

chair for NYCMA and co-secretary of the public information committee for CMA World. I have two projects in which I am heavily involved on the World level. You might think this stuff would give me a big head, but I tell you, the greatest gifts I am learning from World service are humility in the face of the time and dedication that goes in to carrying the message effectively and gratitude for the sanity and bouts of serenity I have today that allow me to concentrate and perform the service I have enlisted to do. With over three years of sobriety now, my suggestions are: Get involved, start where you are comfortable, and recognize that service is anything that you give of yourself to help the fellowship as a whole, or just one other fellow. Yours in service, —*Billy U.*

SERVICE RETURNS

“YOU ARE A BIG PART OF MY RECOVERY.”

My sponsor has told me time and again how much my service is appreciated and how much I am loved in the fellowship of CMA. And every time he has told me that, I brush it off, partly due to embarrassment and disbelief, but mostly because I think he's yanking my chain. Don't get me wrong—I love doing service in CMA. Nothing makes me feel more grateful and worthwhile than to give back to the fellowship that freely handed me the tools to rebuild my life and my self-worth. I cannot do enough service to repay my debt to the fellowship that has given me a second chance. CMA's only request is that I carry the message of recovery to the crystal meth addict who still suffers; I am more than happy to do so.

Even with all the work I've done on myself, I battled with some depression recently. I started to isolate and only showed up when absolutely necessary for appointments or service commitments. I refused to go to fellowship, saying to myself that I would rather just go home and revel in my solitude. Early in my sobriety, entering this mode of self-pity would have been an indicator of an impending relapse, but because of the fellowship, I did not completely isolate. To my sponsor and to a few trusted fellows

who reached out, I confided my feelings. Being out of work for the better part of three years was taking its toll, and I felt like damaged goods. Across the board, the message I received back was loud and clear: "You are a big part of my recovery." Not only did this lift my spirits, but—damn it!—my sponsor was right.

The funny thing about people saying that to me was that they barely mentioned the "official" service I'd performed or in which I was currently involved. The fellows I talked to told me about how much they appreciated that even though I was having a rough time of it financially the past couple of years, I still came to meetings, raised my hand, and shared. They heard the message from me that I was staying sober one day at a time and dealing with life on life's terms. They listened as I shared about my struggles trying to find a new place to live when I was close to being evicted, or to land a new job in financial services when thousands of others were applying for the same positions. They thought to themselves that if I could stumble along to find my way through, so could they. I'd had no clue that my effect on my fellows was so profound.

When I was in early sobriety, I would often think to myself about how I could not wait to have enough clean time to be a GSR or the chair of a meeting. I thought that doing service in those roles would be the most effective way I could carry the message and have the biggest impact on my fellows. Little did I know until this recent bout of depression, the most effective way to help others is simply to raise my hand in a meeting and offer my experience, strength, and hope. The best part is that anyone with any amount of sober time, even one day, can do this.

We must return this day-to-day service in kind. If someone's share moved you, or if another fellow has reached out to help in a time of need, let them know how much you appreciate it and carry that gratitude forward by sharing in another meeting or helping another fellow struggling to stay sober. It is amazing how a few kind words can change someone's path, even just for today. So with that, I humbly want to express my love and gratitude to everyone who has been even a small part of my recovery for the past few years by quoting my favorite singer, Kelly Clarkson: "Honestly, my life would suck without you." —*David H.*

GIVING, NOT USING

FORTY-FOUR DAYS AGO, BEFORE I ENTERED CMA, THE word *service* was not a part of my vocabulary. I thought it meant that other people were supposed to do something for me, like deliver a bottle at a club, bring me food on command at a restaurant, or provide me with cheap (if somewhat prolonged) sexual thrills. Little did I know that this small word would be the first part of a life-changing lesson that continues unfolding daily.

Up until this point, my life has been marked by selfishness. I used crystal to ensure that others would pay attention to me sexually and socially, and to pay attention to myself without being wracked by self-hate. I used alcohol and other drugs to be sure that my social interactions with others, whether at bars or receptions, went the way I wanted them, the way I planned. I believed that offering someone a pipe or buying someone a drink was a sure way to ensure that he would like me. These acts, which I used to believe were extremely generous, ensured that I felt like I could control others' reactions to me.

