4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Many of us found it valuable to be grounded in the first three steps before beginning a searching and fearless moral inventory. We admitted our powerlessness, our inability to control our sexual obsessions; we admitted that our lives had become unmanageable and that we needed help. We began to believe that there was a trustworthy source of healing that could restore us to sanity. Then, one day at a time, we began to let go and turn our will and our lives over to a caring Higher Power. We read the first three steps, thought about them, talked about them and wrote about them.

We were told that working Step Four would rid us of the burden of our hidden lives. As active sex addicts most of us had been full of secrets. We had lived double lives for as long as we could remember. We had been unable to bear life without our sexual "pain relievers," so we'd acted out physically and mentally. Meanwhile, we pretended to the world that we were "nice and normal." We'd often think with a shudder, "If they only knew! If they only knew who I really was, what goes on in my mind, what I did last night, what I'll do as soon as I leave them! I'll never tell anyone!"

For many of us, our need to "never tell"—to lead double lives—was rooted in our early years. When we expressed our authentic emotions, we were often not accepted or not loved or not nurtured. Some of us also felt either smothered or, at the other extreme, neglected. We may have said, "I feel sad," and were told, assuming we got a response, "No you don't!" or "Have some ice cream," or "Think happy thoughts." Often there was abuse—physical or emotional; sometimes there was incest—overt or covert. If we showed our pain when hurt, we were shamed and ridiculed, or even further abused: "Keep that up and I'll really give you something to cry about!" In these ways we suffered the additional wound of having to hold in our pain and our unexpressed feelings. We unconsciously held the belief that our true feelings, and who we really were, were not acceptable. We learned to hide our true selves from others and even from ourselves.

This led us to beating ourselves up with negative thinking by calling ourselves names and berating ourselves for perceived failings. The result was invariably destructive to our self-esteem. We believed that we were bad, that there was something wrong with us, and this was the reason that we were abused or neglected. We thought that we had to be good—or even perfect—to get love and attention, so we learned that we had to hide these negative beliefs. Over the years, we developed coping mechanisms, and more and more we turned to sexually acting out to numb ourselves. Is it any wonder that we came to live our lives secretively and in constant fear of being discovered?

In sobriety, however, we saw that it was crucial for our recovery to come out of hiding, to admit who we really were, what we'd really done and what our lives had really been like. Denial and pretense, which had been indispensable survival tools for us in childhood, enslaved us to our addiction in adulthood. We found that in order to maintain our sobriety and deepen our growth, we needed to break through the wall of denial that had allowed us to lead double lives, separating us from ourselves. We needed to begin confronting the parts of our lives that our addiction had served to camouflage. We recognized that we could never heal without facing our histories, our behaviors, and our feelings. We had to be thorough; we needed to shine a light on the darkness and face ourselves. This moral inventory proved to be an intense undertaking. We needed to be "fearless," as the fourth step says. Even though we sometimes felt afraid to look at our secrets, we went ahead; we didn't let our fear stop us.

For some of us, our fear took the form of perfectionism that lead to paralysis; we became so consumed by making sure we wrote down everything that we wrote down nothing. For others, perfectionism kept us from arriving at a stopping point, continually making us think of more details. It was helpful to be reminded that our work did not have to be "perfect." We were gently guided to do the best we could, as honestly as we could.

So even with our fear, we embarked on a fourth step. We put pen to paper in order to answer the central question, "Who am I?" We asked, "What are my secrets?" "What are my darkest secrets?" "What relationships were damaged?" "What incidents still bother me?" Critical to this exploration was understanding the importance of answering the question, "What have I done?" It was an act of commitment and courage when we looked in the mirror at ourselves and our actions, examining honestly our own behavior and our own part in situations. Excuses such as "I didn't do anything," "It wasn't my fault," or "I never hurt anyone," were simply no longer acceptable. We needed to be willing to face our past actions and the truth about ourselves.

