**Step Four: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.**

*Step Four asks us to take an unflinching look at the one person we have power to change: our self. We make a comprehensive written inventory of our lives, both past and present. We set aside our defenses, and closely examine the patterns in our thoughts, feelings, and behavior. We do this not to find fault but to grow toward a change for the better. We begin to see the aspects of our character that have harmed us, harmed others, and stood in the way of healthy choices. Our inventory and insights during this Step Four process help us clear the way for deeper, more joyful relationships with our Higher Power, our trusted friends in recovery, and ourselves.*

**Fourth Step Prayer**

Higher Power,

Grant me the willingness to look carefully at all aspects of my life. Help me to be honest with myself about my strengths and weaknesses.

Please help me set aside my defenses. Relieve me of judgment and blame. Help me feel your comfort and support as I uncover the truth.

Guide me and give me courage as I walk through all the emotions this Step may stir within me. Keep me close to my trusted friends in recovery who can support me as I do this important work.

May the wisdom I gain as a result of working this Step help me make positive and lasting changes in my life. Help me share these priceless gifts of the Fourth Step with others.

**Considering Step Four**

When we were new in COSA, many of us were confused about what a “searching and fearless moral inventory” even meant. What was a moral inventory and how would it help us? Why did it have to be fearless? Several people had hinted in meetings that it was a daunting task, but well worth the effort. We shared about the reservations we had. We asked questions. Ultimately, we trusted our sponsors and our Higher Power to guide us through the Fourth Step process.

Given the painful events that first prompted us to find the COSA program, many of us wondered why we needed to write our own inventory. Wasn’t it those who had affected us with their compulsive sexual behavior who needed to look at themselves and their behavior? Weren’t they clearly the ones in the wrong? Many of us saw ourselves as the innocent ones or as the responsible ones who had kept everything together as the sexual addiction caused chaos, confusion, and pain. Even those of us who went against our own values or developed our own addictions in an effort to cope often felt, at first, that it was the sex addict’s fault that our lives looked the way they did. Our sponsors listened, and encouraged us to continue moving forward. They knew from experience how Step Four
could clarify the causes of our pain and ultimately lead to healing and freedom. Steps One, Two, and Three had proven to us that relief was available. We took a leap of faith, trusting that Step Four would help us too.

As we entered into the important work of Step Four, we called upon all that we had gained in the first three Steps. Using our newly strengthened reliance on a Power greater than ourselves, we felt ready to learn more about ourselves. We asked our Higher Power to help us let go of self-judgment and be honest about our lives, without internally berating or shaming ourselves. We set aside our desire to have this Step figured out ahead of time, or to do it perfectly. We turned the outcome over to our Higher Power and simply did as our sponsors suggested.

Taking Our Inventory

Our searching and fearless moral inventory required a great deal of writing. It would have been just as impossible for us to keep everything straight in our minds, as it would be for a store owner inventorying stock. We needed it in front of us, on paper. We heard in meetings about many different types of inventories, such as resentment inventories, fear inventories, and sex inventories. We trusted our sponsors to guide us in the way they had worked their Fourth Steps.

The word “searching” guided our endeavor. We gave it everything we had. We made it as thorough and honest as we could. For some, it took weeks and for others, months. When it seemed like too much, we took breaks to nurture ourselves and have some fun. We practiced patience and gentleness with ourselves, but we did not stop altogether.

As with all the Steps, we were not alone in this venture. Once again, we had the support of our Higher Power, our sponsors, and our groups. This was incredibly important as we worked through the inventory. We did not try to figure out how to do this Step ourselves. Our sponsors gave us direction. We did not face ourselves, our past, or our feelings alone. We reached out many times during the process—to other COSAs with phone calls, and to our Higher Power with prayers. We started receiving some of the gifts of this Step right away. We were developing our ability to ask for and receive help, guidance, and loving understanding.

For some of us the word “fearless” suggested that we might encounter fear while working this Step. For others it suggested that this Step required the determination to persevere despite any inner resistance we felt. Regardless of which interpretation worked for us, we often found that this one simple word “fearless” gave us the strength we needed to keep going. When deep feelings or resistance emerged, we summoned courage and strength. We reached out to sponsors, friends, and especially to our Higher Power during these times for support and encouragement. We learned that we were able to move through fear and take action. We didn’t have to let fear paralyze us or change our course.

