

AND SO WE BEGIN

THE FOUNDER OF VIOLENCE
ANONYMOUS SHARES A
DECADE OF EXPERIENCE
WORKING THE 12 STEPS OF VA

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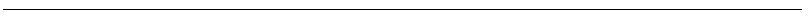
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VA's 1st meeting place. December 2004

Christ Lutheran Church - Christ's Workshop in Austin Texas



This is a special excerpt of this book for those attending the Step 1, 2, 3 Waltz meetings. The page numbers are set to match the book and listings on our website.



Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over violence – that our lives had become unmanageable.

In order to admit that we are powerless over violence, we must first come to the shocking reality that we have been defeated. Violence has torn such a hole in the fabric of our lives that we are left desperate and alone. We are now coming to terms with how cut off we are from the connection and love we crave. Our means of creating safety, security and significance have resulted in heartache, loss and misery. Each VA member's path to rock-bottom was different, but we all share the same crushing hopelessness. Despite this common unity, we respond to the concept of powerlessness in different ways.

Some of us were so relieved and grateful to have found VA that we were willing to admit anything to pull up from the tailspin we called life. This violence addict knew they were free falling and, with help, might avoid hitting the ground with a deafening thud. This newcomer had little problem admitting complete defeat and was aware that their life was unmanageable.

Others met the idea of complete defeat with revolt. As survivors of violence, we pride ourselves on our tenacity and strong will to survive, which makes surrender even harder. "Why should I admit that I'm beaten?" cries this VA newcomer. "My battle siren is 'Never surrender'. How can I possibly admit failure?" This newcomer's sponsor might remind them that it was their rebellious mind that landed them here to begin with. Perhaps a couple more years of acting out

and expecting different results would bring this newcomer to their knees.

Another type of violence addict cowered in shame at the idea of surrender. This poor soul had been beaten down so many times that their will to get back up was exhausted. They were so entrenched in the “Victim” role that they were unable to trust people. This VA thought, “How can I possibly rely on others? They usually want something from me or will deceive me and hurt me.” This newcomer’s sponsor will want to remind them that admitting our powerlessness over participating in drama is the cornerstone to recovering our self-esteem and in time trusting ourselves to attract healthy, kind relationships.

Once at rock bottom our chief drive is to avoid further pain. So why does VA suggest that we admit defeat? Haven’t we been humiliated enough? The only possible way we can stomach the pain of our failure is to understand just how bankrupt our lives have become. Violence has taken from us all that we hold dear. We are broken. Our attempts to change our behavior on our own have resulted in more conflict and crisis. And if we are truly honest with ourselves, we can see the intensity of our downward spiral has increased over time. Our sponsors speak of a life without violent thought or action, where people cooperate rather than struggle in conflict, where success is not at the expense of another. This vision seems too far off to truly comprehend, but with time and experience, each VA will begin to understand the truth of these statements.

Once we can swallow the bitter pill of defeat we realize that it is the liberating medicine that delivers us from the clutches of destruction. Admission of our personal powerlessness becomes the foundation of our new lives. We had crossed the ruthless desert of violence and found an oasis, just when we could not take another step. Our admission that we are powerless over violence is all we need to begin drinking from the springs that bring us back to normal living and restore our health in new ways. Without this admission, we find no lasting happiness or

enduring strength. We understand that, until we completely accept our dependence on violent behavior, we cannot progress. Our sponsors remind us that we must humble ourselves and admit complete defeat. “This is the main taproot from which our whole society has sprung and flowered.”

For this stage of our recovery, we were directed to let go of everything we thought about self-confidence. In fact, our old way of finding confidence was no longer of any use to us. Rather, it was our Achilles’ heel. We had developed a propensity to use violence in meeting our basic needs. None of us had ever overcome this dependence with our own willpower. Our sponsors pointed out that we have an addiction to violent thinking and our use of conflict to resolve conflict only deepens its hold over us. They go on to point out that many of us are traumatized by the experiences of our past. Our orientation to using conflict to act out these traumas increases the level of damage to ourselves and others. Each time we attempt to resolve an issue by using violence (whether emotional, psychological, or physical) we deepen the wound. Our bodies and minds scream out for freedom from the pain and our solution has been to pile on more trauma, in hope of squelching our inner-voice. Each time making the voice harder and harder to hear until, from the deafening silence, we erupt either internally or externally. Our unconscious minds understand that the truth will not be kept silent, and a volcanic eruption cannot be ignored.

In the early years of VA, only the most desperate could bear the shame of admitting they were powerless over this obsession. Even these people had little understanding of how hopeless they were. Others tried to join VA, but were unable to admit their powerlessness. A small number were able to grab hold of VA in a desperate last attempt to find happiness. This group found liberation from the perilous grip of violence and began building a life of promise and hope. Many early VAs had a good deal of experience recovering from alcoholism, drug addiction, underearning, sex addiction, food addiction and co-

dependency in other 12-Step programs, but nonetheless found ourselves baffled by this malady. We had also used many of VA's tools, which you will read about in the upcoming chapters, but still we could not find peace in relation to others. We began to understand VA's first slogan, "It's not the WHAT, it's the WAY." In other words, we had been doing some of the right things, but the way we were doing them was all wrong. We needed a completely new game plan. One that began with admitting we were powerless over violence – that our lives had become unmanageable.

Why do we insist that every VA must hit rock bottom? Few will work this program without realizing that they have no other option. Once we can no longer tolerate the agony, we are ready to try something new. Working the next 11 Steps asks a newcomer to take on new ways of looking at violence that only someone who has hit bottom would be willing to do: to be rigorously honest and learn empathy, to find a belief in a higher power, to admit our faults and amend our past, to practice prayer and meditation, to help others overcome this disease. Only someone who understands these things must be done to live freely will even start. We were driven to VA by extreme circumstances and only by excruciating pain have we opened our minds to the humbling fact that we are addicted to violence. Now we stand ready to do anything necessary to have this ferocious obsession removed from our lives. Luckily for those who are willing to work it, this program works.

Understanding the Drama Triangle

Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer —The states of violence, the roles we play.

“The Victim is not really as helpless as he feels, the Rescuer is not really helping, and the Persecutor does not really have a valid complaint.”

- Claude Steiner PhD

In the beginning of VA, we had no knowledge of the Drama Triangle. We started with the understanding that we couldn't act as a Persecutor without believing consciously or unconsciously that we were a Victim to some person, place or thing. We realized that we were making a choice to see ourselves as a victim either from habit or some underlying trauma, and that we were powerless over the compulsion to control at any cost. We knew that when triggered (a term we will explore more deeply in Step 2) we were rendered temporarily insane, and left to our own devices we would continue to repeat violence in a progressive fashion. When a member of VA from Switzerland introduced us to the Drama Triangle and the three roles that we all play, a new breath of hope was drawn for VA. We could suddenly see the whole picture and our “codependent” behavior was finally recognized as a form of violence. The steady and consistent examination of how we play all three roles in different situations has given us hope, understanding and empathy for the suffering violence addict. Comprehending the roles that we play and how we play them has been crucial and fundamental to our recovery from violence.

The Drama Triangle - defined

The Drama Triangle is a psychological and social model of human interaction first described by Stephen Karpman, which has become widely acknowledged in psychology and psychotherapy. The model posits three habitual psychological roles (or role plays), which people often take in a situation:

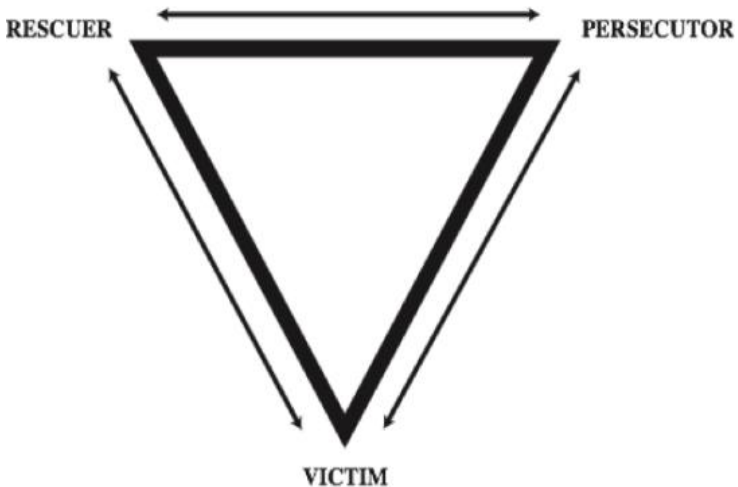
- The person who is treated as, or accepts the role of, a victim
- The person who pressures, coerces or persecutes the victim, and
- The rescuer, who intervenes out of an ostensible wish to help the situation or the underdog. The rescuer role is one of a mixed or covert motive, not an honest rescuer in an emergency, but one who is most interested in changing the victim to the person that they would have them be.

As the drama plays out, people may suddenly switch roles, or change tactics, and others will often switch unconsciously to match this. For example, the rescuer (someone who believes they are a victim and pretends to be a helper, in order to control a situation), frustrated that the victim will not take their “advice” lashes out as a persecutor. The original victim, afraid of the attack, turns persecutor and retaliates or retreats further as a “helpless victim.”

The covert purpose for each 'player' is to meet their unspoken psychological needs in a manner they feel justified, without having to acknowledge the broader dysfunction or harm done in the situation as a whole. As such, each player is acting upon their own unhealthy habits of meeting their own needs, rather

than acting in a genuinely healthy, responsible or altruistic manner.

KARPMAN DRAMA TRIANGLE



Let's define the three roles further, to fully understand the roles we play and how to identify and correct this behavior in ourselves.

Victim

The Oxford Dictionary tells us that a victim is:

- a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action.
- a person who is tricked or duped : the victim of a hoax.
- a living creature killed as a religious sacrifice.

In *The Three Faces of Victim*, Lynne Forrest states that:

“Whether we know it, or not, most of us react to life as victims. Whenever we refuse to take responsibility for ourselves, we unconsciously choose to react as a victim. This inevitably creates feelings of anger, fear, guilt, or inadequacy, and leaves us feeling betrayed, or taken advantage of by others.”

Any time I’ve seen myself as being controlled by outside forces, I have slipped into a Victim mindset. It’s easy to do. Here are some examples:

A woman cut me off on the highway because she was on her cell phone. “What an idiot ,” I think “doesn’t anyone have driver etiquette anymore?” - Victim

Someone doesn’t understand what I’ve tried to explain twice. “This guy’s an imbecile ,” I think, “How did he get this job?” - Victim

“I’ve asked him to do it more than once now he’s just trying to piss me off.” - Victim

“I hate these politicians, why can’t one of them just tell the truth?” - Victim

When I think in ways similar to this, I am “on the Drama Triangle” and participating in violent thought. When I act upon any of these thoughts, I am acting out violent behavior. It’s my experience that it is impossible to act as a perpetrator or rescuer of violence unless I see myself as a victim. When I am successful at changing my mind and no longer view myself as a victim, I am able to abstain from acting as a perpetrator and rescuer.

Let’s go back to the definition. When I convince myself that someone or something outside of me has any power over my state of mind, I have tricked myself into becoming a victim.

Victim - person who is tricked or duped : the victim of a hoax

Maybe as a child you were truly a victim. Perhaps some horrible event shaped your entire life. When I was sexually abused as a 4 year old, I was a real victim, unable to defend myself. An adult who knew better took advantage of me. It took me years of therapy and trauma recovery to get myself to a place where I felt safe again in the world and another few to even consider forgiving. Lucky for me I was willing to go through the pain of remembering such a trauma. Many hide those memories away for a lifetime and stumble through experiences, protecting the wound at all costs. As an adult, I have the responsibility to myself and those I love to acknowledge that I am no longer a victim of anyone or anything. If someone is taking advantage of my naiveté regarding business and charges me more than they should have, do I retaliate at being swindled or do I admit that I could have done more research prior to turning over my money and I could have negotiated a better deal for myself? Perhaps I will report them if that is appropriate and safe, but in order to recover from an addiction to violence, I must abstain from retaliation. If they want to compromise their integrity that's their business, but I do not have that as an option. If I can be quick enough to see that I am responsible for myself, I have a fighting chance to step outside the Victim mindset.

