

Surrender, Humility and the Steps

The idea of surrender is central to the Steps and the whole program of recovery. Indeed, it is a foundational spiritual discipline, just as humility, with which it is intimately related, is a foundational spiritual virtue. The two principles are two sides of the same coin. Humility is the corrective to pride, and pride is the defect we alcoholics most need to surrender. It is at the very heart of our disease of selfishness and self-centeredness and the self-will by which we tend to live our lives.

Since they rub against our ego, the terms, surrender and humility, are intensely disliked. They smack of weakness, and nobody, least of all the alcoholic, wants to admit to weakness. Surrender in particular smacks of cowardice and defeat. Never give up, we are frequently counseled. Don't quit. Never, ever surrender.

All of this works against developing any reasonable understanding of the principle and being able to practice it as we work the Steps. Yet, AA was founded on the idea of surrender. It arose out of the evidence that only a transforming experience could deliver us from our alcoholism, and that such an experience was almost always founded on calamity and collapse. Defeat led to surrender, and surrender opened the door to change.

All of the Steps are directed to bringing about such an experience or awakening. Therefore, surrender is essential to all of them. All of them involve a surrender of our pride and the defects of character and emotion which revolve around it.

We Have Been Surrendering All Our Lives

If we have trouble with the idea of surrender, it might help us to reflect on the fact that we do it all the time. When we hold a grudge against someone, we are surrendering to a character defect (resentment, anger) and diseased emotion. The choice is between surrendering resentment, and surrendering to resentment. We are frequently faced with such a choice: surrendering to a flaw in us or surrendering that flaw, giving in to one form or another of our disease or giving it up, holding on to it, or letting it go. We can yield to anger, fear, dishonesty, intolerance, and our self-centered passions and desires, or we can turn them over. One form of surrender perpetuates our disease and keeps us in bondage to conflict and contention; the other releases us and sets us free to live in peace with ourselves and with others.

Surrender - Medically Speaking

Recovery from addiction can feel like a long, hard battle. But in fact, fighting is not the best way to approach substance abuse. People with substance use disorders often think they just need more willpower. They believe that by fighting hard enough, they can control their substance use or recover from addiction on their own.

Research simply does not support that view. The first step in 12-step recovery states: "We admitted we were powerless" over alcohol or other drugs. Such surrender is central to successful recovery. People who

are sick must acknowledge their disease, admit their powerlessness and surrender themselves to a higher power and to the care of a supportive community.

Why is surrender, not willpower, the key to recovery? The answer lies in brain science. Prolonged use of controlled substances damages the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in problem-solving, self-awareness and controlling behavior. In other words, overuse of alcohol and other drugs damages the very part of the brain that could enable an addict to stop using. Telling someone with a substance use disorder to exercise more willpower is like telling someone with a broken leg to “walk it off.”

At the same time, alcohol and other drugs trigger a powerful release of the pleasure-inducing chemical dopamine in the brain’s reward system. People in recovery need alternative sources of reward. Friendship, affection and supportive companionship all trigger a similar release of dopamine in the brain.

Among the many reasons why 12-step recovery programs work, two stand out. First, the initial act of surrender to a higher power forces the brain to engage the prefrontal cortex in thought processes, such as self-reflection, long numbed by substance abuse. Like a muscle weak from disuse, the brain heals when it is forced into action.

Second, the community and accountability that are fostered by meetings and friendships with other recovering addicts reward the brain in healthy ways and keep addicts on track. Addiction is a disease of isolation. Recovery occurs in community. There’s no reason to go it alone.

Surrender sounds counterintuitive in the fight against addiction. When it comes to substance abuse, however, the key to recovery lies in giving up the fight.

The Word Surrender in AA History

The word “surrender” appears nowhere in our two basic texts, the Big Book and the 12&12. The term was avoided primarily because of its negative association with the Oxford Group. There were two reasons for this. First, the Group had a membership requirement where one had to “make a surrender” on one’s knees in front of other members. The act was coerced, and to many alcoholics, it represented one of the most objectionable aspects of religion. That’s one of the factors which eventually led to the break with the Group and the formation of AA.

The second reason was that, at the time the Big Book was being written, the Oxford Group had gotten caught up in a serious political controversy involving Europe and the Second World War. Using a well-known OG term in the book might have drawn AA into that controversy. Moreover, at a time of war—which within a few months would ensnare the US as well—the idea of surrender seemed to be totally out of place.

As the war and the OG faded into memory, however, it became safe to use the term again. Thus, we’ll find as many as 21 pages of entries indexed as “surrender” in *As Bill Sees It (ABSI)*, published in 1967. In *Reflections*, published in 1990, we’ll find eight such pages. These later changes notwithstanding, surrender never became a familiar word in AA and is seldom used in the rooms. Moreover, it became confused with acceptance, which was sometimes used to replace it. The case is different in the other fellowships inspired by AA, which openly used the surrender from their inception.

CONNECTING WITH AA PRINCIPLES



Writing Exercise - Surrender

1. Are acceptance and surrender the same thing?
2. The idea of surrender is central to the Steps and the whole program of recovery. Indeed, it is a foundational spiritual discipline. What is your definition of a spiritual discipline?