



When affected by alcoholism, our hopes for a loving relationship can bring us pain, disappointment, and loneliness. We tend to isolate ourselves from other people as we become absorbed in a situation that we find shameful and that we're convinced no one else understands. Without realizing how it all happened, we find ourselves vulnerable and afraid. In these circumstances, who would feel comfortable presenting themselves to a room of strangers? They already know each other, but we don't know them and they don't know us. With a history of relationships gone bad, what reason would we have to believe that our relationship with these strangers could result in something positive?

It seemed to some of us that meetings are for people who are comfortable talking with others, enjoy meeting people, and are socially confident. That's why attending an Al-Anon meeting is the very last thing many of us wanted to do. It's not unusual to find Al-Anon members who say they finally went to a meeting because it *was* the last thing for them—they were at a dead end and could see no other alternatives. Paradoxically, Al-Anon meetings are for people who don't like meetings and who may even be fearful of interacting with people. An Al-Anon meeting is a safe place where healing and recovery can begin. No one judges us at an Al-Anon meeting. Our social status or career accomplishments are irrelevant there. No one criticizes us or our mistakes. If we don't feel comfortable enough to share, we can simply say, "I pass."

Over time this environment nurtures our self-confidence and builds our social skills. We come to understand that we can share our innermost feelings at meetings without having to worry about criticism or having to respond to unsolicited advice. For many of us, it may be the first time in a long while that we've been able to speak without interruption, contradiction, or conflict. No one, no matter how well intended, is telling us what to do or how to feel. At the same time, we learn how to listen to other people with respect. We share a safe environment that is healing for those who speak as well as for those who listen.

Al-Anon meetings give us the right to be heard, but not the right to dominate a meeting. Everyone has an equal voice. By practicing this simple principle, we begin stepping outside the familiar but constricting limitations of our old way of thinking. We start to see each other differently. Our minds and hearts begin to open, and we slowly develop acceptance of ourselves and others. While an Al-Anon meeting isn't an instant solution to our problems with relationships, it's a positive step in the right direction. Many of us find one meeting that we attend most frequently, where we feel the most connection to the other members. We often begin to feel close to that group because the members are as supportive to us as we would have wanted our own family to be. We come to consider that group as our "home group."

An Al-Anon meeting cannot take the place of a loving relationship with a spouse or partner, parent or child, friend or relative. It's a place where we can learn something about how the disease of alcoholism has affected us and our relationships. At meetings, we can learn—and practice—some skills in developing healthier relationships. As other members share their experiences, they often hold a mirror to our lives. Each story shared by other members is an opportunity for us to learn from their successes as well as from their mistakes. Yet hearing

members speak about themselves is not threatening to us. We don't have to be defensive because they speak only for themselves about their own experiences—not for us, or to us. We have the freedom to take what we like and leave the rest. There are lessons to be learned, but it's up to us to determine for ourselves what those lessons are.

Communicating with an alcoholic is frustrating and discouraging, and it affects how we communicate with everyone, alcoholic and non-alcoholic alike. It only makes sense that getting along with other people is often the subject of an Al-Anon meeting. So in addition to the safe environment that an Al-Anon meeting offers, the meeting topic is also helpful to us in our efforts to have more positive relationships with other people. No one can say in advance what we'll learn at a meeting. It may be a lesson that's unique to our situation or one appreciated by the entire group. It's not unusual to hear at least one person say at every meeting, "That's exactly what I needed to hear." Many of us come to Al-Anon without clear boundaries of any kind. Decisions that affected us have been made without our input or understanding. We weren't given the opportunity to ask questions or offer opinions. As a result, some of us learn to be silent, helpless victims, never fully participating in our relationships. Others grow angry and resentful from these situations. We jump at any chance to tell our boss, our spouse, or the cashier at the dry cleaners exactly how we feel about everything, and just how unfairly we are being treated. We don't give ourselves the time to think before we speak, and we often wear out our relationships.

Al-Anon works for us through a system of substitutions. We are encouraged to replace each painful thought with a more positive alternative. Hope replaces disappointment. Confidence replaces fear. Stubborn pride gives way to acceptance. Focus on ourselves replaces frustration with someone else. We learn to take care of ourselves, and in the process, we learn how to build better relationships with others. As each member shares personal strengths and hopes, we find wisdom that we can apply to our own lives, and we can begin to replace unhealthy patterns. Adherence to Al-Anon's three Legacies the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts of Service ensures that every meeting is consistent with Al-Anon principles and welcomes everyone. We do our best to keep the focus on ourselves. Although we are individuals in our own unique situations, we start to notice all that we have in common with each other. Accordingly, even as we learn to be independent, we also become better able to work together as a unified group. These are the first steps toward building or repairing relationships with others.

