When we fully concede to our innermost selves that we are powerless over our addiction, we have taken a big step in our recovery (Basic Text, Chapter 5: What Can I Do?).

One member shared their favorite NA metaphor: “Fighting our addiction without recovery is like entering the ring with the boxing world champion. We think we can get in just one good punch, but repeatedly we’re pummeled to the ground. After many tries, we finally concede that the disease will eventually knock our lights out permanently. Admitting powerlessness is the first of many strategies we’ll need to fight it.”

It didn’t matter how practiced we were in our fancy footwork of denial. No matter our clever cunning, our brute strength, or our fearlessness in the face of danger, we did not succeed in managing our drug use. We lost that fight and came to NA cut, bruised, and beaten down. Admitting “I am an addict” the first time and many times thereafter is a big step, but to fully concede our powerlessness, we go deeper than that honest admission.

Our first approach to Step One shows the value of getting honest. Honesty loosens our grip on denial and unlocks surrender. In time, the same line of attack will help us examine other areas of our lives. As we work the Steps, we discover more truths about our innermost selves. Other members help us make sense of what we find and, eventually, we’re able to help others do the same.

The member continued with their metaphor: “The recovery process involves struggle, strategy, and triumph. Striving for complete honesty and ongoing surrender, we have a fighting chance. But we never fully retire from the ring.”

Years on, we’ll struggle with new (or old) areas of our lives where our nemesis of denial rears up again. We get in the ring—and, bam! We get hit with a lights-out combo of relationships, sex, or other compulsive behaviors. Confronting our denial about these issues, surrendering and admitting powerlessness in these arenas—and doing the necessary work—furthers our progress in recovery. To stay clean, we have to.

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I don’t need to get back in the ring with the champ or suffer denial’s low blows to know there’s still work to do. With the Steps as my strategy, I won’t be beat down.
HONESTY, Entry #2 of 8

Honesty is the antidote to our diseased thinking (Basic Text, Chapter 9: Just for Today).

Looking back at our using days, it’s easy to see how our outlook on life morphed to accommodate and justify our choices. Self-delusion had become second nature. It takes effort and practice to embrace honesty instead.

Even before we got clean, there were clues that honesty might help to counter our distorted thinking. At some point in our using, many of us experienced a “moment of clarity”—although we probably didn’t have those words to describe it. Instead of the usual lies we told ourselves, we encountered a sudden wave of understanding in which we realized some essential truths about our lives. The veil of denial lifted, if only for a moment, to give us an undistorted view of ourselves and the mess we’d made. It wasn’t pretty. That brief encounter with reality stuck with us and wore us down until we were ready to try something new.

Eventually, we make it to the rooms and identify ourselves as newcomers. We give our real name, take a breath, and add: “I am an addict.” This admission transforms a tired old excuse into an affirmation and positions us for the first of Twelve Steps. With the Steps as our guide, we honestly confront the wreckage of our past and establish practices that help us maintain our connection to reality.

Recovery is a collective practice, and community is essential to learning about honesty. Real friends support our efforts to be true to ourselves, to choose actions that align with our aspirations, and to help us spot when we’re in trouble. “I surround myself with people who aren’t satisfied when I tell them I’m fine, when they know better. In public, they let that slide—they give me side-eye and say ‘really.’ In private, they ask questions that challenge me to get honest, like ‘What are you afraid of?’ and ‘Where would you be without that defect?’” Our delusions crumble under such scrutiny. Resisting well-rehearsed, unhealthy patterns takes this kind of support and a whole lot of courage. Honesty frees us from diseased thinking each time we choose to voice our concerns instead of censoring ourselves, reveal our insecurities instead of acting like a know-it-all, or practice some humility instead of thinking we’re too good or not good enough.

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*I’ll take some time to honestly evaluate any feelings and behavior I’ve avoided looking at. I will get a better perspective by putting pen to paper and talking to another addict in recovery.*
Honest self-assessment is one of the keys to our new way of life (Basic Text, Chapter 4, Step Four).

As we begin to work on the Fourth Step for the first time, it’s highly likely we already have an opinion about it. Chances are that it’s not very positive. Most of the words that comprise this step are daunting in their own right. Searching. Fearless. Moral. Inventory. *Our selves*. That last one is the core of it. We will be getting to know *ourselves* honestly, something which most of us have had limited experience doing prior to getting clean. Isn’t that who we ran from for so long?

By the time we get to Step Four, we’re already practicing some self-honesty. We’ve admitted that we are powerless over our addiction and that we need help. The next step is to learn what we’re holding onto that is keeping us from progressing in our lives. We identify our resentments toward other people, institutions, and ourselves. We look at our guilt and shame, our fears, our sexual and relationship behaviors, abuses we’ve suffered and wrought upon others, and our secrets.

Working Step Four also provides another, perhaps unexpected, gift: revealing our assets. For many of us, this is the most difficult part. We tend to be far more comfortable obsessing about what’s wrong with us than owning our positive qualities. But our inventory is inclusive of our whole selves. Assessing our assets is absolutely critical to our new way of life. We need to know what we have that we want more of, not just the negative aspects we want to rid ourselves of.

