

"12 Steps" toward healthier attitudes and coping strategies

Steps 2 & 3:

"accepting help and support to restore physical, mental, social and spiritual health; turning our care over to our fellows, who have learned these lessons"

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Step Two in the Physician Health Program's "12-steps for medical professionals who seek rehumanizing," is about belief. If we have admitted we have problems related to living our lives uniquely as medical professionals, we need to believe there are solutions. Doubters and skeptics, we may

be challenged by this notion, for haven't some of us thought our problems to be especially unremediable?

What does life have to offer? At this point, we feel that we have given much more than we have received. This has been our role as medical professionals — a role willingly embraced by us. But now, feelings of depletion and resentment are becoming established, and we must become open to seeing things differently. Perhaps we can consider the same suggestions we offer to our patients.

First, we might need help from our health-care system — the very one we serve. If we believe it is good for others to seek advice from a family doctor, then it's good for us, too. Then we would have proper access to the full range of services available, along with personal support and advocacy...if we were willing.

In any setting, we are accustomed to communicating with others about medical matters, and medical matters only. This has become the basis of the majority of our social interactions. But there are people in our lives other than patients and co-workers — people with interests

other than medicine. Family, friends, even strangers would have much to offer...if we become receptive.

There is an infinite world of ideas and skills that we have abandoned to the pursuit of medical knowledge. We might recall that, as young people and students, we were excited by so much: philosophy, music, art, politics, sport, religion — all areas of human thought and endeavour. Within our medical school class we could find remarkable people who, when they pooled their talents and energies, could do anything from build a house to perform a symphony. Our potential was limitless. What happened?

We are surrounded by the power and beauty of nature. At some level, we all yearn for the feeling of natural terrain beneath our feet, and open sky above our heads. We can be restored by something as simple as a walk in the park or as wonderful as a hike in the mountains. There is a marvellous outdoor world for us to study, play in, or just visit for awhile...if we make the time.

There is a spiritual side to life as well. This is not a reference to religion in the formal sense, but rather

our ability to discover and articulate our own basic purpose in life. Learning to experience all of our emotions, peace and fulfilment, and how to help ourselves and others achieve our full potential are part of developing a meaningful spiritual existence. Spirituality also refers to our understanding of a Power greater than ourselves, and our relationship to that Power. Some see this in nature, others in the collective wisdom of mankind and belief in our human potential. Many find their understanding of a Higher Power, whom they know as God or by a variety of other names, in the traditional religious practices of eastern and western cultures. Unfortunately, many of us have forgotten this aspect of life, or have never had the opportunity to really consider the importance of spirituality.

Life offers us every opportunity to learn and evolve. We can remember love and being loved as the ultimate form of human connectedness. We can realize our grandest vision for ourselves — once living life as a medical professional *only* ceases to hinder us.

Step Two is about hope. If we recognize that our established patterns of

thinking and behaving have not been useful in solving all of our problems, our minds can then be receptive to new ways. Our whole philosophy of life must be open for examination. We begin to understand that experience and wisdom of our fellows who have learned these lessons are available to us. Strength and guidance from a Higher Power, as we choose to understand one, are there for the asking.

Yes, we are doctors. But, in the ways that matter most, we are not so different from other people. Step Two is the beginning of a change in thinking — but a change in thinking is only the beginning.

Step Three

In Step One, we acknowledged that living as a medical professional only has caused problems. In Step Two, we came to believe that life has much to offer that can restore us to wholeness. But it is one thing to believe that there must be something better for us, and quite another to surrender

to that belief. That is the essence of Step Three.

What does it mean to turn our will and our lives over to another? For some medical professionals these are words that rankle, concepts that are contrary to our training, the accumulated experiences of our lives, and even our very nature. We have been reluctant to risk placing our trust in anyone or anything apart from ourselves. Reaching out to others has not been a choice we have considered. But finally, our discomfort exceeds our fear of doing so.

Simply put, this step represents our decision to let go of our reservations and to become willing to seek help. This might mean approaching a good friend or colleague whom we recognize has achieved a measure of health and balance. Perhaps there is someone in our immediate or extended family with whom we can share our feelings. We may now decide to seek professional service in a variety of ways, be it a call to our professional

association, or to a personal physician or other health-care providers.

Then there are the spiritual considerations. This can be a difficult area. The isolation and loneliness of our present condition demands that we depend more than ever on our own internal resources — or so we have been taught to believe. For some of us, belief in self-will and our ability to manage our own lives is all we had. Trust in a Higher Power, however we may have conceptualized this in our lives, does not come naturally to us.

If we come from a religious background, we may have lost touch with the faith of our family, and our youth. The practice of faith requires time, reflection, discussion and meditation. Some of us will have retained a habit of “going through the motions” — maintaining religious ritual without seeking or deriving spiritual sustenance from these practices. Others may recall religion as harsh or punishing, and will have angrily rejected this aspect of life.

Still others have no personal spiritual tradition. Trained as scientists, a more concrete approach to life is taken. These individuals seldom contemplate their place among their fellows and in the world at large, and find little pleasure or relief from internal distress when they do. Self-determination has been the credo, even while doing things entirely their own way has resulted in fatigue, chaos, pain and confusion.

So the time comes to seek spiritual relief, as well as help in other personal areas. Our decision made, we feel a new sense of courage. Faith that help, even for us, exists, and a willingness to use it, lessens our fear. We are now free to move on to greater self-awareness. And our decision implies that we are ready to begin an active process of restoration, starting with Step Four.

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OMA Physician Health Program 12 Steps for Medical Professionals:

Suggested Guidelines for Physicians Who Seek Rehumanizing

1. We admitted difficulty living as a medical professional only, that problems arise from this single focus in life.
2. We came to believe that accepting help and support from everything life has to offer could restore our physical, mental, social and spiritual health.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of our fellows who have learned these lessons and a Higher Power as we understand one.
4. We made a searching and fearless personal inventory of our problems, strengths, goals and dreams.
5. We shared our list with trusted others, acknowledging our character weaknesses, virtues and humanity.
6. We were entirely ready to accept the help available to address our basic human needs.
7. With humility and an open mind we sought to correct the shortcomings in our lives.
8. We made a list of all persons and institutions we resented and became willing to address these issues.
9. We made direct amends where necessary and took any action required to relieve these tensions, except when doing so would harm others.
10. We continued to monitor internal feelings and needs, promptly admitting when we had a problem.
11. We remained open and responsive to help, guidance and love we can receive from others who care about us.
12. Having achieved personal revitalization as a result of these steps, we try to carry this message to the others in our lives, and to practise these principles in all our affairs.

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