



eating disorders *anonymous*™

EDA Step Workbook



A guide for new members and
Eating Disorders Anonymous groups

**Step One –
We admitted we were powerless over our eating disorder –
that our lives had become unmanageable.**

"We" start this journey individually, but we're not alone. No matter how bizarre some of our behavior patterns have been, we can be sure someone else did the same thing. Eating disorders are not new and many of us had very odd behaviors indeed. You are not alone. All of us feel guilt and shame at times.

Talking to others who understand what we're going through gave us the trust to explore our scary secrets and helped us face feelings that kept us from being true to ourselves for years. You can't change until you accept where you are and who you are. You find out who you are by being honest with yourself and others.

"Admitting" is being honest. We're coming clean. Admitting something means accepting it as reality and taking responsibility for our part in it. By taking responsibility, we start dealing with the reality of having an eating disorder. The healing begins.

Admitting "that we are powerless over our eating disorder" is hard for many of us at first. Admitting powerlessness means different things for different people: Are you trying overly hard and getting exhausted? Do you lack consistency? Do situations and emotions overwhelm you? Are you confused by your different urges and needs, which seem to contradict one another? Do you slide back into old patterns when facing difficulty? Any one of these things can feel like powerlessness.

Admitting powerlessness means surrendering to the fact that what we were doing didn't work. It wouldn't help to just do more of it or to do it harder. We needed to find alternatives. We needed to make room in our minds, hearts, and habits for these alternatives. Admitting powerlessness clears the path for new things to come. We question our perceptions of what's happening. We examine and reevaluate our methods. We notice what works and what doesn't work. This feels scary at times (especially since harsh judgments can be part of our disease!).

Accepting powerlessness does NOT mean...

- ... Surrendering to a religion, philosophical system, or a sponsors' opinions.
- ... Giving up because we feel it's no use anyway.
 - ... Avoiding responsibility for our actions.
 - ... Hiding behind self-hate and fear.
 - ... Considering our lives worthless.
- ... Ignoring other people and our own needs.

Accepting powerlessness CAN mean...

- ... Accepting where we are at this point in our lives (instead of making excuses and telling ourselves it's not that bad after all or that friends and family who worry are exaggerating).
- ... Accepting our emotions. (They will all pass. Feeling our emotions and learning to find safe outlets for them helps us develop healthy coping skills.)
- ... Accepting moments of self-loathing and learning to forgive ourselves and others for not being perfect.
- ... Accepting that our expectations will sometimes be disappointed and that this is a normal part of daily life. (Learning to find humor and growth in everything.)
- ... Accepting that whatever we think and feel today will change. Life is never static and neither are we.

Facing our own powerlessness can feel devastating, painful, and humiliating. At times it's extremely uncomfortable. We learn through experience that growing through temporary discomfort brings healing and sanity. We need to be patient and kind with ourselves. We take it one day at a time.

Some of us resist admitting "powerlessness" Honor your fears, but don't allow them to rule your life.

When we're honest about our setbacks, we reclaim the power to pick ourselves up and set out again on the road of recovery. The truth really sets us free.

Is your life "unmanageable"? What does that mean? However organized and purposeful our lives may have looked, we did not manage ourselves very well; we struggled. Even if many of us didn't have to be hospitalized, our attitudes and behavior patterns kept us from living free and happy lives. Perhaps we didn't lose a job, but were afraid to begin a new one. Perhaps we couldn't travel for fear of breaking our routine. Perhaps we hadn't lost friends or family, but were dishonest with them and unable to truly connect with and enjoy their support. Perhaps we didn't lose our health, but took risks we would be shocked to see others we care about take.

We all came to EDA, to therapy and to web sites looking for something. We are looking for a way out, or for better ways of living. Maybe somebody talked us into treatment. No matter what or who brought us here, somewhere deep within, we know we're missing out on life.

Step One encourages us to surrender to the facts. Instead of trying to manage life to fit unrealistic expectations, we step back to have a careful look at what's going on. Instead of searching for "tricks" to avoid pain, we decide to live life fully. This includes allowing ourselves to experience pain, joy and everything in between. The responsibility for our recovery is ours alone. We need to be kind and patient with ourselves as never before. This is easier with help: Get professional and group support.

Step one is the first step on a long journey of finding out and wholeheartedly embracing who you truly are.

Different EDA Members' Step One Experiences

"First, I think this is one of the hardest steps. There is so much denial that can become tied into the disorder. We are able to convince ourselves and often many others that all is fine for a time. For some of us reality may have been knocking for awhile, but it finally bursts forth into our sick, safe feeling little world and tears the image of composure down."