Suppose I begin a conversation with my wife. She needs to be heard about something upsetting to her. I listen for as long as I can, until she begins to repeat herself. At this point I chime in and give some kind of man "fix it" advice (this is an act of rescuing which we will discuss a bit later). She is then upset at not being completely heard (victim) and lashes out at me (persecutor). If I choose to take her attack personally, I have chosen to think of myself as a victim in the situation, and the drama continues. If, however, I am able to remain calm and say something like, "Sorry, I guess you didn't need advice. I heard you say you were frustrated, what do you need now?" I have removed myself from the Drama Triangle and all I have to do is listen for a few more minutes, which for me is a big challenge. She feels great and I don't have an argument on my

hands (by the way, this actually just happened as I was writing this chapter).

Take the person who feels anxiety and fear about paying bills and looking over their finances. This VA may make up all kinds of external reasons for their situation. They could blame their boss or ex-boss, the bank, the government, the economy, their father, their mother, or any number of other people, places or things. As long as they see themselves as a victim to their financial state, they keep themselves on the Drama Triangle and render themselves ineffective. The simple act of calculating what they owe has become a melodramatic affair that they put off. They are waiting for a rescuer to come and do it for them, or better yet, fix their situation. “If I just get that big break, I will be fine,” they tell themselves. The minute they realize how they are thinking and that they are initiating this thought process, they have liberated themselves from the Drama Triangle. They have decided not to buy into the drama of their mind, and suddenly the task has gone from a looming mountain of doom to a simple exercise that they can handle with a little support. If money is not a weakness of yours, I’m sure you can find an example that is.

Exercise 2

Take a moment now and write down the ways you see yourself as a victim.

Rescuer

According to Oxford Languages, a rescuer is “A person who saves someone from a dangerous or difficult situation. A person who prevents something from failing.” This definition sounds noble and important and, in its true form, is of great use to society. However, those of us who enter the Drama Triangle as rescuers, rescue for one reason only: to avoid feeling discomfort. Discomfort generated by our own thinking.

Imagine the VA who grows up with a parent who sees themselves as a Victim. The parent (Victim) uses shame and guilt to manipulate others into taking care of them. The VA learns that in order to “love” the parent they must take care of the parent’s emotional, psychological, and even physical needs. The child (Rescuer) learns to live by the motto, “If I love/take care of you now, you will love/take care of me later.” The irony is that the Rescuer mistakes “love” for “control.” So what they are actually saying is, “If I control this situation by rescuing you now, you will love me later.” Sadly, when dealing with victims, being cared for (loved) later rarely comes, and so the Rescuer is not able to consistently meet their own needs in the relationship. In fact, the Rescuer begins to develop the belief that their needs are unimportant or are only met when they are care-taking others. Thus, the die is cast for future relationships. The blueprint for how the Rescuer relates to the stress and anxiety of meeting or not meeting their own needs is now colored by the guilt and shame of the original wound. Since this phenomenon is progressive, the Rescuer repeats the dynamic over and over, each time getting further from the ability to meet their needs in healthy ways and carrying this behavior into adulthood.

It’s very difficult for a person who relies on rescuing to ever see themselves as a victim. They see themselves as stronger, smarter, and more capable than the person they are “helping.” As the VA learns to develop their skill for rescuing they may begin to exhibit other controlling behaviors like giving

unsolicited advice, “helping to make things better.” This may put them in the line of fire for an attack from a victim turned persecutor who resents the input. Rescuers also like to “educate” victims and persecutors about what they are doing and how they can do it better. This is one way a rescuer can maintain the “moral high ground.” All of these techniques fall short of helping the rescuer meet their need for security, significance, and contribution to others.

“The belief that we know better than someone else how to resolve their conflict, or are somehow better equipped to do so,” Alan Sharland says in *Rescuer Syndrome*, “leads us to intervene or try to 'rescue' them in a way that disempowers them and inhibits their ability to resolve it themselves, which they are actually quite capable of doing. In fact they are the only ones who can.”

Here is an example from my past. My father owned a boat when I was a kid. During my pre-teen years, I developed the belief, whether through hints from my father or my own fantasy, that if I cared for the boat as my own, my father would one day allow me to take the boat out myself. I spent summer after summer washing and waxing the boat. I even paid for and installed a new stereo system. I went as far as enlisting help from my friends, so that we could all better enjoy our experience on the boat. Had I been doing that as a way to express my gratitude to my father for taking us to the lake, it all might have been fine. My motive was not to express gratitude, it was to get something in the future: the keys to the boat and the trust of my father. Neither ever came. When I finally asked for the privilege, my father flatly refused without ever acknowledging my contributions. I was stunned and hurt. How could he not see how responsible I had been? How could he be so selfish? Little did I know that I was rescuing in hopes that he would rescue me in turn. Had I clearly stated what I wanted out of the bargain in the beginning and offered my services as a way to show my gratitude, I might have saved myself all that work for nothing.

I carried resentment toward my father for 20 years about that experience. It's true, he did take advantage of me by letting me do all that work for nothing in return, and since he was the adult in the situation he can't get off scot-free as an innocent bystander, but if I'm honest with myself, I must embrace the fact that I was manipulating him into meeting my needs rather than just coming out and asking for him to help me meet them. I could have struck a deal with him that I would do the work in return for an opportunity to use his boat. I could have waited to do the work until he agreed. I didn't. I proceeded ahead without his agreement, hoping one day he would see the light and rescue me as I had rescued him.

As an adult, before VA recovery, I would allow myself to recall that experience and remind myself that I was a victim of my father's selfishness, etc. Sometimes I would even tell him off in my mind. In VA I learned that telling someone off in my mind or "educating someone with my thoughts" is also rescuing. After years of recovery and working through the traumas of failing to meet my own needs by rescuing, today I can choose to see the entire experience in my memory and remain neutral. When I think about that experience, I may feel sad or frustrated, but I no longer see myself as a victim to the situation, in the present moment, and can quickly change my state of mind by thinking more empowering thoughts.

The following are some reflections about rescuing behavior that founding VAs have expressed:

- Offering unsolicited advice is rescuing.
- Rescuing is a violent need to control.
- A rescuer is a victim playing the hero.
- A rescuer pretends to be helpful, when they are really only looking out for themselves.
- Educating someone who is not asking to be educated is rescuing.

- Arguing with someone in your mind is rescuing behavior.
- A rescuer will skirt success so that others won't feel jealous or abandoned.
- A rescuer will seduce people to believe they are someone they are not, in order to get what they think they want.
- Someone who meets the needs of others at the expense of their own is a rescuer.
- The rescuer is desperate to feel important.
- "Since I can't be important to you any other way, I'll at least make myself important to you this way."
- Rescuing is the act of attempting to meet one's needs by assuming the needs of someone else and acting upon that assumption.
- "My mother was so obsessed with her problems and her state of victimhood that I was not important. So I made myself important by trying to solve her problems."
- "Rescuing is compulsively doing something that I don't want to do in order to make someone give me something they can't give, then feeling like a victim as a result."
- Rescuer – "I'll give you your fantasy and you give me mine." When that fails, the rescuer might turn to the persecutor role to get those needs met.
- "I was afraid that if I had needs I would lose the relationship."

Exercise 3

Take a moment now and write down the ways you see yourself as a rescuer.

Persecutor, Perpetrator, Abuser

“Persecutors or Perpetrators identify themselves primarily as victims. They are usually in complete denial about their blaming tactics. When it is pointed out to them, they argue that attack is warranted and necessary for self-protection.”

- Lynne Forrest, *The Three Faces of Victim*

Persecute: Subject (someone) to hostility and ill treatment.
Harass or annoy (someone).

- *Oxford Dictionary.*

As Persecutors we act out physical, psychological and emotional violence. It's easy to understand how a physical assault is violent behavior, but what about abusive words, mind games, lies, and other manipulations? We in VA have learned, sometimes the hard way, that these types of psychological “power-over” tactics are also violent. Only when I have convinced myself that I am a victim can I act as a persecutor or

perpetrator. It is that simple. Even though we may not yet be conscious of this phenomenon, it is happening every time we jump on the Drama Triangle (something we will discuss a little later). We see ourselves as a victim to some person, place, thing or situation and “bang” we attack. How many times have we felt frightened by someone’s behavior and justified retaliation? “They hurt me, so they deserved it.” Or “They were about to hurt me so I struck first.” How many times have we heard someone say something “wrong” and thought of ourselves as “better than them”? “They don’t know what they are talking about, they are a _____.” Once I stopped using violent physical behavior, I had no choice but to notice my violent thoughts. When we act out violence our thoughts create emotions. If we do not have the discipline to notice and sit with these emotions, they turn into reactions, often before we are aware of the existence of the original thought. Thoughts lead to emotions. Emotions lead to actions. Actions lead to habits. Habits lead to character.

Exercise 4

Take a moment now and write down the ways you may persecute yourself and others.

Once I have humbled myself and admitted that I have lost control of my habits and actions, that my character has become that of a person who uses power and control to get what they

want (safety, security, significance, love, attention, assurance, etc.), then I have a chance to change all the way down to my thoughts: which influence my emotions, actions, habits, and character. In my case, it took the prospect of losing my wife and the State of Texas telling me that my behavior was illegal, for me to remove my blinders and admit that I was behaving violently. It's a tough thing to admit to one's self.

If I admitted that my behavior hurt those around me, I would have to admit that the ways I learned to get what I want were counterproductive, and that those who taught me were ignorant. So, I admitted I had no idea how to successfully function in this world or to achieve my dreams. I admitted that I was beaten by a foe far stronger than me. That violence had taken from me all that I held dear. I was willing to do anything to change from a life of unconsciously seeing myself as a victim. But how do we accomplish this? With daily practice, we VAs continue to discover the answer. If you want the answers that we have found, continue reading and ready yourself for the work ahead. Our first goal is to become aware of our thinking. That may not be easy, since most of us are unconscious of our thoughts. However painful it may be, we find looking back across the landscape of our violent history to be a good starting point. Step 1 directs us to record our story regarding violence.

My story continued...

Parts of my story may be similar to yours or someone you know. To many of you, my experience is too terrible to imagine. To others, it may pale in comparison to the violence you've experienced. The depth of a person's violent scars are less important than their willingness to admit that violence has them in a headlock from which they are unable to escape.

My family of origin was violent. My mother was prone to fits of rage. She would trigger and punish us for the hell she found herself in. She molested and raped my brother and I repeatedly

and has never been able to bring herself to admit it. I cannot remember a time when I was disciplined in a thoughtful and conscious way. My lessons came with the fury of a hurricane. My father was absent for most of my childhood and seemed mainly uninterested in anyone but himself when he returned home. He would bring gifts from airports, but ignored our pleas for protection. I remember one time, at age 3 or 4, telling him that “Mommy was hurting my pee pee.” He seemed to pretend he didn’t hear me, or for all I know he couldn’t comprehend what that meant.

My older brother was at least twice my size and learned that violence could get him what he wanted. He, like my mother, would beat me with fists and open hands. He would often pin me to the ground and torture me until I would pronounce how great he was or berate myself to his liking. Neither my mother nor my brother would beat my face. This prevented anyone in my community from seeing physical traces of abuse.

I did run away a few times for short stints, from age 6 to 9 to escape the madness, but found the violence on the streets more traumatizing and returned home, where at least I had a warm bed and food at meal time.

To deal with my fear of being the victim of other people’s actions, I developed an attack stance. When threatened, I would take the offensive and look for ways to annihilate my opponent. Because I’m small and smart, this usually came in fast and sharp language. I also have a powerful voice, which I used to my advantage.

