

STEP ONE

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

The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, adapted by Clutterers Anonymous, are the greatest force yet found in battling addictions of any kind. They are a path to sobriety that can bring relief to me, this suffering addict, like nothing else can.

I am a clutterer and my life is unmanageable. The purpose of Step One is for me to become crystal clear, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that I am really a clutterer who is powerless over clutter and that my life is really unmanageable. If I become uncertain at any future time, or start to think I am cured or fully recovered, or that I no longer need the program, then I need to get out my First Step, see what I wrote, and re-convince myself.

Step One consists of two distinct parts: 1) the admission that we have a mental obsession to clutter uncontrollably and that this could lead us to the brink of death or insanity, and 2) the admission that our lives have been, are now, and will remain unmanageable by us alone.

The first half of the first step -- we admitted we were powerless over clutter -- is the beginning of the CLA program which we strive to perfect on a daily basis. Since clutter is but a symptom of our disease, we must realize that the thinking mind with its acquired traits, habits and character defects allowed itself to develop this obsession of the mind -- to clutter. "By going back over our drinking [cluttering] histories, we could show that years before we realized it we were out of control, that our drinking even then was no mere habit, that it was indeed the beginning of a fatal progression." (*Twelve & Twelve*) This idea of personal powerlessness goes against what our thinking mind is telling us. Only through utter defeat (having hit our own bottom) are we then able to take the first step toward liberation and strength. This utter defeat is necessary so we can become convinced, beyond any doubt, that we are powerless and our life is unmanageable by us alone. Until we so humble ourselves (accept the devastating weakness and all its consequences), our sobriety -- if any -- will be precarious.

That fact that our lives were unmanageable is apparent, or else why would we be involved in CLA? However, it is not readily apparent to most of us that, even now, our lives are still unmanageable by us alone. This fact must be driven home. This realization that we cannot manage our own lives forms the basis for taking each of the Twelve Steps of CLA in sequence.

In the process of accepting our powerlessness and unmanageability, we must be willing to put aside false pride, the pride which nearly killed us. Although the doing of Step One can be painful to the thinking mind, the road to recovery begins with surrender. The facts of my life are just that -- facts. It is not the purpose of this step to judge where I have been right and wrong. Therefore, the purpose of writing the first step is to admit to myself honestly that I am powerless and my life is unmanageable by my thinking alone.

The following questions are suggested as a guide in working this step. Most of the work is in thinking about the answers, dredging up the pertinent recollections, and making notes, so that I can write it out. This step should contain enough details to convince me. Sometimes it is healing for me to reveal these secret instances to someone who has achieved a period of sobriety and who can support me and guide me in my sharing with the group. Note: Try not to dwell on whose fault it is. So your parents didn't raise you right. Neither did their parents. We got like we are as a part of the human process.

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WRITING GUIDE

In this section I do an inventory of my cluttering. This means I write down the things I have done regarding clutter that I wish I hadn't. I may organize it any way I wish, from my earliest remembrances to most recent, or by subject, or in whatever order comes to mind. I explore how I feel about each of them now. Some questions for reflection are:

I Am a Clutterer

- 1 Do you find it easier to drop something instead of putting it away or to wedge it into an overcrowded drawer or closet rather than finding space for it?
- 2 Do you have a weakness for discarded objects, bargain items, freebies, reading materials, or yard sales?
- 3 Do you use avoidance, distraction, or procrastination to escape dealing with your clutter?
- 4 Do you avoid starting assignments, miss deadlines, or abandon projects because you can't find the paperwork or material you need?
- 5 Do you have difficulty making decisions about what to do with your possessions, daily living, or life in general?
- 6 Do cleaning, organizing, follow through, upkeep, and maintenance all become daunting tasks, making the simplest of chores insurmountable?
- 7 Do you bring an item into your home without designating a place for it and releasing an equivalent one?
- 8 Do you believe that there is all the time in the world to clean your house, finish those projects, and read all those piles of old magazines or newspapers?
- 9 Are you easily sidetracked, moving from one project to another, without finishing any of them?
- 10 Are you constantly doing things for others while your own home is out of order?

11 Do you often replace possessions rather than find or clean those you already have?

12 Does perfectionism keep you from doing anything at all?

13 Do you feel a strong sense of emotional attachment toward your possessions, which makes it difficult to release them?

14 Do you consider all your possessions to be of equal worth, whether or not the objects have financial, functional, or sentimental value?

15 Do you waste your valuable time and talents by constantly rescuing yourself from clutter?

16 Is the clutter problem growing?

17 Am I aware of feelings I might have been trying to cover up by masking them with a cluttering spree? What were my payoffs for these actions?

My life is unmanageable -- I am powerless over clutter

In this section I recognize my powerlessness and how my life has become unmanageable from my cluttering, how have I tried to control clutter but have been unsuccessful, and how my life is out of control. Some questions to guide my reflection are:

18 Do you have more possessions than you can comfortably handle?

19 Are you embarrassed to invite family, friends, health care providers, or maintenance workers into your home because it is not presentable?

20 Is your home, or any part of it, unusable for its intended purpose, with a bed you can't sleep in, a garage you can't park in, a kitchen you can't cook in, or a table you can't use for dining?

21 Is clutter causing problems at home, at work, or in your relationships? How has my illness affected my home life? My spouse? My children? My employment? My career?

22 Do you hesitate sharing about this problem because you feel embarrassment, guilt, or shame about it?

23 Does your clutter create a risk of falling, fire, infestation, or eviction?

24 Do you rent storage space to house possessions that you rarely use?

25 Does clutter cause you to have late charges added to your monthly financial obligations? How has my illness affected my finances? Have I lost income over it? Incurred significant costs? What financially brought me to CLA? What were the financial incidents?

26 Does clutter keep you from enjoying quality leisure time?

27 What has my addiction to clutter cost me? A spouse(s)? Family? Girlfriend/ Boyfriend? Job? Promotion? Money? Reputation?

28 How many times have I tried unsuccessfully to quit? What promises did I make myself? Did I keep them? What happened when I failed?

The only real essential of Step One is stated on the first page of *Alcoholics Anonymous*: "We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics." No book, no guide, no other person or group, no God is necessary, just the addict admitting to his innermost self that he is out of control and helpless and that clutter is ruining his life. But the above tools may help him reach that point.

This material was adapted from SA San Diego Intergroup's use of the study guides from the Top of the Hill Group, an AA group. Their resources included *Alcoholics Anonymous* (Big Book), chapter 5, and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Step Three. It was further adapted for the CLA UK Skype Group by incorporating the 25 questions of CLA "Am I a Clutterer?"