WILLINGNESS, Entry #1 of 12

We do not have to understand this program for it to work. All we have to do is to follow direction (Basic Text, Chapter 8: We Do Recover).

Are we truly able to understand something before we experience it for ourselves? Likely, no. But, as newcomers, this isn’t always our logic. Instead, we want to know what the “it” refers to, when we hear that NA “works when you work it.” We seek hard evidence to prove it will work for us before we’re willing to commit. We’re told NA is a simple program for complicated people, and, while that is an interesting concept to chew on, we don’t quite get it.

We’re also told that taking suggestions from members with experience is critical to staying clean. For most of us, there’s proof enough that the program works right here in the rooms that are filled with recovering addicts who seem to be doing something right. At some point, our desire to stay clean is fortified by a growing willingness to ask for help. We then take a leap of faith by trusting another person, perhaps without fully understanding why.

For many of us, that leap is inspired by a sponsor’s direction. We also consult other members who display characteristics we admire and whom we believe are trustworthy. Their directions are not rocket science; they’re simple and pretty consistent, no matter whom we ask. We act now and leave the understanding for later. Ideally, this process continues throughout our recovery. “Directions are what leads us back when we get lost,” one member shared. “After years clean, I still want direction, and now I’m able to ask for it.”

As far as understanding the program, we learn as we go. Though many of us are clever people, we try not to overthink it. We accept that others found a new way to live, through working Steps and Traditions and doing service, so we become willing to follow in their footsteps. The more we have willingness to trust and exercise faith in this process, the more trustworthy we ourselves become. Understanding comes from experiencing NA and then communicating that experience to others who may not yet be willing. That’s how “it” works.

Can I commit to taking suggestions from someone I trust—or at least believe to be trustworthy? As long as I’m willing to follow direction, understanding will follow.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #2 of 12

Willingness without action is fantasy (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Commitment”).

Those of us who weren’t stoned out of our minds for middle school science may recall the law of inertia: "An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force.” In other words, things tend to keep doing what they're doing unless something intervenes. The same might be said for people.

When humans experience inertia, it can signal our resistance to change. Addicts sometimes take this to extremes—imagine that! When we get stuck in place or in constant motion, a powerful force may be needed to provoke change. That’s why getting through the doors of our first meeting is so extraordinary. This first, often tentative action demonstrates a sublime willingness. Looking back on this first hint of surrender, many of us might see the presence of an external force that propelled us into action. Individually and collectively, you might say that the force is strong with us.

Then and now, meetings can provide a potent antidote to inertia. They offer inspiration and help us to imagine a future without drugs. Beyond fantasizing, we learn from each other’s experience and try out practical new tools. We give ourselves a break and learn to let momentary or even obsessive thoughts of using come and go. By attending meetings regularly, we get frequent reminders about the kinds of actions we can take to sustain our cleantime or delve more intensely into recovery.

The NA program holds the potential to change the direction or speed of the addict who still suffers, but it takes some cooperation and effort on our part. As one member pointed out, “We say ‘It works if you work it’ not ‘It works if you fantasize about it.’” We’re not strangers to wishing things were different. In NA, we still hope and pray, but then we roll up our sleeves and get to work. As the age-old saying goes: “If nothing changes, nothing changes.”

Whether I’ve let complacency grind my forward momentum to a halt or let constant motion block my awareness, I invite a loving force greater than myself to nudge me out of inertia.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #3 of 12

When we first begin to think about recovery, many of us either don’t really believe it’s possible for us or just don’t understand how it will work, but we go ahead with the First Step anyway—and that’s our first experience with willingness (*NA Step Working Guides*, Step One, “Spiritual Principles”).

Early in our exposure to Narcotics Anonymous, many of us believe that mere abstinence will be enough. We tell a member who asks us if we’ve started working with a sponsor yet, “Oh, I’m fine as long as I’m not using. I don’t want to do the Steps and have a sponsor and all that.”

The member asks, “Well, weren’t you willing to do things you didn’t really want to do to feed your addiction? So why not apply that logic to staying clean and read about the First Step?” Our logic tells us that these are not parallel issues, because we understand what we got out of getting high but are uncertain about what Step One would do for us. We don’t say this, however, because we are sure this member will have an answer to that too.

