

CODEPENDENTS' GUIDE TO THE TWELVE STEPS

*How to Find the Right Program
for You and Apply Each of the
Twelve Steps to Your Own Issues*

Melody Beattie

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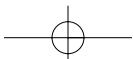
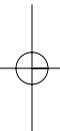
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*This book is dedicated to the people working
the Twelve Steps and to the Higher Power
that helps us do that*



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The Twelve Step groups, who cooperated in providing the information we needed for an accurate directory.

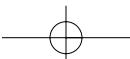
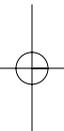
Beatrice Pieper, my research assistant and on-staff freelance writer. Bea diligently conducted the interviews with recovering people and compiled the directory of Twelve Step programs and the book reviews. Her efforts, contributions, and encouragement were vital to this book.

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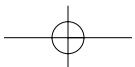
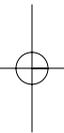
My children, Shane and Nichole. Shane makes me laugh, accepts me when I'm busy, and welcomes me when I'm not. Nichole is my inspiration and a gift.

And my mother, who bought me my first word processor years ago and told me to get to work.



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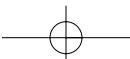
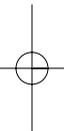


OUT THERE

Out there
you'll see it all.
The floating ends
will meet and mend,
and you will be yourself;
your fully formed,
though always changing,
self of selves.
Every clumsy backward look
will pay for itself.
Every tear you've cried,
or wanted to cry,
will set your broken bones.
The rips in your heart
will no longer
need to be guarded
by steel girders,
banyan trees,
or even rice paper.
Not so much as a
dragonfly's wing
will you need
to cover the bludgeoned place,
to protect the private you
you love so much
and hope to save intact
from what has seemed years
of relentless pummeling.

Go and live and love
in peace, my friend,
for surely there is love
to enfold you,
and life to be feasted upon:
your portion is boundless.
Love will be the more
you've wanted.
You will know it
when you see it.
You will love yourself
as no lover
has ever had the courage
to love;
and the warmth you've wanted
will line your pillowcases,
dance upon your windowsill,
and hide
at the ends of your socks
awaiting your toes.

—DEBORAH MEARS



“The Twelve Steps are the biggest healing gift to the twentieth century.”—Terry N.

INTRODUCTION

The first time I was exposed to the Twelve Steps, I was forced into a state hospital to recover from chemical addiction. I didn't want to be there; I didn't want to get sober. But I had to stay in treatment to avoid legal problems.

As part of the treatment agenda I had to attend a peculiar session in the hospital auditorium. Twice weekly, people from the community came in, walked onstage, and talked about themselves. They said how awful life used to be when they were drinking, what had happened, and how good life was now. They had gone from trouble and pain to living happily ever after.

I sat in the back row, as far away from these people as possible. One day, a man said something that hit me right in the solar plexus. He was no longer talking about himself. He was talking about *me*—my pain, my struggles, the fears I had hidden, even from myself. Something changed despite my agenda. I got sober.

Seven years and several relationships with alcoholics later, I knew I needed something more than sobriety. I wasn't on my way to living happily ever after; I was on my way to codependency recovery.

I found myself again facing these Twelve Steps, this time from a different point of view. This time I was being affected by *another person's* alcoholism. Before long, I learned the truth. It wasn't about the other person; it was about me and my codependency issues—which I now believe were present from age four.

I wasn't happy to be facing these Steps again. I didn't like being in so much pain that I needed another recovery. I thought one big problem was all one person should have to face in one lifetime.

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But I'm grateful now. The first time I was exposed to these Steps, they gave me sobriety. The second time I was exposed to them, they gave me a *self* and a *life*. They gave me recovery from codependency.

This is a book about the Twelve Steps and how these principles can be applied to codependency recovery, regardless of which Twelve Step group you now regularly attend.

Many of us have looked for magic. We've payed, waited, prayed, searched, longed, and hoped for the key that would unlock the mystery of recovery in our life. We've looked for the person, place, or thing that would make us feel better, that would stop our pain and change us.