As a child, I learned the tantrum. This I carried into adulthood. What started as banging my high chair, progressed to smashing phones, ripping precious sweaters, kicking holes in walls, spitting, and even grabbing my wife in anger. I feel ashamed and embarrassed writing it now, but I felt totally justified in my actions back then. This may sound like insanity. That’s because it is. When we are triggered, our thoughts, emotions, and actions become irrational. The trauma of my past had festered

into unhealed wounds deep in my psyche that made it easy for me to relive my state of victimhood and trigger onto the Drama Triangle. Once on the triangle it became easy to justify protecting myself as a persecutor.

I have followed people in traffic just to tell them how terrible their driving was. I have beaten men for standing their ground in the face of my insanity. I broke my hand on one man and spent an evening screaming in pain while a surgeon pinned me back together. The screaming was due to the fact that I didn't trust the doctor to put me under anesthesia, so he and his assistants had to endure my cries while they drilled pins into my shattered bones.

This insanity resulted in job loss, people quietly ducking out of my life, and in the end, the public embarrassment of having the sheriff press charges against me for "man-handling" (probably better described as "unable to act like a man" handling) my wife while she was pregnant, then exhausting my savings on lawyer fees to keep myself out of prison.

This was not the first time I had been at a crisis point because of my violent behavior. Previously, I voluntarily enrolled in an anger management course and attended treatment for behavioral issues. Time would pass and I would get to feeling better, patch it up with my wife, get a new job and forget that I had a problem. Until the next time. And there was always a next time. This disease of violence was always waiting dormant until the next highly stressful moment. Sometimes it took a year, sometimes six months, but it always came back with increasing force and a growing will to destroy. First a nudge, then a push, then a punch. The progression was in full swing with me and I was powerless to stop it. Each time I awoke from the haze thinking, "How did I step in that trap again?!" Then days to recover from the shame of what I had done. This is the seduction of our disease, cunning, baffling and powerful.

As a rescuer, my story is much more subtle and difficult to describe. I learned early in life that, if I could change someone's

behavior before they became a threat to me, I could create some sense of safety for myself. I would spend a good deal of time trying to guess what people's needs were in hopes that, if they were happy, I would have a chance for happiness too. What I didn't realize was that I was dealing with victims who were rarely satisfied, and so they never got around to asking what I needed.

Simultaneously, I learned to deny my needs for fear that, if I rocked the boat, I would provoke a violent outburst. Since my family of origin was not versed in the art of Nonviolent Communication, one of our tools in VA, I became accustomed to hearing shaming and guilt-provoking comments. These are behaviors that I can now easily identify as the weapons of a victim to cajole someone into rescuing them emotionally, but during my formative years, I was defenseless against these attacks. To avoid the pain of the disapproval, guilt, and shame I learned to emotionally rescue those in my family, school, and community. This behavior grew and developed into repeatedly denying my needs, and ultimately settling with less in life. I confused the love that I had for people with "care-taking." I honestly believed that sacrificing my needs for the needs of others was helpful, but I learned in VA that such behavior was simply perpetuating life on the Drama Triangle for myself and for those around me. In turn, I began to look for rescuers who would save me from my situation. As I developed physically, I learned to act out the persecutor role when my shaming and guilt-ing didn't work. And round and round the Drama Triangle I went.

So now, as a First Step, I let go and admit that I am powerless and my life has become unmanageable. I surrender. Despite my best efforts, I have not been able to lick this cunning foe. "Stay down," I would hear from my corner and up again I'd rise thinking, "This time I'm faster and smarter." But I was wrong. Now I give it over to a power greater than the one I've been worshipping. Fear and conflict are no longer my masters.

Exercise 5

Take a moment now and write down 5 more ways you see yourself as a victim, persecutor and/or rescuer.

My recollection of Step 1

I was lucky. I had experiential success with overcoming alcoholism, drug addiction, debting, and sex addiction with the help of AA, NA, DA, SAA, SLAA, and the 12 Steps. I know that they had worked in every aspect of my life that I was willing to change. My experience with the steps had supported me through the biggest challenges of my life, and I had always come out of the darkness of addiction with hope and a new way to look at things. So after two anger management courses, 12 years of therapy and 11 years of 12 Step meetings, why was I so out of control? Why was I pushing away work and money, by losing my cool just at the wrong moment? Why was I shouting at my wife when all she needed was assurance and understanding? Why was I kicking in doors and throwing rocks at her car as she drove away, finally having made the decision not to argue with me any longer? And why was I unable to stop seeing myself as a victim in these situations? I somehow

imagined that I was justified in hurting others because they had hurt me. An eye for an eye was my battle cry. But I knew better, and my heart was heavy with shame, for I remembered my pledge, while crying out as a child, that I would never treat others the way I had been treated. I had vowed that the abuse of power over others would stop with me, and now I was so entrenched in it, I could not stop of my own accord. I had lost my dignity and I was close to losing my wife and unborn child.

I knew that the only way I had licked an addiction was with daily vigilance and the 12 Steps.

The stigma of the word. “Violence”

We use the word violence all the time. In movie ratings, the news, TV. The word itself is so common that we, as a society, have become desensitized to it. Just look at video games and listen to popular music. It’s easy to turn on a commercial radio station and hear songs with violent language or references to violent acts. Much of society condones putting someone down to build up another. Sadly, this thinking has become normal in the 21st century. Even during the middle of the day, there are only a few TV stations I can have on, with my 3 year old in the room, unless I want him to see a murder or some other traumatizing event flash on the screen in the form of an advertisement. These are designed to trigger us into watching the show they represent. They flash on the screen without any warning, and bam, the viewer is left with a terrible image in their mind. So why, in a world where violence is so readily accepted, is it so shameful for a person to admit they have a habit of violent relationships or violent business? We carry mountains of shame about this and trust me, it takes a very brave person to break free. This is what I found in founding Violence Anonymous.

I played around with different names. Domestic Violence Anonymous was the first incarnation, but it seemed to exclude a large part of the way we act out violence. What about the person who has no family problems, but finds themselves

unable to succeed in business due to the way they deal with stress? How about the man who does succeed, but at the expense of others, by stealing or lying to get what he wants? What about the girl who is being shamed and controlled by the rules of organized religion in the name of God? What about the grandmother whose children and grandchildren don't visit, because she is too cantankerous? Is she just to rot away in a lonely end to life, or is there hope for her, too? After bouncing ideas off of a number of friends, we chose Violence Anonymous.

Some said the name was too shocking. Who would come to such a meeting? For those people we began to describe the phenomenon of being "conflict oriented" or "having a propensity for drama." How shameful it must have been for the first Alcoholics to admit complete defeat and to acknowledge to another human being that they were an Alcoholic. The creation of AA was in 1935. Now in 2008, it is considered "trendy" to go to AA and NA meetings. It's a part of popular culture. But not for violent behavior. Here we have a stigma of shame that will take years, perhaps decades, for society to embrace. We find ourselves in a time where only the truly brave at heart will be able to take even the First Step. To admit that I am powerless over violence and that my life has become unmanageable. And that left to my own devices I could end up facing prison or death.

I spent months attending AA meetings and announcing that there was a men's meeting called Violence Anonymous and that those who felt they needed help had a place to go. Most of the time, I would hear people sharing about violence in their lives, but they couldn't see what I could see. They had not reached the bottom. So the response to a men's meeting for violence was usually met with a group round of laughter, like "We know we need it, but we're not quite ready to look under that rock." This was in the company of the men who had faced many demons and come out victorious. These men had faced up to the shame of alcoholism and drug addiction; of lying, stealing,

and cheating to get drugs. These men had rejected the darkness and pain of self-hatred and found a way to help others. If they weren't ready, who would walk with me on this lonely path to god knows where? Who was brave enough to come? Please don't misunderstand my point. I'm not saying I'm any tougher or braver than anyone else. I had hit the bottom and knew if I was to survive and achieve my dreams, I had to have a fundamental change in the way I operate. I had felt enough pain over this issue and I wanted more than anything to save my own tail. All I could hope to give anyone else was my experience. I did know that I was willing to go it alone until I could find a community of like-minded people to help me through it. I also understood what the early AAs discovered. The only way to keep this recovery is to help another violence addict.

It wasn't until I was sharing on a phone meeting of Debtors Anonymous, that I was dealing with issues of violence and this was what was keeping me from true financial success, that I was approached by a group of women who wondered if I would help them create a meeting open to everyone. Hence, the first VA phone meeting was born. Women from all over North America would call in once a week and we would share about how the week went, abstaining from violent behavior, and how we use the 12 Steps to continue to abstain one day at a time. A totally anonymous teleconference meeting. It was a place to come together, to shine a light for each other through the long dark road to recovering from violent behavior. Some of us see ourselves as victims, some as persecutors, and some as peacekeepers (rescuers), but we all have one thing in common. We seek more grace in dealing with conflict in ourselves, families, and communities. And we all had to embrace those feelings of shame that accompany such a journey. The good news is, once I began to admit that I have a problem, the shame lifted and has been replaced with a true sense of confidence and a desire to help those who come after me. Talk about a feeling of purpose. Buddhist studies teach to

turn poison into medicine. We VAs do it every day, by taking the First Step.

Exercise 6

What's your story? How are you powerless over violence and how is your life unmanageable as a result? Take 10 minutes and write it down.

Step 2

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Immediately upon reading this statement many of us raise our heckles with resistance. Since we have grown into conflict-oriented people, it's not surprising that we should rail against the idea that we must believe in a "power greater than ourselves." The VA newcomer may say, "I have already admitted defeat. Haven't I been disgraced enough? Now I must somehow be controlled by some other power. I came to VA because I want to let go of being controlled by others. Now you want me to be controlled by some power greater than myself? I think not." This newcomer's sponsor may guide them to understand that the "ourselves" referred to in Step 2 is the part of us already being controlled by violence. "We are simply stating that we believe there is a power greater than violence that can restore us to sanity. Surely by coming to VA you have already acknowledged that you are not more powerful than violence. Perhaps you might think of the power of Violence Anonymous itself as something greater. Perhaps whatever power you find in the meetings is good enough to start. All you need is a willingness to consider that there might be some power you have not yet tapped in the pursuit of overcoming this painful malady."

There are many names for whatever higher power may or may not exist. For simplicity we use the word God. Many of us substitute different names. The name is not as important as our willingness to believe in something big enough to lift this obsession. Some newcomers don't believe in God. Others have

lost faith that God exists, and still others believe but have no trust that God will help regarding violence. So this brings us to a crucial decision. Do we head back the way we came into the dark waters that nearly drowned us, or remain on the shore with these VAs who claim there is a power greater than violence that can and will restore us to sanity?

Let's examine the newcomer who is resistant to change. They say they won't believe in a higher power. Under their posture of strength, they fear they will lose themselves and all they know about living. Their need for significance is somehow attached to the idea that there is no God. "Everything just happens. There is no rhyme or reason, it just is." Somehow they think that by believing this they are superior to most and therefore significant. In order to even consider that a power could lift their addiction to conflict would mean complete annihilation of the universe, as they know it. They can admit that violence has them licked for good, but perhaps they have trauma that limits their creativity. To this person a sponsor says, "First of all, the Steps of VA are only suggestions, they are not required. Second, to abstain from conflict and remain free of drama you don't have to swallow the entirety of Step 2 all at once. In fact it's rare that anyone really does. Take it a little at a time. Work through some of your trauma and fear as you go and a lot of this resistance will dissolve as you begin to trust both yourself and VA's simple program. For now just try my third suggestion: keep an open mind. My concept of a higher power in Step 2 was simply the word 'Love'. I wrote it on a card and carried it in my wallet. When I needed some peace of mind throughout the day, I pulled it out and just looked at the word written in crayon. That was my start."

