SDSF — selfish, dishonest, self-seeking, and frightened

> *"Where had we been **selfish, dishonest, self-seeking** and **frightened?**" (p.67-¶2)*

References: Column 4 Instructions | The Chain | Self-Seeking | Selfish | Dishonest | Afraid | Harm | Fear Inventory — Expanded | Examples

What Is SDSF

SDSF is the Big Book's diagnostic framework for the spiritual disease. It comes from a single sentence on page 67 — the sentence that generates the entire Fourth Column:

> *"Referring to our list again. Putting out of our minds the wrongs others had done, we resolutely looked for our own mistakes. Where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking and frightened? Though a situation had not been entirely our fault, we tried to disregard the other person involved entirely. Where were we to blame?" (p.67-¶2)*

Four words. Four questions. Four dimensions of a single spiritual problem.

The Mapping

(BBA workshop methodology. The Big Book asks the four questions in p.67-¶2 but does not specify that "selfish" means attitudes, "dishonest" means delusions, etc. This four-part mapping is the BBA workshop's structured interpretation — a useful and internally consistent framework for applying the p.67 question systematically.)

Each word from p.67 becomes a Column 4 question, and each question reveals a different layer of The Chain:

p.67 Word	Column 4 Label	Column 4 Question	Chain Role
Selfish	Selfish	*My selfish attitudes were…?*	Attitude
Dishonest	Dishonest	*I was in the delusion that…?*	Delusion
Self-Seeking	Self-Seeking	*My selfish actions were…?*	Action
Frightened	Afraid	*I was afraid…?*	Fear (root)

Note: the Big Book says “frightened” (p.67); the Column 4 label is “Afraid”; the fear inventory uses “Fearful.” All three words mean the same thing — the root fear driving everything.

The Parallel on Page 62

The same four elements appear two chapters earlier, in different words:

> *“driven by a hundred forms of **fear**, **self-delusion**, **self-seeking** and **self pity** [my attitude]” (p.62-¶1)*

Page 62 gives the *mechanism* — how the disease operates. Page 67 gives the *diagnostic questions* — how the inventory examines it. Both sentences describe the same four-part structure:

p.62 (Mechanism)	p.67 (Diagnosis)	Column 4
“fear”	“frightened”	Afraid
“self-delusion”	“dishonest”	Dishonest
“self pity” [**attitude**]	“selfish”	Selfish
“self-seeking”	“self-seeking”	Self-Seeking

The root of all four is named on the same page:

> *“Selfishness — self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles.” (p.62-¶2)*

SDSF is the Big Book’s anatomy of self-centeredness — four ways it manifests, four questions to expose it.

The Three Orderings

The same four elements appear in three different orders throughout the step guide. Each ordering exists for a reason.

1. Big Book Order: S → D → S → F (p.67)

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Selfish → Dishonest → Self-Seeking → Frightened
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This is the order Bill W. wrote the words on page 67. It is the *question* — the diagnostic checklist as the Big Book states it. This ordering does not imply a sequence or causation. It is simply how the question was asked.

2. Writing Order: SS → S → D → A (Column 4 Instructions)

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Self-Seeking → Selfish → Dishonest → Afraid
(surface → depth)
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This is the order from the Column 4 Instructions. You write Self-Seeking first (what did I *do*?), then Selfish (what was I *thinking*?), then Dishonest (what *lies* was I telling myself?), then Afraid (what was I *afraid of*?).

The writing order moves from the most visible to the most hidden. Actions are easy to see. Attitudes take more honesty. Delusions take real searching. And fear — the root — is the hardest to find and the most important to name.

This is an archaeological dig. You start at the surface and excavate downward, layer by layer, until you hit bedrock. The bedrock is always fear.

