



A MINDFUL PROGRAM
FOR LASTING CHANGE

The Proactive Twelve Steps

Serge Prengel

ALL-NEW 6TH EDITION

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

“The attempt to escape from pain, is what creates more pain.”
— Gabor Maté

This is a first. I started writing a review of a trusted and valued colleague’s text and discovered that much of the material, including detailed resources and information that can truly help readers, was accessible online, for free.

Honestly, I have prayed for colleagues to offer their knowledge, their clinical expertise, their methodology and experientials to readers/clients for free during these tumultuous times.

We are immersed in a strange vibrational resonance with traditional approaches to health challenged to extremes. Serge Prengel is willing to show up for people without a personal agenda, without strings attached. His knowledge and support have the potential to help people initiate lasting changes to improve the quality of their lives.

In this light, I offer a brief introduction about the book and then links to hopefully save time-starved readers and perhaps some frazzled readers from investing time in my thoughts about Serge’s revised edition and what’s involved. If we can cut straight to the chase and get this material out to people who can benefit from it, all the better. From there, I share my thoughts on why this is a useful book to purchase, read/experience, and share with other people.

A brief look borrowing many of Serge’s words

The Proactive Twelve Steps, 6th Edition, teach readers how to transition from feeling stuck and powerless to enjoying a balanced and happy life. The steps offer a revised perspective built on the original Twelve Steps developed by Bill Wilson and Bob Smith (Alcoholics Anonymous founders). While Serge offers an alternative version without a reliance on God, the book is not just for atheists and agnostics; it is for anyone who wants to make sense of how change happens. Serge describes the steps as a mindful program instead of a mystical experience in which change somehow happens to you when you release your control to a higher power and let this power source purge you of your sins and moral defects (of character).

The Proactive Twelve Steps offers readers a way to develop a deeper understanding of behavioral change, codependency, stress, and trauma, as well as look at neuroscience and the Polyvagal Theory and their impact on our physiology and behavior. Serge presents a clear roadmap for self-compassion and mindful self-discovery and provides specific step-by-step instructions within a broader context that helps readers make sense of the healing process.

In short, this book is “a user-friendly guide to the application of mindfulness in everyday life”.

Links and More Links

The Proactive Twelve Steps and a discussion of each step are available at www.proactive12steps.com.

You can follow Serge’s work on [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#).

You can follow the Proactive 12 Steps podcast from your phone, on [Apple Podcasts](#) and on other podcast apps.

You can also access his newsletter here: <https://www.proactive12steps.com/newsletter/>.

He offers numerous articles online: [Articles](#)

[How to work the 12 steps online workbook](#)

[Serenity, Courage & Wisdom](#)

[The mindful process of change in Steps 4 through 10](#)

[Codependency: Symptoms of codependent behavior in relationships](#)

[Higher Power as Inner Power: Lasting change from inside out](#)

[An ecosystem for mindful self-discovery & recovery](#)

[“I” vs “We”](#)

For people who are in recovery, Serge offers the following resources for people seeking kindred companions on the journey to living an alcohol free life:

- [AA Agnostica](#)
- [AA Beyond Belief](#)



In My Opinion: One Reader's Experience

For those interested in the book and what I think, I offer the following review.

To start, I believe that there is no one form or kind of addiction, no one single cause. Some claim addiction is a medical disease, others cite it as a mental/emotional/spiritual concern. Addiction takes on whatever shape, form, intensity that serves the person living with the experience. Some say the brain remembers and no matter what one does to stop, one false step and wham you are back in the muck, mired in a destructive relationship with seemingly no way out. Frankly, there is no 'right way' to treat addiction.

When Bill Wilson met Bob Smith, their synergy resulted in Alcoholic Anonymous. Bill stressed that alcoholism was "a malady of mind, emotions, and body." He believed that humans could not solve their addictions alone. The process needed to include both community (i.e., AA meetings, books, and the twelve steps) and a belief in a higher power, something beyond themselves to turn over their essence for forgiveness and be given the power (courage, wisdom, serenity) to move beyond needing to drink. God was the chosen one.

Serge's book is about the practice of being human and living with human concerns dealing with addiction. His mindful process of self-discovery is a path to lasting change. His goal in writing and revising the book was to describe the original twelve steps in a way that grounded the healing process within ourselves. Readers have the chance to learn how to make change not only possible but also to happen. Serge believes that we don't change by giving our power away to some energy outside ourselves but rather by making conscious changes in the way we live and relate to ourselves and to other people.

The proactive steps are suitable for anyone wanting to adopt a mindful, proactive approach to change (this version has nothing to do with faith, religion, belief or not in God). Serge explains that addiction is not about sin or moral defects but rather a means to an end, a way to cope with trauma/abuse/whatever overwhelming experience that we lacked the skills to deal with.



