

Serenity, Courage & Wisdom (Proactive Twelve Steps)

6th edition

Through trial and error, I develop the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Discussion

The "serenity prayer" describes the process and the desired outcome of the Twelve Steps.

A prayer?

This wording is an adaptation of what is known as the Serenity Prayer. Does this mean that you have to pray for it to work?

Despite all the "Let go and let God" talk, the Twelve Steps are not advocating that people do nothing but wait for the grace of God. Keep in mind that most of the steps are about ways to change your attitude and behavior.

The "prayer" part emphasizes how important the qualities of serenity, courage, and wisdom are. So crucial that religious people would be asking for God's help in achieving them.

If you're not religious, skip the "prayer" part. Keep in mind the valuable advice: The process of change involves learning by trial and error. As you go through it, you develop your ability to be serene, courageous, and wise. In turn, this helps grow your ability to make complex changes.

Serenity

Change does not happen by forcing yourself to be somebody you're not. And it certainly does not occur by blaming yourself for the things you're not doing. Progress comes from deciding to understand what it is that is happening. You don't fight reality; you accept it.

If you cannot change it, you're not going to keep banging your head against a wall. But finding serenity does not mean that you are abandoning any hope of change. You are merely figuring out where you have a grip, some possibility of changing, and where you don't. You are orienting your efforts toward where they may bear fruit.

Courage

Courage does not mean pushing yourself to do things that won't work. It does not mean jumping out of a tenth-floor window because you dare yourself to do that. If you keep doing things that don't work, it's not courage. It is more like insanity.

Courage lies in confronting your vulnerabilities, accepting them, and staying with them. Doing this is very different from bluster. It is much softer but also much more intense, much more difficult. You're not avoiding feeling the difficulty, but you're learning to stay with it.

This is the courage to remain emotionally present as you face your vulnerabilities, to learn from the discomfort, to grow from it. Not to close your eyes and ears and nose and force yourself to do something so unpleasant that you can only do it by avoiding being emotionally present.

Wisdom

Wisdom comes from experience, that is, trial and error. Often, you don't know in advance what you can change and what you can't. It's not that easy to figure it out ahead of time.

As you go through these Twelve Steps, you are giving yourself the chance to learn from experience. So, the "wisdom to know the difference" is the wisdom that you gain from experience.

To gain wisdom, it takes the courage to confront challenging situations. It also takes the serenity to realize that there is no value in keeping banging your head against a wall. Time and again, you are learning to redirect your energy toward where it may be more productive.

Serenity, courage, and wisdom are three facets of the process of lasting change. Giving them distinct names helps you pinpoint what you're doing. This enables you to own the process for the rest of your life.

A broader context

There are plenty of times when people do things they don't want to do. Addiction is an extreme example of this. But addiction is only part of a broad spectrum that includes compulsive behavior, habits that are hard to shake, Freudian slips, etc.

Instead of looking at these occurrences from a moralistic perspective, it is more productive to approach them in a spirit of mindful inquiry. That is, to ask two related questions: "What is it about this situation that I cannot change?" and "What is it about this situation that I can change?"

Asking these questions helps us let go of the all-or-nothing paradigm ("I can change it all?" vs. "I cannot change it at all"). It helps you pay attention to the nitty-gritty of what you can, or cannot, do.

From this perspective, the Serenity prayer is not so much a prayer as a proactive call to mindful action. It is not about reaching an ideal state of serenity, courage, or wisdom. It is about operationalizing courage and serenity, i.e., asking the questions that help you make sense of life and gain wisdom.

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