How many times have we attended a seminar, bought a book, or gone to a therapist, hoping to be transformed? Those activities help. They're valid tools on this journey.

But there's more.

I regularly receive letters from people asking when I'm going to lead a seminar or asking if the person could consult with me. "If I could just talk to you, then I'd get better. You hold the key, the magic to my recovery."

I know the feeling well because I've had it about others. If only I could stand in the presence of Earnie Larsen, or Anne Wilson Schaefer, or any of the other teachers long enough, then I'd be changed. I'd be transformed.

We know that's not true. We each have our own key, our own magic. We each have the power and the ability to discover that magic and tap into our own healing process, regardless of our present circumstances.

The way to do that is by working the Twelve Steps. These are the basic principles of recovery from our codependency. By working these Steps, we will be led, at the right time, to the people, seminars, helping professionals, and books that we need.

But the Steps are the core of transformation. They are the path to recovery.

That's why I'm writing a book about them.

Many Twelve Step groups related to codependency recovery have sprung up across the nation. Many of these groups are inundated with new members and have a shortage of old-timers, people with practi-

cal experience working the Steps. Sometimes, group members practice in group what they are there to recover from: caretaking, shame, controlling, obsessing, victimization, and neglect of self-responsibility. For lack of knowing what else to do, many find themselves sitting in group focusing on the problem instead of the solution—the Steps.

This is my gift to those of you recovering from codependency while this multitude of codependency groups travels from infancy into coming-of-age. It is also a gift to myself. Writing this book has renewed and refreshed my belief in these Steps and their ability to facilitate recovery in anyone's life, including my own.

To write this book, I've interviewed many people attending a variety of groups—from CoDA (Codependents Anonymous) to Al-Anon (for those affected by a loved one's drinking) to Families Anonymous (people concerned about chemical or behavioral problems in a loved one, usually a child) to COSA (Codependents of Sex Addicts). And more.

I've talked to people recovering from multiple addictions—combinations such as an eating disorder, chemical dependency, and codependency. I've talked to people recovering from incest or abuse issues and codependency. I've talked to people who consider themselves “just codependent.”

I've talked to people from the straight and gay communities.

I've talked to people from all parts of the country who, in a variety of dialects, are learning to stop asking “How can I help you?” and start asking “How can I help myself?”

The common denominator of the people I've talked to is that regardless of the Twelve Step group they attended, they considered codependency an important recovery issue and were willing to talk about how the Twelve Steps applied to codependency issues.

The people interviewed were not talking to me on behalf of any particular group. This book is not endorsed, sponsored by, or affiliated with any particular Twelve Step group; it does not represent the opinions of any Twelve Step group. It is not written to promote a Twelve Step group. It is written to spark and trigger individual thinking about how these Steps can facilitate healing from codependency.

Then, you can show others how these principles are working for you.

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That's called recovery.

The anonymity of people interviewed has been protected.

Included in this book is a list of the Twelve Step programs that people are using to recover from codependency and related issues. You will also find a list of books that people have found helpful at different times in their recovery. Some of these are recovery books; others are treasures, little gifts that have helped along the way. It is a list of the classics and the favorites.

You can use this book any way you choose. It is not intended to be read cover to cover; you can dive in at any chapter or Step that feels right for you. This is not *The Book on the Steps*. As with my other writings, it is my personal and prejudiced opinion.

At the end of each chapter I have included suggested activities to trigger thinking about how each Step might apply to your life. You can read the questions and think about your answers. Or, you may want to write your answers in a journal or notebook. To help clarify your thinking and facilitate your recovery, you may want to discuss your answers with a trusted friend.

It is with the greatest respect that I write about these Twelve Steps, originally designed for recovery from alcoholism. In this book, I've tried to capture how these Steps work for recovery from codependency issues. Yet writing about these Steps is a weak reflection of what these Steps are and what they can do. The magic, the mystery, the power in these Steps can be understood only when each of us personally applies these Steps to our life. That's when they reveal themselves. That's when they become more than a list of twelve suggestions.