"The steps are about understanding our problems and finding the power to solve them. However, sometimes I've spent years at Step 1 -- not being willing to believe there could be a solution -- or Step 0 (zero) -- not really being ready to admit that I was stuck -- and falling on my face again and again. At other times my powerlessness was so obvious and the consequences were so dire that I just totally gave up entertaining any thought of ever going back to old patterns of thought and behavior. Everyone's path is a little different and every experience along each path is a little different." "Having our lives become unmanageable is something that must be defined individually. Yes, it is true we may share commonalties with the experience that really hammered home that life was out of control.

But, we each define that differently. For some it may have been getting caught shoplifting food. For others it may have been someone walking into the bathroom and finding a sad body hunched over the toilet. For some it may have been a trip to the emergency room. For me, it was this last incident that I experienced. I realized one night that if I did not act immediately, I was going to die. I felt that it was my last night. It was a horrible feeling, and adrenaline pumped through my body as I made this realization. I went to the emergency room, where I was admitted for severe electrolyte imbalance due to anorexia. That night, I had to come to terms with the fact that I was not living any more. My life had become unmanageable, completely destroyed in fact. I was not able to function, work, barely able to think. What kind of life is that? I also realized I was powerless over this disorder. I had tried on my own. I was caught in the clutches of this vile illness and there was not a thing "I" could do about it. I surrendered. It has been a tough road, but I have not looked back. I am a year and a half into recovery now, and it never would've happened, and I know I wouldn't be here, if I had not admitted powerless and realized life was unmanageable. I wouldn't have made it this far into recovery without the collective support of "we", and God. I'm not perfect; I mess up, but I live life now."

"I work step one in a lot of different contexts. Anytime I'm scared, feeling out of control, or stuck, I say to myself, 'Oh, boy, I'm afraid I'm stuck. Am I really stuck?' If I can honestly say, 'Yes, I'm stuck.' I have taken step one. The language of powerlessness has never appealed to me. If my car gets stuck in the sand, it is not without power, and I am not without power, but I certainly need to stop, think, and decide how to change my direction. If I don't know how to reverse direction, or if I lack the needed resources to get unstuck, I will need to face the fact I need help getting out of the jam I'm in." "I've often spent way too much time detailing and elaborating the levels of powerlessness and unmanageability I got into. I find that in most cases this is unnecessary and can divert attention from the remaining steps. If I can admit I am stuck and miserable I am ready to move on. It is not as if we never work this step again. I work it every day in one way or another. It is a mistake to think we can ever work this step perfectly or that working it harder will make it more everlasting. I just admit I'm in pain and that I'm not sure what to do next, and I'm done."

"For me, the first step means acknowledging that eating disorder behaviors are not innocuous. They're deadly for my body, spirit, and soul. This may seem obvious, but even when feeling strong in my recovery, there are little moments when the eating disorder voice pops in and tries to convince me that it is okay or normal to restrict just a little bit."

"My most 'powerful' step one experience was the time I nearly died from laxative abuse at nineteen. In a fit of angst, I'd taken an enormous amount of laxatives. My heart was fluttering wildly in a bizarre arrhythmia, and my skin would stay in whatever shape I pinched it. Things got worse and I became terrified. People would find me dead, naked and dehydrated in a bathtub I'd been shitting in, with boxes of laxatives in my trash. With the last energy I had, I crawled to the kitchen and managed to drink glass after glass of milk. The arrhythmia, lightheadedness and weakness gradually abated. That was twenty one years ago. I have never taken another laxative, nor have I seriously considered doing so. That was a 'Step 1' that really stuck! But please don't deduce that a life-threatening experience is a good thing. I went through other life-threatening situations that had no impact on my recovery at all, and some very mild "bottoms" that really motivated me. What made the difference was how I chose to think about these experiences. Sometimes I took them seriously and chose to live in reality; sometimes I cavalierly chose denial. Living in reality is empowering and has delivered a life better than I could ever have imagined! I am sad that it took me so long to understand that my attitudes and ways of thinking are really my choice (though conditioned by habit), and not some condition with which I am terminally afflicted. I am so glad I built a great support system to help me as I consciously make my new ideas and attitudes habitual ones."

