

Working the Program using the HOW Approach

Setting Bottom and Top Lines

Bottom lines

Bottom lines are behaviours we choose not to do because they keep us trapped in sex and love addiction. They define our sobriety and give us practical guidelines for a healthier life.

When we stop behaviours that have harmed us, we can begin to feel healthier physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually. We become more available for life.

At first, giving up bottom-line behaviours can feel impossible. We may believe we cannot live without them, even though they have caused deep pain. With help from a sponsor, other people in recovery, and the program, we can stay abstinent one day at a time.

Some people come to recovery after long periods of avoiding sex, intimacy, or close relationships. In SLAA, this may be called **anorexia**. In this case, the addiction may involve deprivation and avoidance rather than compulsive pursuit of sex or love.

- **Acting out** means engaging in addictive or bottom-line behaviour.
- **Acting in** means withdrawing, isolating, or avoiding connection.

These patterns look different for each person. One person's acting out may be another person's acting in. The important question is whether a behaviour prevents us from building healthy relationships with our Higher Power, ourselves, or others.

With a HOW sponsor, we begin by answering the first seven program questions. As trust grows, we identify the behaviours that harm us or the people around us. At the end of the seven days, we agree on bottom lines with our sponsor and then continue with one question a day for the next 30 days.

Top lines

Top lines are positive, healthy behaviours that we choose to add to our lives. They help us move away from old patterns and toward a sober, satisfying life.

Many of us spent a great deal of time and energy acting out or acting in. We may not know what a healthy life feels like. We may have lost touch with self-care, enjoyable activities, trustworthy friendships, or meaningful connection.

Top lines help us practice new skills. They can include spiritual connection, exercise, creativity, rest, learning, pleasure, friendship, community, and living more fully in the present moment.

Recovery can bring clarity and relief, but it can also bring up grief, trauma, anger, shame, or fear that we have pushed down for years. We begin top lines gently, with small and realistic steps. We give ourselves time to reflect, heal, and process difficult feelings.

Putting top lines into practice can be hard. We accept that recovery is about progress rather than perfection. We ask our Higher Power for courage and seek support from people we trust.

Some people treat top lines as firm commitments, while others use them as flexible guidelines. A sponsor may suggest having at least as many top lines as bottom lines, so that harmful behaviours are replaced with healthy ones. The right approach depends on the individual, their sponsor, and their Higher Power.

Keep top lines simple and focused on the process, not on a perfect outcome. If a top line is not helping your recovery, it is okay to change it. Treat yourself with patience, kindness, and encouragement.

Examples of top lines

Spiritual top lines

These can include:

- Reading recovery literature each day
- Prayer, meditation, mindfulness, or reflection
- Step work or journaling
- Walking in nature
- Attending a place of worship, retreat, or recovery event
- Visiting a meaningful place that helps you feel grounded or connected

Personal top lines

These are activities that nurture you, help you have fun, or support your growth. Examples include:

- Going to a park, concert, museum, pool, coffee shop, or favourite restaurant
- Cooking a meal you enjoy
- Buying yourself flowers
- Returning to music, art, writing, cycling, swimming, or another hobby
- Learning a new skill or taking a class
- Exercising in a safe and healthy way
- Seeking medical care, therapy, or counselling when needed
- Receiving appropriate, consensual therapeutic bodywork or massage if that supports healing

Social top lines

These help build safe connection with other people. They may include:

- Accepting invitations from trustworthy people
- Meeting someone for coffee, lunch, a walk, or a movie
- Organising a small group activity
- Joining a class, club, sports activity, or interest group
- Practicing being around people who are safe and supportive

As we build healthier connections, we can become better able to handle difficult or triggering people without returning to old patterns.

Community top lines

These help us practice giving and participation. They may include:

- Sponsoring or doing service in recovery groups
- Taking a service position at a meeting
- Practicing small acts of kindness
- Volunteering, teaching, coaching, or supporting a cause that matters to you

Helping others can strengthen recovery and create a sense of meaning and connection.

Relationship top lines

As we work the Steps and build a relationship with our Higher Power and ourselves, we may begin practicing healthier behaviour in relationships.

This may start with friendships or appropriate family relationships. Later, and with guidance from a sponsor, some people may choose to date or recommit to a partner.

Before beginning a romantic relationship, consider:

- How stable your recovery is
- How much Step work you have completed
- Your current vulnerability to addictive patterns
- Whether you have a clear dating or relationship plan
- Guidance from your sponsor and Higher Power

Many sponsors advise waiting until after Step Nine before dating, because early recovery often requires strong focus on building a relationship with oneself and with one's Higher Power.

Slips and sobriety

In the HOW approach, a **slip** means breaking a bottom line that you previously agreed on with your sponsor.

Sometimes someone may act out in a way that is not yet listed as a bottom line. It may not technically be a slip, but it is still important to discuss with a sponsor. The experience may reveal a behaviour that should be added to the bottom-line list or handled as a slip.

Slips usually have warning signs or contributing factors. For example, we may become overconfident, too busy, tired, isolated, or disconnected from meetings, outreach, Step work, and sponsor contact. Honest conversation with another member or at a meeting can help interrupt shame and restore connection.

During the first three Steps and the first 30 written questions, HOW defines sobriety as 30 continuous days without bottom-line behaviours. If someone breaks a bottom line during that period, they pause the questions and work “slip questions” with their sponsor for the number of days they had been working.

For example, if a person slips on day 21, they will answer 21 slip questions—one each day, sharing them with their sponsor—before returning to the 30-day questions at day 21.