"I really think these Steps are freedom," said Jody. "They give me clues to what freedom can really be about. They do it in a way that challenges my already existing beliefs about what freedom is, about what being human is, about what being spiritual is. And I need that."

Read about what these Steps have done for us, then capture their mystery and magic in your life.

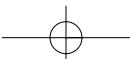
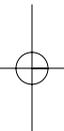
A note here for beginners. It can often be confusing to hear recovery jargon, such as "working a Step." What does it mean to work a Step? Some people think about, write about, and work on the Steps in the same way they would work on school homework or tax returns—in a disciplined, dedicated manner. Some work on the Steps with their

sponsor, another person in the program they choose as their mentor. Others go to meetings, listen, and let the Steps sink in. Others find a course somewhere in the middle.

We are each free to find our own version of what it means to work a Step. I find it helpful to think about these Steps before, during, and sometimes after an incident where I would normally lapse into a codependent behavior, such as controlling or not taking care of myself. I think about the Steps when I'm in emotional pain, when I get stuck, and during those times I find myself running from my feelings.

A natural process takes over, and many of us find ourselves instinctively focusing on these Steps during the course of our lives. We start working the Steps, and soon the Steps begin to work on us. Sometimes they've worked on me when I've resisted. They change us, transform us, in ways that must be experienced, not intellectualized.

Working the Steps means making a very human effort to apply a recovery principle in our lives, and very profound behavioral, emotional, and spiritual results occur. In the following chapters, we'll look at these efforts and the results.



“Surrender happens of its own accord. It just dawns on me. Then peace of mind settles in, and my life starts to get more manageable.”—Bob T.

STEP ONE

“We admitted we were powerless
over others—that our lives had
become unmanageable.”

—*Step One of CoDA*

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD THIS STEP, I DIDN'T GET IT. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND. It felt dark, scary, and untrue.

Powerless over others? My life—unmanageable?

I thought I was in complete control of myself and others. I thought there was no circumstance too overwhelming, no feeling so great that I couldn't handle it by sheer force of willpower. I thought being in control was expected of me. It was my job. That's how I got through life!

And I thought my life looked so much more manageable than the lives of those around me—until I started looking within. That's when I found the undercurrent of fear, anger, pain, loneliness, emptiness, and unmet needs that had controlled me most of my life.

That's when I took my eyes off the other person long enough to take a look at the state of affairs in my life.

That's when I began to find a life and come alive.

“I didn't know about power and powerlessness,” said Mary, talking about the First Step. “Being a victim and being in control was how I was in power. If I was powerless, then someone else was in control.”

Now we are learning a better way to own our power than being victims and being controlling. It begins by admitting and accepting the truth about ourselves and our relationships.

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We are powerless over others. When we try to exert power where we have none, our lives at some level may become unmanageable. Let's take a look at some ways unmanageability can present itself in our lives, and where our ideas about controlling others—or allowing them to control us—began.

MY STORY

I can still remember the scene vividly, even though it happened more than a decade ago. Someone I cared about a lot was drinking. He was an alcoholic. And he wouldn't stop. I had done everything I could to make him stop. Nothing worked.

Nothing.

Neither was I able to stop my efforts to control his drinking. After yet another round of promises, forgiveness, then broken promises, I settled on the ultimate plan to *make* him stop drinking. I would show him how it felt to love someone who was using chemicals. I would make it look like I had returned to drug usage. That would get his attention. That would show him how much I hurt. Then he would stop.

Carefully, I set the stage. Although I had been clean of drugs for years, I laid out the paraphernalia of a user: a small packet with white powder in it (I used sugar); a spoon, burnt on one side; a piece of cotton in the spoon. Then I lay down on the couch to make it look like I was under the influence of narcotics.

A short time later, the person who was the focus (at that time) of my control efforts entered the room. He looked around, saw the spoon, saw me, and started to react. I jumped off the couch and started lecturing.

"See!" I screamed. "See how it feels to love someone and see them using chemicals! See how much it hurts! See what you've been *doing to me* for these years!"

His reaction was not nearly as important as my neighbor's reaction later that evening. "What you're doing is really crazy," she said, "and you need to go to Al-Anon."

