Conscience, Entry 1 of 4

We learn to listen to our conscience—that still, small voice within that tells us if we’re heading in the right direction.

—Living Clean, Chapter 3, “Spirituality Is Practical”

Some of us might argue that the solutions to our problems, the answers to our moment-to-moment decisions and our big life choices have always been within our reach. We just haven’t been listening to our conscience. We’ve been unable to hear it because of the competing, confusing cacophony of noise in our heads, a squeaky hamster wheel of thoughts that we can’t get off of. Others of us feel as if we never had a conscience and that it’s something we develop only once we become abstinent and start to work a program. We come to the opinion that our disease speaks to us—in our own voice, no less!—and is the sole influence for our bad decision-making. Conversely, our conscience, as an expression of our Higher Power, is the source of positive influence.

Whatever our opinions are about the origin story of our conscience, we can probably all agree that we can do a lot to cultivate our sensitivity to the voice of our higher self. We get clean and become humble enough to ask for help. We listen to each other’s experiences of recovery. The work we do on ourselves through the Steps and for others through service awakens us enough to experience our conscience. Many of us would say that our conscience has become clearer, more distinct and dependable as we’ve grown in recovery. It becomes easier to access, because we’re able to turn down the static brought on by its evil twin, our disease. We learn to quiet our minds—and, through prayer and meditation, we gain a lot of practice in not just being able to hear it but listening to what it has to say.

“My conscience is my inner guide,” wrote a member, “It’s a driving force that gives me what I need to make an honest decision. I still can’t control outcomes just because I’m choosing wisely, but I come to my decisions with integrity.”

I will practice staying conscious of my conscience. It’s there for me when I listen, helping me to stay connected to living this new way of life.
Conscience, Entry 2 of 4

We come to know our intentions. We get better at hearing our own voice, our own conscience.

—Living Clean, Chapter 5, “Conscious Contact”).

Even those of us who were raised by wolves were taught the difference between right and wrong. The code of ethics we inherited may have been a bit twisted, but it gave us a point of reference nonetheless. As a result, many of us suffered from a guilty conscience when we screwed up or caused harm early in our using careers. At some point, though, we made a choice—knowingly or not—to behave in ways that were contrary to the values we had internalized. It’s not that we lacked a moral compass; we’d just put it away for a bit. On those occasions when we still felt bad, we turned to denial, defensiveness, and drugs—lots of drugs—to help us stuff the discomfort of a guilty conscience.

Our awareness of that still, quiet voice within starts to return almost as soon as we put down the drugs. Our first reunion with our conscience can feel pretty distressing. Without drugs to mask our feelings, many of us experience an uncut dose of the shame we’d been stuffing for years. We’re relieved to read that “we are not responsible for our disease,” in the Basic Text. People who know their way around the Twelve Steps assure us that the second half of that sentence, “we are responsible for our recovery,” will help us make peace with the past and develop our own conscience.

We begin to tune into what’s right for us and focus on acting in accordance with our own values. We learn—sometimes through trial and error—to behave in ways we can be proud of. Not wanting to pay a spiritual price, we’re slower to act out on our most basic urges and selfish desires, so do so less frequently. We can even observe our impulses without acting on them— who knew? With practice, we recalibrate our value system and develop a code of behavior that reflects our intentions.

I will listen for the reawakened voice of my conscience knowing that it reflects my beliefs and intentions.
Conscience, Entry 3 of 4

We need to stay in tune with the voice of our conscience and listen to what it’s telling us. When we get a nagging feeling that something isn’t quite right, we should pay attention to it.

—It Works, Step Ten

Thanks to the NA program, our days of justifying our own bad behavior are mostly behind us. Sure, we still make mistakes, sometimes big ones, but we’re quicker to clean up our messes. Instead of doubling down or making excuses when we lash out or self-destruct, we let our missteps remind us that we remain acutely human and in need of regular spiritual maintenance.

“That’s the thing about being in recovery, innit?” a member shared. “I’m aware of myself and the world around me. When I screw up, I can’t pretend that everything’s hunky dory—though sometimes I still try.” A short memory can seem like an appealing proxy for a clear conscience. It’s not. Too often this leads us to reaching for new distractions to help us forget. Fortunately—though it may sometimes seem otherwise—we can’t unknow what we know about ourselves. We recognize our part in all of our difficulties and can spot our shortcomings even as they appear in new disguises. Try as we might to shut down and soldier on, we’ve developed a conscience.

Instead of waiting for a 3:00 AM wake-up call from our conscience, Step Ten offers us a way to stay clear and current. We get into—and sometimes, get back to—the habit of regular reflection, taking the time to stay in tune with the internal gauge of our conscience. We examine our behavior with empathy, asking ourselves, “Have I treated others as I would like to be treated?” We tell ourselves the truth, taking note of when we’ve responded admirably and where we need to work out a better approach for next time. Cultivating a conscience takes practice but living a conscience-guided life is worth the effort.

I will live according to my conscience today, taking time to develop it further as I reflect on my mistakes and enjoy the good that come from living by my values.
Conscience, Entry 4 of 4

*In the end, we are the ones who must live with our conscience. In order to do so comfortably, we must decide what is, and what is not, morally acceptable in our lives.*

— *It Works*, Step Ten

There’s some irony in the fact that self-centeredness can make it difficult to stay in our own lane. In some cases, we disregard our own principles to give all our attention to what others think of us. Other times, we overlook our own behavior and focus instead on how other people fail to live up to our standards. Daily inventories help us focus on our own actions and motivations. We often find more clarity about our values and, as a result, the voice of our conscience becomes stronger and clearer. Whether or not we consider our own morals in making decisions, our actions place our principles out in the open for all to see.

Many of us come to NA with some baggage around the word *moral.* Much of what we know about morals and morality comes from family, society, or religion, and may not ring true for us. Maybe we misunderstood what we were taught, or it was communicated poorly. Maybe our values truly differ. In any case, getting to know ourselves better through Steps Four and Five helps many of us realign our own moral compass. We continue that work through regular inventory in Step Ten. We learn to tap into our own inner wisdom and allow our conscience to guide our actions.

Where once our differing moral values may have led us to be defiant or judgmental, recovery allows us the courage and confidence to live according to the values that ring true for us. We might not always know the right thing to do, but as one member shared, “when I honestly check in with myself, I can at least figure out what the wrong thing is so I can not do that.” Along with the guidance of our sponsor and our Higher Power, regular inventory helps us continually improve on our ability to live by our conscience.

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*Daily inventory can be a form of conscious contact with my own conscience. I will work to maintain that connection today.*