Imagine my shock, then, at entering a room full of addicts who did not relate to each other in this petulant way. As soon as I entered the rooms, I realized that the majority of the people present did not want to use me for any purpose. Nor would they tolerate being used by me. The people present in the rooms simply wanted to share. They wanted to give of themselves and to relay their stories to their fellows, both new and old, and to receive wisdom and support in return. The more they gave individually, the more the group as a whole received. Faced with our collective powerlessness over the drug, we have no choice but to pool our resources to survive. I had finally found an environment where the zero-sum game of using others and being used had much less meaning than the phrase "give freely."

I am still going through my earliest moments of early sobriety. Yet no matter what happens, I know I have the power to transform the emotional detritus that crystal left behind into something valuable. To begin to heal myself, all I have to do is open my mouth at a meeting and share. I find it amazing and wonderful that this simple sharing, which can be accomplished by anyone who has ever suffered on account of a drug, lies at the heart of what this fellowship calls service. As an addict, I know of no greater love than to join with others in giving of ourselves to our fellows. —Rodrigo S.

BACK TO BASICS

What are the tools of recovery? When do we use them? How do they work? Most of us learned how to practice these simple, commonsense strategies for staying sober (and sane) when we first came into the rooms. All of these healthy habits are part of working a thorough First Step. Thirty-two fellows of Crystal Meth Anonymous explain what the tools mean to them—and why they still work today.

Abstinence

It's a word we frequently used around Lent in my Catholic upbringing. Abstinence implied something sacrificed. It meant giving up something I liked—like candy or meat on Fridays. In early sobriety, abstinence from drugs felt exactly like that, and on some level I was hoping it would only last forty days, like Lent. Then I learned that I only had to abstain for today. I could do that. I could always pick up tomorrow. And tomorrow came and I thought, *I can abstain for another day.* And days kept coming and going like that. Somewhere along the way a shift occurred—abstinence became a gift. *Maybe I never have to use again. Maybe the nightmare I was living in is over for good.* And a bold promise was made to me: “If you never pick up, you will never get high.” (Makes sense in hindsight, but it was eye-opening at the time.) The implication there was that if I never got high, I never had to relive the horrors that were tied to it. And now, for nearly five years, I have made a daily choice to abstain...just for today. —*Michael A.*

Acceptance

Acceptance is a simple and amazing tool that has made every area of my life more manageable. In the face of all of life's challenges, I am able to practice this tool in order to gain peace and serenity. It's one of the most practical solutions in my toolbox. Once I become willing, it's as simple as making a decision and allowing my Higher Power to take over the results of any situation. When I exercise acceptance, it spares me from the need to control the outcome of every situation—good and bad. Most of all, it

allows me to get out of the way long enough to relish all the rewards life has to offer. —*Harley M.*

Acting as if

One week at fellowship after a Tuesday meeting, I remembered that it was my father's birthday and had no desire to do anything about it. I nonchalantly mentioned to my CMA fellows at the table what day it was. They strongly "suggested" that I call him then and there to offer birthday wishes. I balked at this. My resentment toward the man is a part of my very fiber and to make even a quick call would feel like defeat on my part—nearly an act of conceding ground. "Act as if," my fellows urged me. "Just call him to say 'Happy Birthday,'" they said, as cell phones appeared in front of me. Not altogether willing, I used my own cell to wish my father a happy birthday. Thankfully, no one answered and I left my greetings (as sincerely as I could possibly muster) as a message. I felt relief having done something I absolutely did not want to do.

When I returned home from fellowship, my mother called. She was elated at my last minute "concession" to my father, and he was also very happy to have heard from me. As my fellows had noted, he wouldn't be around forever, and I would be the one who would ultimately feel awful if I'd let that opportunity go by. —*Jon N.*

Bookending

When I got the call, I knew I had to pay my respects. After all, he was my mentor when I was an activist. But if I went, I'd also have to face two ghosts from my past: a former best friend with whom I desperately wanted to be back on speaking terms, and another good friend to whom I really wanted to make amends. Both relationships had been damaged by my drug use. So I called my sponsor. I told him all about my mentor's death and about my two friends. My sponsor understood my desire to repair these friendships, but he reminded me that there really was only one thing I had to do at the memorial: pay my respects. He also told me to call after the service because he understood something else—whether or not I attempted these reconciliations, I was going to be face-to-face with people

I'd hurt; they could react adversely at just seeing me. And any negative outcome could potentially lead me back to using, especially because I had expectations of what would occur.