This newcomer is not alone. Many of us felt this way upon entering VA. Gradually, we stopped arguing and Step 2 became part of the fabric of our new lives. We stuck around and, one-day-at-a-time, began to have more productive experiences with less and less drama and more and more happiness. This did not happen all at once. Like this sponsor's approach to coming to

believe, it takes time and a desire to change. Their sponsor continues: "Some newcomers choose the power of the VA meetings as their new higher power. Others choose religions from different cultures. I know of one man in recovery who chose a chair as his higher power. For him this was better than worshiping his addiction, and it worked. He remained in recovery and got better. The point is that the path is wide and there is no need for us to exclude ourselves from Step 2 simply because our minds tell us it must be one way or the other. It's enough at this stage to have an open mind."

Some of us once had faith and lost it. These VAs sometimes find it even harder than the atheist or agnostic. At least the atheist and agnostic have a belief. The atheist believes that there is no proof of God, the agnostic that there is proof of no God, but the VA who once had faith and has lost it has no position whatsoever. Perhaps this VA was trained in their early life to become a Rescuer. They drift along thinking that both exercising faith in God and living without God brought the same pain, sadness, and loneliness. So what's the point? They are glad that their early religious teachings helped them to have a sense of morality, honesty and tolerance, and are saddened by the fact that their dealings with less scrupulous people left them feeling victimized and shamed. They may have been misled to confuse "helping" with "rescuing" which led them onto the Drama Triangle time and time again. This phenomenon can be even more intoxicating and damaging when it is attached to their "salvation." Perhaps those who taught them religion believed that Rescuing was being a 'good' person and that "good people go to heaven." Now our VA friend carries the belief that Rescuers go to heaven. It's no wonder that when the pain, frustration, and sadness of rescuing became too great to endure, they abandoned the idea of faith at all for a life of no faith. They would gladly reignite their connection to morality, kindness and tolerance, but are afraid. "I've used faith and played by the rules of the good book only to be tricked and manipulated by others. How am I supposed to get ahead in life

when others take and take, exhausting my kindness, money and energy? I'd rather have no faith at all than to experience that again," they say. Their path to recovery will be one of separating their past traumas from the purity of their faith. In time they will realize that their concept of God has been limited by painful experiences that have shaped their beliefs about how to exercise faith.

Often we VAs have been coerced and manipulated into behaving "kindly." Victims are experts at guilt and shaming Rescuers into thinking that they should do or say things that are out of alignment with their integrity. When we behave in ways contrary to our integrity, the experience produces trauma in our psyche that when compounded over time leaves us feeling frustrated and unhappy. Once traumatized, we continue to attract similar situations and experiences. We learn in VA, that the repetition of similar uncomfortable experiences is our minds' way of bringing our behavior into our field of awareness. However most of us continue on without noticing the warning flag being waved. We simply think, "This is how life is. It's full of drama and conflict." Since we have no reference to anything different, we remain ignorant of this phenomenon and perpetuate a conflict-oriented mindset. This mindset keeps us triggered and living on the Drama Triangle, which unchecked leads to an addiction to violent behavior.

The Rescuer who has experienced being manipulated by a Victim into behaving "morally" can easily slip into seeing themselves as a Victim, too. When these behaviors are attached to faith and religion, the depth of the wound can be even deeper and more powerful and the rebellion stronger. When it comes to helping this VA with Step 2, their sponsor may want to echo the words of the previous sponsor, "It's enough at this stage to have an open mind."

There is another type of VA, who has come to rely entirely on their wits. We were like this VA, too. By sheer power of the mind, we had been able to outsmart and outflank almost

anyone. We thought “The world is full of intellectual mice and I am the cat, toying with the helpless creatures, for fun and folly. I’ve never had any need for God, why would I have one now?” We blew ourselves up to gigantic proportions, floating above the pack in an egoic hot air balloon, enjoying the view as we looked down at everyone and everything. Sadly, this mindset of judgment and shame brought us to VA. The loneliness and unhappiness that accompanies this type of behavior took us to our knees and forced us to admit not only that we were powerless over violent thought and behavior, but also that we must find some type of humility in order to progress with our recovery. Perhaps, like us, this newcomer was indoctrinated into these behaviors by others who treated them in the same fashion. In youth they were shamed and judged by their elders, teachers, and peers. They may have even vowed never to treat others the way they had been treated, but in the end found themselves powerless to stop this type of intellectual cruelty. Or they may have enjoyed the feeling of power that went along with using vicious words and put-downs. Their sponsor might suggest that they begin to acknowledge their feelings and needs rather than their judgments. This might seem a daunting task for this intellectual to begin, but they will soon learn that by focusing on their feelings, and the needs associated with those feelings, they can create a new connection with themselves and a doorway to a power beyond their mind. The simple VA Tool of “Sit with the feeling rather than act on it,” might serve this VA well in coming to believe in a power greater than their violent behavior. If this basic VA tool can bring them more peace of mind, imagine what a reliance on a higher power can do for this VA. They may say, “I might try this feelings business, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves with this God nonsense.” Here the sponsor might tell them, “Some scientists claim that we can only see 4% of the universe. The rest is matter that we don’t see or touch. Take the wind, for example: we feel its power on our skin, in our hair. We see its effects on rocks and tree tops. It powers the waves that crash

onto our beaches. Yet we cannot see the wind. Perhaps you might consider humbling yourself to consider that there is power beyond our comprehension. With time in recovery I learned to disentangle my intelligence from the pain of my trauma. I have been able to combine intellectual, emotional and spiritual intelligence with humility. If I can do it, I believe you can, too.”

Religion and the people in it repulse the next type of VA. Some of us who hold this view watched from the outside as religious figures fell into disgrace with scandal. Those who claimed to be closest to God had dishonored themselves with war, racketeering, fraud and sexual abuse of children. In VA we call this behavior Spiritual Violence. Anyone can agree that these behaviors are abhorrent, however we VAs took it a step further. Some of us delighted in the failure of these people and enjoyed thinking ourselves superior. Other VAs experienced these crimes from the inside, as direct victims and/or perpetrators of such Spiritual Violence. We were survivors of cults and sexual abuse from religious people. We suffered the feelings of shame when we awoke to realize we had been swindled and lied to by the pious. These traumas ran very deep and kept us well back from the idea of getting involved with any program that even remotely claimed to deal with God. This VA newcomer might say, “God is what got me into this mess in the first place and I most definitely will never place my trust in anyone remotely associated with God again.” Here the VA sponsor might gently reply, “I too have suffered from Spiritual Violence and I will likely never forget the pain and torture that I endured, but I can tell you that I am no longer triggered by it and in time you too can recover and feel neutral about all of your traumas. You have already shown great courage by admitting you are powerless over violence. The next step is to find a power greater than all this pain that you carry.” They might go on to say, “I chose the sunset. To me it was something of beauty that had never caused me harm and that was consistently there, every evening, to remind me of the

power of the sun and the beauty of the universe. There is no religious text to follow and only I know what it means to me. Maybe you can find something similar. My point is, if you want recovery from violence, to free yourself from the grips of your trauma and this disease, please try to keep an open mind. That's all you need to make a start."

Now let's have a look at the one full of faith, yet still using power and control to meet their needs. This VA is a precarious type, but not rare at all. In fact, most of the founding members of VA fall into this category. Many of us were long-time 12 Steppers from AA, Al-Anon, NA, DA, UA, SA, SAA, SLAA, OA and more. We were people who had overcome some of the toughest addictions known to humankind, and yet we were baffled by the fact that our relationships were broken, our families were fractured and our businesses were either successful at the expense of others, or failing. How could we have worked so hard on our spiritual condition and centered our lives on recovery, yet still have been missing a genuine connection to God and to other human beings? Without a clear understanding of how violence had colored all of our life experience, we were powerless to change it. With a Step 1 admission of powerlessness over violent behavior and a Step 2 coming to believe in a power greater than ourselves, we discovered that we had unconsciously been worshiping violence over a higher power. Regardless of the name we chose for God, we had been putting our desire or habit for conflict before our relationship with Source. It was this addiction to playing the Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor that kept us from truly connecting with the God of our understanding. When triggered onto the Drama Triangle we were entering into periods of madness. We needed a power greater than drama that could restore us to sanity.

Many VAs will have trouble with the idea of this addiction being called a mental illness. However, upon closer examination we all realize that the time we spend on the Drama Triangle is time insanely spent. We lose perspective of reality

and dive into traumas past and present without regard for what is really happening in the moment. We make ourselves out to be Victims and justify playing the role of the Rescuer, Persecutor, or both. Upon sober examination of the harm we cause while caught up in conflict, whether it be to the psychological condition of those we effect, the emotional wellbeing of our friends, family, children and colleagues, or the physical condition of the property that we recently damaged, we can clearly see that we have no claim when it comes to "soundness of mind." During these periods we have "lost the plot" and "gone off the rails." Our propensity for victim thinking has rendered us temporarily insane.

With Step 2 we can all stand together, atheist, agnostic, former believer and the faithful. Knowing that, with an open mind and a bit of humility, we can find a deeper spiritual connection that can transform our thinking, lift the obsession of violence from us and restore us to sanity.

Exercise 7

Take 10 minutes to write about your view of a higher power.

Putting Step 2 into Action

Understanding powerful feelings that lead us onto the Drama Triangle and Tools of Abstinence.

Anger (an example)

In order to abstain from violent behavior (my addiction to power and control) I had to understand how my emotions dominated certain aspects of my life. Since anger was easy to spot, I began my exploration there. I could admit that my fears generally manifested in anger and frustration, which led to violence. Having grown up in a family of violence, I had used anger as a way to protect myself as a child. Since I was smaller than my parents and older brother, who was double my size, I often found that outbursts of rage would stop them from picking on me and would give me the space that I needed to keep what I thought was my sanity. However, over time this habit became my first response to stressful situations and I found the consequences to this behavior counterproductive. I soon realized this action was driving me further from the love and connection that I needed.

Other early VAs reacted to their strong emotions by isolating themselves and cutting off from those they feared or resented. They would hide by sleeping more than necessary or by putting up walls to prevent healthy communication. Others dealt with strong emotions by Rescuing (“helping” a Persecutor or Victim). This helping was not really helping, but simply “people pleasing” to avoid the pain of an emotionally, psychologically

or physically violent interaction. In other words rescuing is codependent behavior that we VAs employ when triggered onto the Drama Triangle by strong emotions.

Let's take a look at the Oxford Dictionary's definition of Anger.

Anger

Noun: a strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure, or hostility : the colonel's anger at his daughter's disobedience.

Verb: fill (someone) with such a feeling; provoke anger in

I find it interesting to note that the origin of the word anger comes from "grief." What I noticed is, if I allowed myself to sit with my anger rather than act on it, what I really felt was grief or sadness. I was using anger to mask a deeper feeling. This led me to wonder what other feelings I was numbing by jumping straight to anger. The list included many feelings, which could be boiled down to shame, guilt, fear, sadness and hurt.

Exercise 8

Take a few moments to write a list of feelings that you experience when on and off the Drama Triangle.

Exercise 9

Open a dictionary and define each feeling to help you understand yourself more completely. Write the definitions here.

The Niagara Falls Metaphor

Niagara Falls, one of the 7 wonders of the world, pours 35,000,000 gallons of water over its shelf per minute. A few miles up the Niagara River, people safely fish from boats in the slowly moving channel. From there, you can't even hear the monstrous wonder. Imagine if you were in one of those boats and your engine failed, or you lost your oars. At first, you would have plenty of time to call for help and get yourself safely to the shore. However, the closer you get to the falls the faster the current flows and the more dangerous your situation becomes. With each closing second the tension and power of the falls increases and the last 100 yards becomes a raging torrent, until you have taken the plunge over the 180 foot falls into a rock-filled gorge.