Our honest and courageous self-assessment doesn’t end with Step Four, nor with Step Ten which helps us to make this process a consistent practice. Beyond what happened during our using days, we continue to look at the patterns and behaviors that follow us into recovery. We learn to differentiate what’s really true about us now from what our head tells us. Through this work, we develop trust in ourselves and in this new way of life. Our pasts instruct us; they do not define us, and they no longer control us.

*No matter where I am in the Steps, I am committed to looking at myself as honestly and completely as possible. I have the fearlessness I need to examine the parts of myself I want to cultivate and those I strive to diminish.*
HONESTY, Entry #4 of 8

Open, honest, and straightforward communication nurtures the spirit of service in our fellowship, and poisons the impulse to govern (Twelve Concepts of NA Service, Concept Twelve).

At its best, our service to NA is selfless—the right thing, done for the right reason. Selflessness, which definitely requires tamping down our ego and communicating with each other honestly, directly, and respectfully, may be a stretch for us at times. But it’s certainly something we all aspire to. The true spirit of service in NA can be found in that aspiration. When we serve to fulfill our primary purpose—whether one-on-one, through a home group, or in some facet of our service system—we have the opportunity to reinforce the best aspects of ourselves. This is a benefit to us as individuals as well as to our common welfare.

Selfless service calls on us to apply everything we know about spiritual principles. The experience we’ve gained from working the Steps and applying Traditions comes to bear big-time. We learn a lot about open-mindedness when we work Step Two, for example, and then as we serve, open-mindedness finds a new purpose as we exchange ideas in a business meeting. Likewise, the importance of inclusion that we first encountered in Tradition One reinforces our belief in a spirit of rotation, making it a little easier to end a commitment. We’ve practiced honesty and gained clarity as we’ve inventoried our lives, past and present. This practice proves invaluable in service as we strive to foster healthy communication.

When we’ve tended to our spiritual condition, it’s easier to come correct to service. We’re able to set aside the rigidity, ancient resentments, and impulse to control that can interfere with a spirit of service. Fortunately, we’re not all sick on the same day and a spiritually-fit majority have a way of keeping our worst impulses in check. At some point or other, we’ll probably get our turn to play the role of that difficult member. The good news is that honest communication has a way of neutralizing the myriad forms that self-will can take.

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I will practice the spiritual principles of honesty and open-mindedness in my service to NA today. I will encourage open communication and unity by acknowledging others’ efforts to do the same.
HONESTY, Entry #5 of 8

In the beginning, we may have to consciously practice being honest. As we continue this practice, we find dishonesty progressively more uncomfortable, perhaps even agonizing; and gradually we notice that honesty has become more normal for us (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Keys to Freedom”).

In active addiction, dishonesty was organic to how most of us functioned in the world. We did what we had to do to stay high; stealing, being manipulative and deceitful were among our strategies to meet that goal. We were chameleons more adept at figuring out who others wanted us to be than being ourselves. Our skewed perception was that the risk of being real outweighed its benefits.

Lifelong habits die hard. In early recovery, we often find ourselves embellishing our using careers or whitewashing our wrongdoings. We are quick to justify our behavior, blame others, and minimize our feelings. Some of us continue to steal, cheat to get ahead, or promote a clean date that isn’t quite...accurate. But every time we come to a meeting, we hear that honesty is essential to recovery. We know that we’re setting ourselves up for relapse if we don’t start telling the truth and acting with integrity. We hear that lesson in others’ stories.

So, we practice being honest in all of our affairs. We identify with other members—and vice-versa—which encourages us to be more open. Our sponsor helps us to see that being honest is actually the solution to our problems. We adjust our stories to match the truth. Gradually, as our behavior shifts, so does our comfort level with the truth. The perceived danger we felt at being truly ourselves is replaced by the gift of participating in reality and receiving support from our fellow members.

Like any defect, the impulse to lie comes back. Though it’s not as habitual, dishonesty may be that rusty old tool we reach for in a jam. Nowadays, when we pop off a lie, it’s painful. Our denial and justification wound us. Our denial and justification wound us. Knowing ourselves and our defects well allows us to put some time between impulse and action. We are able to investigate the urge, forgive ourselves, and humbly ask for help to avoid acting on it.

When I feel that now familiar discomfort in the pit of my stomach from being dishonest, I will reflect on it. I’ll change direction and take action, because I know reality and the truth pose no real risk to me today.
The steps help us to increase our ability to be honest with ourselves and others (Living Clean, Chapter 1, “Growing Pains”).

To say that honesty wasn’t a top priority when we were using may be an understatement. We gain a new awareness of honesty’s value once we clean up. With a clear head and a restored conscience, we find that dishonesty comes at a price. Regret is no joke so we try to avoid it. Practicing honesty with ourselves can be a little more complicated. Self-deception creates some major blind spots that have a nasty habit of reemerging. Fortunately, our ability to be honest with ourselves deepens as we work the Twelve Steps.