3. Chain Order: A → D → S → SS (Causal Reality)

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Afraid → Dishonest → Selfish → Self-Seeking
(root → symptom)
```

This is the order from The Chain — the actual causal sequence of the disease:

> ***The fears** that drive the **delusions**, that result in the **attitude** that are behind the **actions**. (ref. p.62-¶1)*

The fear was there first. The fear created the delusion — sometimes long ago, maybe in childhood. The delusion hardened into attitude over years. And the attitude produced the actions that brought you to this inventory.

The Chain order is *reality*. The writing order is *method*. The Big Book order is *question*. All three are necessary:

- **You ask** the question (p.67 order)
- **You discover** the answer (writing order — surface to depth)
- **You understand** the mechanism (chain order — root to symptom)

> *"The writing order is an archaeological dig. The Chain is the geological history. You dig from the surface, but the layers were laid from the bottom up." (The Chain)*

How SDSF Diagnoses Every Resentment

SDSF is not four separate questions — it is one question asked four ways. Each letter reveals a different layer of the same spiritual problem. Together, the four provide a complete picture.

Example: #1 Mr. Brown (Simple Case)

SDSF	Question	Answer	Chain Role
S (Selfish)	My attitudes were…?	"No one interferes with my life or tells me how to behave."	Attitude
D (Dishonest)	I was in the delusion that…?	"I had to protect myself from Brown, that he was out to get me."	Delusion
S (Self-Seeking)	My actions were…?	Drank too much, fought with Brown, punished wife, gave Brown a hard time	Action
F (Frightened)	I was afraid…?	Lose control of my job, my marriage, my life	Fear (root)

Read the Chain order (bottom to top): The **fear** of losing control creates the **delusion** that Brown is a threat. The delusion produces an **attitude** of total autonomy — no one tells me what to do. And the attitude drives aggressive **actions**: fighting, punishing, harassing.

Every link follows logically from the one beneath it. The fear explains everything above it.

Example: #11 I Am Unloveable (Complex Case)

SDSF	Question	Answer	Chain Role
S (Selfish)	My attitudes were…?	"My needs are more important than your needs. Boundaries don't exist for me."	Attitude
D (Dishonest)	I was in the delusion that…?	"Becoming whatever I need to be loved won't have consequences. I don't tell the truth, and may not even know the truth."	Delusion
S (Self-Seeking)	My actions were…?	Be anything and do anything to be loved. Adopt others' values, opinions, beliefs. Manipulate. Cling.	Action
F (Frightened)	I was afraid…?	I'll never be loved and always be alone	Fear (root)

Read the Chain order: The **fear** of permanent unlovability creates the **delusion** that shape-shifting is free — no consequences. The deepest part of the delusion is *"I may not even know*

the truth" — identity has been so thoroughly abandoned that the self is lost. The **attitude** is boundary-less need. And the **actions** are total self-erasure in pursuit of love.

The terrible irony: by becoming everything, I become nothing, which confirms the original fear.

The Completeness Check

If you can fill in all four SDSF letters for a resentment, you have a complete picture. If one is missing, dig deeper:

- **No fear found?** Keep asking "why does this bother me?" until you find what you're protecting
- **No delusion found?** Ask: "What would I have to believe for my attitude to make sense?"
- **No attitude found?** Ask: "What was I thinking that made my actions feel reasonable?"
- **No action found?** Look at what you did *before*, *during*, and *after* the resentment event — including the things you do to hold onto the resentment

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SDSF in the Fear Inventory

SDSF extends beyond the resentment inventory into the fear inventory. In the resentment inventory, you discover SDSF by answering four questions about a specific resentment. In the fear inventory, you use SDSF to analyze how a root fear manifests across all four dimensions.

The Format

The SDSF breakdown in the fear inventory follows this template:

SDSF breakdown:

- *Selfish:* How this fear makes me self-centered — what I want at others' expense
- *Dishonest:* How this fear makes me deceive myself — what lies I tell to manage the fear
- *Self-seeking:* What I do because of this fear — the visible behaviors

- *Fearful:* The deeper fear underneath — what I'm *really* afraid of

Example: Fear of Not Being Good Enough

From the expanded fear inventory:

SDSF breakdown:

- *Selfish:* I'm consumed with self-evaluation. I can't see others' needs because I'm too busy measuring my own worth.
- *Dishonest:* I lie about accomplishments (inflating or deflating). I pretend I don't care about things I desperately want.
- *Self-seeking:* ***I seek validation like an addict seeks a fix — the relief is temporary, and I always need more.***
- *Fearful:* I'm afraid that if I stop performing, I'll be exposed as empty.

Notice how the SDSF breakdown in the fear inventory mirrors the resentment inventory structure — the same four dimensions, applied to a fear rather than a person. The fear itself sits in the "F" position, and the other three letters show how the fear manifests in daily life.

For the full SDSF breakdowns of all common fears, see the Fear Inventory — Expanded and the individual fear examples: Not Good Enough, Alone, Unloved, Worthless, Not Respected, Unwanted, Not Valued, Weak.

SDSF Across All 12 Examples

#	Who	S (Attitude)	D (Delusion)	S (Action)	F (Fear)
1	Mr. Brown	No one interferes with my life	Had to protect myself from Brown	Fought, drank, punished wife	Lose control of job, marriage, life
2	Mrs. Jones	I only care about myself and what I want	She has no right to an opinion on my drinking	Brought alcohol, mocked her concern	Incapable of living up to anyone's expectations
3	My Employer	My private life is none of their business; work owes me	I could get what I need by controlling the world	Missed days, poor work, padded expenses	Never succeed or amount to anything
4	My Wife	I can do whatever I want; she shouldn't get in my way	It's my life and she has no say	Ignored, embarrassed her, made her jealous	She'll see I'm incapable and leave me
5	Susie	If I say no, she'll hate me	It wasn't OK for me to be honest	Loaned money to avoid discomfort	If I stand up for myself she'll reject me
6	Mr. Brown (Alt)	He got what he deserved; justified in my anger	Jim was someone I needed to defend myself from	Complained, gossiped, celebrated his demotion	If I stand up for myself, he'll get me
7	My Father	My pain is the most important thing; he owes me	I could get what I needed by acting out; if I show him, he can fix it	Self-harm, acting out, name-calling, got drunk at his house	I don't matter; unless I look a certain way, no one will love me
8	My Sister	If she can't talk normally, I'll treat her as lesser	She is not important to me	Ignored, shut out, lied, gossiped, stole	Too defective to be loved; might relapse or hurt myself
9	God Does Not Care	Closed mind; no one has my back except me	I don't need anyone; God can't be trusted	Guarded, attacked first, sarcasm as weapon	If there is a God, He'll never love me; I can't be fixed

#	Who	S (Attitude)	D (Delusion)	S (Action)	F (Fear)
10	Not Fulfilled	Get my needs met first, then I'll care about you	A relationship will fix me; they are the problem	Put on an act, overpowered, faked listening, never let go	If I'm alone too long, I'll die inside
11	I Am Unloveable	My needs are more important; boundaries don't exist for me	Becoming whatever I need to be won't have consequences	Be anything to be loved, manipulate, cling	Never be loved; always be alone
12	Not OK Without Money	Sacrifice anyone to get ahead; everyone cheats	I can live behind a mask without consequences	Manipulate, lie, use people, take shortcuts	Even with money, still unhappy; a nobody forever

For the complete chain analysis of each example, see The Chain. For detailed exploration of any single dimension, see Selfish, Dishonest, Self-Seeking, or Afraid.

SDSF and The Chain

SDSF names the four elements. The Chain describes their relationship. SDSF is the vocabulary; The Chain is the grammar. SDSF tells you *what* to look for. The Chain tells you *how they connect*.

The Mapping

SDSF Letter	Chain Role	Position	What It Does
F (Frightened)	Fear	Deepest — drives everything	Creates the delusion
D (Dishonest)	Delusion	Bridge	Converts fear into a manageable story
S (Selfish)	Attitude	Reinforcement	Hardens the delusion into daily thinking
S (Self-Seeking)	Action	Surface — easiest to see	Produces the visible behavior

The Chain Notation

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AFRAID → drives → DISHONEST → produces → SELFISH → generates → SELF-SEEKING
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Or, with the SDSF letters:

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F → D → S → SS
(root) → (bridge) → (reinforcement) → (output)
```