It took me months to learn the truth: I didn't need to prove to the

alcoholic how much I hurt. I needed to become aware of how much pain I was in. I needed to take care of myself.

That's only one of many incidents that shows the lengths I went to to control people. I was so good at seeing the behaviors, especially the out-of-control behaviors, of another. Yet I couldn't see unmanageability in my own life. I couldn't see myself. And I was trapped, locked into the victim role. People didn't just do things. They did things *to me*. No matter what happened, each event felt like a pointed attempt to do me in.

My ability to separate myself from others—to separate my issues, my business, my affairs, and my responsibilities from the issues, business, affairs, and responsibilities of others—was nonexistent. I blended into the rest of the world like an amoeba.

If someone needed something, I considered that need my personal and private responsibility, even if I was just guessing about what he or she needed. If someone had a feeling, it was my responsibility to work through it for him or her. If someone had a problem, it was mine to solve.

I didn't know how to say no. I didn't have a life of my own. I had a backlog of feelings from childhood, and chances were great that whatever I was reacting to today was probably a patterned reaction from childhood. Two weeks after I got married, I raced home from work, flung open the closet doors, and checked to see if my husband's clothes were still in the closet. I was certain I was going to be abandoned, left. I felt totally unlovable. And I didn't have the foggiest idea what it meant to own my power.

The base I operated from was fear, coupled with low self-esteem. I spent most of my time reacting to other people, trying to control them, allowing them to control me, and feeling confused by it all.

I thought I was doing everything right. Aren't people supposed to be perfect? Aren't people supposed to be stoic? Shouldn't we keep pushing forward, no matter how much it hurts? Isn't it good to give until it hurts, then keep giving until we're doubled over in pain? And how can we allow others to go about their life course? Isn't it our job to stop them, set them straight? Isn't that the right way, the good way, the Christian way?

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The codependent way.

As many others have said about themselves, I wasn't me. I was whoever people wanted me to be. And I felt quite victimized and used up by it all. After years of practicing hard-line codependency, the unmanageability in my life was overwhelming. Some of my codependency I didn't understand until well into recovery.

When I began recovery I was more than \$50,000 in debt, as a result of the unmanageability in my financial affairs. No amount was too great to be borrowed if it would help someone else.

My spirituality had been taxed to the limit. How many times had I prayed for God to change other people? How often had God refused? I thought God had abandoned me. I didn't know that I had abandoned myself. I didn't know that now that I was an adult, people couldn't abandon me. All they could do was leave.

In some instances, I may have been better off if they had.

My relationships with my children were chaotic. It's hard to be an effective parent when you're bound up in pain, denial, and repressed feelings and are regularly wishing for death.

My relationships with friends were strained. I had little to offer friends, except my perpetual complaints about the misery in my life. Most of my friendships centered around shared stories of victimization, interspersed with Rabelaisian humor to make it bearable.

"Guess who used me today?"

I had no feelings that I was aware of. I had no needs that I was aware of. I prided myself on my ability to endure needless suffering, deprive myself, and go without.

I neglected my career.

My health was failing. I spent years seeking medical treatment for nonspecific viruses. I had a hysterectomy. I had viral meningitis. I had gastritis. My back hurt. My head ached. Arthritis was beginning to settle in.

And I was only thirty-two years old.

Codependency is a powerful force. So is denial and the ability to ignore what is before our eyes. What's there has the power to hurt, especially when we feel helpless, vulnerable, frightened, and ashamed by it all.

STANLEY'S STORY

Stanley is a successful architect in his fifties. It took him sixteen years to notice the unmanageability and chaos in his life—sixteen years of denying, putting up with, pretending, and going deeper into hiding within himself before he saw the truth.

Stanley's father is an alcoholic. Stanley's wife's father died of alcoholism. And after sixteen years of trying to control his youngest son, Stanley reached the point of emotional collapse.

"By the time our youngest son, John, was six, I knew we were in trouble," Stanley said. "He constantly fought at school. He was belligerent and refused to do his homework. At home, he caused problems. He hollered at his mother, swore at her, and sometimes hit her.