Managing the stages of strong emotions can be like navigating that river. Get out soon enough and you're fine. Wait too long and you could be facing what I faced: prison or death. I needed

to understand and practice these tools everyday on the small stuff, so when the big emotions surfaced, I was prepared.

5 Stages of strong emotions

How do we accelerate onto the Drama Triangle?

Stage 1 Anchors

Stage 2 Triggers

Stage 3 Craving

Stage 4 Compulsion

Stage 5 Consequences

Stage 1: Anchors

An anchor is a conscious or unconscious thought, trauma or memory stored in our minds and/or bodies that will trigger an emotional response. We all have them: a familiar voice, sound, or smell, being touched in a specific way, tasting a particular food. Some anchors lead us to emotions that we would call constructive. Others lead us to negative or destructive emotions. It's important for us to begin to differentiate between those thoughts and emotions that help us heal, and those that keep us spinning on the same unending wheel of violence. We can place anchors in our minds consciously: however, most of our anchors or thoughts that lead to emotional cues, are set there unconsciously by way of past experience. Many negative past experiences are conscious and unconscious traumas that occurred earlier in our lives. What I had to do, and I encourage you to do the same, is to identify cues that led me to these anchored traumas. My thinking, while reliving these traumas, resulted in anger, fear, resentment and other destructive feelings, what we in VA call the "Victim

State” or being “Triggered onto the Drama Triangle.” Often these traumas are not visible to us until we trigger. Once we are able to stabilize our thinking, after a trigger, we can admit that we have some trauma work to do. Now we can begin our exploration with the sticky subject. By tracing our feelings back to the thought that generated the feeling, we can begin to rebuild the way we think about past traumas.

Here are some examples to help us get started identifying negative anchors:

1. I feel uneasy in a negotiation situation. Perhaps my needs were not met as a child or youth when I asked for them. Perhaps I have held on to a belief that I am vulnerable or somehow unsafe and need to protect myself. I may not understand how to ask for my needs without getting triggered.
2. I often think people are out to get me. Perhaps I have some trauma around being abused or taken advantage of.
3. My heart races when I feel cornered. Perhaps I have some strong memory of feeling trapped, emotionally, psychologically or physically.
4. I can't hear negative feedback about myself without a strong reaction. Perhaps I have trauma about being verbally abused or picked on.

Exercise 10

Make a list of anchors or emotional cues that send you into a Victim State and trigger you onto the Drama Triangle.

Here are a number of tools that we VAs use to bring our attention back to productive thinking. When my negative anchors are triggered, I do these things to get my attention back to a positive state.

Change Attention

Often, if I catch an old negative re-run playing in my mind early enough, I can just change my attention to a more productive/positive thought, and it's over. For example, I'm driving down the road and someone cuts me off. I can run the old, "_____ -er has no respect for me" tape or I can change my attention to something else and get on with my day. It's really that easy. At first I told myself that I would become one of those "ignorant people who never feels a feeling," but I found that to be far from the case. Instead, I spend much more time in gratitude and less time seeing myself as a victim.

Change Location

An actor friend of mine once told me when he is having trouble in a scene, he takes a walk outside. He said, "If you want to change your mind, change your environment." By changing our environment, leaving the argument, getting away

from someone who is being irrational instead of sticking around to defend ourselves, VAs have avoided thousands of violent situations. In the beginning of our recovery, removing oneself from a situation may pose a challenge, especially to those who are accustomed to Rescuing. With practice and support from our fellow VAs, using this tool becomes easy. We now politely excuse ourselves from the conversation and move on with our day. This allows both parties to de-escalate and reconvene the conversation under calmer circumstances.

Create new positive anchors

There are many ways to do this. The way I found most effective is to recall a time when you were feeling unstoppable, totally confident and happy. Stand up and feel it in your body. Really get it going. Then do a physical gesture like clapping your hands in a very specific way while saying “Yea!” for example. Keep yourself in that heightened powerful state and keep anchoring that specific clap and say “Yea!” Continue this for a while placing your new anchor at the peak of that powerful and confident state until you know that anchor is placed. Throughout the week, when you find yourself in a peak state, re-anchor. Clap and say “Yea!” If you are exercising and feeling strong or reached a goal, re-anchor to deepen its strength. Now when you need to change your state of mind, or “state,” you just fire off the clap and the “Yea!” and you have taken yourself from a negative state to a positive one in seconds.

Exercise 11

Take a few minutes, stand on your feet and create a positive anchor. Go ahead, get up and do it. No need to wait, this tool will change your thinking, your emotions, your actions and your life. Practicing this tool is more important than any reason you may have for postponing this exercise. If you can't do it now, please do it as soon as you possibly can.

Stage 2: Triggers

A trigger is our reaction to the thought embedded in a negative anchor. We hear someone say something with a certain tone of voice, we smell something, we see someone acting a certain way, and our unconscious thoughts based on some past trauma or negative anchor create overwhelming emotions. “Bang!” We are triggered right onto the Drama Triangle. Perhaps when we trigger we play the rescuer. Maybe we play the victim. Or, we become aggressive and play the persecutor role. Regardless of our starting gate position we are now on the Drama Triangle and are acting out violence. This process usually happens in seconds. Whether we experience a mild trigger or a strong trigger, we are irrational and will not find peace until we have successfully removed ourselves from the Drama Triangle by somehow changing our state of mind. Once I am negatively triggered I am no longer dealing in the rational world. I have opened the door of historical pain and I am fighting against

that old experience, while tricking myself to believe the person or situation I'm currently dealing with is the true culprit. If it's difficult for you to see in yourself, think of a time when someone you know has acted irrationally about something. It was impossible to reason with that person at the time. Even if you did what they asked, they were still unsatisfied and upset. That is how people act when they are negatively triggered. I had to trust my wife and friends to tell me I was triggered. I had to force myself to listen to them and believe them. Only then could I actually recognize how being triggered felt. To me it is like bad acting. I would go into tantrums or big rages that felt totally false. This was exactly what I disliked about soap operas: the fake emotions. Now I could see I was starring in my own bad soap. Eventually I began to be able to watch myself as if this was an echo of myself and not the true me.

Exercise 12

Make a list of the times when you have triggered and the effects of such behavior.

Exercise 13

What thoughts and beliefs, anchored in your mind, were calling out to be noticed?

Here are some tools we VAs use to bring ourselves back from a trigger.

Belly Breathing – (from “fight or flight” to “I’m alright”)

This is perhaps the simplest way to slow down one’s thoughts. Rather than sending your attention to your head and the very thoughts that keep you enslaved, try putting your focus on your breathing. You must practice this every day to prepare yourself for the moments when your wellbeing depends on its use. Inhale and let your entire belly and lower back expand like a balloon. Fill up with more air than you think you can hold or are accustomed to taking in. Now when you exhale, drive the air out steadily by pushing your navel toward your spine. Again push further than you are accustomed. Your chest should float upward, remaining full as you release the air, so as not to collapse downward. Repeat this for 10-20 breaths. When you

feel your heart rate accelerate and your pulse begin to quicken, recognize you are in the path of an emotional storm and are accelerating toward potential violent thoughts. Use this technique to regain your composure and to redirect your brain's response from "fight or flight" to "I'm alright." This allows us to sit with the feeling rather than act on it.

Processing (neutralizing) a Trigger using Reframing – a graduation exercise

Now that you have re-established some form of calm by belly breathing you can try this tool. Reframing was taught to me by a trusted therapist, and it works like this. Suppose I have triggered. My son is not getting himself into the car fast enough and we are late. I find myself feeling more and more stressed, my heart rate begins to accelerate and I have reached the "steam coming out of my ears" point of no return. I know that I have triggered and I am now in the grips of the "Victim State." I see myself as a victim to this situation and I am ready to act out to protect myself (meet my needs). I step away from the car, take some belly breaths and then begin reframing. Now I search for a way that I can take responsibility without blaming myself or any person, place, or thing, for this situation. This takes the power away from the situation, over which I have no control, and gives it back to me.

First I identify, "What is my belief about this emotional state?" I believe my son doesn't respect me and I hate being late.

Now I have something to work with. You may think I'm nuts, but I believe that there is a part of me that I have unconsciously asked to create situations for my evolution. Here is one right before my very eyes, I call upon that part of myself, sometimes it feels masculine or feminine, and sometimes I even hear a name for it. For now, let's call it an

"Inner Voice." I begin graduating that part of me.

The dialogue with myself goes something like this:

Me (Moderator): “Thank you for creating situations where I feel disrespected and the stress of being late. I am very grateful for your service and for doing just what I asked you to do for so many years. You have created situations like this for me most of my life and you have done it with great precision. Today is your graduation day. A day for you to be promoted, if you wish, to a new position. Congratulations!”

Now I let the part of me that has been working so hard at creating triggered situations like this, give a speech. It may say something like this.

Inner Voice: “Well it’s true I have worked very hard and at times it has been exhausting, but ultimately I enjoyed it. I couldn’t have done it without the help of some people and situations who I want to thank now. Thanks to my son, who helped by participating in this situation and thanks to my father who usually ran late and thanks to my mother who was always uptight about how I got ready for appointments. Thanks to my boss who is frightening if I’m late. I am now ready to release these duties and my new role will be making sure that we are always 10 minutes early for appointments, so that we can enjoy the ride. I will make extra time for the unexpected and allow my son to take his time, too.”

Me: Thanks for your service. Is there any assistance you need to succeed in your new job?

This may work for many of you and may not for others. I find it gets me back on the page of feeling empowered and responsible for my part and allows me to celebrate the change in a positive way.

Prayer

Prayer can be a very powerful tool. There are many prayers that can be used to guide us off the Drama Triangle. You may have many you already use. I like this one. It works for me every time I have a mild to medium trigger.

“God, I pray to find in you what I’m looking for in this person, place, thing or situation. I pray that this person, place, thing, or situation find in you what they may be looking for in me.”

This frees me from the grips of my violent thinking and puts me back into neutral. Once my thoughts and feelings about the situation are neutral, I can rationally and reasonably respond in a non-violent way.

Perhaps I should mention that when I began to pray, to really, truly, humbly ask for help from a higher power I was 26 and recovering from alcoholism. I prayed to David Bowie. That’s right, sounds crazy, but I know people who prayed to a chair or even made an AA meeting their higher power, so why not Bowie? I had completely lost faith in the God that was thrust upon me as a child. Having been a product of Religious or Spiritual violence and having grown up in an environment where my mother used “burning in hell” as a persuasion method to bend me to her will, I rejected religion with the fury of a hurricane. So when I found myself in need of the help and peace of mind that no man could provide, I was humbled to admit that there are forces at work beyond my explanation and that my surrender to that idea was inevitable if I were to survive. This was when I decided I must be sober to remain alive. August of 1994. So, since I had no belief in the hypocrisy and cruelty of spirituality as outlined by my violent past, I had to start anew. Since I was inspired by Bowie and had his poster hanging on my bathroom wall, as ridiculous as it may sound, I would look into his one blue eye and pray for the courage to remain sober for just that day. Later, with the guidance of friends and my sponsor, I learned new prayers and ways to pray. My prayer life has evolved in a way that works for me, but

without a start I was destined for the same agony I had found in drugs and drink. So when I was well enough to face my violent behavior and see it as perhaps the cause for all my other addictions, I had some 11 years of practice under my belt.

In my early VA recovery, if I knew I was triggered I would leave the scene and distance myself before prayer had any effect at all to reduce a craving for violence (believing I was a victim to some person, place or thing). The main consideration for my prayer is my willingness to ask for help, a distinct change from the man who insisted he knew how to solve situations using fear and manipulation to gain power and control.

There are thousands of prayers that have been uttered for centuries and I encourage you to find many that resonate with you.

Exercise 14

Write a prayer that you might use when faced with a trigger.