What SDSF Adds to The Chain

The Chain shows the *mechanism* — how fear creates the behavior. SDSF provides the *diagnostic checklist* — a way to confirm you've found all four layers.

When writing inventory, The Chain is the insight: *"Oh — the fear drove the delusion, which produced the attitude, which generated the action."* SDSF is the verification: *"Have I identified the selfish attitude? The dishonest delusion? The self-seeking action? The root fear?"*

If one is missing, the inventory is incomplete. If all four are present and the fear explains everything above it, the work is done for that resentment.

For the full Chain analysis — including pattern categories, chain archetypes (The Defender, The Controller, The People-Pleaser, The Fortress, The Performer, The Victim), the self-fulfilling nature of each chain, and the opposite-fear principle — see The Chain.

Deeper Understanding

The Four Words as a Spiritual X-Ray

SDSF is not just an inventory technique — it is the Big Book's description of the spiritual disease in four dimensions:

- **Selfish** — self-centeredness in thought. *"Our actor is self-centered — ego-centric."* (p.61)
- **Dishonest** — self-deception. The lies we tell ourselves to justify the self-centeredness.
- **Self-Seeking** — self-will in action. The things we do to arrange life to suit ourselves.

- **Frightened** — the root cause of all three. *"This short word somehow touches about every aspect of our lives."* (p.67)

Together they form a complete picture of what page 62 calls "selfishness — self-centeredness." The selfish attitudes are how we think. The dishonest delusions are how we deceive ourselves. The self-seeking actions are how we behave. And the fear is why we do all of it.

