

Setting Bottom and Top Lines

Bottom Lines

Bottom lines are behaviors we choose to abstain from in order to begin recovering from sex and love addiction. Bottom lines help define our sobriety. They are guidelines for our new life. When we stop the unhealthy behaviors that have made us so unhappy in the past, we begin to experience physical, mental, emotional, sexual, and spiritual wholeness. We start to engage with life.

Bottom-line behaviors seem hard to let go of in the beginning. We believe we cannot survive without our old behaviors, although they have driven us to despair, and, for some, to suicide.

In spite of our reservations and fears that we will not be able to maintain abstinence from our bottom lines, we find that with the help of a sponsor, our peers in recovery, and our program of recovery, we can do it one day at a time.

Some of us come to the program having deprived ourselves of sex, sexual contact, and intimate relationships throughout our lives. If we identify as anorexics in S.L.A.A., then our addiction is about deprivation rather than active misuse of sex and love. As anorexics, we often “act in” rather than “act out.” While acting out is defined as engaging in addictive bottom-line behavior, acting in behavior isolates us or withdraws us from others; it reflects avoidant patterns. These two terms define a wide spectrum of behavior used to avoid building relationships with our Higher Power, ourselves, and others. One person’s acting out could be another person’s acting in because of the individual nature of defining our destructive behavior. But how can we set bottom lines? Once we have found an S.L.A.A. HOW sponsor, we begin to answer the first seven questions set out above. As trust in the relationship with our sponsor develops, we identify the behaviors that are harmful to us and the people around us. The pamphlet, *Setting Bottom Lines*, offers us a plan to help break the destructive cycles of sex and love addiction. At the end of the seven days, we agree on our bottom lines with our sponsor, then begin answering a question each day for the next thirty days.

Top Lines

In contrast to bottom lines, top lines are positive, affirming behaviors that we now choose to include in our lives. They are a tool for sanity when we feel least sane – a way to get out of our head and into our heart. For many of us top lines are the start of living a sober, contented life.

In the past we exerted much time and energy in our acting out or acting in; we didn’t know what a healthy lifestyle looked like or felt like. We had lost the ability to nurture ourselves, to pursue healthy interests and activities. We may also have lost the ability to build friendships with people who were truly available and trustworthy. It matters little if our addiction was compulsively pursuing sex and love or isolating from sex and love, we now know that if we are to truly live beyond the addiction we have to learn new skills.

While some instinctively know what is lacking — for example, spiritual connection, exercise, or food choices — there often seems to be something greater missing from our lives. Some describe it as “purpose,” or a need for learning, creativity, enjoyment, or connection to ourselves and to our community. Some describe it simply as “being in the moment.”

Being in recovery even for a short time brings us some clarity and a feeling of relief. Some begin to use the tools of prayer and meditation. For some of us it is the first time that we fully connect to or experience our past grief or trauma.

We set top lines from the beginning — soft, slow steps towards more positive, reinforcing behaviors. We give ourselves time for peaceful reflection, and some activity (or non-activity) to help process the painful resentment, anger, shame, or fear that has been suppressed for many years.

Top lines can be difficult to put into practice. We acknowledge our powerlessness and work the Steps, practicing progress, not perfection. We pray for courage and ask for support from people we trust.

Some of us view top lines in the same way as bottom lines. So, not adhering to them may be interpreted as a slip or loss of sobriety. Some sponsors suggest that we create at least as many top lines as bottom lines. This helps us replace destructive behaviors with new, healthy ones. Or it might help us begin to open our lives to healthy contact where there is complete or near complete deprivation. Some of us respond to a gentler approach so that some or even all our top lines are defined as guidelines rather than requirements. Ultimately, in defining our bottom lines and top lines, we listen to guidance from our sponsor and our Higher Power.

We keep top lines simple, uncomplicated and focused on the process rather than the end result. We learn it is okay to change top lines if they don't move us toward our recovery goals. We treat ourselves in a loving, gentle, and encouraging way.

Suggestions for Top Lines

The following top lines are recovery-positive suggestions for activities we can incorporate into our daily lives. We review the following sections with our sponsor and make a list that is appropriate for each of us.

Spiritual Top Lines These can include daily readings, reflection, prayer, meditation, mindfulness, Step work, journaling, walking in nature, or visiting a place of worship. Some seek solace or reconnection with their faith by attending an S.L.A.A. retreat or convention, or by visiting a specific place, tree, lake, or rock.

