

The Three A's Quick Reference Guide.



Dave H. @dave.h.recovery

Right now, you're exhausted. That makes sense. You've been running on empty while trying to fill someone else's tank. Let me show you a simple framework that will help you find your way back to yourself—and eventually, to serenity. It's called the Three A's: Awareness, Acceptance, and Action. It's one of my favorite tools to find my way back when I lose my peace.

The first time I tried it, I didn't do them in the moment. I did them later, after I'd already surrendered my serenity, trying to figure out how to get it back. That's usually how it works at first. You lose your serenity, then you use this framework to find it again. Eventually, with practice, you start recognizing the pattern earlier. Let me explain what each part of this Serenity Roadmap actually means.

Awareness (What's Actually Happening)

Awareness has several different definitions but the dictionary definitionFor the purposes of this book, I want you to think of awareness as *the acknowledgement of what is actually happening*. This is critically important because so often when I ask someone why they are upset, or what is holding them back from acceptance, they tell me the **story** of what happened, the **reason** for what happened, their **diagnosis** of the person who wronged them, but rarely zero in on what happened.

Meet Amanda. She's sharing with her sponsor that Jaime, her boyfriend, overslept because he was hung over and they were supposed to be at her parents' house by 11:00 to drop off their daughter so they could go to Amanda's work event; a barbecue at the beach, 30 minutes away. She didn't even want to go to the event because Jaime wasn't feeling his best and they were going to be late. She also knew there was beer at the event. She knew one beer would help his attitude but she was afraid he would get drunk and embarrass her in front of her boss so she

lectured him the whole way to the beach. The event ended after they had been there about 90 minutes and she was watching him the whole time. Amanda said her goodbyes, grabbed Jaime and they drove home.

“What happened?” Her sponsor asked.

“What do you mean?” Amanda replied, stunned.

“What couldn’t you change? What did you have to accept?” Her sponsor continued. “Where did all the feelings kick in?”

“I guess when he didn’t wake up on time.” Amanda offered.

“Never mind him.” Said the sponsor. “What was wrong for you?”

Silence. Then the sponsor suggested “You were going to be late to the barbecue. Period.”

That’s what was actually happening. It doesn’t matter why. It doesn't matter how late. It doesn't matter whether it was a barbecue or a baseball game or a book signing. Amanda was going to be late and it triggered several worst-case scenarios that produced all kinds of feelings. What will the parents think? What will her coworkers think? Will he get drunk? Will they have to leave early? Will he get belligerent? All of that was in Amanda’s head. What was actually happening was they were running late.

Awareness comes first because the Serenity Prayer leaves you with two choices; Is this something I can change, in me? Or is it something I need to accept, outside of my control or choice? If I can change it, I can accept that I have work to do and get into action. If it’s a reality that I can’t choose or change, it is time to accept it so I can move on. The wisdom to know the difference requires me to slow down and ask that question. I have a sign on my refrigerator. It’s in my handwriting and it says, in big felt marker letters, “HAPPENING.”

I only need to accept what is actually happening. Not the stories, the reasons, the number of times it’s happened before, the fact that I should have known, or that nobody informed me that something changed while I was away.

For Amanda, it was “I’m going to be late.” Accepting that reality doesn’t require embarrassment, excuses, reasoning, lecturing, speeding, monitoring or any of the other mental and emotional gymnastics that followed that day. Only Amanda’s lateness was hers. All the other stuff; the hangover, the barbecue, the drive, the parents, the beer, the traffic, the perceptions, the judgment either wasn’t real, or it wasn’t Amanda’s to choose or control. Awareness means seeing your own behavior clearly. If you’ve ended up in the rooms of recovery, it’s likely that you have patterns that you may or may not notice. Awareness of patterns usually comes up in fourth step inventories. Sometimes a caring friend or sponsor will point them out. The discomfort we feel when that happens helps us to first accept the reality and then change what we can. Awareness is also a process of distinguishing between what’s yours to change from what’s theirs to own and process. Awareness is also a process of observing without judgment. This is a helpful skill to develop for meditation. If you wake up in the middle of the night with your head running or wake up in a panic thinking about something you have to do, take five seconds and acknowledge it. “I’m panicking. I can stop now.” No judgment. This is happening and I can stop. Another one of my favorite questions is “How is this helping me?” If I’m stuck in my stories or talking down to myself, I can ask “How is this helping me?” Usually it isn’t. It’s taking time, energy and focus away from things that are more meaningful, important and valuable. Again, I don’t punish the waste of time. I accept that it’s okay to stop and that I’ve editorialized on my life long enough. It’s time to get back to it. Once I’m aware of the truth I can ask myself the right question: “Is this something I can change, in me? Or is it something I need to accept, outside of my control or choice?”

Acceptance (Making Peace With Reality)

Bryce is three years old. He has his sippy cup of chocolate milk and he is walking around the house proudly sipping and visiting with family members in different rooms. He goes into the living room and dad is playing with the dog. Dad throws the ball and the dog runs after it, grabs it with his mouth and brings it back to dad. “Good boy!” Dad says and throws the ball in the other direction. The dog fetches again. “Good boy!” Dad explains. Just then, Bryce takes his

cup and yeets it across the living room in the general direction of the dog, just as his mother walks into the living room to see what's happening. "BRYCE! That is TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE!" She booms.