Trauma Therapy – EMDR

There are many forms of successful therapies that help millions of people become happier, healthier, and more productive members of our global society. I use EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy. With EMDR I have learned to neutralize a trauma in less than 5 minutes. I began employing it with a trusted certified EMDR practitioner during one-hour therapy sessions. After years of practice, I am now able to turn a traumatic anchor (that has led me to trigger) into a neutral/empowering experience in minutes. I've been able to excavate most of the traumatic experiences from my past and am now able to use EMDR therapy as a means of creating peak performance that leads to daily successes in my life. Those of you who take this program to heart by working the 12 Steps and using the tools will understand the power of trauma therapy. EMDR has been one of the most powerful tools in my first 10 years of VA recovery and has helped me work the 12 Steps of VA with a clearer understanding of how my own thinking is affected by violence.

By the time you read this book there will likely be new technologies and methods of rapidly rewiring our minds and replacing trauma with neutral and empowering experience. All of these tools are vital to our recovery from violent thinking and acting. They help us to recover from our triggers and shine a light on the darkness of our unconscious thoughts and beliefs that are anchored in our minds. They are a vital part of Step 2: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Here is a list of Techniques that Early VAs employed to process triggers:

- EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)
- EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) also known as Tapping Technique
- Reframing Exercise
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- The Work by Byron Katie
- Breathwork
- Focusing
- Internal Family Systems Therapy
- HeartMath
- Hypnotherapy
- NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programing)
- T.A.T Method
- And Others

Consider asking an experienced VA to help you process a trigger.

Stage 3: Craving (Your last warning)

Craving

Noun: a powerful desire for something; a *craving* for chocolate.

A craving, in terms of violent behavior, is the body and mind demanding that we use power and control to solve the current situation. That's a tough thing to reason with. How do we feel when someone makes a demand? Do we enjoy giving them what they ask for? I don't know about you, but when someone comes up to me and says, "give me that now!" My first response, depending on their size, is either "go ____ yourself" (persecutor) or "oh no, I'm scared" (victim) which can lead to "Here take it, even though I need it for myself" (rescuer). Either way there is a potential power struggle. Once we hit the craving stage we have ignited the flames of the power struggle, the collision of beliefs and judgment, the playground of right and wrong. These are places, as violence addicts, we loved to play, but now that we are conscious of the damage that is caused, we can no longer afford to even visit. As VAs in recovery, we no longer want to create situations where one person yields to guilt, shame, or threats and the other dominates. Instead, we aspire to cooperative conflict resolution where both parties feel empowered.

My job in recovery is to remove myself from the power struggle as quickly as possible. Winning a power struggle never creates full satisfaction because someone has to lose for someone else to win. This works in competitive sports, but not in relationships. Recognizing that we are experiencing a craving for unproductive behavior is the first phase to changing our actions and thinking. This phase is called awareness. By raising our awareness we can limit and even avoid the craving stage.

Here are some of the entries from the Oxford Dictionary's Thesaurus.

Longing, yearning, desire, want, wish, hankering, hunger, thirst, appetite, greed, lust, ache, urge, itch, jones.

Exercise 15

Write down some cravings you experience.

So what do we VAs do when we've reached Stage 3, craving and want freedom from strong emotional charges, drama and violence? This is the time for drastic measures.

Change Location - Remove ourselves (Step 2 in action)

Like the wise, we must run from a burning building. This tool has saved me many times. By the time I began to really employ it, I was under investigation by the State of Texas for domestic violence against my pregnant wife and I was desperate to change my behavior. To me this was an admission that I was powerless over violence and my life had become unmanageable (Step 1), and that a power greater than violence could restore me to sanity (Step 2).

My brother-in-law served as a commander in the Green Jackets of her majesty's army. I remember him telling me stories of having to lead his men through hedgerows riddled with land mines. His philosophy was that he couldn't ask those men to

do anything he wasn't willing to do himself. It was because of this resolve that he was the first man through the potential minefield. I pretended to be him during this stage of my recovery. My wife and I were trying to work things out, but by no means were we out of the woods. Our conversations easily turned into arguments and I needed a Safety Plan to prevent myself from acting out violence. I decided that I would keep a change of clothes and some money in my car at all times, for easy escapes. In addition I told myself, "Even if I'm in my underwear, if my heart rate begins to climb, I'm outta there." I told my wife as best I could at the time that it was about me and not about her and that I would be using "Change Location" as a tool to prevent violence in our home. I kept the image of my brother-in-law always being ready to go into battle even without his boots, in my mind, and likened myself to a warrior fighting for something I truly believed in; the happiness of my family and my own salvation. When an argument would arise, and I would find myself in stage 3, heart racing and anger rising from the pain of being called this or told that, I would say, "I'll be back" so as not to invoke my wife's feelings of abandonment, and off I would go. Many times I thought, "I need to go back in for my phone or my sunglasses," but I would refuse the impulse and drive away. I told myself, "I'm a grown man, I don't need gadgets, I need peace." I did this for months. The further I got from the house the calmer I would feel, until I was back to a rational state. Now I could do the reframing exercise or some trauma work and get my mind back on track.

Stage 4: Compulsion – (over the falls we go)

Compulsion

noun

1 the action or state of forcing or being forced to do something; constraint: the payment was made under *compulsion*.

2 an irresistible urge to behave in a certain way, esp. against one's conscious wishes: he felt a compulsion to babble on about what had happened.

I find this part of the definition enlightening. “Against one’s conscious wishes.” Of course in most cases we are not consciously choosing to go into a “victim state” and act out violence. But it happens. Why? Because one of our own thoughts just fired off an unconscious trigger. We know that the unconscious mind is the 90% of the iceberg we cannot see, looming under the surface of the water, waiting to sink the Titanic. But how do we know when it has taken over our actions? Ever see someone acting irrationally, shouting and name calling? Here is an obvious example of someone who has triggered into unconscious pain or fear and is acting out. Some triggers are so deep that we jump right past Stage 3 craving and straight into Compulsion. Snap! We are off the rails and heading for a train wreck. How about the guy who flips you off in traffic despite the fact that you are apologizing for not paying attention? Am I that guy? Are you that guy? If so, you have gone into the haze of compulsion and are crashing over the Niagara Falls, heading for the rocks and undercurrent that many do not return from. Ever have that thought, “I know I shouldn’t do this, but I don’t care, they are going to pay!” or something like that? Welcome to the compulsion for violent behavior. We VAs are experienced with this state of mind.

How about the person who, when triggered by fear, looks for ways to rescue the other person from their irrational anger? “If I could only change the way I am acting or better yet, change the other person’s mind about this issue, I will be safe ,” they tell themselves. This rescuing behavior is an unconscious compulsion practiced over and over in the past. Not only does it exacerbate and escalate the danger of the situation, it puts the rescuer further from their need for safety. We will discuss ways to identify our needs and practice healthy ways for getting them met later in this book. For now, let us all understand that this compulsive behavior is the very problem that keeps us from

healthy loving relationships with family, friends, and money. Yes, money. How often have we wrecked some business deal because we couldn't keep our cool? How often have we chosen not to work with someone else we labeled as difficult? I missed many financial opportunities, because of my compulsion for drama. The traumas and beliefs I held deep inside kept me from realizing my full potential. They hypnotized me and held my focus on drama while opportunity after opportunity passed me by. Without a daily reprieve from such behavior we could all miss many more.

An example of the Compulsion for violence regarding money:

My relationship with money, employment and abundance is an example of how I developed a habit of living in a mild trigger when dealing with matters of financial security and abundance. Founded in a series of traumas over the course of years living with my family of origin, I developed the habit of thinking and acting from a state of compulsion regarding financial matters. By re-triggering myself and living in a perpetual "Victim" state of mind, I allowed my violent thinking to keep me small and failed to prosper.

My relationship with violence and money came from my relationship with my family of origin. If you are expecting some overtly violent story, you may be disappointed. There is no murder or criminal activity. My history is much more subtle in its relation to violence. The violence here is emotional. My father's main concern in life was money. From my perspective, his need for money superseded his need for integrity and to support his family, friends and community. Embarrassingly cheap, he would argue and shame us into never asking for it. So my mother did her best to provide for us three children on her music teacher's income. She paid for school lunches, clothes, sports uniforms, and any other expenses that went beyond shelter. Much of which she did at the expense of her own financial needs. Since my parents had no training in how to meet their needs cooperatively, they perpetuated a violent

paradigm of communication in most matters, and especially about finances. My father would play the Persecutor role, ranting and raving when asked for support and my mother played the Rescuer, denying her own needs to avoid conflict.

Like many white-collar working class kids, I began employment at age 10, cutting lawns and shoveling snow to create spending money for myself. I resented it. We lived in the biggest house in our small Kansas town and my dad had a boat and always wore jewelry and bought expensive toys and cars for himself. We even had a swimming pool. But my father was unable to express his needs or hear mine, so my requests for things like new shoes for my growing feet, allowance and fair pay for chores generally resulted in him shaming me or making comments designed to make me feel guilty for needing more than food and shelter. He would shout at us for asking for extras, crying, "I just bought you that!" not remembering that he had purchased something similar over a year ago, and "Get a job and pay for it yourself," a valid suggestion when made lovingly rather than full of anger and shame. What I can see now was that he might have been feeling afraid to spend the money and needed some help, but since he himself had been indoctrinated into the world of using violence to meet his needs at the expense of others, he used guilt and shame to protect himself and his need for financial security. I began to take jobs with the attitude of doing as little as possible and expecting more than my share. This was me looking for a Rescue, founded in the grief and trauma of forfeiting my need to feel significant in the eyes of my father. Since he saw no financial opportunity in my musical talents, and I was desperate for my father's approval, I denied my passion for music, took any job that would pay me and lost the connection between money and fulfillment. This was the blueprint for my Rescuing behavior around money and the source of trauma after trauma as I repeated this behavior time and time again. I sacrificed my need for finding work that inspired my passion and fell into pleasing others to meet my need for significance. My

resentment toward my father and my grief of being less important than money to him, turned into an entitlement complex and a habit of looking for success by resenting work and feeling ashamed of my need to be valuable to others. The “way” my father attempted to teach me about the merits of work created repulsion to it. This is the effect of violence. After years of recovery I see he may have been trying to communicate his desire for me to be successful in life, by taking responsibility for my own financial needs. Sadly, his violent approach left me feeling unimportant, hurt, and victimized. I carried this mindset into all of my financial endeavors. “I am a victim and I feel ashamed of the way I earn money.” This was my unconscious mantra.

This is the effect of emotional trauma. We carry these wounds around thinking that if we can somehow find success in similar situations, we can win over the trauma. Sadly, that is not how it ends up working. Instead, we re-traumatize ourselves and create a progressive cycle that, rather than improve, becomes increasingly worse. We become addicted to the state of compulsion. Unconsciously, we are bound to the original trauma until we can neutralize it and completely change our thinking. Compound these traumas over years and we have an addiction to violent behavior. We VAs recognize that we must find a power greater than violence to restore us to sanity.

As children we have a natural need to be cared for and loved. Somehow, I saw my father’s behavior as a personal attack against me, rather than an expression of his own needs. This thinking left only one conclusion. “I’m a victim and I must manipulate others to take care of me (Rescuer) and/or punish those who don’t (Persecutor).” From this state of compulsion, I believed I was entitled to be financially cared for, and I squeezed it out of anyone who would play the game. I was a Victim in my own mind and constantly searching for a Rescuer to meet my needs for me. All of this was, of course, unconscious. After University, I took a job in New York working for a corporation. My attitude was that of resentment

toward my employer. Like many of the jobs before, this one ended in my quitting prior to being fired. The sad part for me today is that I didn't even know that I was acting out this power and control cycle. It was my way of somehow having power over the person handing out the checks. Like I was somehow outsmarting them into paying for the pain I carried from my relationship with my family of origin. One boss told me she didn't think I even liked my job and I would be happier in another line of employment, which was absolutely true since I wasn't passionate about the work, but I couldn't admit it to myself. I was afraid of having to face my fears around money and the grief I felt about my family's relationship with abundance. With time and recovery via the 12 Steps I have been able to muster the courage to do work that I enjoy. I now have a career that utilizes many of my strongest skills. I love my work and I am able to provide for my family emotionally, spiritually and financially. After years of healing, I no longer worry that my fears will trigger those unconscious compulsions to transfer my parent's shame to my wife and son. As I grow in my recovery from violence and clear out the past traumas around my need for support, safety, security and prosperity, the level of abundance has gradually increased in my life, both with money and the belief of being truly wealthy and grateful for the affluence I experience. I'm able to provide better for my family and to communicate lovingly about money and our needs for the present and the future, one day at a time.

