Powerlessness, Entry 1 of 3

The First Step of Narcotics Anonymous is unique. Rather than addressing a single symptom or substance, we admit our powerlessness over the disease that drives us.

—Guiding Principles, Tradition Five, “For Members”

Depending on who’s telling the story, our First Step’s focus on the disease was either A) a stroke of genius, B) tremendous good luck, C) the work of a Higher Power, or D) all of the above. Our founding members knew that identifying a specific drug as the object of our powerlessness wouldn’t work for this motley crew. They were intent on creating a place for all drug addicts, where all of us could find identification. If refraining from naming a substance had been their only concern, our First Step might have just stated that we’re powerless over drugs. Instead, Step One points to the disease of addiction as our problem.

Powerlessness over the disease gives our First Step lasting relevance. Our focus on addiction—instead of an apparent symptom—makes Step One as relatable before we detox and as it is when we have decades clean. Sure, drug use was the most prominent and destructive manifestation of the disease, but unmanageability can bubble to the surface long after we’ve stopped using. When reaching outside ourselves to fix what’s within seems like a good idea, we may be in trouble. “When I admit my powerlessness, I interrupt that outward reach and turn to my Higher Power instead,” in one member’s experience. Surrendering to the First Step acts as a circuit breaker on our diseased thinking. This pause in the action is what’s needed for us to dodge some unmanageability.

Step One’s ongoing relevance influences how we think about the Fifth Tradition, too. Knowing that we’re all eligible to be the still-suffering addict reminds us to be more inclusive as we address our primary purpose. War stories may illustrate the unmanageability in our past, but our present-day, squeaky-clean powerlessness also deserves some attention. Talking about our struggles confirms that last element of our message: We keep coming back and keep finding a new way to live.

I will recognize my powerlessness in some present-day situation, flipping the circuit breaker on some distorted thinking and opening myself to spiritual solutions.
Powerlessness, Entry 2 of 3

By admitting our own powerlessness, we open our minds to an entirely new idea: the possibility that something greater than ourselves might be powerful enough to relieve our obsession to use drugs.

— It Works, Step Two

Our literature describes how the Second Step helps us to fill the gap created when we admit our powerlessness in Step One. If we are powerless over our disease, what can we do about it? For many of us, simply seeing that there are other addicts like us who have lost the desire to use is enough to open our minds to the possibility that something might be able to help us, too—even if we don’t know what that something might be.

The catch to accepting help from a power greater than ourselves is that we have to stop exerting our own power, first. Practicing powerlessness over our disease means that we stop trying to manage and control it. So many of us have shared about trying to limit our using, hiding our stash from ourselves, using only certain substances or on certain days of the week, and many other ways of trying to be clever or tricky enough to outsmart our addiction. If anyone had success with those types of tricks, they’re probably not NA members. (Yet?)

That’s the way it is with addiction. If we try to overpower or outmaneuver our disease, we’re bound to fail. It might not even happen right away, but eventually, we find ourselves surrounded by unmanageability, wondering what happened to our well-laid plans. Rather than exerting great control over ourselves to behave in a highly predictable and consistent manner, we let go of the illusion of control and open ourselves to power from elsewhere. Unlimited examples of experience, strength, and hope are available to us when we share with other addicts in recovery.

Rather than trying to go it alone, I will rely on a power greater than myself.
Powerlessness, Entry 3 of 3

*When we admit our powerlessness and our inability to manage our own lives, we open the door to recovery.*

—Basic Text, Chapter 4: How It Works, Step One

Practicing powerlessness as a spiritual principle may seem far-fetched to many of us. Admitting defeat is a concept that we’re very uncomfortable with. But what’s ironic is that we’re already practicing powerlessness by darkening the doorstep of our first NA meeting. And, even before that, very likely we’ve had our moments of crying out to *something* to stop this madness, this pain, begging to get well, pleading to finally get to sleep, fearing the sun coming up or going down again, promising and bargaining another time, the *last* time, we swear it!

The surrender of Step One is often terrifying for us, because it’s a threshold that we can’t easily back away from once we make ourselves truly vulnerable to it. Try as some of us might, we can’t put the toothpaste back in the tube: we can’t return to using and just forget that people like us are staying clean in NA. We admit that we’re addicts, that we’re powerless over our addiction, and that we cannot manage our own lives. We need power to survive, and we gain it with the help of other recovering addicts, a program, and a Higher Power.

Practicing powerlessness is not a one-time occurrence; we are faced with embracing it over and over again. “No, we *get* to do it over and over,” a member corrected themself from the podium. “I used to feel so defeated by my powerlessness. But now that I have experienced some relief from active addiction and the benefits of getting this honest about my life, I see it as a source of strength and possibility: the possibility of recovery and a better life.”

Yes, we open the door to recovery. On some days, that door is flung wide open, because we are wide open. On other days we can only muster a crack to let a bit of willingness flow out and our Higher Power flow in.

*It’s a relief to admit I’m powerless over my addiction—in whatever form it takes.*

*I’ll ask for help, because my real power comes when I surrender.*