We admit our powerlessness and begin to reckon with our unmanageability. We come to recognize that we’re, frankly, screwed on our own, and decide to accept some help. Taking action that’s aligned with that decision begins with an honest evaluation of how we’ve lived our lives so far. Sometimes we get as many insights in sharing our inventories as we do in writing them. We go on to dig a bit deeper, examining how aspects of our character had become disproportionate to their intended purpose. We turn this bag of dirty tricks over to a Higher Power—and over and over and over again as we strive to be better people with help from that Power whatever we conceive that to be. Taking another look at the harm we’ve caused, we make an earnest effort to right our past wrongs.

Continuing on this path takes daily commitment and, honestly, we all slack off from time to time. Our experience with the Steps means we’re quicker to notice when old patterns of thinking and behavior creep back up on us. “Oh, I’m doing that again.” We may find that we’ve shut-down emotionally, become disconnected from our spiritual lives, resumed a hurtful interior monologue, or taken up some other outmoded approach to life. We put in the work to restore wholehearted honesty to our lives and in our relationships including those with ourselves and with a Higher Power. We tune into reality, to the truth, to our higher selves. And we help others to do the same, to live and to thrive through the daily application of spiritual principles.

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I will engage in some honest self-assessment today. I will shore up my foundation and restore my zest for learning how to live.
HONESTY, Entry #7 of 8

Honesty is a commitment to reality (Guiding Principles, Tradition One, “In Service”).

If honesty really is a commitment to reality, then we addicts definitely need help in this arena. Many of us gamed reality for as long as we can remember. A member shared, “We tend to not see things as they are. We see them as we are.” Often our version of the past isn’t necessarily reliable. Today, we can be confused about how much to say that’s on our minds and who to say it to—and then end up oversharing or being needlessly brutal in our truth-telling.

By working the Twelve Steps, we address our past and present commitment to reality. Through that process, one truth becomes apparent: no matter how hard we try, we can’t make something true that isn’t. Denial can be fierce and keep us running for years, but ultimately, it’s not more powerful than reality. The member quipped, “Reality will always catch up with you. Hopefully it’s just your spouse, a government agency, or a pair of handcuffs, not the morgue.”

We carry our commitment to reality with us as home group members and in service. Tradition One tells us to consider NA’s common welfare, not just our own. Our commitment to reality can be complicated by having to consider the realities of our fellow group members. Does this mean then that we’ll all have the same perspective on how to put our common welfare first? In a word, no. But what we can do is stay committed to spiritual principles in our group work.

There will be communication problems and differences of opinions. We can start by being real about that and accepting our responsibility as committed NA members to face these challenges. As individuals, we can commit to admitting when we’re wrong or when we don’t know something. We can be candid about caring deeply about the outcome of a particular decision. We can be real about the fact that we don’t remember every single detail about the past and we can’t predict the future.

When we can make an honest self-assessment and realize that our self-centeredness is working against our desire to serve, then we have taken a great step towards shedding our denial and embracing reality.

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Today I acknowledge my commitment to seeking and expressing the truth, respecting others’ perspectives, and staying real.
HONESTY, Entry #8 of 8

Honesty begins with not lying, but that’s not where it ends. (Guiding Principles, Tradition Ten, opening meditation).

With any luck, we’re challenged to practice a bit of “cash-register honesty” early in our recovery. When a cashier gives us too much change, it’s tempting to quietly pocket it, but we do the right thing instead. We hand the money back rather than lying by default. Damn, that feels good. We get an attaboy from the clerk and have some righteous experience to share at the next meeting. We revel in the positive attention and, even better, we feel proud of ourselves.

This is a great start to practicing honesty, but it doesn’t end there. The Steps offer some important guidance for us as we sift through our past and examine our present state of mind and behavior. Personal inventories—long-form as well as the frequent spot checks—help us develop a habit of honest self-evaluation. We take stock of our assets and liabilities, refining our lists in consultation with a sponsor and Higher Power. Knowing—really knowing—ourselves is a crucial element of recovery.

Our relationships—with ourselves, with others, and with our lives—are enriched by our willingness to be honest. When we’re in a good groove with honesty, we tend to surrender a little more and have fewer amends to make. Clarity about our character, our motivations, and our emotional lives means we’re less defensive and more introspective. It turns out that having access to our feelings makes it easier to connect with others. We build deep and lasting relationships with others who are also emotionally available.

When we understand ourselves and our lives, it’s easier to respond to the world around us in a way that’s consistent with our values. For some of us, conscious living means that we find our voice and become advocates for causes that are important to us. We can hold strong opinions on difficult issues and still take care not to complicate the NA message. Clarity comes from honestly reflecting on our experience and sharing how living by spiritual principles keeps us grounded and growing. Our experience offers a vision of hope.

Being myself is my best asset in carrying the message. I will take time for some honest reflection today.