

Preparing to hear a Step Five

The instructions for the actual Step Five in the Big Book are sparse, and there is little advice on what form it takes or how long it lasts:

'... until they told someone else all their life story.' (73:0)

'... a long talk' (75:1)

'We pocket our pride and go to it, illuminating every twist of character, every dark cranny of the past.' (75:2)

In AA in general, the instructions for Step Five are taken to be, 'read out your Step Four'.

A good Step Four takes ten to twenty hours to write, and a good Step Five takes perhaps one or two hours of revelation and discussion. However, in most cases, sponsees, especially on their first Step Four, are unable not to tell long-winded stories or regurgitate endlessly repetitive resentments that differ from each other only in name and time. The Step Five can then drag on for up to a year in some cases, with a couple of hours every Sunday, perhaps. Some Step Fives take all weekend.

What's wrong with a Step Five that lasts 20 or 100 hours?

Firstly, I'm an AA sponsor, not a therapist paid by the hour or a friend. I can spend a couple of hours helping a sponsee understand the exact nature of their wrongs. An additional 18 or 98 hours spent hearing someone repeat the same resentments and character defects over and over provides no marginal benefit to them or me. It is not the most useful way for me to spend my time, nor the most useful way for the sponsee to spend his time.

The purpose of Step Five is to reveal the exact nature of our wrongs and to share them with another person and thereby to admit them to ourselves and to God. The Book does not say, 'share with another person everything that has ever happened to you, everything you have ever thought and felt, and everything you have ever done, right or wrong.' Two hours is enough 'exact nature'. The reference to the whole of one's life story is clearly meant to prompt a summing up of one's life in a 'long talk' of a couple or a few hours, not a months of Sundays—that is certainly not what happened in the early days of AA, when these suggestions were written. The flaw in no one's approach to life (in thought and deed) is so involved that it takes more than two hours or so to isolate. In fact, the exact nature of someone's wrongs can often be nailed in about half an hour.

What would the exact nature of someone's wrongs be? Well, in my case, it would be spending my life running after money, sex, power, and prestige, comfort, thrills, and looks, admiration, validation, and approval, getting frustrated and vindictive when I do not get them, and dropping into disillusionment and disappointment when I do. I have a history of being arrogant, hostile, distrustful, vain, judgemental, critical, cruel, and indifferent to the suffering of others. In short, I trusted self, not God.

Are there exceptions?

Yes. I have engaged in Step Fives that extend over multiple sessions, usually where the individual is several years sober and there is not much of a pre-existing relationship. Then, the Step Five is used as a springboard to talk mostly about corrective measures and how to approach the area of life in question in a spiritual way. In such cases, there're perhaps ten minutes' revelation per session plus fifty minutes' discussion. This is certainly valuable.

What sometimes fails are multiple-session Step Five where the individual simply talks, talks, and talks, and the listener just listens, listens, listens. I've seen individuals merely burrow themselves further into their self-obsessed, warped narratives and fail to achieve that moment when the penny drops and perspective is regained or gained for the first time.

The danger in these instances is that the individual will not see that there are common threads and really quite simple causes behind the plethora of awful situations and decades of distorted and painful thinking. Unless the root causes are found, the individual will continue in delusion in perpetuity. Complexity or long-windedness in a Step Five usually suggests the root cause has not been found.

So, does the detail ever get discussed?

If the sponsee would like to 'share with another person everything that has ever happened to him, everything he has ever thought and felt, and everything he has ever done, right or wrong,' a therapist can be hired or friends can be found. There likely is a need to talk, talk, and talk, but that's what fellowship and the rest of one's life are for. Also, every story will ultimately get retold when the individual acquires sponsees. That is a very good time for telling all the stories, because then the stories, combined with some insight, can prove useful to others.

The detail of what went wrong in past and present relationships will get discussed in detail in a targeted way in Steps Eight and Nine, to work out whether and how to make amends and what the vision of God's will and the sane and sound ideal for such relationship will be in the future.

So, how do you keep Step Five to one–two hours?

When the sponsee is doing Step Four, monitor closely when each column or section is started, to ensure that the responses are concise and to the point. Help the person boil down to the absolute nub of the matter. Look at page 65: there are just a few words on each item. No more than ten–twenty resentments really need examination. Any further resentments will be variations on a theme. A doctor takes a tiny amount of blood to test it, not pints and pints. We're aiming to get to the core reasons why we resent: we have a plan in the seven areas of self (pride, self-esteem, personal and sex relationships, ambitions, security, and pocketbooks), and the world, of course, is not under our control. If you can't see that with twenty, the penny won't drop with fifty. So twenty resentments will do.

When it comes to the fourth column, the questions can also be answered succinctly in relation to the major resentments.

The final inventory, the list of remaining harms not otherwise covered (cf. page 76), can mop up any other harms scratching away at the back of the sponsee's mind.

The fear and sex inventories (if the latter involves grouping relationships into category or type) are pattern-finding inventories anyway, so produce little material.

If the Step Four is kept concise, the Step Five will be short.

Finally: I suggest that the individual pick the top ten most illustrative or exemplary relationships they have had. Perhaps some family, some childhood relationship, a work relationship or two, etc. It is likely that these relationships will be the templates for every other relationship in their life.

And just in case there is anything else, I ask the individual to pray at the end of the Step Five to be shown anything else they need to get off their chest. Usually one or two things come. The rest—the hand baggage as opposed to the heavy luggage—will be revealed later.

<http://first164.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/preparing-to-hear-step-five.html>