The purpose is not punishment. It is to restore honesty, support, spiritual connection, and a stable foundation before continuing Step work. After Step Three, responses to slips vary. A sponsor and sponsee may review the situation, revise bottom or top lines, agree on additional questions, or set a period of daily check-ins.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal is the difficult period that can happen when we stop using old addictive patterns to escape or cope. We are leaving familiar behaviours behind, but the new way of living may still feel unknown and frightening.

Withdrawal can feel painful, confusing, or unsettling. People may experience loneliness, sadness, anxiety, anger, sleep problems, cravings for past partners or activities, changes in appetite, exhaustion, physical discomfort, or a strong urge to use other compulsive behaviours, alcohol, or drugs.

Some people may have thoughts of self-harm or suicide. If that is happening, seek immediate support from emergency services, a crisis line, a qualified mental-health professional, your sponsor, or a trusted person who can stay with you. You do not need to handle that level of distress alone.

The program's support structure is intended to help people move through withdrawal: sponsorship, daily written questions, meetings, outreach, service, prayer, meditation, and fellowship. The document recommends four outreach calls a day—three to other members and one to a sponsor—as part of that support structure.

Helpful practices during withdrawal

- Stay in contact with your sponsor
- Continue outreach calls
- Answer one HOW question each day
- Attend meetings and connect with others afterward
- Pray or meditate
- Take a service commitment
- Journal or write
- Practice gratitude

- Read Steps One, Two, and Three
- Move your body through walking, exercise, yoga, or bathing
- Use encouraging and compassionate self-talk
- Be gentle with yourself

Withdrawal is not necessarily a sign that recovery is failing. It can be the uncomfortable transition between old survival patterns and a more whole, connected life.

Defining Bottom Lines: First Seven Days

During the first seven days, we work with our sponsor to identify the behaviours we need to stop in order to support our recovery. We answer one bottom-line question each day and read our answer to our sponsor. Our sponsor listens, offers gentle guidance, and gives feedback when needed.

We answer the questions in order, one per day. We focus only on that day's question so our answers stay current and honest.

After completing the seven questions, we use our sponsor's help, outreach calls, and guidance from our Higher Power to set our bottom lines. Because each person's addiction and anorexic behaviours are different, bottom lines need to be personal and specific.

To support recovery, we may also identify:

- **Bottom lines:** Behaviours we commit to not doing because they harm our recovery
- **Middle lines:** Accessory or warning behaviours that can lead us toward a bottom line
- **Top lines:** Healthy behaviours that support recovery and a fuller life

Reading Materials

To answer the bottom-line questions during the first seven days, we need these books:

- *Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous* (SLAA's Basic Text)
- *Alcoholics Anonymous* (AA's Big Book)
- *A Framework For Living*
- *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*

We also use these SLAA pamphlets to help us understand our behaviours:

- *40 Questions for Self-Diagnosis*
- *Anorexia: Sexual, Social, Emotional*
- *Withdrawal: Gateway to Freedom, Hope, and Joy*
- *Romantic Obsession*
- *Questions Beginners Ask*
- *Setting Bottom Lines*

The Seven HOW Bottom-Line Questions

• Day 1

What is sex and love addiction for you? Discuss in writing.

Read the SLAA document *Characteristics of Sex and Love Addiction*.

Underline words or ideas you do not understand and discuss them with your sponsor.

Also underline passages that feel familiar or remind you of your own behaviour. Write about how those passages relate to you. Discuss what you discover during your daily outreach calls and with your sponsor.

• Day 2

Read “The First Step” in Chapter Four of SLAA’s Basic Text, pages 68–73.

Do you identify as a sex addict, a love addict, or both of these?

Using examples from your own life, write about how you have acted out in these areas in the past.

• Day 3

Read the SLAA pamphlet *40 Questions for Self-Diagnosis*.

Mark the behaviours that you identify with most strongly. Choose the ten that seem most relevant to you. Write a few sentences about each one, using specific examples from your past.

• Day 4

Read the SLAA pamphlet *Anorexia: Sexual, Social, Emotional*.

Do you relate to any of these behaviours? Discuss in writing.

- **Day 5**

Read Chapter Five, “The Withdrawal Experience,” in SLAA’s Basic Text, pages 104–115. Also read the SLAA pamphlet *Withdrawal: Gateway to Freedom, Hope, and Joy*.

Write about how you have experienced withdrawal related to sex and love relationships. For example, reflect on what happened for you when a relationship ended.

- **Day 6**

Read the SLAA pamphlet *Romantic Obsession*. Write about anything that feels meaningful to you and reflect on what you have learned.

Then read the sections “What is Acting Out?” and “What are Slips?” in the *Questions Beginners Ask* pamphlet.

Have you tried to control your compulsive behaviour in the past?

Write about how you tried to control it, what happened, and why you slipped or acted out after deciding to behave differently.

- **Day 7**

Read the SLAA pamphlet *Setting Bottom Lines* and the “Top Lines” section in this guide.

First, make a list of the obvious behaviours you believe should be bottom lines or top lines for you.

Next, write about why absolute honesty is necessary in recovery from sex and love addiction.

Then make a list of more subtle behaviours that may cause problems or put you at risk of breaking a bottom line. These are sometimes called middle lines.

Discuss these lists with your sponsor. Together, identify bottom-line, middle-line, and top-line behaviours for the 30-day Steps One to Three period.

To continue using the program through the first thirty days and beyond, purchase the full SLAA HOW Step and Sponsorship Guide from
webstore.slaafws.org or store.slaa.org.au