On my way home, I gave my sponsor a call. The second friend had come right up to me and started talking like it was old times. We caught up on each other's lives, and it felt absolutely right; I made my amends on the spot and it was graciously received. However, when my former best friend and I found ourselves standing next to each other, he turned away; nothing was said. I was disappointed with this outcome, but happy that I'd been able to repair one relationship. Most of all, I felt serene knowing I had been present to honor my mentor's life. Though in the end I was not tempted to go out and lose my six months of sobriety, I was glad my sponsor had me call after the service. That call allowed me to debrief and process what did occur, and that was just as important as the call I made before I went. —*David H.*

Burning desires

When I first came to CMA, there was a lot in my head and in my chest that I needed to talk about. But I was too ashamed and didn't have the strength to express what I was dealing with. When they called for a burning desire in meetings, I almost felt as if they were calling on me to express what I needed to say to stay sober. When I took one for the first time, I discovered when I walked out of that meeting that I felt relieved, lighter, and perhaps even peaceful. These new comforting feelings encouraged me to take other burning desires during my first few months when I needed to. Today, I am sober for ten months, and I'm grateful for having CMA and this useful tool in meetings. —*Ricardo S.*

Counting days

I didn't announce my day count at my first meeting, but I remember thinking, *I have three days today. I want to come back next week and say I have ten.* Counting days kept me sober that first week and got me back to another meeting. Having ninety days as my goal helped me stay focused and keep things simple. *All I have to do is stay sober,* I thought. *If I don't*

pick up, today is a success. This tool helped me acknowledge what a great challenge it was to stay sober for just one more day. —*Bruce C.*

Fellowship

For me, going to fellowship is almost as important as attending the meeting itself. My sponsor told me “the meeting after the meeting” is essential, because I had isolated myself for years using crystal meth. Though I’m able to both give and get phone numbers before and after meetings, there isn’t really enough time then to have meaningful conversations; and during the actual meeting, of course, there are no conversations at all. In the beginning, fellowship provided a safe place for me to practice reintegrating into the real world, and it still gives me a chance to develop relationships with fellows, which makes phone calls afterward much more natural and comfortable.

When I first got sober, I didn’t have much money, so instead of skipping fellowship because I thought I couldn’t afford it or was embarrassed, I’d eat before the meeting and have coffee and maybe dessert after. On weekends, we’d often go to the movies after dinner, which I know helped me stay away from bars and other triggering places. By going to the meeting after the meeting consistently—after every meeting—I’ve gotten a chance to make lifelong sober friends. —*Paul B.*

HALT: hungry, angry, lonely, tired

I first heard about this tool—“Don’t let yourself get too hungry, angry, lonely, or tired”—in a meeting. I was a broken soul, counting days, had been in the program maybe two weeks, hearing but almost unable to comprehend. Someone said, “When you’re hungry, eat,” and suddenly something clicked. Hunger, anger, tiredness, loneliness—these things underlie a lot of my moods.

But back then, my moods fluctuated so much, along with my speedy mind, I wasn’t in the habit of pausing, breathing, and analyzing how I felt. I used this tool the next time I felt scattered and said to myself, “Oh my god! I’m just hungry!” Then I acted simply—I had a meal and felt better.

I’m still very aware of hunger and tiredness. Especially tiredness.

Back when I used crystal meth, coming down, I'd feel exhausted. But still tweaking, I was unable to fall asleep. So my moods were just insane. It was horrible. Well, today I take better care of myself. I'll come home after a long day of working, a social activity, a meeting, and maybe the gym. By around 11:00 P.M. I feel tired, but if I push myself to stay up later I start to become melancholy. So I turn off the lights and go to bed. It's really that simple!

For some reason anger and loneliness are trickier for me. My sponsor has suggested I take time out to breathe when I get angry. Meditation and writing it out are good, too. Early on in recovery I had a few relapses. I used to medicate myself with street drugs and surrounded myself with other using buddies. Loneliness played a large part in those relapses, along with anger that I couldn't use any more. Later, I made the connection that meetings, fellowship, and staying in touch with my new sober friends—this was how to overcome my loneliness and anger. It was taking the contrary action that led me to an amazing result: Pretty soon I stopped relapsing. That was seven and a half years ago. OMG! I have a life, it's summer, and I am blooming, thanks to you all and your tools. —*Ronen M.*

Higher Power

"God is a verb," a fellow in the program recently told me. "An understanding that grows as I grow, an action that I take." That stopped me in my tracks. Literally, I was crossing Atlantic Avenue on a Tuesday morning and I stopped on the median. The statement rang true in my soul. I have a soul now; the program led me to it. I kind of knew a soul was always in me, but the program has made hearing it and feeling it respond so much clearer, so much easier.