“Okay, then,” the member says, wheels turning. “How about this: are you willing to become willing?” As it turns out, we are—because we keep coming back.

Most of us do find that willingness to begin the next phase of our journey. For some, we quickly saw the evidence of recovery working in other members’ lives. We actively wanted to move forward and were willing to do whatever it took. For others, willingness came when our discomfort outpaced our resistance. For still others, we found it only after going back out and using more.

Working on Step One and staring straight into the mirror of our unmanageability can elicit intense emotions: shame, regret, remorse, anger, fear, and doubt. In response, a member said, “The stuff of our past can either be weight or be fuel.” We don’t want to be weighed down anymore, so we become willing to explore our burdens. We learn how to convert the pain of our past into fuel, and we use that fuel to propel ourselves further down the road toward freedom.

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I don’t want only to be abstinent. I want to recover. I’m willing to start or come back to Step One as often as is necessary to fuel my recovery.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #4 of 12

When we show up for life with willingness and an open mind, the next right thing tends to present itself (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Spirituality Is Practical”).

“I have a full, rich life in recovery,” a member shared to knowing nods. “But I’m facing some decisions about what comes next for me. The options are all good, but I can’t figure out what God’s will is for me.” After the meeting, some more experienced NA members offered their insights on Steps Three and Eleven.

“I would freak out trying to know, really know, if my choices aligned with my Higher Power’s will,” one member shared. “I was told: ‘If you’re looking for a burning bush, you’re going to be disappointed.’” When we’re dealing with clear-cut questions of right and wrong—Should I steal this candy or pay for it?—the next right thing is obvious. But seeking a singular right response to all of life’s dilemmas can be paralyzing. The member continued: “I came to understand that Step Three is all about my decision. I put that decision into acon by working the rest of the Steps and they give me a way to sort out my motivations. So long as I’m plugged into the Steps, I can trust my intuition.”

“I used to pray to know God’s will for me, too,” another member confessed. “My sponsor pointed out that self-centeredness had distorted my hearing: Step Eleven isn’t about me. It’s about us.” She went on to explain how a focus on us broadened her perspective. “It changed my outlook and influenced how I pray and meditate. That made it easier to live by principles and to listen to my heart, trusting that my choices would enrich my ability to serve.” Viewing life through a wide-angle lens puts our decisions within a larger context filled with love, support, and service. Even our missteps expand our usefulness to others.

When we’re spiritually fit, doing the next right thing doesn’t have to be complicated. We find the willingness to walk in faith, knowing that we’ll be alright. People like saying, “when one door closes another opens.” As NA members, we become better equipped to navigate hallways with multiple doors, some leading nowhere, others to new worlds, and all of them preparing us to serve.

I will make principled decisions and take positive action, secure in the knowledge that my service will be enhanced.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #5 of 12

We go from simply showing up and reporting for duty each day to a willingness to serve the greater good in the best way we can (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Creative Action of the Spirit”).

A lot of us describe ourselves as having been spiritually asleep, bankrupt, or even dead before coming to NA. Some of us find immediate relief when we hear NA described as a spiritual program. We may not be fully willing to let go and dive into a new spiritual journey—or continue the one that we had been on before our addiction darkened the path—but the spark is there. Others of us do not take comfort in NA being a spiritual program. We may not know what the word “spiritual” means, especially as it relates to “religious” or “not religious.” It may not feel authentic to describe ourselves as being on a spiritual path or even interested in pursuing one.

No matter what our beliefs are, or how open-minded we are to challenging them, we’re all willing—to some degree—to show up for ourselves. At the start, we report for recovery duty, because we’re following suggestions made by other members and because it’s making us better: meetings, Steps, sponsorship, a service commitment or two. We build a support system in NA, and we work on developing a relationship with a Higher Power. Our understanding of spiritual principles—and how we’re already applying them to our recovery—expands.

Our willingness becomes more expansive, too. We continue to show up for our own healing and because we’ve made commitments. But our motivation to serve broadens when we follow suggestions to do so. A desire to contribute to NA and help other addicts slowly blooms within us and we express it through service. This progress includes sharing about our awakening to the spiritual aspects of NA and our budding spiritual life.

Most of us become willing to let go of our ambivalent or negative preconceived feelings and ideas about spirituality. Though we don’t fully understand our transformation, many of us eventually can describe ourselves as spiritually awake, enriched, or alive—in no small part because of our willingness to serve.