Remove any one dimension and the picture is incomplete:

- Without the attitude, you know what someone *did* but not what they were *thinking*
- Without the delusion, you know the attitude but not *why it felt reasonable*
- Without the action, you have theory but no inventory — nothing concrete to examine
- Without the fear, you have symptoms but no diagnosis — and no root to hand over to God

Why "Frightened" Comes Last

The Big Book lists "frightened" last on page 67 — and the Column 4 Instructions put "Afraid" last in the writing order. This is not an accident.

Fear is the root cause but the last thing we see. It is the most hidden, the most defended, the hardest to admit. We will readily confess to being selfish, acknowledge our dishonesty, catalog our self-seeking behavior. But naming the fear requires a different kind of honesty — the kind that comes only after the other three layers have been peeled back.

The writing order is designed for this reality. You start with what you *did* (Self-Seeking) because it's visible and concrete. You move to what you were *thinking* (Selfish) because it takes more honesty. You examine what you *believed* (Dishonest) because it takes real searching. And finally you name what you were *afraid of* — the truth that was buried under all the rest.

The paradox: fear comes last in discovery but first in reality. The fear was there before the delusion, before the attitude, before the action. It was the seed that grew the whole tree. But you can't see the seed until you've traced the branches, the trunk, and the roots downward.

> *"The fear was there first. The fear created the delusion long ago — maybe in childhood. The delusion hardened into attitude over years. And the attitude produced the actions that brought you to this inventory." (The Chain)*

SDSF as a Daily Tool

Beyond formal inventory, SDSF works as a real-time check — the Tenth Step in four questions. When disturbed, pause and ask:

1. **What am I being selfish about?** What attitude am I holding? What do I feel entitled to?
2. **Where am I being dishonest with myself?** What story am I telling that makes this feel justified?
3. **What am I doing about it?** What self-seeking behavior is this producing — or about to produce?
4. **What am I afraid of?** What is the fear underneath?

> *"Continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear. When these crop up, we ask God at once to remove them. We discuss them with someone immediately and make amends quickly if we have harmed anyone. Then we resolutely turn our thoughts to someone we can help." (p.84)*

Page 84 uses three of the four SDSF words directly — "selfishness, dishonesty… and fear" — plus "resentment" (which is what SDSF diagnoses). The Tenth Step is SDSF applied in real time rather than in retrospect.

The Order Tells You What to Do

Each SDSF letter suggests a different intervention:

If you can see the action (S — Self-Seeking): Stop. You've caught the behavior. Pause before acting on it, or make amends if you've already acted. This is the shallowest intervention but the most immediately practical.

If you can identify the attitude (S — Selfish): Challenge it. Ask: "Is this true, or is this my self-centeredness talking?" Choose a different posture — one aligned with God's will rather than my wants.

If you can name the delusion (D — Dishonest): Replace it with truth. The delusion is a story I'm telling myself to manage the fear. Once I see the story, I can ask: "What's actually true here?" The truth is usually simpler and less threatening than the delusion.

If you can identify the fear (F — Frightened): Pray. The Big Book's instruction is explicit:

> *"We ask Him to remove our fear and direct our attention to what He would have us be. At once, we commence to outgrow fear." (p.68-¶3)*

The Chain order (F → D → S → SS) tells you where the *root solution* is — the fear. The writing order (SS → S → D → F) tells you where the *first signal* appears — the action. Both are useful. In daily life, you usually catch the action first and trace backward to the fear. In inventory, you write the action first and dig to the fear. Either way, the destination is the same: hand the fear to God.

SDSF is the Big Book's complete diagnostic framework for the spiritual disease — four words from page 67, four questions, four dimensions of a single problem. For deeper exploration of each dimension, see Selfish, Dishonest, Self-Seeking, and Afraid. For the mechanism that connects them, see The Chain. For SDSF applied to specific fears, see Fear Inventory — Expanded and the individual fear examples.

Sources & Attribution

Direct Big Book text:

- p.62-¶1: "driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking and self pity" — the four elements
- p.62-¶2: "Selfishness — self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles"
- p.67-¶2: "Where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking and frightened?" — the diagnostic question
- pp.84-85: Step 10 application of the same framework

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions: Steps 4, 7, & 10

BBA workshop methodology:

- The SDSF mapping (Selfish = attitudes, Dishonest = delusions, Self-Seeking = actions, Frightened = root fears) — the BB asks the question; the four-part mapping is BBA's answer to how to apply it systematically
- The three orderings (BB order, writing order, chain order) and the rationale for each
- SDSF as daily tool and completeness check

Other sources: Narcotics Anonymous Basic Text (parallel language)

From the Big Book Awakening Step Four guide at bigbook.it/step-4/ · a page of the guide, not the workbook itself: the workbook's own pages are linked from "Originals & sources." · source sdsf.md