As we take part in informed group conscience discussions at our meetings, we learn how to peacefully decide matters that are important to the group. This process gives us the opportunity to examine all sides of an issue, ask questions, share our opinions, and then accept the decision of the group as a whole, whether or not our opinion prevails. We learn good communication skills, without the drama. Through the support of the Al-Anon fellowship, we continue to give voice to thoughts that we previously kept to ourselves. In time we begin to practice our new attitudes and actions in the world. We know that if we stumble or even fall, there is a safe place where we can return to revitalize our commitment. Whenever we come to an Al-Anon meeting, we know we are among people who understand. We can be ourselves, bringing all our struggles and triumphs with us, and be met by others who have had similar experiences. Through regular attendance, we stop being afraid of how the relationships in our lives define us, and we learn to accept ourselves and others exactly as we are.

Personal Stories

Emptiness and gloom filled my entire being. My life was in chaos and I felt utterly unloved and unlovable. My misery brought me to Al-Anon. Although everyone greeted me with warmth, I was suspicious of the concern that they demonstrated. I interpreted their smiling faces as evidence that they were a bunch of frauds. I recoiled at their hugs and rejected their warm invitations to join them for coffee after the meeting. How could anyone really care about a fat, ugly, stupid, worthless piece of garbage?

Although my doubts almost kept me away, something deep within urged me to keep coming back. Week after week as people shared their experience, strength, and hope, I gradually began to “Listen and Learn.” At times I felt awestruck that I could actually feel the presence of God among us. As I immersed myself in the program, I was introduced to a caring God who loved me unconditionally.

Through the nurturing that I received, I felt like a rosebud gradually blossoming into a magnificent flower. With each unfolding petal, I banished the old negative images of myself and began to recognize all the unique talents and gifts that God has bestowed upon me. I was learning how to love myself as God loves me. As this positive attitude blossomed and grew, I discovered that my relationships with others also improved. It was so much easier to love and accept others when I loved and accepted myself.

This new attitude brought me so much joy that I expanded my horizons to my seventh and eighth grade students, many of whom were struggling with the same low self-esteem that once tormented me. I wanted to reach out to them and help them shed their negativity. I wanted them to blossom, grow, and see themselves and each other as lovable human beings. My new silent mantra was to look at each person through the eyes of God and celebrate the beauty that He sees in each of them. With each affirmation that they received, my students began to recognize my classroom as a safe environment in which to share their unique talents and gifts.

My students’ response to my affirmations has been beautiful and contagious. It’s truly a pleasure to be greeted each day by a sea of smiling faces. Because they know that I’m looking for their best qualities, this is exactly what they bring into my classroom. Because they know that I celebrate what is special about each of them, they, in turn, demonstrate love and concern for me, helping me recognize my own unique talents and gifts. Each day brings a new celebration of God’s love. As a child, I was subjected to physical violence from my mom’s boyfriend. He would come home drunk and abuse me on a regular basis. As a result, I became very afraid of people and their potential to hurt me. I built many walls of protection that later became my confinement. I grew to enjoy being alone because I saw it as safe. However, my gnawing sense of loneliness and disconnection also grew. I knew, inside of me, that I needed to be with people— not be continually isolated from humanity. I didn’t feel safe with people, yet I needed them. My dilemma grew into acute pain.

I went to my first Al-Anon meeting nervous and unsure of what to expect. To my amazement, everyone treated me kindly and with consideration. I listened in awe as people took turns openly sharing their hearts and baring their souls. I had found a place to be with people and safely

interact with them. Since that time, I have learned how to open up my heart, quiet my head, and share my soul too.

I still have a difficult time reaching out to people in general, but I always know I have a place where I can be with nurturing people. I am learning to open up to people and give them a chance to communicate with me. I see now that it's possible for people to treat each other with loving kindness and respect. I watch as we all heal, grow, and learn how to feed and strengthen the relationships with ourselves and with each other. Today, I understand gratitude.

Before Al-Anon, I only had relationships within my immediate family. I had too many secrets and didn't want to talk about what was going on in my life. I was the queen of isolation. At my first meeting, I was horrified at the friendliness and hugs shared between members. I liked my isolation and aloneness. However, I heard something at my first meeting that made me return. I wanted to hear more.

It felt wonderful not to be judged in Al-Anon meetings. I started reaching out to others, which was something I had never done before. I started taking down all the walls I had built around myself to keep everyone else out. They had been built out of fear of judgment.

