

THE TWELVE STEP CONTROVERSY

By Charlotte Davis Kasl

Drug addiction, codependency, incest, compulsive eating, sex, gambling, and shopping - multitudes of people are using 12-step programs modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to recover from these problems. But beneath the surface of this massive movement, women are asking, is this really good for women? While female dissatisfaction with AA is not new (Jean Kirkpatrick founded Women for Sobriety in 1976), widespread questioning of these programs has only begun recently.

In workshops and group interviews, women repeatedly expressed fear about opening up the sacrosanct 12-step institution to scrutiny: "I'm afraid if we talk about this I'll lose something that helped me," or "I questioned the steps in my training program and they said I'd have to leave if I kept that up."

Women who question "the program," as it's often called, have been shamed, called resistant, and threatened with abandonment. They have been trained to believe that male models of nearly everything are better than whatever they might create for themselves.

Some women are grateful for what 12-step programs have given them: a generally available peer model providing support and understanding at no cost. Yet no one way works for everyone. The steps were formulated by a white, middle-class male in the 1930s; not surprisingly, they work to break down an overinflated ego, and put reliance on an all-powerful male God. But most women suffer from the

lack of a healthy, aware ego, and need to strengthen their sense of self by affirming their own inner wisdom.

Research strongly suggests that alcohol addiction has links to genetic predisposition. A vital point that seems overlooked in AA is that in the case of nearly all substance abuse, the brain chemistry and the body ecology need extensive healing in order to prevent the protracted withdrawal syndrome of depression, anxiety, volatile emotions, and obsessive thinking that can last for years. Too often women endlessly attend groups, have psychotherapy, or take antidepressants when their emotions are actually being influenced by a chemical imbalance that could be helped by proper nutrition and exercise.

Other addictions and codependency (as well as the will to recover), are influenced by cultural oppression, which includes poverty, battering, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Treatment programs need to incorporate understanding - and advocacy - regarding these concerns.

As a psychologist and former member of 12-step programs, I have encouraged women to write steps that resonate with their own inner selves, putting the focus on self-empowerment.

Here are the 12 steps (as published by AA World Services) followed by a critique and by some possible empowerment steps:

1. "We admitted we were powerless over [our addiction] -

that our lives had become unmanageable." The purpose of this step is to crack through denial or an inflated ego and acknowledge a destructive problem. It can be helpful to say "i am powerless to change my partner," but many women abuse chemicals or stay in harmful relationships because they feel powerless in their lives. Thus, many women prefer to affirm that they have the power to *choose* not to use chemicals or have dependent relationships. So, alternatively: *We acknowledge we were out of control with _____ but have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent on others for our self-esteem and security.*

2. "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." I believe that spiritual power is neither higher nor lower but all pervasive. I would replace the passivity implied in this step - that something external will magically restore us to sanity - with "affirmative action"; *I came to believe that the Universe/Goddess/Great Spirit would awaken the healing wisdom within me if I opened myself to that power.*

3. "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him." This conjures up images of women passively submitting their lives to male doctors, teachers, ministers, often with devastating consequences. Instead: *I declared myself willing to tune into my inner wisdom, to listen and act based upon these truths.*

The following steps are grouped together here because they all ask women to focus on negative aspects of themselves:

4. "Made a searching and fearless *moral inventory* of ourselves."

5. "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human

being the exact nature of our wrongs."

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

7. "*Humbly* asked Him to remove our *shortcomings*."

8. "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to *make amends* to them all."

9. "*Made direct amends* to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others." (All emphasis mine.)

We women need to make a searching and fearless inventory of how the culture has mired us down with guilt and shame, recognizing how hierarchy has harmed us, and how we have been complicit in harming ourselves - and only then look at how we have harmed others. So, instead:

We examined our behavior and beliefs in the context of living in a hierarchal, male-dominated culture.

We shared with others the ways we have been harmed, harmed ourselves and others, striving to forgive ourselves and to change our behavior.

We admitted to our talents, strengths, and accomplishments, agreeing not to hide these qualities to protect others' egos.

We became willing to let go of our shame, guilt, and other behavior that prevents us from taking control of our lives and loving ourselves.

We took steps to clear out all negative feelings between us and other people by sharing grievances in a respectful way and making amends when appropriate.

10. "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." As one woman said in a group, "Admit that I'm wrong? I say that I'm wrong for breathing air. I need to say that I'm *right* for a change."

Continued to trust my reality, and when I was right promptly admitted it and refused to back down. We do not take responsibility for, analyze, or cover up the shortcomings of others.

11. "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out." Instead of looking to an external power, women need to reach inside and ask, What do I believe, what feels right to me? For example: *Sought through meditation and inner awareness the ability to listen to our inward calling and gain the will and wisdom to follow it.*

12. "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this

message to [others], and to practice these principles in all our affairs." The desire to reach out to others is a natural step that comes with healing, but women need to remember to first care for and love themselves and then to give from choice, not from guilt, emptiness, or to prevent abandonment.

Most important is that we not identify ourselves with such labels as codependent or addict, or get stuck in chronic recovery as if we were constantly in need of fixing.

The goal is to heal and move on, embrace life's ups and downs, and move from recovery to discovery. Then we can break through the limitation imposed by hierarchy, work together for a just society, and free our capacity for courage, joy, power, and love.