Compulsion

ORIGIN late Middle English : via Old French from late Latin 'to drive, force' (see compel).

Thesaurus for Compulsion

Noun: he is under no compulsion to go: obligation, constraint, coercion, duress, pressure, intimidation. A compulsion to tell the truth: urge, impulse, need, desire, drive; obsession, fixation, addiction; temptation.

Exercise 16

What can I see about my compulsion for triggering onto the Drama Triangle?

Exercise 17

What strong emotions like shame, guilt, fear, sadness, anger, and hurt overwhelm me?

Exercise 18

What are some of the triggers that set off my compulsions for violent behavior (manipulating others to meet my needs)?

Stage 5: Consequences – (What the heck just happened?)

Consequence

Noun: a result or effect of an action or condition: many have been laid off from work as a consequence of the administration's policies.

I'm sure you wouldn't be reading this book if you hadn't already suffered some of the consequences of strong emotions like anger, shame, and guilt that lead us to violence. Perhaps you have done jail time, lost a spouse, hurt a child, lost a job, money, or your self-respect. After a violent interaction, whether from the rescuer, persecutor, or victim role we inevitably feel guilty, ashamed or embarrassed. Somehow we understand that our methods for meeting our needs for comfort, variety, significance, connection, growth or contribution have fallen short of the mark. Not only do we feel that our needs were unmet, if we are honest with ourselves, we'd know that we have failed to help the other person meet their needs as well. These thoughts and feelings, if unresolved, become anchors for future

triggers allowing the cycle to begin again. And the wheel goes round and round. But there is a way out of the maddening cycle of abusive behavior. You can learn to stop this cycle or prevent yourself from plunging over the mighty Niagara. I found a way out in these 12 Steps, Violence Anonymous Meetings and the tools of VA.

Education: the antidote to ignorance

I'm sure we can all agree that education is crucial in understanding any subject. Some VAs believe that ignorance is the root source of violent behavior. By lacking a clear understanding of our own needs and how to meet those needs in cooperation with another, don't we lay the foundation for someone who shares our ignorance to continue the cycle of violence? Might a higher level of education regarding our behavior remedy the problem? Recovering VAs will rejoice "Yes, however education alone could not save us from the voracious appetite of power and control. It was daily vigilance, meetings and working VA's 12 Steps that secured our recovery."

Even after quantum leaps in knowledge about my behavior and months of reprieve from its effects on the lives of my family, violence always returned and each time with a greater fury than the last. It was consistent progress through VA meetings and step work that allowed me to convert my years of education into a lasting change and allowed my family and colleagues to feel relaxed and safe in my company.

We VAs who have come before you, understand from experience, that becoming conscious of our thoughts, feelings, actions and behavior begins in the 2nd Step of VA. By admitting our powerlessness over violence in Step 1 and acknowledging that we have failed to overcome this malady, we enter into Step 2 with an open willingness to try something new; to listen to those who have come before us and have found a way out of the pain and shame of violent behavior.

Here we embraced the tools listed in this chapter and sought out as many more as we could employ toward the aim of “coming to believe in a power greater than violence.” We have found this belief to be imperative and fundamental in recovering and creating true happiness.

For resources that I found helpful see Appendix A. I’m sure you have and will find many more to add to this list.

Exercise 19

Write down the consequences of violent behavior that you have experienced.

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood God.

Step 1 and 2 encouraged us to reflect on ourselves; to examine our history with violence and to open our minds to new ideas about how to find something more fulfilling in life. Unlike these previous Steps of contemplation, Step 3 and the Steps that follow require action. It is through action that we can begin to change our habitual pattern toward self-will that has kept us separate from our highest good. Faith is necessary for our liberation from violence, but faith alone will not free our hearts and minds. It is possible to believe that a higher power exists without allowing that power to guide and direct us. For the newcomer this may seem difficult, even impossible. They may ask, “How precisely do I turn my will and life over the care of whatever God there might be?” Step 3 becomes our first attempt.

By simply having the willingness to remain free of the Drama Triangle, we begin to experience a shift in our relationship to the world, both visible and hidden from our sight. Once the door of willingness is open, we find we can always open it a little more. Though a sudden trigger may slam the door shut again, simply returning to willingness will re-open our channel to God. We have found that our VA recovery will depend upon our level of willingness to completely open this door.

This may seem too metaphoric for the practical-minded newcomer. They may say, “I don’t know about all this door and

channel to God business. I'm not sure about any of this hocus pocus." Step 3 is much more practical than it may first seem. Every person who has joined VA with the intention to recover has already begun this Step. We came to meetings broken by our own admission and turned our lives over to the protection and care of Violence Anonymous. Every VA has let go of a level of self-will just to be here. We laid down many of our beliefs about violence and picked up those suggested by the VA program. These are all examples of willingness to change. Any willing newcomer can see that VA is a safe place for the ball of confusion we have become. We are already living examples of turning one's will and life over to a newfound Power.

Some VAs began this path desperate to save a relationship, a career or some situation in life that, because of the VA's behavior, has now ended. Others want to escape incarceration or to shorten a sentence. For these people willingness may come easier. They may find themselves beaten down by their desire for power and control. They may be willing to try anything in order to find relief from the agony of shame and grief. Others simply were not living the life that would truly fulfill them. Their bottom was not as dramatic. For those, this idea of willingness may not come so easily. They may say, "Many facets of my life are working well. Why should I become willing to turn my will and life over to a higher power?" Why would they want to give up the dignity of knowing that the knowledge they have accumulated in some areas has empowered them to great heights? Perhaps great family fortunes have been amassed. Perhaps amazing feats have been accomplished. So how does that VA find the strength to let go of control? Their sponsor might remind them that violence rarely only turns up in one aspect of our lives. Instead it has woven itself into the fabric of our thinking.

Let's have a look at our society today. Is self-sufficiency really paying off? Mankind has progressed to the point where one can log into a device and communicate all over the world. Business can function without ever seeing a client. Information is king

and those who have it are selling their business for fortunes to marketers and conglomerates. Buildings rise and fall in faster and more efficient ways. The sun and wind are harnessed for power to accomplish unlimited tasks. Yet our society is becoming increasingly violent and divided. Men and women grapple for control of governments and countries. Each side proclaiming, "I'm right and you are wrong." The masses are gradually allowing themselves to be ensnared by consumerism and the number of people starving continues to rise. Crime is on the rise despite the increase of prisons. We have wars on drugs, terrorism, and crime, yet none are completely effective because of the nature of conflict. How can we blame those who retaliate from having their neighborhoods bombed, their families erased and their sources of income taken? This kind of thing is happening all over the world in the name of progress. Do we really think we are creating peace? These are extreme examples that make it easy to see how power and control strategies do not produce harmony in society. With an individual, these behaviors may not be as easy to identify. We may find it more difficult to see how our dependence on violence has rung the life out of our family and co-workers, and led them to feelings of frustration and fear. We may find ourselves ignorant to the ways that we injure those around us by depending on manipulation, or a co-dependency to those who manipulate. We may not want to see how dependent we have become on seeing ourselves as a victim to the job, the partner, the child, the stranger.

Once we are truly willing to admit that we are already acting out a dependency, it's easy to replace that dependence on violence with a dependence on a higher power, or at the very least the VA meeting or group. An experienced member of the VA group might suggest replacing our dependence on violent interactions with the tools of VA. She might tell the newcomer that, when abstaining from violence, the VA Tools are invaluable. Making a Phone Call to another VA in times of crisis, Changing Location to avoid a potential conflict, Self

Care, Processing Triggers and Nonviolent Communication have all proven successful in not only preventing an experience of discord but creating an experience of happiness. This VA old-timer would be wise to encourage dependence on these Tools as a practical expression of turning our will and our lives over to a higher power.

Exercise 20

List the ways you need to let go of power and control.

Tools of Violence Anonymous

1. **Sponsorship** – Our experience shows that working the 12 Steps of Violence Anonymous is crucial to our recovery and working with a sponsor keeps us focused and grounded in that process. We seek a sponsor who has worked the 12 Steps of VA and who has experience processing triggers. By being willing to sponsor and be sponsored we ensure our personal recovery and the strength of VA as a whole.

2. **Meetings** – We attend VA meetings to share our experience, strength, hope, and honesty with one another and to learn about the many faces of violence in our lives. At meetings we are reminded that there is a solution. By attending meetings, we deepen our recovery and carry the message of VA to those who still suffer.

3. **Literature/Readings** – We use literature to improve our understanding of our relationship to violence. By reading literature we remind ourselves of the solution to violent behavior and increase our awareness of our thoughts about people, places and things that sometimes trigger us into thinking that playing the rescuer, persecutor or victim will help us meet our needs. Many VAs utilize this tool between meetings as a reminder that we can live off the Drama Triangle.

4. **Service** – Service strengthens our recovery and helps ensure our growth in overcoming violence. Service can include attending meetings, chairing a meeting, reading

literature in a meeting, time keeping, sharing, sponsoring, participating in business meetings, and speaking on the phone with other VAs.

5. **Prayer/Meditation** – When we pick up this tool we acknowledge the limits of our own power and perspective, and seek reliance on a spiritual source of strength. To pray and meditate, it is not necessary that we name or define that spiritual source. There are many ways to use this tool. Here are some possibilities: contemplating a starry sky; participating in ceremonies with a religious community; communicating aloud to a benevolent power, in solitude; attuning to our feelings and needs; reading prayers or inspirational words; focusing on the movement of our breath. In prayer and meditation we open ourselves to a state of being where we can transcend our dependence on violence and experience the true power of being connected to source.

6. **Nonviolent Communication** – We use Nonviolent Communication when listening and speaking. This form of communication allows us to identify and express our feelings and needs, and request help in meeting those needs. Using NVC liberates us, as we discover a way to relate to others while remaining free of the Drama Triangle. Practicing NVC creates the possibility of cooperative solutions that meet our needs and the needs of others. Nonviolent Communication deepens connections and cultivates authenticity and well-being in our lives.

7. **Phone Calls** – We call other VAs as a means of giving and receiving support in abstaining from violent

behavior. A consistent daily practice of phone calls makes it easier to reach out for support with challenges and in crisis moments. Isolation and the belief that we can recover alone are symptoms of an addiction to violence. Using the phone is a way to strengthen our recovery by building a strong network of support with other VAs. We are especially careful to respect anonymity when leaving messages.

8. Awareness – In VA we see awareness as an intimate understanding of violence in ourselves, others and society. We use this understanding to choose recovery by responding consciously, rather than reacting unconsciously to life situations with helplessness, attack or control. We develop the capacity to discern when others are engaging in violence, allowing us to maintain a state of neutrality. We have found that our awareness grows by attending meetings, reading literature, utilizing VA's tools and working the 12 Steps of VA. With awareness we notice our progress and our experiences of increasing serenity, effectiveness and happiness.