Today I have many friends in Al-Anon. I have shared my problems and secrets and still I'm loved. My recovery is connected to these relationships. The alcoholic in my life has moved on, but I have stayed with Al-Anon and my Al-Anon friends. When I first came to Al-Anon Family Groups, I was often the only man at the meetings I attended. The women encouraged me to feel my feelings—something I had never learned to do as a boy. Yet I wondered why I had trouble connecting to others. The more I listened to other members share their own feelings, the more I began to get in touch with my own. It proved to be a great advantage in all my relationships.

I struggled for 11 years to make my husband quit drinking. I had tried everything from the silent treatment and threatening to leave, to screaming and crying. Then I gave up. I had hit bottom. I finally went to an Al-Anon meeting and brought a list of questions intended to help me change my husband. The members were gentle with me and told me to keep coming back.

I did. I learned to focus on myself and provide care for myself and my children. Unfortunately, my marriage ended in divorce. Soon after, my ex-spouse entered treatment. He has now been sober for 15 years. After ten years of sobriety, we remarried, but I had fallen away from attending meetings. Then our son was in trouble with the law and had an addiction. I felt myself slipping again into the dark tunnel of loving someone with a disease, but I knew of a way of life to manage myself. The Al-Anon program allows me to live the life I choose.

I was angry when I went to my first Al-Anon meeting two years ago. I had been in therapy before, read numerous self-help books, and even tried church. Nothing gave me any significant relief. That first time I went, I was so angry—angry with clients at work, coworkers, and my partner of two years, who was very active in A.A. I was always angry and thought others were just being unreasonable. I was frustrated with my partner, who went to her meetings almost daily. I would call my friends, who were not in any program, and they would agree with me. I had every right to be resentful.

Initially, I just went to Al-Anon in order to learn how to nag less at my partner and to be more supportive. The more I went, the more I became aware of my fears and my expectations that my partner meet my needs. A year into Al-Anon, I was talking to a longtime member, complaining about my partner attending so many meetings. She told me I needed to “get a life.” She said the more I had a life, the less I would rely on my partner to meet all my needs.

It has been hard to not sit at home and wait for her to come home while I put on my victim’s face. Instead, I go to three or four Al-Anon meetings per week, call my Sponsor, and actively work the Steps. I blameless and accept more. Since I don’t rely on her to meet all my needs, our relationship has improved. It isn’t based on fear and neediness so much, but on a mutual respect where two people can have a life separate from the relationship. I continue to learn from others and to learn about me. I have been married 28 years. I was angry much of that time. I thought that if I had children, we would make a happy family. I thought that if my husband would just stop drinking, I would feel better. I told him many times how inconsiderate and selfish he was. I felt that I had to do everything—look after the kids, shop, do the housework, and manage the finances. I would sit up half the night and try to explain to him how I felt. But I still didn’t really know.

In Al-Anon, I learned detachment, and then detachment with love. I learned to look for the good and not to wallow in all of the bad stuff. I am learning to be good to myself. I am able to communicate reasonably well with my husband these days, even though he continues to drink daily. Al-Anon has also helped me with my relationship with my children, who are all adults now.

My initial reason for attending Al-Anon meetings was in order to have a common language with my girlfriend who was in A.A. She thought if I began going to Al-Anon I might be able to understand her better, and so I agreed to go. This was one of a long line of choices I made in order to please the alcoholic with whom I was in a relationship. I spent several months mostly listening. I never heard anything about pleasing the alcoholic. Instead, I heard people talking about what they had done in the Al-Anon program to help themselves. The idea of keeping the focus on myself in an intimate relationship, or any relationship for that matter, was an entirely new concept.

I was married to an alcoholic for 30 years. I had unhealthy relationships with everyone. I was a nagging, fault-finding shrew. I taught my children to join in as we maintained a façade to the outside world that we lived a normal even happy life. My actions ensured that the problems in our family would continue on to the next generation. With my wider family, my parents and siblings, I was the classic people-pleaser, willing to do anything for anyone at any time, except for myself. I knew I was unhappy, but I didn’t know what to do about it. It had been so long since I had, to be honest with anyone that I was very surprised at the love and support showed to me at Al-Anon meetings. It was my dear friends at that first meeting who showed me that I could have and sustain relationships just by being myself.

Just before his death, my husband told everyone that the last years of our marriage were the happiest of his life. This was all due to Al-Anon because he had not stopped drinking. Now I

allow my children to be themselves and make their own mistakes with- out my interference. I have a life of my own—full of friends.

I am a grown man who has been around alcoholism all of my life. I didn't realize how much the disease had affected my entire life. I ended up getting married, having children, and treating them the same way I had been treated. Through Al-Anon meetings, I learned that I only needed to take care of myself. Other things will take care of themselves.

