

Step Six

“Were entirely ready to have these defects of character removed.”

We begin working Step Six full of the hope we have developed in the first five steps. If we have been thorough, we have also developed some humility. In Step Six, “humility” means that we’re able to see ourselves more clearly. We’ve seen the exact nature of our wrongs. We’ve seen how we’ve harmed ourselves and others by acting on our defects of character. We’ve seen the patterns of our behavior, and we’ve come to understand how we are likely to act on the same defects over and over. Now we have to become entirely ready to have our defects of character removed.

Becoming entirely ready won’t happen in an instant. It’s a long process, often taking place over the course of a whole lifetime. Immediately following an inventory, we may feel very ready indeed to have our defects removed. If we’ve been around awhile and are generally pretty well aware of what our defects are, and we still act on one of them, we’ll naturally find that our willingness level rises. Awareness alone will never be enough to ensure our readiness, but it’s the necessary first step on the path to readiness. The inventory process itself has raised our awareness about our character defects; working the Sixth Step will do so even more. To be entirely ready is to reach a spiritual state where we are not just aware of our defects; not just tired of them; not just confident that the God of our understanding will remove what should go – but all these things.

In order to become entirely ready, we’ll need to address our fears about the Sixth Step. We’ll also need to take a look at how our defects will be removed. The Sixth Step says that only a Higher Power can remove them, but what does that mean in practical terms? What is our responsibility in the Sixth Step? These questions, when reviewed with a sponsor, will help give us direction in working this step.

Entirely Ready for What?

If we’re new in GA and this is our first experience with the Sixth Step, many of our character defects will be so blatant that our immediate reaction will likely be one of overwhelming willingness to get rid of them. We’re seeing them for the first time, in all their glory, so to speak, and we want them gone – today!

Once we’ve gotten past our initial reaction, we’ll find that we probably have at least some measure of fear or uncertainty about changing. The unknown is terrifying for almost everyone. We’ve had the defects we’re about to let go of for a long time, probably most of our lives.

We probably have some fears about what our lives will be like without these defects. Some of them may seem more like vital survival skills than defects of character. We wonder if the removal of our defects will inhibit our ability to earn a living. We may find that the idea of being a “respectable citizen” is repulsive to us. Many of us are strongly attached to an image – we’re cool, we’re trendy, we’re outside the bounds of polite society, and we like it that way. We may be afraid that by working the Sixth Step we’ll be changed into dull conformists. Some of us may think that we’re nothing but defects, and wonder what will be left of us if our defects are removed. Our fears are probably vague and unformed. If we pursue them to their logical conclusion, we’re sure to find that they are unfounded. In other words, if we say them out loud, we can see them for what they are.

- Are there parts of me I like, but which might be “defects”? Am I afraid I’ll turn into someone I don’t like if those parts of my character are removed?
- What do I think will be removed?

If we’ve had some previous experience with the Sixth Step, our character defects are nothing new. In fact, we may be feeling dismayed right now that we still have a certain defect, or we may be upset because we’re looking at the same old defect in a new manifestation.

For instance, we’re still insecure. We may no longer run around indulging in a series of transparent attempts to convince others that we’re big shots, but we still have the defect. The way we’ve been acting on it lately is far more subtle and far more insidious. We may have been unconsciously sabotaging the efforts of others so that we can look better by comparison, or trampling on someone else’s desires because they don’t directly serve our own needs. What’s especially painful about realizations such as this in later recovery is that we’ve tended to think of ourselves in a better light. We’re deeply ashamed of harming others. We may feel a dull fear that we’re incapable of change, that one character defect or another is here to stay. We can draw some measure of comfort from the fact that we’re now aware of what we’ve been doing and are willing to work on it. We need to maintain a sense of hope and trust that the process of recovery works even on the most firmly entrenched defects.

- Do I still believe in the process of recovery? Do I believe I can change? How have I changed so far? What defects do I no longer have to act on?

- Do I have any defects that I think cannot be removed? What are they? Why do I think they cannot be removed?

... to Have God Remove...

Yes, the Sixth Step specifies that only a Power greater than ourselves can remove our defects of character. However, the extent to which most of us grasp what that actually means is directly influenced by how much experience we have with the up-and-down, on-again-off-again struggle and surrender associated with Step Six.

The first thing most of us do about our character defects is decide not to have them. Unfortunately, this is futile – about as effective as attempting to control our gambling. We may have some apparent success for a time, but our defects will eventually resurface. The problem is that our defects are part of us. We will always be subject to reverting to our worst character defects in stressful situations.

What we need to do in the Sixth Step is much like what we had to do in the first two steps. We have to admit that we have been defeated by an internal force that has brought nothing but pain and degradation to our lives; then, we have to admit we need help in dealing with that force. We must completely accept the fact that we cannot remove our own shortcomings, and we must prepare ourselves to ask in the Seventh Step for God to remove them for us.

- How am I trying to remove or control my own character defects? What have my attempts resulted in?
- What is the difference between being entirely ready to have God remove my defects of character and suppressing them myself?
- How am I increasing my trust in the God of my understanding by working this step?
- How does my surrender deepen in this step?
- What action can I take that shows that I am entirely ready?

Our Defects of Character

Even after all the work we've done in the Fourth and Fifth Steps, we're still not entirely clear at this point about the nature of our defects of character. We're probably wondering where, precisely, our character *defects* end and our *character* begins within the complex structure of our personality. Why do we do the things we do? Is it someone's fault? When did we first feel this way? Why? How? Where? If we're not careful, we can become so self-obsessed that we lose sight of why we're working a Sixth Step. We need to focus our efforts. Our goal is to raise our awareness of our character defects so that we can become entirely ready to have them removed, not to analyze their origin or indulge in a bout of self-absorption.

