

SPECIAL FEATURE BY CAROL CANNON

THE “MAGIC” TOOLBOX

We all have idiosyncrasies that frustrate us and irritate friends and family. Have you ever tried to change one of these annoying little habits and failed? Maybe you promised yourself you would stop interrupting people, snapping your gum, biting your nails, or talking too loud because you knew how much it bugged people. You really tried to stop. When that didn't work, you *really* tried to stop. When that didn't work you *really* tried. And, when that didn't work, you *really, really* tried.

Even if your negativity doesn't seem to bother anyone else, you know it's hurting *you*, so you've made many sincere attempts to stop complaining, seeking attention, or expecting people to fix you. In spite of your best intentions, you still catch yourself doing the very things you don't want to do. You're not alone.

Most people resolve at least once a year to make major or minor changes in their lives, only to discover that *deciding* to behave differently does not always produce the desired results. No matter how hard they try or cry or beg or plead or pray, they remain stuck in old habit patterns.

The good news is that there is another way to change long-standing, deep-seated habits—a set of simple spiritual principles that can be applied to any number of unhealthy behaviors. These principles evolved from a chance conversation between two falling-down drunks who had failed repeatedly in their efforts to abstain from drinking and nearly given up. These two men with feet of clay didn't know that the lives of millions would be changed by the solution they stumbled upon.

The model for change they discovered is not superficial. It is a gradual, gentle approach to growth and healing that brings out the best in people—helps them become all that they were meant to be. This program, known as the Twelve Steps, is a strategic, sequential set of spiritual principles that help people live peaceful, serene, successful lives, whether or not they have ever had a problem with alcohol. Is it appropriate for everyone? No. The Twelve Steps are only for people who need them.

Many individuals have reservations about twelve-step groups. Some think it's not OK to seek help from sources outside their home, family, or church. Sometimes these convictions are firmly rooted in the biases of previous generations: “Mom and Dad solved their problems without going to counselors or support groups and I can too” is their logic. That's a perfectly acceptable approach to life. There's no need to change if it's working.

Some ultra-conservative religious people suspect that twelve-step programs are a dangerous new gospel that conflicts with or is in competition with their deeply-held religious beliefs. They're afraid that their beliefs will be compromised if they attend twelve-step groups. (They don't stop to think that their value system—and possibly their Christian witness as well—is *already* being compromised by the addictive and/or compulsive behavior they are engaging in.)

Have you heard the saying that people are down on what they aren't up on? Condemna-

tion prior to investigation is an age-old problem. Most of us have trouble living up to our democratic ideal—*innocent until proven guilty*—in this regard.

Some religiously-oriented folks object to the fact that twelve-step groups are not specific enough in defining God. They're uncomfortable with terms such as “Higher Power” and “God of our understanding.” They don't know that recovery groups deliberately use such terminology in order to open the door of welcome wide enough so that anyone who has a desire to abstain from addictive behavior can find the help and hope.

It's ironic that some *alcoholics* avoid AA because they consider it too religious, and other alcoholics avoid it because they think it's not religious enough! There may be deeper reasons for their reluctance, but every individual has to work through his/her own personal reservations in his or her own time. Wisdom and insight can't be hurried.

I usually suggest that newcomers to twelve-step programs who still have reservations about their legitimacy attend six to twelve meetings, listening skeptically but with an open mind, before they make a decision.

Remember, twelve-step principles are not for people who don't need them. They are for people who have been brought low by a sin, a substance, or a situation over which they have lost control. *They are for people who know that they are wretched, poor, blind, naked, and in need of help!*

Excerpt from *Hooked on Happiness*, published by Pacific Press, ch. 12, pp. 124-126.