"But where do I begin?" many of us asked. Our collective experience writing fourth step inventories points toward exploring several specific areas of our lives. Looking at these areas gave us a structure to build on and usually led us to those places that harbored our deepest hurts. It was in these very places that we found the painful emotional wounds that needed to be exposed to the light of day. To the question, "Where do I begin?" we usually answered, "Begin at the beginning"—with an examination of childhood, our relationships with immediate family and other relatives. We found that most of our behaviors and patterns for living were set during childhood. Then we explored other relationships—with sexual and romantic partners, friends, co-workers, and others.

As we looked at all these relationships, we found it extremely helpful to examine the part played by our resentments. Although we may not have been ready to let go of our resentments, we were told it was important not to keep them hidden inside, that it was here vital insights would be revealed. Resentments were a hot spot for perhaps one of our strongest feelings, our unsettled, unresolved anger. We put down on paper what we thought others had done to us—why we were angry—and what we still wanted to do to others. We tried to see if there were other feelings under our anger and we often found fear. Then we looked at our own behavior; the role we had played and what we had done. Had we gossiped about others, demeaned them, mistreated them, or attacked them? Had we done these things often? Had we believed we were "defending" ourselves?

From this honest examination of our feelings and behavior, we found patterns in the way we had treated others. Looking at these patterns, we discovered a list of character defects. We may have been troubled by the words, "character defects" and consequently wanted to use a phrase such as

"character defenses." No matter what words we used, we could now identify attitudes and patterns of behavior in our lives that only hurt ourselves and others. These included dishonesty, excessive pride, jealousy, being judgmental or controlling, perfectionism, over-dependence on others, and impatience.

Finally, before we finished our fourth step, it was crucial for us to take into account our assets; we needed to see that we still had strengths and positive parts of ourselves, no matter how far we had fallen. We included the positive side of things as well as the negative, acknowledging that we had acted lovingly and courageously in the midst of our other behavior. We returned to the question, "What have I done?" In this context we realized that we could ask if we had ever supported others, cared for them, been generous to them or brought joy to them. Had we been given abilities, talents, or gifts that brought happiness to ourselves and others? After answering these questions and listing our assets, we saw that no matter what we had done before, we could be people deserving of love and respect.

Oddly enough, for many of us the positive side of the inventory could also trigger painful feelings. Sometimes the pain came from the struggle against acknowledging that we could have positive attributes, having lived with negative feelings about ourselves for so long. Sometimes having memories of positive actions brought deeper sadness because we were given glimpses of what we could have been.

In addition to the general fourth step guide outlined above, there are many other fourth step guides available. With the help of those who had gone before us (sponsors could be particularly helpful), we decided on a method and got to work.

One important note: we discovered that writing our Step Four could bring up many difficult feelings. We could become very vulnerable. Some of us found that this work actually triggered our disease. For this reason, we found it necessary to stay in close contact with our sponsors and program friends while we wrote our fourth step. Some of us thought it best to write during daylight hours. Also, many of us found it very helpful to get to a meeting or make a program phone call after each writing session. In this way, any difficult feelings that came up during the writing could be processed in a healthy manner and a safe environment. We found it important not to let the process drag on because the experience could be like living with an open wound. We tried to work on it, with concentration, over a relatively short period of time, complete it and then move right on to Step Five.

As we wrote our inventories, it was important for us to remember that we were not bad people trying to become good, but sick people trying to become well. We found we had warehouses of trapped, unfelt, unexpressed emotions, and as we took a deep and concentrated look within ourselves, many of those feelings were released. We learned to accept these feelings. For the first time in our lives we faced the truth about who we were, what had happened, and how we felt. We were assured by people who'd gone before us that ultimately, by facing the truth in this way, we'd be set free to live healthy, authentic lives, no longer ashamed of our past. We stopped pretending that things that had hurt us hadn't hurt us. We stopped pretending that we hadn't done what we had done. Working the fourth step began to give us an inner strength and resilience we had never had before—the strength to bear the truth of our feelings and the truth of our lives.

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Step Four