

# The Serenity Prayer and Twelve Step Recovery

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## The AA Serenity Prayer

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These simple words ring clear through the hearts and minds of Alcoholics Anonymous members across the world:

God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can, and  
Wisdom to know the difference.

This often used AA prayer is an excerpt from a longer prayer commonly attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr. Although its origins are a bit unclear, its impacts are not. The Serenity Prayer serves as a focal point for the very spirit of AA, anchoring its members to its quintessential teachings about surrender and acceptance. Below, we provide the full Serenity Prayer along with an examination of its history, meaning and importance so that we all might carry its lessons closely and transform common hardships into a calming surrender.

## The Full Serenity Prayer

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God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.  
Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
As it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make things right  
If I surrender to His Will;  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life

And supremely happy with Him

Forever and ever in the next.

Amen.

## AA, the Twelve Steps and the Serenity Prayer

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Members of Alcoholics Anonymous have enthusiastically embraced this prayer—known as the Serenity Prayer—almost from the moment they discovered it. In fact, these 25 words are heard in most every AA meeting and widely taken as a succinct statement of a path to sanity and sobriety.

The Serenity Prayer meshes perfectly with the spirituality of AA's Twelve Steps. And, although the origin is thought to be Christian, the Serenity Prayer is applicable to your daily life regardless of religion or spiritual belief system. There are several versions of the Serenity Prayer, each with slightly different wording that support groups have adopted. The full Serenity Prayer text has stronger religious overtones.

Also there are conflicting accounts of the prayer's origin. The Serenity Prayer has been variously attributed to an ancient Sanskrit text, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi and others. Many AA members were first exposed to the prayer in 1948, when it was quoted in the *Grapevine*, an AA periodical. There it was credited to American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). The Serenity Prayer spread both through Niebuhr's sermons and church groups in the 1930s and 1940s, and was later adopted and popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step programs.

## Living the Serenity Prayer in Recovery from Alcohol or Drug Addiction

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For many, the first verse of the Serenity Prayer serves as a daily touchstone, reminding us that to achieve serenity, we must approach each moment with wisdom and courage. The Serenity Prayer accurately expresses a central problem of addiction and prescribes a timeless solution.

The prayer's message about acceptance echoes insights from Bill W., cofounder of AA. In the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* (published by AA World Services), Bill described the core trait of alcoholics as self-centeredness—something he called "self-will run riot." He further described the alcoholic as "an actor who wants to run the whole show; is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way." Bill's solution: "First of all, we had to quit playing God."

What blocks some alcoholics and addicts from achieving serenity is their intense desire to achieve a sense of absolute control—one that is simply not possible for human beings. This need for control has two aspects. First is an attempt to control the behavior of others, a strategy that addicts cling to despite its repeated failure. Second is the attempt to control feelings by medicating them with mood-altering chemicals. This strategy, too, is doomed to failure.

An alcoholic's quest for absolute control can lead to misery, which may contribute to substance abuse problems. Ironically, the need to control may also be a response to the unmanageability caused by their out-of-control use of drugs. And the vicious cycle continues until the addict accepts that there will always be external circumstances that we cannot change. The prayer instead points us to examine our inner life: We cannot directly control our feelings. However, we can influence our feelings through what we can control—our thinking and our actions. By focusing on those two factors, we can attain the final quality promised by the Serenity Prayer: courage.

The Serenity Prayer is a wide door, one that's open to people of all faiths and backgrounds. It speaks wisdom to addicts and non-addicts alike. People who live this prayer discover how to strike a dynamic balance between acceptance and change. This gift is precious, and it's one that we can enjoy for a lifetime of serenity.

The prayer perfectly expresses the central problem of addiction and prescribes a timeless solution