

My Wife Was Addicted to the 12 Steps

Dear Rabbi Taub:

I am finally getting a divorce from my wife who is addicted to the 12 steps.

In short, here is the story. My wife revealed to me after we were married that she was addicted to anxiety medication. She weaned off of the drugs when she was pregnant and nursing, but afterwards was soon back on the drugs. When off the drugs, she suffered depression and refused all help until she had to be committed to the hospital in a suicidal state.

When she came out of the hospital, she kept off the drugs. And she joined a 12-step program, which did help her get out of depression. But it had a worse effect in the end. All the while, I still stuck it out, hoping to make a life for our children, but she now turned the blame on me. She uses the "steps approach" for making everyone miserable to the point that it became physically dangerous for me to stay, and I was advised by *rabbanim* and therapists to leave.

I think meeting in churches and having sponsors (read: untrained people) guiding you can be dangerous. My wife changed her *tznius* dress code, and her *hashkafah* has become all distorted. This all comes from the influence of this program. The whole focus of existence becomes the 12 steps. The program becomes a dangerous addiction. Ask all our children who have no clue how all this happened. The only one happy is me, as I am looking forward to a real life in the future!

Here is my question. This 12-step program: Is it good or bad, and for whom? What pitfalls are there to avoid, what are the danger signs, and how does one deal with them?

Burned by the Steps

AMERICAN
ORTHODOX
JEWISH
COMMUNITY
CENTER
OF
NEW
YORK
CITY
100
ST. MARK'S
PLACE
NEW YORK, NY 10003
TEL: 212 693 4000
WWW.AOJCC.ORG

Dear Burned:
First of all I am very sorry to hear of your impending divorce. That's always a sad thing, no matter what. Even though you say you are happy to be moving on, I am sure it is an emotionally difficult time for you, as was evident to me from the tone of frustration in your letter.

You bring up a legitimate concern, and I want to address it here for all of my readers, so I thank you.

For the sake of full disclosure, I want to make it clear from the beginning that I have been a very public and vocal proponent of the 12-step model of recovery for many years now. Much of my book, *G-d of Our Understanding*, is devoted to explaining the virtues of that program and addressing specific concerns often raised by Jewish people. This column is not the place for me to reiterate the many points I make in my book. Suffice it to say, however, that my conclusion in the book is a glowing endorsement of 12-step principles. That being so, I am admittedly biased in this matter.

I also want to make it clear that I am not going to attempt to offer you any specific guidance in this matter. It sounds like you are already in touch with people you trust. Plus, you didn't really ask me what I think you should do. Your question was of a more general nature about the 12-step programs, so I am going to address the matter accordingly. As such, none of what I say is specifically directed toward you, although, like I said, I thank you for being the one to bring up the topic in this forum.

The first thing I want to talk about is what you yourself quite aptly referred

12 STEPS



to as being “addicted to the 12 steps.” I don’t know if you were trying to be ironic, but “addicted to the 12 steps” sounds like an oxymoron. The steps are designed to help people *recover* from addiction. And yet, I must admit to you I know exactly what you mean.

Many people who are “in recovery” actually never recover; they just swap addictions. They used to be hooked on drugs and now they are hooked on meetings. But that is a total misuse of everything that the 12-step approach stands for. I like to quote what Bill W., the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, once said: “We didn’t get sober in order to go to meetings.” Of course, a lot of people in the meetings don’t like to hear that quote, but the truth is that the purpose of recovery is to make a complete return to regular life.

As I am writing this column, it is Thursday, 21 Sivan (which happens to be my birthday, by the way) and the *parshah* this Shabbos will be *parshas Shelach*. We all know the disaster that ensued when the *meraglim* feared entering the Land. *Chasidus* explains that their fear was that Torah was given in the wilderness, and that it would only work in a wilderness. If they were to enter the Land and become involved in real life issues like agriculture and politics and city-building, they would be consumed with mundane things and lose their whole spiritual connection. They preferred to stay in the wilderness eating manna from Heaven and drinking from Miriam’s well. It’s easy to be spiritual when you don’t have any responsibilities. Of course we know how Hashem responded of the *meraglim*. The whole point of Torah and *mitzvos* is to bring holiness into regular day-to-day life. If you have to escape the world to be spiritual, then you are actually not being spiritual at all. You’re being selfish, and worst of all,

you’re limiting Hashem. You’re saying that Hashem isn’t strong enough to get you through your daily tasks. Hashem is only in the wilderness; not at work or at home or in traffic jams.

And I see this same mistake being made all the time by people in recovery. Oftentimes, people discover the fellowship, and they are so incredibly relieved to have found this safe place where they can speak openly and vulnerably, they fall in love with the serenity they feel in the meetings, and then they get stuck there.

actually work the program. Of course, they don’t get better, and they just become dependent on running back to the meeting where they can again feel some peace.

Why is this so common? I will tell you my thoughts. The program is not complicated but it is demanding, so logically most people don’t want to go through it. Most people will avoid doing the work if

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And although it is antithetical to the whole point of the program, it still can happen, which is why I am seizing the opportunity here and now to write about this.

In order to get clarity on this issue, I think it is essential to differentiate between the *program* of recovery and the *fellowship* of recovery. They are two different things. The *program* of recovery is the simple action plan called the 12 Steps. The program is a great system for getting over addictions and for gaining emotional health in all areas of life. The *fellowship* of recovery, however, is a separate thing. The fellowship is supposed to be a *support* for implementing the program. Unfortunately, there are people who use the fellowship as a *substitute* for the program. They use fellowship for comfort and relief and never

they can find any excuse. So, they don’t do the steps, or they do some steps and not others, or they do them out of order or they do them without a sponsor, or some combination thereof. Yet they still want to hang around the fellowship even though they aren’t really working the program. The best way I can explain it to an outsider is that it’s not all that different from the fellow who stops at *shul* on Shabbos to catch the end of *davening* and to hang out at the Kiddush before he heads off to the golf course. He’s enjoying the social life, the culture of *shul*, but he’s not doing the work, the *avodah*, of *shul*.

The ironic thing about all of this is that if you just get down to business and start pounding out the work, you can get through the Steps in a pretty short time.

