

Step Eight, Part One: Who and Why

Made a list of people we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

WHO should be on the list?

The first part of this step is **making the list** of people you have harmed, whether or not you're willing to make amends yet – we'll worry about the willingness later in this step.

For the most part, if you've gotten this far, you will have a pretty good idea who belongs on the list, but some cases might be questionable. If you're not sure whether someone belongs on your list, ask yourself these questions:

- Did I cause them harm?
- Did I do anything that deserves an apology?
- Did I behave in a way I would not behave today?
- Do I feel guilt for my behavior towards them?
- If I saw them today, would I cross the street to avoid them?

If you can answer “yes” to any of these questions, put them on your list. At this stage, don't worry about whether people might be harmed by your apology. You should err on the side of listing too many people – your sponsor is likely to cross a few off your list immediately.

WHY make amends?

In order to **become willing** to make amends, it helps to understand *why* we make amends, and what to expect as a result of doing so.

In a general sense, just like all the other steps, we make amends because we want to feel better. But steps 8 and 9 are particularly important, as they are the final triggers of the spiritual awakening promised by the steps. The vigor with which you approach and work these steps will determine the quality of that awakening.

That may sound like reason enough for some, but it's still pretty abstract. A more down-to-Earth understanding of the benefits may be helpful. Let's examine a few situations that arise when it's time to make amends:

Type 1: The recipient doesn't know what you did.

This kind is simple. You make amends for these actions because if you don't, the guilt will slowly eat you alive from the inside out. Keeping secrets is not an option for us anymore. It's just dishonesty, compounded daily – shame on the installment plan.

Since this is also the situation where making amends is most likely to cause harm, your sponsor will help you determine if, when, and how to make these amends.

Type 2: The recipient knows what you did, but you'd rather pretend it never happened.

Let's say you did something wrong while intoxicated. You feel guilty about it, but you're still friends with the person you harmed, you see them all the time, and you've gone out of your way to be really nice to them ever since. Can't you just let bygones be bygones? They don't really seem that mad, anyway. Maybe they even forgot about it!

To see the flaw here, imagine the situation in reverse: one day, a coworker insults you in front of a group of

people. Then, the next day, he acts like nothing happened. How would that make you feel? Assuming you don't confront the guy, you'd probably harbor some level of resentment. Even if you still like him and think you forgive him, you'd be at least a little more angry, mistrustful, and defensive than you would've been otherwise. A reservation will exist in your mind, a mark on his mental file.

We are most haunted by the wrongs of others when they seem unaware of what they've done wrong. Why? It's all about protection. Just as our physical reflexes make us yank our hand away from something hot, the ego seeks to protect us by holding onto stories, because a story about harm done keeps us on guard against future harm from the same source. When the source of harm is a person, we also hold the story so that one day, if necessary, we can inform the person of their error – preferably during an argument. Obviously, the reverse is also true: unacknowledged harms *you* have done live in the heads of those you've wronged.

So, back to our example: imagine that the guy approaches you and says with palpable sincerity: “Hey, I'd like to apologize for being a jerk and insulting you in front of all those people. It was childish and inconsiderate, and I'm really sorry.” In my experience, when someone does this, my resentment evaporates almost instantly. I feel relief because the apology, delivered correctly, allows me to let go of that story, that reservation, that mark on the mental file.

Making amends tells the people you've harmed that *you* know what you've done wrong, which allows them to stop carrying it around for future reference. The chance to relinquish the burden of *their* mental reservation is a truly precious gift. At the same time, you cease engaging in the passive dishonesty of ignoring what you've done wrong! The relief is as swift as removing a splinter.

Type 3: The recipient has caused you enough harm that you don't think they deserve an apology.

This might be the hardest situation to wrap your head around. Why would you give someone who harmed you the satisfaction of admitting that you're wrong? The apparent injustice of it fills us with resistance.

Well, it turns out that the most galling thing about these people is that even though they have acted badly, you can't be totally free to judge, feel superior to, or gossip about them – *because they know what you've done too*. If you even tried to criticize them, they could immediately throw your misdeeds back in your face. They possess firsthand knowledge of your defects, and who deserves to have that less than people who have harmed you? The whole situation makes you feel exposed and vulnerable.

But if you approach them, freely admit to everything you ever did wrong, and sincerely apologize for it? Well, then: they've got *nothing* on you. Their moral high ground, such as it was, disappears.

As you'll probably guess, the trick is that once you've regained the right to be judgmental and superior towards

them, the desire to do so can't be sustained. Judgment and shame turns into sympathy and compassion.

In Summary

In essence, making amends is a process where you roam the earth picking up all the little pieces of vulnerability and fear that you've left in the possession of others.

The reason the spiritual awakening happens before you are halfway through Step 9 is that by then you will have internalized the truth that nobody else really owns your fear. Simply *knowing* you can set yourself free from all harm you've done (and all future harm you might inflict) is the whole ballgame.

Also, once you have made amends for a specific behavior, you are much less likely to repeat that behavior. You will spot it coming a mile away and think "damn, the last time I did this I had to make amends for it. I can't pretend that I don't know it's wrong. I definitely don't want to make amends for the same thing again."

Hopefully, this section has brought you closer to being willing to make amends to the people on your list. Now it's time to start developing the specific information you are going to communicate when you make amends.

Some things you can't say!

"I was dishonest because I pretended to be your friend even though I never really liked you."

AMENDS-RELATED MEME ALERT

Because making amends is such a terrifying prospect, a lot of superstitious practices

"What can I do to fix this?"

You may hear it suggested that, after you make amends to someone, you should ask "is there anything I can do to rectify the situation?", or something to that effect.

This is not a good idea.

First of all, if there is something tangible you can do to fix the situation, you shouldn't need to ask – you'd better know it already, and if possible already done it! For example, if you owe someone money, your amends should be accompanied by repayment in full, or at least a first payment and an explicit plan to pay the rest.

In the absence of tangible fixes, you should not ask the recipient what they want. Amends are not a bargaining session, and you should never give the impression that you are trying to buy forgiveness. You clean up your side of the street by acknowledging the harm you caused.

"Amends aren't apologies"

You may have heard people say that "amends aren't apologies." This is dangerous nonsense – they sure as hell better be apologies! Where does this myth come from? The explanation I've heard goes something like this: **"As active alcoholics, we spent our lives issuing hollow apologies and continuing to behave badly. An apology isn't enough. You have to fix the situation."**

Well, it's true that most of us made hollow apologies to get out of trouble. But the solution to this history of failed apologies is not to *never apologize again* – it's to *apologize correctly*, with honesty, sincerity, and a credible indication that we won't continue to cause harm.

The structured process of making formal amends is how you fix the situation. Obviously, just saying "sorry" isn't enough, and if you owe money you must repay it. But amends without apologies are incomplete.