Personal Top Lines These are nurturing or fun activities such as going to a concert or an exhibition, a swimming pool, a park or a particular spot in nature that is special to us. It can be cooking a favorite meal or going to our favorite restaurant or coffee shop on a regular basis. It can be picking up a long abandoned musical instrument or buying ourselves flowers. For some of us, personal top lines are trying a new skill that has nothing to do with our past or with our career, or it might be signing up for a class we have always wanted to take but have never had the time or courage to. Learning to draw, paint, write, sail, sing, cycle, bike, climb,

drive, swim – whatever activity that facilitates growth. Some find regular exercise a safe release for anger – using a punch bag, mattress, or pillow to hit (useful in Step Four). This activity can release anger from the body. If we have experienced a long period of abstinence or withdrawal, having the physical contact of massage is healing. We might seek medical advice and therapy for untreated symptoms that affect our health, our ability to have sex or to be intimate in a relationship. Some of us enter psychotherapy as a way to support our recovery and help deal with the trauma of our past.

Social Top Lines These start with saying “yes” to social invitations from those we trust. If we feel socially anorexic we practice organizing a meet-up (coffee, lunch, cinema, concert, sports game, cycle, run or walk with a group). Some of us sign up for a dance or exercise class, woodwork, carving, bread-making, drumming, self-defense. By engaging with people that we trust, and who are able to help us, we also learn how to tolerate people that we find difficult, challenging, or triggering.

Community Top Lines Sponsoring and doing service in our home groups and intergroup are useful ways to learn about giving. Some of us practice small acts of kindness. Some go on to volunteer in their communities: teaching, coaching, facilitating for a cause that we feel passionate about. We find many needs in our world that can benefit from people like us who have gained personal awareness through recovery. There is a great reward in being able to contribute to the community around us. Giving hope to one person can make a huge difference in their life and ours.

Relationship Top Lines As we move through the Steps and develop a relationship with a Higher Power, and an ability to nurture ourselves, some of us decide to practice healthy behaviors in relationship with others, as well. We initially work on developing friendships or improving relationships with the family (as appropriate). In due course and in consultation with our sponsor, we commence dating or recommitting to a partner, having devised an appropriate plan for dating. We think carefully before commencing romantic relationships, reviewing the robustness of our recovery, the extent of Step work we have committed to, our progress in recovery, and our vulnerability to addiction. The answer as to when and how to work on romantic relationships is entirely a matter of Higher Power direction, individual experience, consultation with our sponsor, and personal journey. Most sponsors don't recommend dating before completing Step Nine, because developing a relationship with our Higher Power and with ourselves are most vital to our recovery, and need to be strong before starting a romantic relationship.

Breaking Bottom Lines - What Are Slips?

In terms of the HOW concept, we define a slip as breaking one of the bottom lines from the list of bottom lines we had previously agreed upon with our sponsor.

Sometimes we act out in ways that haven't clearly been identified or defined in our bottom lines. When this happens, it is not technically a slip. But such acting out provides an opportunity for sponsor and sponsee to discuss the behavior. In reviewing what happened, we gain new insights, potentially identify other addictive behaviors that need to be on our list of bottom lines, and, if appropriate, actually treat it as a slip (see next section “Slip Questions and Sobriety”)

Experience has shown us that slips don't just happen. Most S.L.A.A members who have been through these periods could say that slips can be traced to specific causes. We forget that we are sex and love addicts and can become overconfident or complacent. Or we become too preoccupied with business or social affairs to remember the importance of abstaining from acting out. Or our foundation Steps of One, Two, and Three are not strong enough. Or we let ourselves become tired and are caught with our mental and emotional defenses down. In any event, we withdraw from taking advantage of the help available to us. We cease maintaining our S.L.A.A. lifeline. Getting honest and current with another S.L.A.A. member or at an S.L.A.A. meeting helps us overcome the despair that can arise from slipping, and put our recovery back on track. It may be useful to read about slips in the S.L.A.A., *Questions Beginners Ask* pamphlet.

Slip Questions and Sobriety

An important principle in the S.L.A.A. HOW approach is that, while working the first three Steps and answering the first 30 questions (see pp. 19-23), we maintain 30 days of continuous sobriety. Sobriety in the S.L.A.A. HOW approach is defined as 30 days of abstinence from bottom-line behaviors. Top lines are often not defined as strict sobriety requirements, but they can be if this is deemed appropriate or useful.