Having grown up with alcoholism, I felt that I never learned how to have normal relationships. I came into Al-Anon because I did not know how to carry on relationships with the alcoholics in my life. Other people seemed able to handle their relationships without the struggle I had. I always tried to be nice to other people, but still ended up hurting them and feeling awful about myself. I was trying desperately to keep the peace with everyone around me. Somehow I had decided this was my role.

When I walked into the rooms of Al-Anon, I found people who talked about their feelings, which was scary territory for me. As I listened, others spoke of feelings that I had. When I finally found the courage to share, no one laughed or ridiculed me. When I asked someone to be my Sponsor, I was not turned away as I had feared. That relationship was the beginning of my learning how to have healthy relationships.

It was a miracle to learn that I could share the real me my real feelings, not just what I thought someone wanted to hear. I began to stand up for myself and take responsibility for my actions—or lack of action. I began, to be honest with myself and with others. I learned to confront those who hurt my feelings. I learned that if others continued to treat me badly, I did not need them to be a part of my life, no matter how much they professed to love me. I got to try out new behaviors in a safe environment before I tried them out in the world. I received support and gentle redirection when I needed it.

I began to stop questioning my ability to have relationships with others. I came to recognize that I already had several successful relationships with people that spanned many years. I didn't always do everything perfectly in those relationships, but those people still loved me. I began to learn to trust my heart in relationships. Right now I am learning how to have a good relationship with myself, something that has been lacking for many years. I am learning to treat myself more like I would treat a friend or a loved one. I am convinced after sharing and living the Al-Anon pro- gram that if I learn to have a good relationship with myself, my relationship with others will seem almost effortless too.

Before Al-Anon, I always stayed busy and had little time to do things with anyone else. I took care of others and neglected my own needs. I kept to myself at parties. I feared intimacy, sure that others would see how flawed I was. I became lonely, resentful, paralyzed, and isolated. I never suspected that these were simply the effects of what I was doing and had always done.

In Al-Anon meetings, I learned to do things differently. I found a connection with a Higher Power that is a source of comfort and strength. I'm able to express myself honestly in relation- ships, to accept others as they are, and to see the gifts others have to offer me. I was an

active member of Al-Anon with five years in recovery before my husband and I relocated to another state. Once we moved, I planned to get to meetings and find a new home group, but there was so much to do. I had to unpack and set up a new home. Things were going well, and although we weren't connecting with other people, we were happy with each other.

It was right before Thanksgiving that my husband was diagnosed with lung cancer. I had been in my new job for seven months, and we had been in our new city for almost 18 months. When the cancer was discovered, it had already spread to the lymph nodes. What followed was a barrage of doctors' visits, treatments, and major and minor crises. Our lives were driven by hospital and medical schedules. Plus, I had to keep working to maintain the health insurance that had become so necessary. My best efforts were to no avail, and my husband passed away after ten months of treatment.

The grief was overwhelming; suddenly I didn't have anything to keep me busy. I was in an empty house with no close friends or family. I went to an Al-Anon meeting because I was desperate. I don't remember much of that meeting except that I got out the words, "My husband died," and I started to cry. Two exceptional women who were widows themselves immediately took me under their wings. They gave me their phone numbers and told me to call. They told me to keep coming back and

I did. One of these women started meeting me for coffee in the morning. We talked, and she shared her experience in the program and with the death of her husband. I started cooking with the other woman I had met, who also shared her experience, strength, and hope with me. We got together at least once a month and made a meal that we had never made before. After the first try, we needed people to experiment on, and we started inviting other group members to eat the experiment du jour. I wound up being invited to a series of social events given by members of what was now my home group. When the holidays came around, I had a different Al-Anon member's home to go to from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day. We grew from members of the same group to friends.

Since then, the members of my home group have truly become my family. As with any family, I am closer to some than others. I have incredibly strong relationships with the two women who originally reached out to me. I am close to another member in a way I would not have thought possible. We have supported each other through illness and surgery. We share our triumphs and our failures—and we go to meetings. For me, Tuesday nights feel like a family reunion with everyone having to check in, connect with each other, and give and receive hugs. Members of my group have changed. I have learned people will always come and go in my life, but the core group that I consider my family remains the same. I went to that meeting in such unbelievable pain that all I wanted was for it to lessen a little somehow. What I received was a family that truly loves me, a recommitment on my part to my Al-Anon program, and growth in my recovery.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. How does sharing at a meeting enhance my recovery?
2. How can my participation during meetings help me to learn how to speak to others in my life?

3. Why do I consider one group my “home group” rather than another?
4. Have I ever asked for a group conscience meeting when there was conflict among members of my group? How did the group deal with the conflict?
5. When I feel frustrated during a meeting, what is the problem? Is there a lesson I need to learn?
6. What types of changes, if any, have I noticed in the ways I interact with people outside of meetings?