we hardly even notice. It seems as though we're especially vulnerable to self-will when

things are going well. We cross the fine line that divides humble and honest pursuit of goals from subtle manipulation and forced results. We find ourselves going just a little too far in a discussion to convince someone that we are right. We find ourselves holding on to something just a little too long. We suddenly realize that we haven't contacted our group or a member of the group in quiet a while. We feel a quiet, almost subconscious discomfort that will alert us to this subtle shift away from recovery – if we listen.

- Have there been times in my recovery when I've found myself subtly taking back my will and my life? What alerted me? What have I done to recommit myself to the Third Step?

The God of Our Understanding

Before we delve deeply into the process of turning our will and our lives over to the care of the God of our understanding, we should work on overcoming any negative beliefs or unproductive preconceptions we may have about the word "God".

- Does the word "God," or even the concept itself, make me uncomfortable? What is the source of my discomfort?
- Have I ever believed that God caused horrible things to happen to me or was punishing me? What were those things?

Our literature suggests that we choose an understanding of our Higher Power that is loving and caring and greater than ourselves. These simple guidelines can encompass as many understandings of God as there are GA members. They don't exclude anyone. If we understand the word "God" to mean the Power of the program, these guidelines fit. If we understand the word "God" to mean the spiritual principles of the program, these guidelines fit. If we understand the word "God" to mean a personal power or being with which we can communicate, these guidelines fit. It is essential that we begin exploring and developing our understanding. Our sponsor can help immeasurably in this progress.

- What is my understanding of a Power greater than myself today?
- How is my Higher Power working in my life?

As important as it is to figure out what our Higher Power is to us, it is more important that we develop a relationship with whatever we understand that Power to be. We can do this in a variety of ways. First, we need to somehow communicate with our Higher Power. Some of us call this prayer, and some call it other things. This communication does not have to be formal, or even verbal.

Second, we need to be open to communication from our Higher Power. This may be done by paying attention to how we feel, our reactions, and what is going on inside and around us. Or we may have a personal routine that helps us connect with a Power greater than ourselves. It may be that our Higher Power speaks to us or helps us see the right thing to do through our fellow GA members.

Third, we need to allow ourselves to have feelings about the God of our understanding. We may get angry. We may feel love. We may feel frightened. We may feel grateful. It's okay to share the entire range of human emotion with our Higher Power. This allows us to feel closer to the Power upon which we rely and helps develop our trust in that Power.

- How do I communicate with my Higher Power?
- How does my Higher Power communicate with me?
- What feelings do I have about my Higher Power?

As many of us stay abstinent for some time, we work on developing an understanding of God for ourselves. Our growing understanding reflects our experiences. We mature into an understanding of God that gives us peace and serenity. We trust our Higher Power and are optimistic about life. We begin to feel that our lives are touched by something beyond our comprehension, and we are glad and grateful that this is so.

Then something happens that challenges everything we believe about our Higher Power or makes us doubt the existence of that Power altogether. It may be a death, or an injustice, or a loss. Whatever it is, it leaves us feeling as though we've been kicked in the stomach. We just can't understand it.

Times like these are when we need our Higher Power the most, though we probably find ourselves instinctively drawing away. Our understanding of a Higher Power is about to undergo a dramatic change. We need to ask for strength to go on. Eventually we will re-establish our relationship with our Higher Power, although probably on different terms.

- Am I struggling with changing beliefs about the nature of my Higher Power? Describe
- Is my current concept of a Higher Power still working? How might it need to change?

As our understanding of a Higher Power grows and evolves, we'll find that we react differently to what goes on in our lives. We may find ourselves able to courageously face situations that used to strike fear in our hearts. We may deal with frustrations more gracefully. We may find ourselves able to pause and think about a situation before acting. We'll probably be calmer, less compulsive, and more able to see beyond the immediacy of the moment.

Turning It Over

The order in which we prepare to surrender our will and our lives to the care of the God of our understanding is significant. Many of us have found that we actually follow the order in the step: First, we turn over our will; then, gradually, we turn over our lives. It seems that it's easier for us to grasp the destructive nature of our self-will and see that it must be surrendered; consequently, it's usually the first to go. Harder for us to grasp is the need to turn over our lives and the process of that surrender.

For us to be comfortable with allowing our Higher Power to care for our lives, we will have to develop some trust. We may have no trouble turning over our addiction, but want to remain in control of the rest of our lives. We may trust our Higher Power to care for our work lives, but not our relationships. We may trust our Higher Power to care for our partners, but not our children. We may trust our Higher Power with our safety, but not our finances. Many of us have trouble letting go completely. We think we trust our Higher Power with certain areas of our lives, but immediately take back control the first time we get scared or things aren't going the way we think they should. It's necessary for us to examine our progress in turning it over.