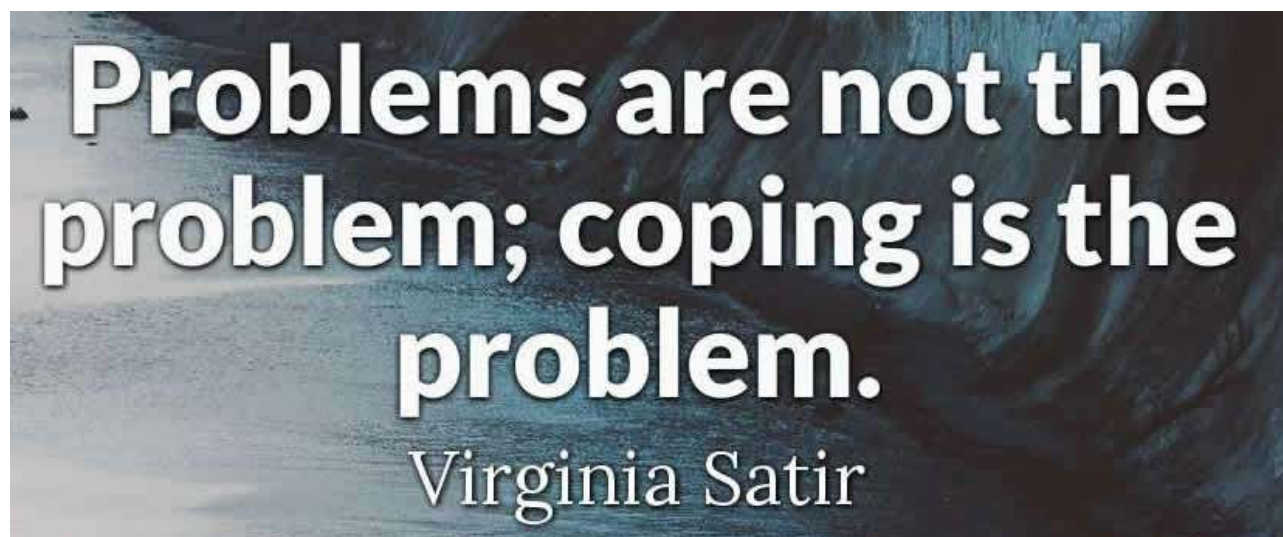
According to Serge, the core of the book is Part 1: Step by Step. Reading the book is like taking part in a workshop. Readers are called on to do the work, to be an active participant, one step at a time rather than by simply reading through it as if the material will simply be internalized and change will occur. Serge encourages doing this with someone, with a group perhaps (he offers advice for working with a group in Appendix 2). He suggests readers take time to be with each step and offers advice in his chapter: How to Walk the Walk.

The process is not supposed to be harsh or intense. It is designed to be a gentle process of self-discovery, simply being with yourself compassionately and exploring, watching, wondering. Serge encourages readers to keep a journal and track their experiences and feelings and outcomes. The experience is meant to help readers be proactive and reflective, to create a mindful orientation toward their felt experience, a quality, Serge notes we want to cultivate in our present life.

Part Two: A mindful and proactive roadmap

In this section, Serge covers ways to stop self-defeating behaviors as people move from being reactive to proactive. He writes about ecosystems and codependency, how to have a creative dialogue with your inner critic, and why dysfunctional behaviors make sense. He discusses the potency of using the word "I" versus "We", noting that I-statements convey a sense of personal journey, of self-discovery and self-development, where you confront complex issues, makes choices, and learn from experience.

The difference in word choice provides the grounding for a reader to say, "This is important to me, and I will do what it takes" (pg. 75). The I, the self, is empowered.



Part Three: A perspective informed by neuroscience

In this section, Serge writes about the three circuits of the autonomous nervous system, what happens in civilized life, how coping mechanisms work, and the healing process.

He begins with Stephen W. Porges' Polyvagal Theory and how it describes our autonomic nervous system. Basically, it consists of three circuits: shut down, flight/fight, and mindful engagement. He talks about these innate systems and how they are triggered by and trigger our responses to stress and trauma, and how they impact our resiliency and health.

Coping mechanisms arise to alleviate suffering. Addiction is said to be a copying mechanism, a way to medicate the pain, to feel some release even if only temporary. However, coping mechanisms come with side effects and lack solutions. The patterns we develop become our way of making it from moment-to-moment to get through life rather than fully embrace and live life in the moment.

The healing process ala neuroscience

Healing starts with the acknowledgement of the situation. Step 1: I am not in control, and this has serious consequences. This usually means we are in flight or fight mode or in shutdown mode. We cannot easily move into mindful engagement mode and use co-regulation with others (also known as social engagement).

Can we find safety in connection with another person?

I venture to say that in the beginning many addicts lacked the ability to self-regulate and in turn to co-regulate their emotional states. They are carried away by the tide and find themselves drowning without even calling for help. There's no life preserver just a bottle or a chocolate cake, or whatever substance or activity is used to numb out, distract, dissociate.

From a therapeutic stance, if we were not in a safe relationship early on, if we did not have the opportunity to be co-regulated as a child, our ability to self-regulate is compromised. Interactions with threat, trauma, abuse, and neglect resulted in difficulties in co-regulating and became manifested in relationship difficulties.