I’m willing to show up for my own wellbeing. Am I also willing to do that for the greater good of NA? How will I demonstrate that today?
WILLINGNESS, Entry #6 of 12

Great or small, our awakenings show in our willingness to practice the principles and carry the message (Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Creative Action of the Spirit”).

We may have hoped for easy answers to our drug problem when we attended our first meeting. Some of us were looking for a set formula, a specific order of operations that would invariably add up to a spiritual awakening or at least bring some relief to our troubled existence. We warm up to the idea that recovery is less like math and more like one of Grandma’s unwritten recipes—a little of this, some of that, and so on. Our longing for respite or connection or awakening gets us to meeting after meeting nonetheless. Without fully recognizing it, we learn to practice persistence.

We hear a member celebrating 30 days clean explain, “I went to meetings every day and didn’t take anything in between.” Duly noted. Could this be the formula we were looking for? It seems almost too simple and also impossible. But maybe it’s a good start—hello, open-mindedness! We give it a try.

As our heads start to clear, we awaken to the possibilities of a better life. We gravitate towards another formula that seems doable: “Go to meetings, get a sponsor, read the literature.” Check, check, and check. We willingly take these actions and practice humility by keeping things simple. We’re handed a pink card with the “Just for Today” reading and, as we read it aloud, another light comes on. We put this approach to work and practice a bit of pragmatism.

The value of taking action is revealed by our experience at 30 days. We made it this far! Holding up our keytag, we share: “I’m celebrating 30 days today because I went to meetings every day and didn’t take anything in between. I picked up the Basic Text and a sponsor and am finding that there is life after drugs. As much as I wanted to figure out this recovery thing, I’m learning to just do what you do and it seems to work.” And just like that, we’re carrying the message and offering hope to every addict in the room.

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No matter how many days I have, I recognize the awakening that’s evident in my willingness. I will apply spiritual principles to the work that’s in front of me and allow my example to carry the message.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #7 of 12

With self-acceptance comes a willingness to creatively explore new directions (Living Clean, Chapter 4, “Wellness and Health”).

Our willingness to stay clean triggers willingness to improve our lives. In turn, we’re able to look at ourselves with greater clarity and a realness we never imagined possible. Our minds become open to an awareness of our shortcomings and our limitations. We humbly evaluate and acknowledge our assets. Acceptance of where we are right now creates a willingness to move forward. And like everything in recovery—and in life—we won’t experience self-acceptance perfectly. Rather, it’s something we strive for daily.

In recovery, accepting ourselves doesn’t mean we accept our conditions. Instead, we can pursue new goals that better mirror the self we have come to accept. Many of us who find some stability in NA also find the willingness to create new opportunities for ourselves, or to take ones that are offered to us. We now know that we don’t have to be held back or be victimized by our pasts. We follow through on a long-held dream, rent our own place for the first time, enroll in or finish college, or have a kid (on purpose).

We also can be led by a deep-seated knowing, or what one member called “divine dissatisfaction.” A motivating, self-affirming voice tells us it’s time to move on from the relationship that we’ve used all the arrows in our quiver to save. It tells us to move on from a job that’s no longer fulfilling us, to move to a new city, to just move our lives in some significant way. We learn to trust our instincts.

Our self-acceptance helps us to be willing to make mistakes—and then be willing to forgive ourselves and learn from them. We find ourselves often being more flexible, knowing that we’ll be okay no matter what, more resilient and responsible, less of a perfectionist. If one endeavor doesn’t work, we’re willing to feel the pain of failure and then seek an alternate strategy to reach our goal.

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I am determined to accept who I am and who I’m becoming today. With those arrows in my quiver, I’m willing to point my life in a new direction and take aim.
When we show up with an open mind and a willingness to be of service, the rewards can be far greater than our efforts (*Living Clean*, Chapter 5, “Family”).