"One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Addiction is about holding onto a belief/wish that you can go back to that first time you used a drug, when it felt so good and there were no adverse consequences. With an eating disorder, we have a similar distorted belief: I hold onto the belief that some day, I will be able to go back to the beginning, when I was a kid, and I went on my first diet, lost weight, and got everyone's approval. I tend to forget where this led. Since then, no "diet" has ever led me to anything but illness and loss of control. In taking the first step, I remind myself that if I keep doing what I've done, I'll get what I've always gotten: my eating disorder will lead to the same, devastating results. No, this time it won't be different. I see the illness behind the voice that says, "This time, I will do it, and soon I will be the thinnest ever, and then I will be happy and life will be perfect." I remind myself that restricting is not a magic cure for my soul; it only has two results: 1) I end up bingeing or 2) I get sicker and die." "The first step means realizing that the eating disorder is an illness. For so long, I thought the solution to my insecurities or fears was to lose more and more weight. If I could only do that, everything else would fall into place. In many ways the eating disorder and thinness were my God. I believed in them. I looked to them to improve my life. The first step of recovery means seeing the eating disorder behaviors/weight loss as a problem and recovery as what improves my life. It means seeing the eating disorder as something that stands in the way of my life and my connection to God."

"To really work through this step, I think it is crucial to realize what a disaster life can be when ruled by an eating disorder. Step one, for me, is the realization that life with an eating disorder is no longer a life."

"I work the Steps on all my major problems. Anytime I feel powerless and my life is unmanageable, Step 1 helps me light a fire of motivation, so I can get to the solutions"

"The ED says that I am better if I skip this meal; the ED says that other people care if I am five pounds heavier; the ED believes that if I run twice a day every day, then I will lose x lbs, and it will be okay because I am still eating; the ED tells me that being sick is better because then people have to take care of me. I really make it into a voice or character that is separate from my higher self. Then, I can work the 1st step in my real life; not buying into these hollow promises when I hear them and pointing out to myself, hey this is my eating disorder! I am unable to reason with it. It is not a voice worth listening to or negotiating with. It just wants me dead."

Step One Exercises

How can we work Step 1 if we don't have a death-defying experience? (Please remember: Death-defying experiences usually don't work and can have disastrous consequences!) By admitting what we know as honestly as we can, trusting that we have done what needs to be done, and moving on to Step 2. As with the rest of the steps, there is nothing terribly mystical about Step 1.

This step and any exercises that accompany it are more about admitting where we stand than about pushing forward. What sacrifices in life (happiness, health, and relationships) have you made, in order to protect your eating disorder and carry out the behaviors? The following questions are meant to help you realize what the eating disorder has taken from you, and what has become of your life as a result.

Your answers will help you clarify those strange terms, "Powerlessness" and Unmanageability." Use your journal. Explore your feelings underneath the idea of being powerless. Write quickly and freely. Do not edit, censor or review your writing. Re-reading your writing after a few weeks or months is okay.

Although you can do a good job with Step One in very little time, please do not spend more than a week on it even if you haven't answered all the questions as completely as you might want. If you are like many of us, you are probably scared of taking this step. Here is a strategy: Read through all the questions as quickly as you can. Commit to reading and thinking about one question a day. Write down what you can as fast as possible at the end of the day in ten minutes or less. Then let it go. Start with a new question the next day even if you aren't satisfied with your answers. Do NOT go back to previous questions. It is really, really okay to be imperfect!

1. Make a list of food memories, from an early age until now. This can go in order, or just be random. It's amazing how many memories you will find, once you write down the obvious ones. **Do not spend more than an hour at this activity.** So often we are tempted to overdo. See how much you can write down in half an hour or even twenty minutes.

2. How have you tried to control your eating in the past? List foods you have binged on in the past and foods you have restricted. Again, don't spend too much time at this. Twenty minutes to an hour is more than enough, **less is better**.

3. Have you promised yourself or others in that past that you would stop using your eating disorder? Did you try to stop acting in eating disordered ways and fail? Have you tried to reduce your eating disordered behavior (i.e. I'll only purge once today) and failed?

4. Have you continued to use your eating disorder even though it produced negative consequences in your life? What negative consequences has it produced?

5. Have you ever done anything you would have stopped yourself from doing if you could have? If so, what specifically did you do? Do you ever do any of this habitually, or in a pattern of any sort?

6. Make a list of all the things you missed and are missing because of your eating disorder or all the things you lost out on in life because of your ED.

Did you answer all of the above questions honestly? CONGRATULATIONS! You have, in essence, just taken Step 1. Please don't delay: move on to Step 2. Step 1 is not a particularly good place to stop.

If you're reading this workbook, it is a fair bet that you have "done" Step 1 over and over. Step 2 holds the ticket to freedom and a new life. Even if you don't think you can do step 2 yet, get started. Even if you are not entirely sure you have done a perfect job on this Step 1, you will be probably working these steps again: the steps are such a useful process for understanding and solving problems, they are likely to become part of your daily life skills tool kit. Put Step 1 down now, and go on to step 2.