

## Step 7 of the Proactive Twelve Steps

6th edition

### **I learn to accept the sense of vulnerability that goes with life's pressures and uncertainties.**

#### Discussion of Step 7

The previous steps have led you to see problematic behavior patterns in a different light. You now get a sense of the emotional logic behind them. That is, they are ways of coping with things that would otherwise feel overwhelming.

#### **What is it that is overwhelming?**

Of course, the specifics vary. But, when you dig deeper, it comes down to the very opposite of feeling safe. A sense that you have no way of protecting yourself, that your very existence is threatened, that you will be crushed. "All resistance will be futile," as Darth Vader would say.

When you read this, you might say: "I can see how it might work for other people, but what I'm talking about is not that drastic."

So let's slow it down a little and explore. Go back to the fears that you identified in Step 6. Instead of just thinking of them as abstract words, go deeper into the physical sensation.

What does it feel like when you are imagining facing these situations that you fear? Let's pay attention to some of the markers that have to do with the experience of intense fear. There is, for instance, a sense of holding your breath physically. You might notice a tightness in your shoulders. You might feel that your shoulders coming up and your neck coming down as if bracing for a blow to come upon you. You might notice some weird sensations in your stomach. You might feel your eyes widen and how you are rigid, somewhat like a deer in the headlights.

#### **What your body sensations tell you**

Becoming aware of how your body is affected puts you in touch with the visceral quality of the fears.

Stay with these sensations, even for a moment, getting a glimpse of how intensely awful it feels. The difficulty of it gives you more understanding of why you're not able to stay with them in everyday life. And that gives you more of a sense of why the coping mechanism exists and why it continues.

The coping mechanism is essentially a way to avoid staying in what is literally an unbearable experience. Getting in touch with the physicality of the experience and how much it blocks you helps you understand why words and logic are not adequate at such moments. Your mind and body automatically do whatever it takes to stop that unbearable pain. And that's where the coping mechanism comes in.

We are talking about a mechanism of avoidance, but not in a way that would justify self-blaming. When you pay attention to the intensity of the experience, you understand better how you have no other choice at that moment. It's not about willpower.

### **If not willpower, what is the way to deal with it?**

Essentially, the idea is to become more tolerant of that unbearable feeling progressively. Gradually become more able to tolerate how awful it feels. Realize that you can feel that bad and still survive it. As you do this, little by little, you develop the ability to live through the pain. You become able to have more choice in what you do, despite the pain, instead of automatically defaulting to the coping mechanism.

So the principle is straightforward: There is unbearable pain. You learn to stay with it, little by little. As you do, you start to notice that you have options. Of course, what is very simple in theory is excruciatingly hard in practice. Here again, we have to recognize the importance of avoiding the very damaging cycle of self-blame. When you say to yourself: "Look, it's so easy. How come I can't do it? If I can't do it, it's terrible, and so on," this is not helpful at all.

### **Safety**

In contrast, what is very important is to focus on a sense of safety. To foster a sense of nurturing, a sense of encouragement. So, whenever you see yourself reverting to a sense of pressure and blame, remember that what you're dealing with is related to overwhelming fear.

You are experiencing a sense that you're going to be crushed, that you're defenseless. What you need more than anything else is a sense of safety, a sense of protection, a sense of support to be better able to face this enormous threat.

There is absolutely no point in trying to minimize the threat by saying: "Oh, objectively, it's no big deal. So if I realize how it's no big deal, I should be able to deal with it easily." These are should, not reality. The point is you perceive something that feels like a genuine threat to your very existence. There is no reasoning with that kind of fear. You have to address it at the gut level. What it takes is reinforcing your sense of safety. Once you are safe, you have options. In the middle of fear and pressure, you don't.

And so, what is of foremost importance is developing ways to reinforce a sense of safety. I will come back to it a little later.

## **If you cannot feel body sensations**

I want first to address something that you might be wondering about. When I described the physical sensations of fear in your body, you might be among the many people who don't experience that. You feel numb. Or you might not even experience yourself as emotionless. You might say: "I don't experience anything abnormal. I'm just here. What's that?" If that is the case, you might then think that everything else I've been talking about after that does not apply to you.

Well, I want to kind of put this into a different framework. When the intensity of fear is extreme, a standard human coping mechanism is to dissociate from the experience. So I suggest that you do not take it at face value that your lack of sensations means that you are not having a sense of overwhelming pressure. If you are indeed somebody who has problems doing things that you don't want to do, chances are the coping concept applies to you.

I suggest you feel curious about what there might be under that sense of: "Oh, nothing's happening" or in that numbness.

Take it for granted that there might be something, even if, at this moment, you cannot feel it. Be curious about it. You're going to make it an essential part of your life to understand it better. Gently, without undue pressure, without forcing yourself to find it right away or in the next few days or even in the next few weeks.

## **A physical sense of vulnerability**

Having said this, I can come back to what you do to create safety to stay longer with that physical sense of vulnerability.

One way to do it is to develop your physical sensations as a resource. For instance, build your ability to notice what happens when you breathe a little deeper. Or when you do some gentle stretches, not necessarily full-fledged yoga movements, just moving in a mindful way. Or when you pay attention to the flow of blood and air moving through your body. Notice the sense of feeling more grounded in the way you're sitting or standing up. Notice how these things help you come to a more grounded emotional state.

Another resource is talking to people, friends, acquaintances, and peers engaged in a similar exploration process. People with whom you can gently share your experience as part of this exploration and who can share with you their own so that there is a sense of trust. You share a common goal. You want to progressively open up to things that might feel way too much for you to experience or deal with on your own. Because, with pressure and overwhelm, you might be cut off from even the experience of it. So, dealing with it in a gentle, supportive group is something that's going to be helpful.

Of course, it never hurts to seek professional help. As we've talked about before, this is something that's in the continuum of traumatic stress. It doesn't hurt to find all the help you can get.

I want to emphasize that we're talking about exploring, not changing behavior patterns. The Twelve Steps process proceeds step-by-step. Actual changes are going to come later. Right now, you're not pushing. You merely have the goal to progressively, slowly expand your ability to tolerate the intensity of sensations that accompany those problematic situations.

### **What about asking God?**

Step 7 of A.A. is "asked God to remove these shortcomings." Again, it helps to see the reference to God in context.

For one thing, it is a signal that changing profoundly ingrained behavior patterns is a slow process. It is not: "I see the pattern, and I immediately wipe it away." There are several steps in the process. One of them, Step 7, is just "asking God," which might feel redundant with Step 6, which was about "being entirely ready." Talk about an excruciatingly slow!

It is slow because it is akin to disentangling a tangled cord: you cannot do it if you're not patient and careful.

So, what do you do with this time? While the original Twelve Steps refer to asking God, the Proactive Twelve Steps describe a psychological change process. You cannot get rid of a coping mechanism until you are able to deal with the vulnerability that the coping mechanism was covering up for. Hence, this step is about accepting vulnerability.

For the full book, see <http://proactive12steps.com/book/>