

**GOD ANONYMOUS:
The God(s) of 12-Step Recovery*
Anonymous**

Introduction: The only prerequisite for joining any 12-Step recovery program is a desire to be free of our addictive behavior. While the program uses the terms “God” and “higher power,” it is also explicit about not imposing any religion, creed or dogma. In this way, anyone can participate regardless of their belief system. The founders of AA were committed to making the program accessible, not only to Christians, but to people of other faiths or no faith at all.

That said, the program does lead people on a journey of surrender to one’s “higher power,” including practices such as prayer and meditation, even if only “as if” God exists. These practices are meant to improve the addict’s *conscious contact* with their higher power, trusting that this will also *deepen and heal their understanding of God*.

In that context, I see **two notions of God** at work within the program: *1. the God of the addict’s understanding and 2. a God whose nature and attributes are described in the program.*

I. The God of our understanding: Whether one comes from a dogmatic religious background or has no faith at all, when we speak of “God,” we admit that our ideas of God are incomplete and biased, formed by our culture, family and experiences. These ideas form “our understanding of God,” however immature, broken or twisted. Some of the most distorted images of God arise from early childhood trauma or overdeveloped fundamentalist training. Some addicts may be unable to entertain any idea of a God, so they may begin by thinking of their higher power as the principles of the program or embodied by the fellowship they attend. And fair enough.

The point is that however limited or misshapen, the “God of our understanding” is always enough for God to work with. Even if they pray to “the Unknown God”—*God Anonymous*, if you will—we believe God (as God truly is) sees the addict’s plight and hears the addict’s cry for help. That God will respond to every broken and willing heart. The path toward freedom has begun. The program teaches that this path will include growth and healing in our understanding of God. While 12-Step recovery resists forays into theology, it does in fact attribute at least five important character traits to God that we believe every addict will discover through the program.

II. God Anonymous: The five traits of God revealed through the program are as follows:

A. God is loving: Addicts need to be reassured again and again that regardless of what their shame tells them, God is not angry with them. He is not a punitive judge, scowling at them in condemnation. Many addicts have fashioned a vindictive God out of the dust of their own shame—a God that they feel must hate them and is punishing them for their failings. But 12-Step recovery says, “No! God doesn’t hate you. You need not run or hide from God. God is not a gavel-heavy judge who treats your addiction as a moral failing. Instead, God is a Great Physician who sees your addiction as a disease. And his medicine is the love you’ll experience in the program.” But what does this love look like in practice?

* NOTE: This resource is not officially approved by any fellowship. These are observations of an individual member.

B. God is caring: The love of God is experienced as care. God is not distant, absent or silent. God's care is real, experienced in a variety of beautiful ways. For example, God's care is known through the belonging and acceptance of the fellowship. God's care is felt through the welcome of addicts just like us who listen without judgment—and especially through the care of a sponsor. This sense of care grows as the addict finds their prayers being answered, they know not how, and realize that God's providential hand is at work for their good. Most of all, God's care comes as the obsessions and cravings begin to lift, through moments of clarity and growing clean time.

C. God is forgiving: Addicts begin to learn that God is forgiving when they find their higher power already waiting for them at "rock bottom." No matter how far we sink or how badly we've blown up our lives, the truth is that there is nothing God can't forgive. While we proclaim this regularly in our meetings, we come to know it directly as we work steps 4 and 5 with our sponsor. Our sponsor embodies forgiveness as we share our "fearless moral inventory." It's also essential we know God has forgiven us *before* we make our amends. The reason for this is that God's love is *not* conditional on the response of those we've harmed. Some may never be able to forgive us, and we mustn't try to manipulate forgiveness from them. No, it is God who must and will and has forgiven us.

D. God is responsive: 12-Step literature tells us that we'll gradually learn that God is responsive. A practice as simple as the Serenity Prayer comes with a growing expectancy that when we pray, God *does and will* grant us serenity, courage and wisdom beyond our temperament. As we work the steps, we discover that God truly does answer unselfish prayer. The step-3 prayer says, "*God, I offer myself to you – to build with me and to do with me as you will. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of your Power, your Love, and your Way of Life.*" As we practice daily gratitude for how these prayers manifest in our lives, we come to believe God is responsive and thus, personal.

E. God is personal: Many of us began as agnostics or even as atheists, and could not associate our higher power with a personal God. But by working the steps in earnest and even just praying "as if" faithfully, we came to believe that the "power greater than ourselves" is more than a projection. Words such as loving, caring, forgiving and responsive become lived realities, regardless of the name we chose for our higher power. We were no longer simply personifying the program—we were relating daily to something, or rather, *Someone*, who was personal—who never abandoned or condemned us, who would never leave us or give up on us.

Through Step 11, our spiritual awakening now included conscious contact with "the God of our understanding." And that understanding now became a conviction: this God was loving, caring, forgiving, responsive and personal. This God humbly came to us, even anonymously, to guide us from shame to grace, and into the freedom of recovery.

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Addendum: Christianizing the Program: Christians in 12-Step programs around the world have noted that making Jesus Christ their higher power has been beneficial to them personally. Certainly, the God who Jesus proclaimed as "Our Father" is loving, caring, forgiving, responsive and personal. However, some Christians have felt discomfort with speaking about God generically or "reducing" God to a "higher power." They believe it might be "watering down the gospel" and reason that the program itself needs to upgrade its higher power to Jesus for it to truly be effective. Some groups, such as *Overcomers*

Outreach and *Celebrate Recovery*, believe they have successfully transposed 12-Step recovery into a fruitful Christ-centered option suitable for their churches and ministries. That may be. I've heard some good reports.

However, it was not without reason or wisdom that Alcoholics Anonymous and its affiliates began as they did, despite their Christian foundations. Nor is Christianizing the program without its own perils.

First, the founders of AA understood some important truths that are compromised when we Christianize the program:

- The truth is that God is present to all people, not only Christians. Bill W. and associates saw the steps as a gift of God's grace to all who suffer from addiction.
- The truth is that God is well able and willing to transform anyone who gives themselves to God's loving care, prior to or without converting to any religious affiliation or worshiping God under a particular name. "There's a wideness in God's mercy."
- The truth is that addicts who don't identify Christ as their higher power do find an authentic connection with God and they experience freedom in recovery.
- The truth is that regardless of our botched notions of God, when addicts turn toward the God of their understanding, the loving, caring, forgiving, responsive and personal God who truly exists welcomes them in grace.

While any member is welcome to name Christ as their higher power, the peril of creating a fellowship where that confession is *required* (a) creates an exclusive "outer court" of conditional grace, and (b) gives the impression that until an addict believes what Christians believe, lasting recovery is not possible. This just isn't so. God's healing grace for addicts is not conditional on using the right name.

Conversely, while one might believe that naming Christ as one's higher power is an obvious *upgrade* to our idea of God, the very opposite can and does happen! How so? Namely, *in the name of Christ*, certain fundamentalist aberrations concerning the nature of God are smuggled in. These include, for example, (a) shame, (b) punishment, and (c) moralism. These elements have no place in the program. Some Christian traditions would add that they have no place in Christianity either—and yet they have frequently infected the gospel with a fear-based message of an ugly and angry God.

The unspoken scandal is that *the God of Christian religion has tended to be far less Christlike than the God of AA et al!* Christian members of AA, NA, SAA, etc. ought to be encouraged to see their open fellowships, not as a watered-down gospel, but as a place for Christ himself to move anonymously, a hospital not for those who believe they're righteous, but for those who know they need a doctor.