9. Processing Triggers – A trigger is our internal reaction to a person, place, thing, situation or thought. Triggers can range from mild to severe. Some triggers are positive, and some are negative. When we are negatively triggered we are casting ourselves as victims. This puts us on the Drama Triangle, making it difficult to think, speak or act without causing harm. In recovery we recognize each trigger as a warning that we are at risk of behaving violently. We heed this warning, halt, and process the trigger before moving on. Processing a trigger is

investigating the trauma that lies beneath the trigger and neutralizing our reaction to it. Our experience shows that processing triggers with support is essential. We don't have to do it alone. Neutralizing traumas with the guidance of a trusted therapist, peer or sponsor helps us become adept at processing triggers ourselves. By processing triggers as they come up, we gradually clear our inner landscape of the traumas that set off our violent behavior.

10. **Fun, Humor and Laughter** – By choosing to value the lighter side of human experience we learn to let go and to enjoy our lives more. We use humor in a way that inspires a feeling of safety and belonging among those involved.

11. **Deep Breathing** – We have found that deep breathing helps us de-escalate from a trigger or a potential trigger. Taking 10-20 deep breaths can settle our minds and allow our bodies to relax. This practice brings us out of the thoughts that keep us on the Drama Triangle and into the present moment.

12. **Choice** – The habit of acknowledging responsibility for how we choose to spend our time and energy becomes insurance against the temptation to see ourselves as victims of circumstance. We maintain a level of participation in activities and commitments that is balanced and sustainable over time, knowing that we also have the choice to adjust our participation level in response to inspiration or special circumstances. As our recovery deepens through working the 12 Steps of VA, we become able to listen to the intuitive feedback our

body gives us about our true needs, and discover a world of choice we never knew existed.

13. Self-Care – Our biochemistry affects our judgment and our ability to respond to situations in a neutral way. The list below raises our awareness of ways we can care for our essential physical needs and avoid playing one of the roles on the Drama Triangle. Each individual may have additional ways that they practice self-care.

- Balanced rest.
- Balanced nutrition.
- Balanced exercise.

14. Experience the feeling (sit with the feeling rather than act on it) – In VA, as we learn to experience our feelings we discover that they hold the keys to understanding what our true needs really are. Sitting with a feeling means giving ourselves time to connect to the need that's behind it. Then, instead of acting on the feeling, we can take action on meeting the *need* – peacefully. By using this tool we become able to make choices that are truly in alignment with our heart's desire.

15. Change Attention – Many of us suffer from chronic “victim thinking.” With this tool, we change the habitual thinking patterns that have repeatedly led us onto the Drama Triangle. We also use this tool to neutralize a mild trigger or minimize the impact of a more intense trigger. If we can recognize an impending trigger, we can use this tool to avoid triggering at all. Changing attention

to a more positive state may include redirecting our thoughts; changing the subject of a conversation to a more positive one; focusing on something of beauty; using affirmations; becoming aware of our body and surroundings; focusing on something inspiring rather than upsetting. By cultivating the habit of changing our attention to a more positive state we increase the amount of time we spend in gratitude, joy and peace.

16. Change Location – Changing location is a safety mechanism to avoid triggering and/or reduce the intensity of a trigger. Whether we are triggered or dealing with someone else who is triggered, moving to a safe location can reduce the effects of the situation and give us crucial time and space to allow our thinking to return to a neutral state. By changing our location we can put ourselves in a position to pause and work toward a cooperative solution, at a later time, when we can meet our need for connection in a peaceful way.

17. Safety Plan – The safety plan tool helps us prepare for the moment-by-moment challenge of remaining free from the Drama Triangle and abstaining from violent thought and behavior. When we create a safety plan we identify *ahead of time* what VA Tools we can use in a potentially triggering situation and what steps we will take, should a trigger (our own or someone else's) catch us by surprise. A plan for physical safety may include a clear intention and willingness to change location if a situation threatens to escalate, keeping spare keys, clothing, and money where we can access them quickly if needed. With a safety plan in place, in the heat of the

moment we can grab hold of the VA program...and each time we do, we feel our feet more solidly on the ground of our new life.

18. **Creativity** – For simplicity, we define creativity as making, doing, thinking or experiencing in an imaginative way. Many consider creativity to be an act of meditation, devotion, or practice. Others find solace in the technical aspects of an activity. Regardless of how one might define it, we find creativity to be helpful in connecting with something deeper or bigger than our current state of mind. Being creative can be a way of processing conscious and unconscious beliefs, patterns, and triggers and can also help us achieve a blissful and fulfilling state of mind. It enhances our connection to ourselves and the outside world while giving us a potential vehicle to meet our needs for Certainty, Variety, Significance, Connection, Growth, and Contribution. Some examples of creative activities are sports, visual arts, cooking, gardening, work, crafts, music, performance, writing, dance, and other fine arts. Making time for creativity can enhance our ability to use other tools of VA, and be a healthy addition to our recovery.

Here is a list of techniques that Early VAs employed to process triggers:

- EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)
- EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) also known as Tapping Technique
- Reframing Exercise
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- The Work by Byron Katie
- Breathwork
- Focusing
- Internal Family Systems Therapy
- HeartMath
- Hypnotherapy
- NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programing)
- T.A.T Method

Recognizing gravity as a natural law has freed up scientists to understand planetary movements. Our dependence on electricity has improved most aspects of our modern lives. So we can easily agree that there is freedom in certain dependencies. Take a moment to consider the natural laws of the universe. These are the rules by which all changes occur.

We cannot begin to understand many of these laws, but some we do. Gravity is one we all agree upon. So what about the guy who despite the knowledge of ages insists that he can prevent himself from falling from the sky to the ground? He steps out of a first story window to prove that he won't hit the pavement below, but does. So in defiance he climbs to the second floor of his building and leaps out a window there, only to find that he again plummets to the earth. Now frustrated, he runs to the third story and leaps again, this time breaking his leg. After months of recovery and having supposedly learned his lesson, he finds himself on the ledge of a fourth story window again determined to prove that he can overpower gravity, this time paralyzing himself. He is not very different from the person who is determined to defeat violence with sheer human will power. Despite all that we have learned about ourselves regarding violence, we found that only the willingness to let go of control could consistently confirm our freedom from the incessant habit of its use. It was only by turning our will over on a daily basis that we were able to establish anything like continuous sobriety from violence. But this was just the beginning. Success lies in the remaining Steps. The true test of our willingness was the action required to follow through with Steps 4 through 12. We VAs have found, from experience, that freedom from violent behavior is built on the firm bedrock of willingness to turn our will and lives over to a higher power. Our best expression of this willingness is attending VA Meetings, working these 12 Steps and employing the VA Tools on a daily basis.

It's clear that I had been unknowingly placing my dependence on power and control. When I felt that my well being or my plan was in jeopardy, I resorted to violence as a means of maintaining what I believed to be balance. However, this strategy failed to bring about true balance or any lasting resolution to whatever conflict I applied it. Instead it brought ruin, destruction and severed relations with people. Violence took me further from my true goal of peace and prosperity for

myself and others. My loved ones were afraid of me and business partners fled from agreements, not wanting to deal with my behavior or fearing how it would affect the bottom line. So it's safe to say that my dependency on violence as a means of power has failed, and turning to a power greater than violence might be a good start.

Many VAs change the language of Step 3 to fit their particular belief about God or a higher power. Some VAs view a "spiritual awakening" as a psychological and emotional maturing that does not require a "God," but instead a reliance on the fellowship of VA. I have trouble with the language of "greater than myself" since my faith is based on the belief that God and I are one and that in my best form I am carrying out the will of God at each moment. I cannot argue that I often fall short of my highest potential, hence my arrival in Violence Anonymous. It is by putting my power in my false-self/small-self/ego-self that I fall short and forfeit my connection to my God-self. So "A power greater than my false-self or my unhealthy ego" is more appropriate for me. Regardless of the language one uses, the point is the same. We have found ourselves at the bottom and in order to climb out we must lay down our previous beliefs and find a faith that works. If we continue along our violent path, we are surely doomed to more misery. So we begin by turning our will and our lives over to God, as we understand God. The wording of any prayer is optional, the point is that we express sincerity and make an honest attempt at willingness to change. Many VA's begin with the Serenity Prayer.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference. Thy will and mine be one."

Others prefer this 3rd Step Prayer found in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"God, I offer myself to Thee-to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may

better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of Life. May I do Thy will always!”

Some of us found it helpful to take this spiritual step with another VA, a close family member, Sponsor or spiritual advisor. Some found it better to take this Step alone, rather than sharing this delicate moment with someone who might misunderstand. However it is done, as long as we approach Step 3 with an honest and humble heart we find the effects deep and profound.

Exercise 21

In what ways do I need to let go of control?

Exercise 22

How can I use the VA Tools to let go of control?

Appendix B

The Step 1, 2, 3 Waltz meeting does the reading and writing listed here each week on Tuesday 7 PM and Wednesday 11 AM Central Time.

1. Start Step 1 – Intro to VA: Read “Step 1 - We admitted we were powerless...” on **page 13** to “Luckily for those who are willing to work it...”; Write on “What Brought You to VA?”
2. Step 1 – Intro to the Drama Triangle & Victim Role: Read “Understanding The Drama Triangle” on **page 17** to “Exercise (2)”: Write on the ways you see yourself as a victim
3. Step 1 – Rescuer Role: Read “Rescuer” on **page 23** to “Exercise (3)”; Write on the ways you see yourself as a rescuer
4. Step 1 – Persecutor Role: Read “Persecutor, Perpetrator Abuser” on **page 27** to “Exercise (4)”; Write down the ways you may persecute yourself and others
5. Step 1 - Read "Once I have humbled myself..." on **page 28** to "Exercise (5)" - More on the Drama Triangle: Write out 5 more ways you see yourself as a victim, rescuer or persecutor
6. Finish Step 1 – Read “My recollection of Step 1...” on **page 33** to “Exercise (6)”: Write on “How are you powerless over violence and how is your life unmanageable as a result?”
7. Start Step 2 – Higher Power: Read “Step 2 - Came to believe...” on **page 39** to “Exercise (7)” (Agnostic Atheist Faithful); Write about “Your View of a Higher Power”

8. Step 2 – Putting Step 2 Into Action: Read “Putting Step 2 Into Action” on **page 47** to “Exercise (8)”: Write on Feelings & Definitions “Exercise (9)”
9. Step 2 – Read “Niagara Falls Metaphor” on **page 49** to “Exercise (10)”: Write a list of Anchors. Read “Tools for Stage 1 Anchors” - Change Attention, Change Location, Positive Anchors): Get up and do the positive anchor “Exercise (11)”
10. Step 2 – Read “Stage 2 Triggers” on **page 54** - stop at “Belly Breathing”; Write on Triggers & Effects “Exercise (12)” & Thoughts & Beliefs “Exercise (13)”; Read “Tools to use for Stage 2 Triggers” - Belly Breathing & Reframing (stop at Prayer)
11. Step 2 – Read “Tool for Stage 2 Triggers - Prayer” on **page 59**; Write a prayer “Exercise (14)”; Read “Tools for Stage 2 Triggers – EMDR & List of Techniques” (stop at Stage 3)
12. Step 2 – Read “Stage 3 Cravings” on **page 63** - stop at “Change Location”; Write on Cravings you experience “Exercise (15)”; Read “Tool for Stage 3 Cravings - Change Location” - stop at “Stage 4”
13. Step 2 – Over The Falls & Stage 4 Compulsions: Read “Stage 4” on **page 65** to “Exercise (16)”; Write on Compulsions & Strong Emotions “Exercise (17)” & Triggers “Exercise (18)”
14. Finish Step 2 – Stage 5 Consequences & Education: Read “Stage 5” on **page 72** to “Exercise (19)”; Write about consequences of your violent behavior
15. Start Step 3 – Letting go of Control: Read “Made a decision...” on **page 75** to “Exercise (20)”; Write on “In What Ways do I Need to Let Go of Control?”

16. Finish Step 3 – Tools: Read “Tools of Violence Anonymous” on **page 79** to “Exercise (21)”; Write on “In what ways do I need to let go of control?” “Exercise (22)”; Write on “How can I use the VA Tools to let go of control?”