When I came in to CMA, it was coming to believe in a Higher Power that stopped me in my tracks. And I came across Higher Power a lot. Six of the Steps mention it, using those dreaded capital letters. And there were even more capitals in the "Big Book." I heard about Higher Power in meetings, where fellows would talk about God. But each time I read, heard, or talked about Higher Power, there was a big red stop sign inside. I'm not one of those well-meaning but misguided saps.

"Pray. Every day. On your knees," my sponsor told me week after week. "Have you tried it yet?" he'd ask.

"No," or, "I tried once," I'd say.

“Pray. Every day. On your knees,” my sponsor would tell me again.

I couldn't do it. Not even alone in my bedroom. It felt weird. Then I realized what was holding me back: My ego was so *big* that I was embarrassed to pray all by myself. I thought, *If praying doesn't mean anything, why do I care if I do it?* When I was a kid, my dad told me, “Don't die of embarrassment.” So I took action in the place I felt the most at ease and at one with myself: I tried praying, on my knees, in the shower. I said the Serenity Prayer, the Third Step Prayer, and the Seventh Step Prayer.

Very quickly, serenity began seeping into my everyday life. I learned to turn things over. I learned humility. I learned to accept the many things I cannot change. I found the courage to change myself as I can. This power to learn, accept, and change was the Higher Power that everyone was talking about. A Higher Power I found by praying every day, on my knees, in the shower.

Finding my Higher Power was like learning to ride a bike. I didn't understand balance before I tried. I just got on and pedaled. It took a while, but I got it. Now I ride without thinking. I still really don't understand balance, but I know what it is and that I have it. I didn't understand God before I started to pray. I still don't understand Higher Power, but I know what it is and that I found it.

I still take showers every day, and I still pray every day. I can't define my Higher Power for you; I can only describe what It feels like today. And right now Higher Power is the act of pushing through procrastination and fear to write this. Right now God is the next right action.

God is a verb. —*Jim F.*

HOW: honest, open, willing (or 1, 2, and 3)

Honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness have probably been the three most helpful words in my recovery over these past few years. Often we hear people relate them to the first three Steps. This makes sense to me now. When I came to CMA and had a hard time dealing with the subject of faith in God, someone suggested I consider honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness as a path to faith. They pointed out that the literature calls these “indispensable spiritual principles,” and said that no one was referring to religion as I had known it. I could see that if I was honest with

myself, I had to admit I had a problem with addiction and my life was frequently unmanageable. Then I could be honest in meetings about my sometimes overwhelming desire to use, which prompted suggestions from my sponsor and fellows.

That's where open-mindedness came in: Some suggestions that seemed off-the-wall at the time actually worked—like “easy does it” in my approach to others and to life's problems; and taking my recovery “one day at a time.” When I became willing to take even a few of these suggestions, my life started to change. More important, my mind started to change. Suddenly, what others were saying had worked for them started to work for me, too. I could see that this Twelve Step program might actually help me in the way people said it had helped them. —*John H.*

Literature

The first time I read *Alcoholics Anonymous*, I found its language stilted and the God talk offputting. I'd come to CMA because I knew I had a drug problem, so why was I reading about alcohol? But reading two pages at a time and talking about them with my sponsor, I learned how to read the book. I took a suggestion and substituted *thinking* for *drinking* while reading, and that made a lot of sense. Gradually, I learned I had a problem, an “ism” which the “Big Book” describes to a tee. I most definitely could not read and understand this book alone—and I'm a smart guy. Being smart didn't keep me from destructive drug use, and it didn't do much for me trying to grasp the usefulness of the literature. I needed help with that. I'm continuing to learn from it today. —*Rick S.*

Making the bed

Basically, I was a very undisciplined person. I couldn't show up—I might have known what to do, but I'd lost the ability to do it. I was so undisciplined I couldn't do it. This was just a by-product of my unmanageable life.

I was in detox—they wouldn't let you out of your room unless you made your bed. And so, the best thing I learned in rehab was to make my bed every day. I have made my bed every single day of sobriety since March 1, 1988. I do not move without doing it—it's nonnegotiable.

If you want to change your life, making the bed is an amazing thing to do. Because then you build on that. It was a contrary action, the first tangible one I took. I could see the effect. I learned that it works. It creates a new energy when you take a contrary action. And it all starts with making the bed. And maybe capping the toothpaste. —*Ava L.*

Meditation

The tools of the program not only help keep me sober, they also allow me to find a place within myself to go when the world around me is spinning uncontrollably. One of the gifts I've found in sobriety is meditation. In early sobriety I went to a meditation workshop led by a CMA fellow. It changed my life and the way I handle it. I learned to create a daily practice called a 5, 5, and 5: Five minutes of reading a book relating to spirituality, five minutes of meditation, and five minutes of journal writing. When I first started, I found my mind making many excuses why I shouldn't do it or how I could put it off—I was too busy, didn't have enough time, had bigger things to worry about, and so on and so on. Once I committed to this practice and made time to do a 5, 5, and 5 every morning before my day started, I slowly found that I looked at things that frustrated me differently. I started to find a center within me that was calming and serene.