"My wife and I fought all the time. I tried to be understanding. She had special circumstances. She had been in the camps during World War II, and she believed children should be loved and adored. She didn't want us to discipline John.

"John caused complete chaos at home. He was bright. He knew how to push everyone's buttons. He had my wife and I fighting, his siblings and I fighting. He even had his grandparents going at it."

When John was ten, Stanley gave his wife an ultimatum: Either they sought professional help for John and the family or Stanley was moving out. They went to a psychologist who told them not to worry. John, the psychologist said, was a bright child, a bit precocious, but he'd grow out of this *stage*.

That session was the beginning of \$20,000 (after insurance coverage) of fruitless family counseling.

When John was eleven, Stanley's wife threw up her arms in despair and walked out of a school counseling session. She was tired. She had given all she could to the situation. She vowed never to set foot inside a school again. A short time later she moved out, leaving Stanley to raise the three children alone.

By the time John was twelve, Stanley was spending more time in school than John. Stanley was there three days a week, explaining why John was only there two days a week.

"The only way I could get John graduated from ninth to tenth grade was by promising to leave that school system," Stanley said.

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“How codependent is that? I sold our home and moved to another school system so the school would graduate John.”

On one occasion, Stanley came home to find his middle son, Jeremy, choking John. Jeremy had his hands around John's neck and had lifted him off the ground. Jeremy quietly said that he had put up with John for twelve years and could do it no longer.

Another time, Stanley walked into a room just as John was throwing a knife at another child. Stanley was able to deflect the course of the knife, causing it to pierce a window screen instead of the boy.

When John was sixteen, things came to a head. By then, Stanley's wife had moved back home. One Sunday, Stanley was in the den watching football, and his wife was in the kitchen preparing brunch. John walked into the kitchen and began arguing with his mother. Stanley listened, as their discussion escalated and their voices grew louder.

“I was afraid,” said Stanley. “John still acted abusively toward his mother, hollering at her and sometimes hitting her. I wasn't going to let that happen again.”

Stanley walked into the kitchen just as John was about to strike his mother. Stanley grabbed John and restrained him in a bear hug. When he did this, his wife came to John's rescue. She started pulling at Stanley, trying to get him to let John loose.

Then Jeremy, the middle son, walked into the kitchen. He started pulling at his mother, trying to get her to leave Stanley alone, so he could restrain John.

The four of them toppled to the floor. Stanley cut his head open. Blood gushed out. Stanley let John loose, ran to the car, drove to the emergency room at the hospital, received forty-five stitches, and drove back home.

There in the living room stood Jeremy and John, toe to toe. They were still going at it.

“They were ready to duke it out,” said Stanley. “My wife was standing next to them, watching. She didn't know what to do. The boys were fully grown. John was six feet tall and weighted 175 pounds. Both of them had been trained in martial arts.

“Damn it,” Stanley said. “If there's going to be any fighting around here, I'm going to do it.”

Then Stanley stepped in between the two boys and punched them both.

The next day Jeremy moved out. A few weeks later, the oldest sister moved out. Two weeks after that, Stanley moved out. Two months later, Stanley's wife moved out.

"A sixteen-year-old boy had gained complete control of the house and two dogs," Stanley said. "That was it. I moved back in."

Two weeks later, a school counselor called Stanley. "I think you've got a problem," she said. The counselor then informed Stanley that John was using drugs and had been since he was eight years old—a fact that \$20,000 worth of counseling and therapy had failed to reveal.

By then, when he wasn't dealing with the school or police officials, Stanley was spending his days locked in his office, head down on his desk, crying.

"I was drained, and felt totally devoid of any worth as a human being," Stanley said.

Stanley began attending Al-Anon, then Families Anonymous. He was ready to face and accept his powerlessness and the unmanageability in his own life. He was ready to detach and begin taking care of himself.

(The epilogue to the story is this: John went to treatment but wasn't successful. Later on, after going to jail on a narcotics sale charge, he began a true recovery. He is now a successful businessman and has a close relationship with his father. Stanley and his wife divorced. Jeremy and the oldest sister are not yet in recovery for codependency. Stanley has lost one hundred pounds, exercises regularly, feels peaceful and hopeful about life, and takes care of himself daily.)