If we slip – if we break our bottom lines – we will need to start again. This means regaining our sobriety through daily contact with our sponsor and by answering questions from “Further Thoughts on Sobriety - The Slip Questions” (see list on p.65) for the same number of days that we have been working the Steps. For example, if we are on day 21 of the 30 questions when we break a bottom line, we answer 21 “Further Thoughts on Sobriety” questions and read our answers to our sponsor each day, and then resume the 30-day questions from where we left off. In this case, from day 21. This practice is to support us in reestablishing our sobriety before continuing our Step work. This is a time to pause and reconnect with our Higher Power and our authentic selves. We do this to ensure that our Step work isn't undermined by our addiction, and that we have a solid foundation in Steps One, Two, and Three.

The objective is not to be punitive but to provide us with the support and connection we need to help us through this period of our recovery. With thirty days of continuous sobriety, we have now established a safe spiritual space in which we may become sponsors and resume our own recovery.

Slips that take place after Step Three are discussed with our sponsor. There are no hard and fast rules about the return to sobriety, but typically this is a process of reflection, review, and discussion of bottom or top lines, and agreed-upon action to take. Each sponsor passes on the learning that has been passed on to them. Some assign 30 days of slip questions. Others consider the nature of the slip and assign a varying number of slip questions depending on the context. Some agree on a period of checking in and writing about the slip.

Withdrawal

Between the unhappy, out-of-control circumstances that bring us to S.L.A.A. and the recovery miracles we hear people describe, is a challenging stage called “withdrawal”.

This period can definitely be difficult and painful. Suddenly we are no longer using our old ways of acting out or acting in to get by in life. This can come as quite a shock and in fact many members describe this early period of “withdrawing” from their past lives of sex and love addiction as exactly that, a state of shock.

So what is withdrawal? Withdrawal is what happens when we stop using our old patterns of escape and are suddenly left with ourselves. In other words, we draw back from the old to take on the new and it is this period between the old and the new that we call withdrawal.

Withdrawal can seem very disconcerting. Here we are at a turning point, gradually choosing to let go of our past painful yet familiar lives to take on an unknown source of pain that seems like it might well be worse and might go on forever.

Sometimes we have a sense of feeling downright strange, maybe panicky, and possibly even a little unreal. We may lose sleep and often feel very uncomfortable in our bodies. Some of us have thoughts of suicide.

However, in our experience all of us who are willing and sincere get through this period with the help of the program and each other.

Common experiences and feelings in withdrawal include: intense feelings of sadness and excitement, sleep disturbances, craving past partners, craving past activities, loneliness and isolation, anger and frustration, headaches, sadness or depression, emotional pain, physical symptoms such as flu-like symptoms, decreased or increased appetite, a desire to use alcohol or drugs, and exhaustion or compulsive activity.

Facing Withdrawal

The S.L.A.A. HOW approach supports us with a very strong program of tools, including sponsorship, daily questions, partnership with a Higher Power, and the fellowship of others sharing our path so that we have a safe space to help us move through this withdrawal stage of our recovery.

This is one of the reasons it is highly recommended to make four outreach calls a day (three to fellow members and one to our sponsor). It is also why HOW places such emphasis upon bottom lines, answering written questions, going to meetings, and regular contact with our sponsor and fellows.

Many of us find these HOW suggestions challenging at first. But we take courage and support from the fact that, time and again, fellow S.L.A.A. members say these tools are what pulled them through the challenging period of withdrawal. Most of us find that the more willingly we adopt the strong support and structure of HOW, the more gracefully we allow our old lives to fall away and our new lives to be rebuilt.

It is through withdrawal that we meet ourselves as we are because it is only behind the fear that we find the seeds of our own personal wholeness.

Here are some other ways that we help ourselves through withdrawal:

- we keep up our outreach calls;
- we keep answering one HOW question a day;
- we keep in touch with our sponsor;
- we attend meetings;
- we go for coffee and fellowship after meetings;
- we pray;
- we take a service position;
- we are kind to ourselves;
- we connect with our body by walking, exercising, practicing yoga, or bathing;
- we meditate;
- we journal and write;
- we use positive affirmations;
- we make a gratitude list each morning or before going to bed;
- we read Steps One, Two, and Three.

Some of us find that the S.L.A.A. pamphlet, *Withdrawal: Gateway to Freedom, Hope, and Joy*, is an invaluable source of suggestions for entering, coping with, and emerging from withdrawal. Others read Chapter Five of the *Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous*, S.L.A.A.'s Basic Text, which deals more fully with the experiences members have had in this process, and the tools they have used to survive the withdrawal experience without relapsing into the addictive patterns.