Our character defects are indicators of our basic nature. We are likely to find that we have the same basic nature as anyone else. We have needs, and we try to get them met. For instance, we need love. How we go about getting love is where our defects come into play. As defined in our literature, our defects are basic human traits that have been distorted by our self-centeredness. With our sponsor's help, we need to list each defect we have, describe the ways in which we act on it, look at how it affects our lives, and, very importantly, find out what we're feeling when we practice it. Imagining what our life would be like without each defect will help us see that we can live without it. Some of us take practical actions by finding out what the opposite spiritual principle would be for each character defect.

- List each defect, and give a brief definition of it.
- In what ways do I act on this defect?
- When I act on this defect, what effect does it have on myself and others?
- What feelings do I associate with this defect? Am I trying to suppress certain feelings by acting on certain defects?
- What would my life be like without this behavior? Which spiritual principle can I apply instead?

Spiritual Principles

In the Sixth Step, we will focus on commitment and perseverance, willingness, faith and trust, and self-acceptance. At this point in our Sixth Step work, we should be acutely aware of our shortcomings. In fact, we're probably so aware of them that, in the course of our daily lives, we can see them coming and even stop ourselves from acting on them much of the time. At times, our awareness may fade, and we may no longer be as vigilant in watching our behavior. It takes an incredible amount of energy to monitor ourselves every second and curb every impulse to act out. We'll relax into everyday life until, all of a sudden,

we'll be left feeling sick and ashamed and wondering how, after all the work we've done, we could have possibly done *that* again.

However, we do not give up. Instead, we make a commitment to our recovery. We maintain our newly emerging principles despite our setback. We keep taking steps forward even though we've taken one or more backward. We're looking for gradual improvement, not instant faultlessness.

- How am I demonstrating my commitment to recovery today?
- By working the first five steps, I have persevered in my recovery. Why is this quality so vital to the Sixth Step?

Applying the spiritual principle of willingness means, very simply, that we are willing to act differently. It does not necessarily mean that we will act differently or even that we're capable of doing so. We can perhaps best illustrate this attitude by an example. Suppose we've been dishonest – with our families, with our employers, with our friends – in many ways, ranging from the minor to the severe. While it may seem better to become willing in “layers,” focusing our willingness on the worst or most destructive forms of dishonesty first, this step says that we were *entirely* ready to have all our defects removed. That means being willing never to be dishonest again, even in a minor way. This may seem like more than we can expect ourselves, but we only have to do it for today.

It's hard to have this kind of willingness, especially when the apparent consequences for mild dishonesty aren't so severe. We may be aware that we're not being entirely honest, but we think we're not hurting anyone and we're getting away with it, so why be concerned about it? But it's this kind of thinking that has perhaps the most severe spiritual consequences. It may turn out that no one is obviously harmed by our dishonesty, and that no one ever finds out, but the dishonesty reverberates in our spirits from then on. Even if we're not consciously aware of it, even if we sleep just fine at night, the result of acting on a defect when we have the ability not to is an impairment of our spiritual growth. If we continue being unwilling, we'll eventually paralyze our spiritual growth.

- Am I willing to have all my defects of character removed at this time? If not, why not?
- What have I done to show my willingness today?

The amount of willingness we have to develop in this step requires a corresponding amount of faith and trust. We have to believe that a Higher Power is going to work in our lives to the exact degree that's necessary. Continuing with the example of dishonesty, we have to trust that our Higher Power isn't going to remove the defects of dishonesty from our lives to such a degree that we become brutally honest, incapable of remaining silent even when speaking the truth would hurt someone. As long as we get out of the way so that God can work in our lives, we'll experience the exact degree of spiritual growth we need.

- To what degree is my fear of what I will become still present? Has it diminished since I began working this step?
- How am I increasing my trust in the God of my understanding by working this step?

With words like “entirely” and “all” playing such a prominent role in this step, it's easy to become overly self-critical and perfectionistic. We need to remember that even though our willingness must be complete, we're not going to become perfect – not today, not ever. When we act out on a defect against our will, we need to practice the principle of self-acceptance. We need to accept that while we're still capable of acting out, we're also still willing to change; with that acknowledgement, we renew our commitment to be changed. We've grown exactly as much as we were supposed to for today, and if we were perfect, we would have no further need to grow.

- Do I accept myself today? What do I like about myself? What has changed since I've been working the steps?

Moving on

We may have had fleeting glimpses in the past of what we could become – maybe during childhood, maybe during our active addiction. We probably thought either that life didn't put us in a place where we could become what we dreamed of, or that we were just innately incapable of rising to a higher place. We may once have dreamed of money, or status, or position. In the spiritual program of Gamblers Anonymous, we're more concerned with spiritual growth. We want to think about qualities we wish we had, or about other people we know in recovery who have qualities we wish to emulate.

As we work this step, we begin developing a vision of the person we'd like to become. If we have been selfish, we probably have a vision of becoming selfless, maybe by helping another compulsive gambler

find recovery or by some other act of selfless giving. If we've been lazy, we may see ourselves becoming productive and reaping the rewards of our efforts. If we've been dishonest, we may have a dream of the freedom that can be ours when we no longer have to spend so much time worrying about being found out. We want to get from this step a vision of ourselves and a sense of hope that we can attain that vision.

- What do I see myself doing with the qualities I wish to attain?
- What will I do with my career? What will I do in my spare time? What kind of parent, child, partner, or friend will I be? Be specific.

This vision can be our inspiration. Recalling it during the times when we feel despair, or when it seems to be taking a long time to reach our goals, will sustain us and help us renew our willingness. Our vision is our springboard into Step Seven, where we'll ask the God of our understanding to remove our shortcomings.