OTHER STORIES OF UNMANAGEABILITY

But I'm not in that much trouble, you might be thinking. My response is: good. You don't have to be in a lot of trouble to recognize unmanageability and begin recovering from codependency. It takes many of us much pain to become ready for recovery. Others do not need as much chaos.

Mike's awareness of the unmanageability in his life was a quiet one.

"I came home from work one night, and I could no longer stand

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my usual system of sitting in front of the television, staring at it, and escaping from myself by reading the newspaper. My sister, who has always been borderline psychotic, called. She started going on and on, giving fifteen different reasons for why she had lost her job. It was about the fifteenth one in a row she had lost. And the thought occurred to me that I could either go on and on with my life as it was, being bored and quietly escaping through the television, or I could start doing something different. Someone had given me the address of a Twelve Step group for adult children of alcoholics. I got up, turned off the television, and went to a meeting. I was ready to take this First Step—out of sheer boredom.”

Karen’s unmanageability with her codependency became apparent while she was in recovery from addiction to drugs and alcohol.

“I had been recovering from chemical addiction for fifteen years. I was doing everything everyone told me to. I was going to five meetings a week. I was *helping* people constantly, whether they wanted it or not. But inside, I was just as ashamed of myself as I was the day I got sober. I had no self-worth. I couldn’t tell people no. I couldn’t say what I thought. And everything I did, I did to make people like me—from the way I dressed, to the way I combed my hair and put on my makeup, to the way I sat, and the things I did for people. I felt so victimized. I never felt good enough. If I ever did say no or take care of myself with people, I felt so guilty. And, I felt angry and resentful, because my days and hours were consumed with doing things for people I felt I had to do, and people never seemed to appreciate what I did for them.

“I felt so bad about myself, I hoped that if I helped enough people, God would start treating me good. That’s when it dawned on me that I needed to start treating myself good. God wasn’t making me do all these things. God wasn’t stopping the good from happening in my life. I was.

“I knew I needed, wanted, and deserved more from my sobriety than what I was getting. I came to understand that to get that ‘more,’ I had to begin addressing my codependency. It was time.”

To use author Charlotte Kasl’s phrase, Karen was constantly “giving more than she could afford” to others and not giving to herself—a codependent behavior that ultimately creates unman-

ageability. We can give more of ourselves than we can afford financially or emotionally. Any time our giving begins to get compulsive or is induced by feelings of guilt and obligation or leaves us feeling victimized, we are in danger. Any time we're uncomfortable with what we're doing because it goes against our own truth and what we want, we are in danger.

Consistently giving more than our share and not getting our needs met in relationships can create unmanageability.

After ending a relationship and staying away from love relationships for a while, Martha met Jack. He really charmed her one evening in the early days of their relationship when he drove her to the train station and carried her bags to the platform for her.

"No man had ever done anything like that for me in my life," she said. "It was love at first sight."

The problems began subtly and were hard to identify. Jack told her early on that once she got to know him, she wouldn't like him. Jack was right.

"He seemed to want to control my opinions and thinking," Martha said. "Whenever I voiced an opinion that was different than his, even if it was about a piece of art, he would argue with me until I gave in and agreed with him."

Whenever it came time to be close, Jack withdrew. He would have sexual relations with Martha, but he refused to spend the night with her. He would go for long periods without seeing her, then make a date, and at the last minute, cancel.

The relationship evolved into long conversations on each other's answering machines.

"My friends kept telling me this relationship was no good," Martha said, "but I had a hard time seeing it. I couldn't break loose. I got stuck, trapped in it. It caused me a lot of pain. My self-esteem dropped. I cried a lot and sat waiting by the phone. I stopped trusting myself."

Finally, Martha began attending meetings of CoDA. Soon she was able to terminate the relationship and begin taking care of herself. Martha learned that giving away her power and allowing herself to be victimized created unmanageability in her relationship and her life. She also began to look at and change some of the underlying reasons