Co-regulation is necessary for many reasons. For one, the process helps us develop resilience. When our body is physiologically regulated it is calmer and in this 'parasympathetic nervous system state', we feel safe and can in turn develop trusting relationships. The quest for safety is an innate need; we need to experience safety in co-regulation. Our physiology craves social interactions that provide the chance to co-regulate. It is not about the removal of threat, but rather how to find safety in interaction (with people) not in withdrawal and isolation (in substances).

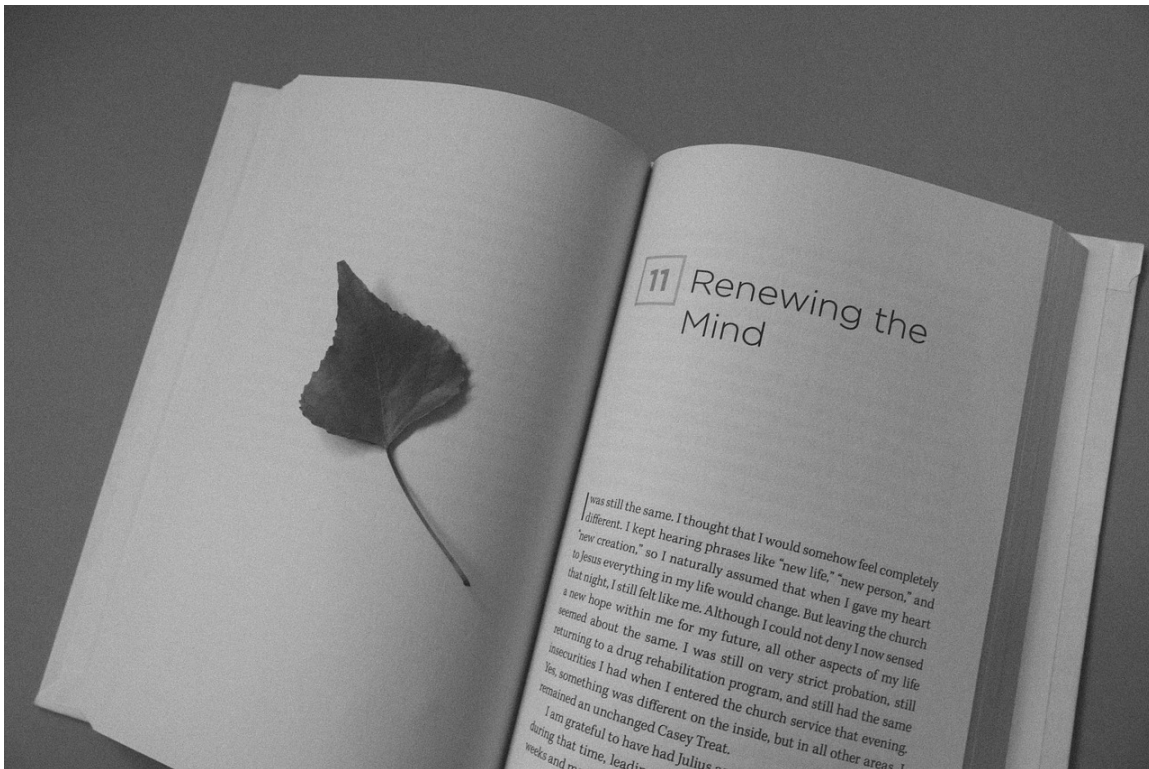
Mindfulness is not a cognitive learning process but rather one way to retrain our nervous system to classify threats as manageable so we can be less reactive.

Healing is not a linear process

The steps allow readers to find a way to be calm, patient, to be mindful and engage. Readers learn how to pay attention to their patterns (behavioral and in relationship) and see how they have become coping mechanisms. Readers learn



how to develop the desire to understand what is happening and to develop self-empathy as they get in touch with the intensity of their fears and vulnerability. Strategies are created to change these patterns, they are rehearsed, and then used with an eye for what happened—the causes and the effects.



Part 4: A spiritual and philosophical context

This final section involves a discussion about how agnostics and atheists might feel when working in a traditional 12-step program when they are immersed in a God environment. There is a conversation about juxtaposing a higher versus inner power and about faith in human nature. Serge poses the question: What happens when you are in a 12-step program but don't believe in God? The result, he says, can be a sense of failure, absence, isolation etc. . . . the issue of God is not merely a spiritual or philosophical one. It's about being who you are and how you can forge a relationship with the group without losing yourself.

The book closes with three Appendices, a list of useful resources, information about Serge and the process and endorsements.

In Conclusion

I offer my review for readers to consider several questions: is this process something that resonates with me? Am I curious to learn more? Can this mindful means support me to make changes in my life?

And when I say changes, perhaps they are not related to addiction but just behavior patterns that have been longstanding, frustrating. Things that obstruct your path to living a happier, fuller, more present life. There is much here for readers wanting to explore.

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