- What does "to the care of" mean to me?
- What does it mean for me to turn my will and my life over to the care of the God of my understanding?
- How might my life be changed if I make the decision to turn it over to my Higher Power's care?
- How do I allow my Higher Power to work in my life?
- How does my Higher Power care for my will and my life?
- Have there been times when I have been unable to let go and trust God to care for the outcome of a particular situation? Describe.
- Have there been times when I have been able to let go and trust God for the outcome? Describe.

To turn our will and our lives over to the care of our Higher Power, we must take some kind of action. Many of us find that it works best for us to make some formal declaration on a regular basis. We may want to use the following quote: *"Take my will and my life. Guide me in my recovery. Show me how to live."* This seems to capture the essence of Step Three for many of us. However, we can certainly feel free to find our own words, or to find a more informal way of taking action. Many of us believe that every day we abstain from gambling, or take suggestions from our sponsor, we are taking practical action on our decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of our Higher Power.

- How do I take action to turn it over? Are there any words I say regularly? What are they?

Spiritual Principles

In considering the spiritual principles intrinsic to Step Three, we will focus first on surrender and willingness. Then we will look at how hope translates into faith and trust. Finally, we will see how the principle of commitment is tied to the Third Step.

Practicing the principle of surrender is easy for us when everything is going along as we'd like – we think. Actually, when things are going smoothly, it's more likely that we are being lulled into a belief that we're in charge, which doesn't require such "surrender." Keeping the principle of surrender to the care of the God of our understanding alive in our spirits is essential, even when things are going well.

- What am I doing to reinforce my decision to allow my Higher Power to care for my will and my life?
- How does the Third Step allow me to build on the surrender I've developed in Steps One and Two?

We usually feel most willing immediately following a surrender. Willingness often comes in the wake of despair or a struggle for control. We can practice the principle of willingness, though, before it becomes necessary and possibly save ourselves some pain.

- In what ways have I demonstrated willingness in my recovery so far?
- Am I fighting anything in my recovery? What do I think would happen if I became willing to let recovery prevail in that area of my life?

There is a spiritual progression from hope to faith to trust in the Third Step. As we begin Step Three, we carry with us the sense of hope that was born in us as we worked the Second Step. Hope springs from the knowledge that our life is full of possibilities – there are no hard certainties yet, just the first whispers of anticipation that we just may be able to fulfill our heart's deepest desires. Lingered doubts fade as hope becomes faith. Faith propels us forward into action; we actually do the work that those we have faith in are telling us is necessary if we are to achieve what we want. In the Third Step, faith gives us the capacity to actually make a decision and carry that decision into action. Trust comes into play after faith has been applied. We have probably made significant progress toward fulfilling our goals; now we have evidence that we can influence the course of our lives through taking positive action.

- How have hope, faith, and trust become positive forces in my life?
- What further action can I take to apply the principles of hope, faith, and trust in my recovery?
- What evidence do I have that I can trust confidently in my recovery?

The principle of commitment is the culmination of the spiritual process of Step Three. Making the decision to "turn it over," over and over again, even when our decision doesn't seem to be having any positive effect, is what this step is all about. We can practice the spiritual principle of commitment by reaffirming our decision on a regular basis and by continuing to take action that gives our decision substance and meaning – for instance, working the rest of the steps.

- What have I done recently that demonstrates my commitment to recovery and to working a program? (For example: Have I taken a service position in GA? Have I agreed to sponsor another recovering compulsive gambler? Have I continued to go to meetings no matter what I was feeling about them? Have I continued to work with my sponsor even after he or she told me an unpleasant truth or gave me some direction I didn't want to follow? Did I follow that direction?)

Moving On

As we get ready to go on to Step Four, we'll want to take a look at what we've gained by working Step Three. Writing about our understanding of each step as we prepare to move on helps us internalize the spiritual principles connected to it.

- Do I have any reservations about my decision to turn my will and my life over to God's care?
- Do I feel that I am now ready to turn it over?
- How does my surrender in the First Step help me in the Third Step?
- What action do I plan to take to follow through on my decision? How does working the remainder of the steps fit into this?

We wind up our work on Step Three, with an increase in our level of freedom. If we've been thorough with this step, we're profoundly relieved to realize that the world will go along just fine without our intervention. The responsibility of running everything is a huge burden, and we're happy to lay it down. We many feel comforted that a loving God is caring for our will and our lives, letting us know in subtle ways that the path we're on is the right one. We've seen our old ideas for what they were, and we're willing to let go of them and allow change to happen in our lives. We may even find that we're willing to take some risks we never had the courage to take before, because we're secure in the knowledge of our Higher Power's care for us.

Some people pause before making major decisions and ground themselves in their own spirituality. We look to the source of our strength, invite our Higher Power to work in our lives, and move forward once we're sure we're on the right track. Now we need to take another step along the path of recovery, a step that makes our Third Step decision real. It's time to make a searching and fearless moral and financial inventory of ourselves.