Um. No. It just happened.

Mom doesn't LIKE what happened but sooner or later (hopefully sooner so she can mitigate the stain on the carpet) she's going to **accept** that Bryce threw the cup of chocolate milk. After all, it IS reality. For a long time I hated the expression "it is what it is." My response was usually something like "Yeah but it sucks!" Which may have been true. Acceptance is acknowledging that reality is what is, not what I wish it was. Fighting reality is a losing battle and it robs me of my living. Denial is the unwillingness to accept reality. "No. This can't be happening. This isn't happening." Unless and until I acknowledge the truth, I am not living in the real world. I am delaying the rest of my life with the work of reimagining the past. I was taught early in recovery that I don't have to like it but I do have to accept it.

Acceptance is to "let in" like when you are accepted to a college. I'm letting in the information about reality, not processing it, judging it or evaluating it. This brings me to the story of your mailbox.

Your mailbox is in the same place every day. Your postal carrier comes by six days a week and drops stuff in the mailbox. The mailbox accepts whatever is placed inside. It doesn't care if a different postal carrier delivers it. It accepts small envelopes, big envelopes, magazines, birthday cards, junk mail, checks and jury notices. Once the mail is delivered, you go out and take it from the mailbox. You can decide what to keep and what to throw away; what needs a response and what to save for later. You don't run out when the mail delivery comes and say "Hold on just a minute! What are you putting in my box?" You let the carrier do their job. Let reality do its job. There's no point in resisting. Be the mailbox.

Action (Doing What's Yours To Do)

Bryce has thrown the chocolate milk. Mom doesn't like it. She cannot change it or choose to go back in time and take the cup from his hand. With a heavy sigh, mom realizes that this behavior is totally un-LIKE-able, yet must be accepted. In her own voice she internally acknowledges "Bryce threw chocolate milk and it is draining into the living room carpet." Now she is free to move into action. She does what is right for her life, her carpet and her home. She grabs a roll of paper towels and some dish or laundry soap. She absorbs as much of the milk as she can using up to \$15.00 worth of paper towels. She then pours detergent directly onto all affected areas of the carpet. With her fingers or a cleaning brush she agitates the detergent and rubs it into the carpet to allow the detergent to loosen the milk and cocoa from the carpet fibers. She allows it to work overnight. In the morning she will use wet cloths to wipe up the remaining soap and soil from the carpet. This is the proper and most beneficial response to the reality of spilled chocolate milk.

Granted, we don't all respond with the best and appropriate action when confronted with an impulse. If only our worst reality was a bit of spilled milk. Most of us have dealt with real horrors and painful tragedies. They can be much harder to accept, or to *agree* to accept. Real crises like overdose, death, injury, illness, destruction, divorce and more cross all of our paths. Addiction is not the only theater where these dramas play out. Choosing the next right action is not always fixing. Every situation is different. Sometimes the right action is setting a boundary. Sometimes we need to focus on self-care. One of the most important advantages of the PAUSE, is that I can check myself so that I act in alignment with my core values. I've learned the most important thing is to take action for myself, not for anyone else or AT anyone else. The alcoholic drinks AT their problems and they don't change, they usually get worse. We can judge, criticize, lecture and reason at others. None of those brings our serenity back.

Why This Works

The Three A's are a framework. I think of them as a Serenity Retrieval System. The truth is, serenity isn't a steady state. It's more of a correction. A miracle, if you will. There will be periods of serenity, but about half the time we mistake it for boredom and go immediately into action. Life in recovery is a cycle of losing serenity, finding it again and working to hang on to it. Life gets lifey sometimes. We all have character defects in our nature and behaviors that we have learned that convince us to relinquish our serenity.

Without a framework, living with an addict, using or sober, is too much for most of us. Their crisis becomes your crisis. You swing between despair and attempts at control. I know that lack of acceptance leads me to frustration, followed by saying things that I have to clean up later. Instead of finding my own peace I shine a light on my own shortcomings. I become the problem and then I don't know what to do or where to start the repair process. I get overwhelmed and before I know it, I'm exhausted again. When I put the focus on myself, I have a chance to recover serenity. When I PAUSE, I can bring myself back to the Three A's and work through it. That pause brings me back to my center. I can adjust my thinking to the reality of the situation. When you feel the urge to react to a seemingly unacceptable situation, repeat this gem I heard in a meeting: "Don't just do something! Sit there."

Awareness, acceptance and action work together. They are like the proverbial three-legged stool; one of the most stable designs for weight-bearing, balance and efficiency. Take off one leg and the stool is useless. Awareness without acceptance is just painful truth with no peace. Acceptance without awareness is denial. Action without the other two is the illusion of control. All three together create the conditions for serenity to bloom and grow. Unfortunately there is no way to do this perfectly. We cycle through the different elements of the framework repeatedly. That's not failure. That's the practice. The practice of imperfection.

<https://dave-h-recovery.substack.com>