A nudge from a sponsor, a longing to be a part of NA, a hunger for validation — any of these might be our initial inspiration to serve. Regardless of what motivates us, the rewards of service quickly become apparent. It feels good to be part of the beehive of activity that goes into keeping the doors open and meetings running smoothly. We feel a sense of belonging as home group members greet us by name and invite us to check out other meetings. We welcome new members and introduce them to others who have their best interest at heart. Realizing that we fit that description, too, we offer our phone number and some advice: “If you don’t pick up, you can’t get high. Call one of us if the disease starts talking to you.” We’re humbled to think that our willingness to be of service might make a difference for a potential new member. Viewed with an open mind, we realize that it’s already made a difference for us.

While groups remain the most powerful vehicle for carrying the message, the NA service infrastructure exists to amplify our ability to fulfill this primary purpose. Members contribute to the good and necessary work organized by service bodies large and small. All of these efforts are geared to helping more addicts find their way to the rooms. We offer our time and effort and find ourselves becoming more invested, more connected, and more alive. Our willingness to show up and pitch in means that our groups have current meeting directories, that cops and doctors send addicts our way, that websites provide the latest information, and that incarcerated members get sponsors and NA literature.

Our primary purpose inspires all of these service efforts and more. We show up with the still-suffering addict in mind and find that our burdens are lessened by our generosity. Our service to NA affects who we are and how we interact with the world. Within NA and beyond, we do loving things for our families and communities and experience love in return. Our insights compel us to keep showing up and giving back and enjoying the rewards.

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*I am willing to show up and give of myself today. It will keep me clean and remind me of the abundance I enjoy as a result of the life I found in Narcotics Anonymous.*
WILLINGNESS, Entry #9 of 12

When we take the Serenity Prayer seriously and really consider what in our lives we do have the courage to change, we find that our ability to shape our lives is limited more by our willingness than by anything outside ourselves (Living Clean, Chapter 6, “Finding Our Place in the World”).

We say the Serenity Prayer so often in NA meetings that it’s easy to do it by rote, without intention or commitment. “Sometimes I forget that it’s actually a prayer,” one member reflected. “It was only when it was suggested that I say it outside of meetings as a prayer for willingness that I began to connect to it, to really use it to help me in a moment of strife, confusion, or indecision.”

“It helps me get real,” another member offered. “I need to know what I can change before mustering up the courage to do it. Most of the time it’s me that’s standing in my own way. Not my past. Not my upbringing, or my culture, or institutions, or even other people. Just this addict.”

Change is hard, because it’s often painful. Too often, we view the pain we’re in now as worthwhile, because at least it’s familiar. We know we can live with that. We fear the pain will be worse on the other side of a decision. Who wants to experience rejection or failure? Or what if we succeed? Then, there may be a slew of new responsibilities to deal with. Will we be able to manage those? In the simplest terms, these are fears that limit our capacity to grow.

Change is even harder when we view the world as hostile to us, when we listen to the voice in our heads telling us “you can’t” or “don’t do it.” Ignoring that voice and practicing willingness to change the things we can—and then taking an action toward that change we want to make—requires a lot. We have to simultaneously accept where we are right now and be willing to take a risk.

There are lessons to be learned, no matter how things turn out. A bonus of NA membership is that we get to report back and share those with each other.

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I’ll carefully consider what I have the power to change in my life right now. Instead of cursing the dark, I pray for willingness to change the lightbulb. Sometimes it is that simple.
Our ability to enjoy our lives is directly related to our willingness to let go of our self-obsession (Living Clean, Chapter 7, “Love”).

The very idea of dancing without some chemical courage sounds intimidating if not absurd when we’re newly clean. Clubbing might have been in the early chapters of our stories, but as fun turned into fun with problems and later to simply problems, any dancing we did was more often about commerce, than enjoyment. Going to our first NA dance, therefore, can be a rite of passage, especially those of us who danced for fun or a fix in our using days.

As the saying goes: “We’re fools whether we dance or not, so we might as well dance.” We might warm up to the idea by lurking outside with the smokers after a speaker meeting. A familiar face from meetings asks if we’re going in. Not wanting to disappoint, we lean into willingness and say, “Ugh. Okay.”

We might muster enough willingness to get through the door and still come up short when it’s time to dance. We’ll be lining the walls: too tough, too cool, too self-absorbed to give dancing clean a try. When and if we do, the self-doubt of adolescence returns to inquire: “Am I doing this right? Do I look attractive?” and other obnoxious questions that poke at our insecurities.

