

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Proactive Twelve Steps

*A Mindful Program for Lasting Change*

by Serge Prengel

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*he Proactive Twelve Steps* is a great resource for our clients who are dealing with addiction or other manifestations of trauma. It provides a user-friendly framework that helps clients practice, on their own, a mindful process of self-discovery that is consistent with what we do in therapy.

The book integrates trauma and addiction. You cannot separate them out; they are intimately intertwined. When seen through a polyvagal lens, addictions are neurophysiological state changers. They involve being stuck in a feedback loop of sympathetic and dorsal, shifting between one and the other in order to find some kind of regulation. Of course, it doesn't work, but it is all that is available until the underlying trauma is addressed.

Serge's premise is that there is something in the Twelve Steps that really resonates with people. So, instead of focusing on the limitations of the Twelve Step model, he embarked on a dialogue between his perspective as a trauma-informed therapist and the healing process outlined by the steps.

The outcome is a user-friendly guide to embodied self-inquiry. As we all know, you can't just tell people that they should be "in their body," especially when that is scary to them. This book leads readers, little by little, to be in touch with their embodied experience.

It starts, in Step Two, with a metaphor: the healing process is likened to disentangling a cord. You cannot disentangle it by pulling mindlessly. You have to engage with it. Serge does not need to tell the reader to be in their body. He conveys it through the powerful metaphor of disentangling. This has an embodied resonance with all of us who have ever dealt with that experience.

Step Three shows us a way to shift from mindless, automatic behavior by taking a mindful pause. Serge clearly explains that this kind of pause is not the same as pausing a video. It involves curiosity, sensing into inner experience, and inviting the potential for change.

And so, by the time we come to Step Four, looking for patterns in your life is not an abstract idea. It is clearly based on exploring inner experience.

While the process is parallel to the traditional Twelve Steps, the actual step-by-step experiencing reflects a trauma-informed understanding of how people can make difficult changes. Instead of using the language of "defects of character," Serge shifts the paradigm by talking about "coping mechanisms." He invites the reader to understand the wisdom of these survival strategies from inside the body. He introduces the notion of vulnerability: helping the addicted person to begin to touch into threatening experiences while slowly building a capacity to be with uncomfortable places.

As a reader, you begin to understand how fear compels you to avoid staying in a vulnerable place, and pushes you to bounce back into your coping mechanisms. Addictions are not scary demons lurking inside. This is the intensity of the fear which can be assuaged by creating safe, nourishing relationships.

The process described in these *Proactive Twelve Steps* is clear and practical. It involves finding and rehearsing alternative behaviors that become daily practices. If you are in the middle of the fire, you cannot improvise a new response. It takes rehearsing, while you are safe enough to think more clearly.

And so, these steps do not dwell on making apologies to people for the sake of apologizing. Apologies naturally come about as a result of having a deeper understanding of your coping mechanisms, of finding more effective ways to deal with your fears and manage your problems. The apology is all the more meaningful, as it comes after you have found a way to not repeat the offensive behavior. As the shame heals, the apology follows.

Unlike the original Twelve Steps, *The Proactive Twelve Steps* are not driven by the grace of God or a Higher Power. They describe a down-to-earth process of developing your ability to make an enduring connection with yourself and others. Finding acceptance need not require believing in the grace of God. Being listened to in a compassionate way helps you find the acceptance that makes it possible to change.

You can now experience your social engagement system as a compass. It can fulfill this role, as you are able to deal with the triggers that fueled your reactivity. It is empowering to understand that your reactivity was trauma-based, not a moral failing. This leads to moments of true liberation – liberation from fear and shame.

## In Summary

*The Proactive Twelve Steps* is an unusual kind of self-help book. It describes a deep process in user-friendly terms. It gently draws you into an inner exploration that is mindful and embodied.

It is a great tool to help our clients keep practicing, on their own, the kind of mindful process that we foster in therapy. For our clients who are in traditional Twelve Step groups, this book provides a most useful bridge between what they do in these programs and what they do in therapy. For those who seek the support of the groups, but are looking for a different way to understand their addictions, this book is a welcome addition to the field.

While the book is a great resource, clients do not need to buy it to have access to *The Proactive Twelve Steps*. The steps themselves, commentaries on the steps, instructions, and FAQs are all available online at <http://proactive12steps.com>.



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