Every morning, I set the timer on my cell phone and did my fives. At first I found it difficult to meditate for five minutes: My mind would not shut off, my thoughts seemed to just take over. I learned to listen to my breathing, feel and hear my surroundings, and focus on being in the moment. I was able to calm my mind for only a minute or two at first. As weeks passed, I found myself being able to stay in the moment for longer periods.

Journaling played a huge part in this practice as well. At first my writing was short and shallow. Often I did not know what to say. Soon I found that writing a letter to my Higher Power and letting it write back to me changed my thinking and gave me peace. Having your Higher Power write a letter to you may sound strange—but once I write, I put the pen down, close my eyes, and take in a deep breath and slowly let it out. Then I pick up my pen and start. I don't worry about grammar or spelling—I just write whatever comes to mind without second-guessing the thoughts that pop up.

As time moved on and I continued my daily practice, I increased the time—to 10, 10, and 10, and when I was ready, to 20, 20, and 20. Meditating has not only helped me stay sober; I've also discovered who I am, what makes things work or not work for me. I'm able to focus on solutions and not ponder the problem. From time to time I lose my way and neglect doing my morning routine. When I restart my 5, 5, and 5, my problems, fears, and concerns are not instantly solved, but I know there are ways to work toward solutions. I learn that I cannot control the world, just how I handle life on life's terms. —*Keith V.*

Meetings

Meetings have played an essential and evolving role in my recovery. I still remember that feeling of complete wonder and amazement which accompanied my first meetings, where I began to realize that every single thought, feeling, and action I'd believed to be uniquely mine was shared with someone else in the rooms. I learned that while I was quite special, I was not at all unique.

Next, meetings provided an important series of stepping stones as I began to navigate my way through early recovery. I could remain sober another twenty-four hours knowing I had just left my last meeting and seeing the next one on the horizon. Weekends were tough at first, so I would load them with meetings, often going from one group to fellowship to another and fellowship again, until I found myself safely in bed at the end of the day. I learned quickly to listen closely to the speaker and each share in a meeting, looking for suggestions from another's program that might work for me. Eventually, I found myself listening closely when something in a meeting irritated me, knowing that the source of my irritation was actually inside me—and this was an opportunity to face it honestly and learn more about my own nature.

Later, as I completed my Step work and my recovery began to mature, I reduced the number of meetings I attended each week. This was an intentional step—removing the “training wheels” as I began to take greater personal responsibility, opening myself up to a level of intimacy with friends and family I'd previously avoided out of fear, and even relying on them for some of the support I could initially only find in the fellowship. —*Barry L.*

Ninety in ninety

My first thought when I heard this suggested was, *I will try my best*, but I didn't know if I could find the time. Truth be told, doing anything consistently for ninety days was a foreign concept to me when I joined the fellowship of CMA. My day-to-day life had little consistency and I liked it that way. I was excited by not making plans too far in advance and just living spontaneously, energized by using and my unpredictable circumstances. For me, of course, that way of living quite often led to hospitals and institutions.

But having finally given up, I thought, *Fine—rather than crawl along “existing,” I will surrender to these people, guided by my sponsor, and turn it over.* At Day 12, I was back in the rooms, just released from yet another rehab. Still paranoid, I was willing to do anything, and that included attending ninety meetings in ninety days. Not having much work at the time, I usually attended two a day, a morning meeting and an evening meeting. Doing this relieved me of the loneliness I felt, and helped me foster new friendships where there had been none. Going to so many meetings helped me develop a structure and “smart feet.” I'll never forget Day 67: I was going through some terrible stuff, and life got really hard. I know I'd have never stayed sober if I hadn't been so committed to showing up at a meeting. But Day 73 or so came, and I was okay. It works, it really does! —*Anonymous*

One day at a time

I'm a worrier, not a warrior, by nature. There was never enough drama and apocalyptic thoughts to fill one day, so I used to burrow into future years' worth of creepy nightmares. At 24 years old, I was convinced I had destroyed my life beyond repair. Tina had won, and I was damaged goods. Then came recovery and its message of hope, and slowly the old tape has been erased.