We retreat to the bathroom where we encounter a homegroup member. They practically read our minds and offer this sage advice: “Remember that we’re all self-obsessed. I just assume that everyone’s too busy thinking about themselves to worry about my dancing.” This practical advice helps us combat our self-obsession and find the willingness to get back out on the dance floor.

It’s not as if our preoccupation with ourselves ends with one NA dance. If we’re paying attention though, there’s a lesson on willingness that we can apply to other pursuits. Acknowledging that if we’re thinking about ourselves, we’re not really enjoying what we’re doing is a good place to start. With that, we can rally the willingness to release those unhelpful self-concerns that are the enemy of joy.

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I won’t let self-obsession constrain my choices or limit my joy today. I will set aside unhealthy thinking that interferes with being in the moment and enjoying life clean. Might as well dance.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #11 of 12

Through some combination of desperation, courage, anguish, and hope, we find willingness (Guiding Principles, Tradition Three, opening essay).

Our willingness to admit to being addicts who are powerless over our addiction in Step One is linked to our willingness to be members of NA in Tradition Three. They are complementary parts of the same surrender. Resistance, doubt, and fear may forestall our initial surrender to seek help by months or years, even decades. But they ultimately are no match for the array of emotions and experiences that drive our decision to let go and allow ourselves to be welcomed into the Fellowship of NA.

All of us have been newcomers to NA; perhaps we’re new right now. Regardless of the amount of time we have today, as we read this passage, we have a shared experience of active addiction that compelled us to try something different. We’ve all had a moment of desperation—or thousands—that brought us to this moment. No doubt we’ve experienced pain and anguish from using. We’ve had the courage to walk into an NA meeting for the first time. And whether or not we are feeling it today, we’ve felt at least a flicker of hope for the future. All of this collective experience gives us the willingness to get through the day clean and to safeguard our NA membership.

It’s not uncommon for us to rethink our membership in NA at some point. We may be hurt by or experience abuse from another member. There may be a conflict in our home group or in the region that disheartens us. Our participation in the Fellowship may fade, because we’re busy with our work, school, and family. Many of us have relapsed, and the reality is that many still will. But we can surrender again—and again and again—and recommit to NA, if we’re willing and if we make it back.

To stay clean, experience the fullness of our lives in and out of NA, and keep what we have so we can give it away, we need at least some willingness every day—no matter what emotions are driving it.

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Meeting the only requirement for membership is the easy part. I will summon the willingness to surrender once more and show up for my recovery today.
WILLINGNESS, Entry #12 of 12

Balancing willingness and humility means that we are able to step up to the work we are able to do, and also admit that sometimes we need help (Guiding Principles, Tradition Eight, “Spiritual Principles”).

Each of us contributes to NA in ways that fit our lives and abilities. As home group members, we show up early and stay late. As sponsors, we demonstrate love in action. We’re elected to serve in various positions established by groups and service bodies to support our primary purpose. And we bring this spirit of service to our lives outside of NA. Giving back is an expression of our gratitude and a big part of our identity as individuals and as a Fellowship.

Service gives us purpose and helps us find our place in the NA community, but our commitment to helping others can skew our perspective at times. In the service equivalent to having eyes bigger than one’s belly, we can be tempted to pile too many commitments onto our plates. We might find ourselves neglecting our families and stepwork in favor of service to others. Our willingness to serve can outpace its usefulness for many noble reasons and a few lousy ones—like avoidance, hubris, and a desire for control. We learn to be realistic about our limits, allowing humility to temper our willingness. It gets easier to ask for help and to recognize when saying “no” is the right thing to do.

One addict shared: “When I see someone being a commitment hog, I know their heart is in the right place, but they’re not doing themselves or us any favors by taking on too much. Our challenge is to moderate our willingness with some humility. Too much of this good thing is a bad thing for this addict and for those who have to deal with me.”

To balance our enthusiasm, we also become willing to consider our limits. We face our limitations collectively and as individuals. Time is not infinite. Our skill sets are not comprehensive. Sometimes our needs and passion simply exceed our aptitude and energy. We find ourselves willing but not quite able to meet all the demands, or notice the price we’re paying as we try to do too much. Honesty helps us to recognize reality. Humility allows us to ask for and accept help.

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I will examine the portions on my service plate and temper my willingness with humility, sharing the blessings of service with others.