Lastly, this was our own inventory, not an inventory of other people. Most of us felt like victims and had a great deal of pain when we thought about the impact of compulsive
sexual behavior on our lives. We were confused, hurt, angry, and scared. It was easy for us to see the wrongs others had done and were doing! It was harder for us to focus on ourselves. Our sponsors explained the gifts of this Step would come from looking at our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. When we recognized our own patterns, we could move toward real change, clarity, and choice.

We started our inventory by specifically naming who and what we resented. When had we experienced times of conflict or pain? What were the circumstances? How did we feel in relation to these people, places, and things? These were easy to answer. We wrote them down.

When that portion was complete, we reflected more deeply on the specifics. We asked ourselves, did I feel threatened in some way? How did I act or react in these situations? Was I dishonest? Did I blame others and justify my own poor behavior? Did I rely on others to make me feel safe, loved, useful, or whole? Did I act in ways that were immoral or in ways that conflicted with my own values? Why did I act the way I did? These questions and their answers were the very heart of the inventory: we looked thoroughly at the part we played. We looked for the thoughts and behaviors that caused harm to ourselves or others, made the situations worse, or were outside of our values. We wrote all of these down.

We found that our part was sometimes difficult to see. Our dishonesty could be so covert. It often showed up as being dishonest with ourselves, not speaking our truth, acting as others would have us act, believing as others would have us believe, denying reality, and creating fantasies. We blamed the addict for our unhappiness and our misery. And yet, while the addict’s behavior, at times, had harmed us, weren’t we the ones who denied our own feelings about it over and over again? Our dishonesty was not the addict’s fault.

Some of our behaviors were not so covert. Many of us had reacted to our pain and shame with acts of rage, verbal and physical abuse, sexual revenge, and excessive use of alcohol or drugs. Our fears manifested themselves as hypervigilance, snooping, and manipulation. Sometimes, these painful feelings got acted out toward our children, our family, our friends, and our co-workers. These behaviors were ours, not the addict’s.

We listed the feelings driving our undesirable behavior. Was there shame, anger, pain, guilt, or loneliness? What were our fears? We began to realize that our previously unrecognized feelings almost always drove our undesirable behavior, which harmed us and the people around us. Did we have painful shame messages echoing from our past or coming from people currently in our lives? What were the messages? How did we react to them? Gradually, we began to see the choices we had been making and the new choices we could make. We started to recognize and let go of the victim role. We began to feel the gift of hope.

We found it important to examine our sexual behavior for patterns of dysfunction and for the effects of the compulsive sexual behavior we had witnessed. We asked ourselves if
we had used sex to gain attention, validation, approval, love, or commitment from others. Did we feel obligated to have sex when we weren’t feeling open or safe? Had we participated in sex in ways that felt uncomfortable to us? Did we use sex to control or manipulate? Punish or reward? Had we been actors in bed? Were we neglectful or even unaware of our own needs? Were there times we felt shut down or avoided sex or pleasure altogether? In what circumstances had we felt sexual shame?

This was eye-opening for many of us and played a key role in bringing our sexual selves into alignment with our own values. We were growing toward a healthy sexuality. We were learning about nourishing intimacy. It felt so empowering to see how we may have harmed ourselves in the past, and to own our decisions going forward. For some, it was the first release of the shame we had carried from our sexual past. We got it out of our heads and our bodies, and onto paper. Once we saw our own sexual patterns, we had the prospect of making new, healthier choices.

Some sponsors suggested that we look for and note our assets. In this case, we saw ourselves fully, and recognized when our thoughts and actions were in line with our values. We recorded when we had spoken up for ourselves, honored our feelings, and trusted our Higher Power. We took note of when we positively impacted the people around us. One little bit at a time, we moved through our inventory. We began receiving the gift of balance.

**Step Four Reflection**

By the time we reached the end of Step Four, we had learned how to look at ourselves during times of struggle and were ready for a new way of living. We started to know ourselves, to feel our feelings, and to hear our own thoughts. Our eyes were opening. We saw what was going on around us and wanted to make healthy choices instead of denying reality. We saw how we had abandoned ourselves and others. We started to recognize the terrible messages we had been telling ourselves and we longed to be free from them.

We clearly saw the shortcomings that had harmed us and kept us from healthy relationships with ourselves, our Higher Power, and others. Our new awareness could be painful, yet it was a natural and essential part of the process. We were reminded that we could not heal what we could not see. We were ready to let go of the victim identity and take responsibility for our own unhealthy and compulsive reactions to the sex addict. Through Step Four, we began experiencing the gifts of a more honest perspective. We noticed ourselves thinking differently. We were changing. We were ready to share in Step Five.