All I ever have is today. Instead of being paralyzed with the fear of what has yet to come, I can start to put one foot in front of the other, step by step into the next right action. All I used to know was self-sabotage, but within these twenty-four hours, I am able to reach out to the men and women trudging the road ahead of me. At times I walk gracefully, at times

I have to be gently dragged back to the moment. As long as I live in this one day, the molehill doesn't become Mt. Everest—I am safer in this instant than I can ever be inside my own head.

The first time (in the United States) my addiction took me to the hospital, Bobby McFerrin had just won a Grammy, and every time I heard “don't worry, be happy” from the nurse's station, I screamed. Today I smile, knowing I have found the peace and happiness that eluded me then. —*Fabrice C.*

Other fellowships

Like many of my fellows in CMA, I identify myself as both an addict and alcoholic. Although crystal was a huge part of my story—fourteen years of episodic binge use and one year of daily use—I was introduced to AA first, by my sister and two other friends. They were also addicts, but had found a solution in those rooms. I had the gift of desperation and wanted what they had. I like to think that my first eight months in AA cemented the foundation of my sobriety. I immediately related and realized there was a solution to what they called my “soul sickness.”

Despite this, I wasn't always comfortable sharing my experience, because so much of it revolved around drugs, specifically crystal. Soon, I met a fellow who told me about CMA. I attended my first meeting in January 2006, and have been an active member of the fellowship since. Through this collective experience I was able to see I had other issues that ultimately led to my alcohol and drug use. A few years ago, I attended my first Al-Anon meeting, looking for a solution to my codependency issues. Today I draw on the strength of all these fellowships to help lead a healthy sober life, happy to consider myself a gratefully recovering addict and alcoholic. —*Anthony L.*

People, places, and things

When I had almost six months sober, my phone rang at 2:00 A.M. I was sleeping, but I answered—it was a “friend” inviting me out with him. Almost without hesitation, I was in a cab and diving headfirst into a relapse. After that painful experience, I realized I needed to put up what I call “firewalls” between the drugs and myself in order to stay sober.

People: Obviously, as the phone facilitated my relapse, it was the first thing I sought to change. I began taking my phone off the hook at night to avoid being placed in that vulnerable situation ever again. For at least the first five years of sobriety I did that. (Only recently have I begun to leave my phone on at night, fearing I might miss a call from my parents in the event of an emergency.) Doing that simple, yet difficult, task of taking the phone off the hook helped me stay sober by preventing contact with people I'd used with during my active addiction. I could have accomplished the same thing by changing my phone number—in hindsight, that might have been easier!

Places: I didn't go to places where I'd used (such as bathhouses) during early sobriety. I recall not even walking down the streets they were on—I thought even proximity was threatening. Meanwhile, I created new places in sobriety that made me feel safe (like meetings and church). I also “reclaimed” my apartment, which felt very tainted to me after getting sober. A priest friend came over and blessed each room with holy water and prayers. It was very healing for me and helped me feel more relaxed at home. Today, I take care of myself and treat myself to things that make my space more comfortable: I buy nice soaps, good candles, and fresh flowers periodically. This is part of the living amends I make to myself, to care for the spirit and body I abused for so many years.

Things: Another lesson I learned from my relapses was that the computer was a people-place-and-thing that I needed to get away from to stay clean. The literature speaks about “going to any lengths,” and I was now willing to do that. (I'd tried without success to stay clean the first time using my own ideas.) In those days, I had a desktop—I disconnected it and placed it on the back floor of my closet until I had almost a year of sobriety.

Individually, each of these actions was helpful. And using these firewalls in conjunction with my other tools—calling my sponsor every day, ninety meetings in ninety days, calling three sober people a day, etc.—enabled me to have a life today that is truly beyond my wildest dreams. As a result of taking the suggestions, I'm preparing to celebrate eight years of continuous sobriety from all mind-altering drugs. I am so grateful to the fellowship of CMA for my recovery. —*Carmine N.*

Phone numbers

I'll never forget the first time someone in the program offered me his phone number. It was my third meeting and I had seven days clean. After I announced my day count, the guy sitting next to me gave me a little piece of paper with his name and phone number on it, with a smile. I panicked. I thought, *Oh no, this guy wants to pick me up and I'm not attracted to him at all.*

Not only was he not trying to pick me up, but I actually was attracted to him—to his sobriety. He had what I wanted! As I became more experienced and knowledgeable about the tools of recovery, I learned that phone numbers really could save my life. "Dial them, don't file them," people told me. The only problem was, I didn't have a phone! Cell phones weren't really around yet and I hadn't had a home phone in years. (*Why pay the phone bill?* I thought. *That only takes away money I can spend on drugs!*) Imagine how isolated I was. So I got into the habit of carrying around a pocketful of quarters and used the pay phones that used to be on every corner.

The phone nearest to my apartment played a very important role in my sobriety. I called my sponsor from that phone every day. And I regularly called other fellows from that phone. One time, I awoke at about 5 A.M. and had an incredible urge to use. I knew the after-hours club I used to go to was open and my dealer would be more than willing to oblige. Within a few minutes I found myself dressed and heading out to get high. As I crossed the street, there it was—that phone booth. By then I had made a habit of using phone numbers to connect with people in the program—when I felt good or when I felt bad. I didn't even think about it, I just put the quarter in the phone and called my sponsor. Of course I woke her up, but she was glad I called. I ended up going to her place instead of getting high, and then I went to my morning meeting.

More than a decade later, I still walk by that old pay phone every day. It's a constant reminder that using the number of another addict in recovery really can help me stay sober! —*Craig S.*

Playing the tape

Playing the tape—all the way through to the end—means something different to me now than it did when I first became sober. Early in

sobriety, it meant the horror and powerlessness of my last hit. It meant the handcuffs and self-hate and shame. When I came into the rooms, I obviously remembered my last hit quite well. The words carried great meaning for me then.

After several months, I began to understand that the tool was meant to keep me “sweetly reasonable,” as the “Big Book” says. The pain of my previous life would dim with time; indeed, the bite and humiliation was evaporating with every clean month. How was I to keep the memory of the suffering in the forefront of my mind? The goal of the Twelve Steps is to have a spiritual awakening, so playing the tape wouldn’t be the only thing keeping me sober. Living the Twelve Step life—trusting in my Higher Power and cleaning house on a daily basis, would keep me safe.

I began to think of the consequences of moving from the path of the Twelve Step life instead of only trying to remember the pain. As I said, remembering the pain would only go so far. Now when I thought of relapse, I didn’t think of the act of hitting the pipe as the first part of a slip. I thought instead of the erosion of my connection to my Higher Power, of detaching from the rooms of recovery and the isolation that must surely precede using. I began to believe taking a hit was the last of a litany of things I would do on my way to relapse. I also formed the idea that, if I did nothing to reconnect to the program when I was in trouble, then at some level I was embracing the idea of relapse—and I would be the last one I’d tell the truth to.

My “tape” now (what happened to digital?) sounds something like this: Track 1. I’m losing my compassion and I don’t care. 2. I’m too tired to go to a meeting. 3. I don’t need to do service anymore because I got this thing, right? 4. I haven’t been to a meeting in two years, but I’m still sober so who’s kidding who? 5. The waitress gave me change for a twenty when I only gave her a ten but I’m not saying anything. 6. It’s Sunday and I’m bored, so who’s to know that I took the Vicodin just for fun? 7. It’s just a glass of wine at Thanksgiving. 8. Weed is *legal* in California now. 9. Here comes the glass pipe... 10. I can make better dope than this, so let’s set the lab up again. 11. What lovely handcuffs, Officer. 12. Hi, my name is...

This might seem funny, but I’ve been around for a few years and most of the people I’ve seen relapse have gone through just this journey on their way out. My particular tape works for me. Make your own as the years go by and make sure it keeps you sweetly reasonable. —*Rick B.*

Prayer

I found my way to recovery as the direct result of a desperate cry for assistance. I couldn't go on living in such unbearable agony, yet I wasn't able to imagine a life without meth. Awakening from that all too familiar blackout that followed my final binge, I remember uttering one simple request: "Help." That's all. One word. Yet this time it seemed unconditional. For once, I had no reservations.

I wasn't making this request to anyone or anything in particular. I just put it "out there"—to the universe—to something with more power. My own had failed me. And that very night, I was carried to my first Twelve Step meeting, in the fellowship of CMA. I didn't understand it then, but my first prayer in recovery had been answered.

The Steps don't even mention the word *prayer* until Step Eleven, thank God. And I knew it would be a long time (if ever) until I'd reach that milestone, so I didn't let my prejudice toward religious people and their small-minded practices stand in my way of coming to meetings and sharing. Others shared prayers they found helpful in their own daily lives. The Third and Seventh Step Prayers come to mind. And, of course, the Serenity Prayer. I came to understand that this prayer thing could exist entirely outside of a traditional religion or system of structured belief. It was simply a way for me to tap into the natural energy of the world surrounding me. Prayer helped me stop swimming irrepressibly upstream and instead move gently with the flow of things as they are.

Nearly eight years later, and still sober, my prayers remain as uncomplicated as they were when I began. I start most days asking for "help," and, when I remember, I say "thank you" before the day ends. Occasionally, a few more words follow: "help me be useful," "help me know the right thing to do," "thank you for guiding me," and "thank you for one more day clean." —*John T.*

Professionals

For a long time I didn't take good care of myself. To be honest, I didn't know how. I tried to do things my way, all alone, faking and fumbling through. Life was filled with chaos, fear, and anxiety. I was afraid and embarrassed to let anyone know, including myself, that I needed help and

didn't know where to begin. I remember closing my eyes and thinking, *Please help me*, wishing for someone to come to my rescue and assist me in managing my life. For a long time using crystal meth was my solution. It encouraged me to fool myself, convincing me any help I needed was unavailable, but that all my worries could suddenly disappear. The predictable reality was that crystal never alleviated my fears. I was socially and interpersonally handicapped. Not knowing how to admit I needed and wanted help, I became a pro at transforming a simple situation into an unmanageable mess.

At 40 years old, I am just beginning to understand how to take care of myself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. From opening the mail and paying my bills to scheduling doctors appointments and showing up for commitments, it's all new for me. When it comes to working the Steps I have the fellowship and my sponsor. But for life's many other challenges, I have taken the obvious but excellent suggestion to seek outside aid. Today I am not afraid to call in the pros and ask them for help. I have put together a great team and now have the assistance I desperately wished for.

When I don't feel well or have a health concern, I have a great doctor I can call. He wants to help me. When my depression gets the better of me or my medications don't seem effective, I call my psychiatrist. He wants to help me. There are days that just remaining sober and keeping a positive frame of mind are daunting. Those days I lean on credentialed therapists and drug and alcohol counselors, not just myself and fellow recovering addicts. The pros on my team only desire to assist me in achieving sobriety and learning how to live a sound life. They all want to help me!

Having no medical insurance to pay for all these necessary services, though, felt like an unsolvable problem. The solution was to follow the direction of my case manager and keep all the appointments with professional agencies that she set up for me. I had full health care coverage in a short time. If the calls from the creditors, banks, and other institutions become too much to deal with for today, I have access to good legal help, courtesy of New York state. I am learning there is always a solution to my challenges, and usually a professional waiting for me to just ask for help. An important lesson I continue to learn: They really do want to help! I believe it is our nature as human beings to want to be needed. I always feel proud when someone reaches out to me and trusts me to help. All any of

us ever have to do is ask. The help surrounds us. One of the most profound spiritual lessons I have learned on my journey is that we are never meant to do any of “this thing called life” alone. My solution is to continue to have the willingness to put my hand up, swallow my ego, and ask for help. We can all be pros while remaining in service to each other. —*Bill B.*

Service

Service was a great way to shore up my self-esteem, especially when I was first rebuilding my life in sobriety. Setting up chairs, arranging literature, and maintaining meeting contact lists led me to elected service positions. I felt connected as a member of and contributor to our fellowship. But somewhere along the way, my ego and indomitable self-will stepped in. The home group I was secretary of became *my* meeting—a meeting that belonged to me and depended on me to function. I began to question the catchphrase we use in the program: “Service keeps you sober.” After three years in CMA, in which I’ve done lots of service as a meeting secretary, chair, GSR, committee member, etc., how can I explain why I’m counting days again? Is it possible to do too much service, especially if the service is motivated by ego and accompanied by resentments?

At my sponsor’s suggestion, I looked up the definitions of the words *trusted* and *servant*. A trusted servant is a person relied upon to be of assistance to, or to promote the interests of, another—in this case, the group. This is in contrast to being a *leader*, or one who directs. Because I’ve been a leader in my professional life for many years, the concept of trusted servant can be tricky for me. What I’ve discovered through my relapse is that doing service doesn’t mean “leading.” It can be as simple as showing up to a meeting and sharing authentically how difficult it is to come back from a slip. If one person hears the experience I’ve shared, and it helps keep him sober today, then I’ve done service.

Going forward, I hope to be a “worker among workers,” focusing on service that I can do behind the scenes that both serves the group and is meaningful to me. Not holding an elected position, yet still contributing by preparing materials, taking notes, and helping to set up meetings, helps me to build humility while remaining engaged and a part of the group. And learning to focus on the principles of the program, rather