

The Al-Anon Slogans

Unlike some of Al-Anon's practices and principles that take a while to learn and apply, the Al-Anon slogans are easy to learn and remember. You may have heard some of these slogans hundreds of times before without ever taking them seriously or trying to put them to work. After all, they are clichés, and easy to disregard. But it is their very simplicity that makes them so powerful.

When confronted with a confusing or upsetting situation, a slogan can be a lifesaver. If we are at a loss for what to do, these simple yet profound sayings can clarify our thinking. For example, when fears about the future cloud our ability to make a pressing decision, we can apply the slogan "One Day at a Time" and focus on this day only, remembering that our fears may not reflect reality because the future has yet to be written. When suddenly faced with a complex, seemingly overwhelming problem, we can put "First Things First," knowing that some actions are more important than others and that we cannot do everything at once.

Slogans serve as gentle, calming reminders that our circumstances might not be as impossible or as desperate as they at first appear. These concise expressions of wisdom offer quick reassurance that we really are able to cope with whatever life brings, prompting us to take constructive action and to treat ourselves and others with compassion and respect. Even when we are too new to Al-Anon or too overwhelmed by our circumstances to recall one of the many Al-Anon principles that may apply, a simple slogan can put the entire situation into perspective.

"Keep It Simple" When coping with the baffling and often overwhelming effects of alcoholism, the simpler and more straightforward the approach, the better. The slogan, "Keep It Simple," makes just that point. When life seems unmanageable or confusing, many of us unknowingly complicate matters even further by trying to anticipate everything that could go wrong, so that we will be prepared to respond. This slogan reminds us that we can't control every possible outcome to every situation and that trying to do so makes our lives more difficult and more stressful than they already are. When we "Keep It Simple," we try to take things at face value, looking at what is actually happening rather than the 50 things that might or might not follow. Perhaps we can approach large projects and challenges slowly, step by step, in manageable stages rather than all at once. Sometimes we must act with haste, but not every new task or unexpected event is a crisis. Our initial, fearful responses may arise more from habit rather than necessity. In time, we learn that if we are feeling paralyzed and overwhelmed, we may be complicating matters or taking on more than we can handle for this moment or this day, and that we may have better luck by simplifying what we are trying to accomplish. We can relax and try to be more gentle with ourselves, trusting that by putting one foot in front of the other, we will eventually get where we are going.

"But for the Grace of God" This slogan, an abbreviated version of "There, but for the grace of God, go I," is a reminder to approach other people with compassion. Many of us have long since become impatient, critical, and resentful of those around us, especially the alcoholics in our lives. But when other people's attitudes and actions bother us, we can remember that, were it not for the grace of our Higher Power, we could easily be in their shoes. We cannot truly know what others are struggling with, nor is it our job to punish them for any suffering we feel they might have caused. Vindictiveness, vengeance, resentment, blame, and hard-heartedness do us far more harm than anyone else. Is this what we want to put our energy into cultivating? Perhaps we might find a more positive use for our

time, finding gratitude for the blessings we have received and recognizing that every single human being, even those suffering from alcoholism, is doing the best they can.

“Easy Does It” Al-Anon’s Suggested Welcome explains that without the spiritual help of our program, many of us try to “force solutions.” When our efforts to overcome another’s alcoholism get us nowhere, we resolve to try even harder. When we are impatient for an answer and no answer comes to us, we take an action at random just to feel we are doing something. When the square peg fails to fit into the round hole, we refuse to give up and try to force it into place. As a result, our frustration mounts, our anxiety increases, we feel like failures, and we vow to try even harder. In short, our thinking becomes distorted. With the slogan, “Easy Does It,” Al-Anon suggests a simple alternative to this destructive and frustrating pattern. Sometimes even doing nothing can be far more productive!

We have tried doing things the hard way. This slogan reminds us that, while “hard” doesn’t do it, “easy” often does. We may not have all the answers today. This is not a failure, only a reality. It is not always our job to solve every problem. Perhaps we are expecting too much of ourselves or others. In fact, we may know everything we need to know for this day. If and when the time is right, more will be revealed. “Easy Does It” reminds us that a gentler approach might make a tough situation much more bearable.

Or maybe we are trying to take on something that is not our responsibility. Struggling harder will only make things more difficult. But if we adopt a kinder, more relaxed attitude, we may be able to see the situation more clearly and act more appropriately.

“First Things First” When life becomes chaotic, it is easy to lose track of what needs immediate attention and what does not. Small obstacles can seem like crises, and major problems can be overlooked. An alcoholic’s rage over a paper cut can take precedence over a medical emergency because the rage is so loud and so demanding— and because we have become accustomed to reacting to whatever the alcoholic demands. As a result, not only do we overlook critical situations, but we often neglect those quiet but important needs of our own that might make our lives more enjoyable. We neglect our health, find little time to give our children loving attention, and set aside any urge we may feel to have fun.

“First Things First” encourages us to take a moment to set priorities. Before we react, we can ask ourselves what is of primary importance right now. When planning our morning, we can consider which of our more quiet needs might deserve attention. In the midst of a heated discussion, we can stick with the topic that concerns us and set aside other matters that are not so pressing. When there doesn’t seem to be enough hours in the day, we can accept our limitations and make choices about what has to be done at once and what can be postponed. We are not superhuman; we cannot do it all. “First Things First” helps us to make more workable choices and to live with the choices we make.

“Just for Today” This slogan is a commitment to set aside the past and the future and live in this one day only. When we deal with today only, seemingly impossible projects become manageable. Conflicts that would have consumed all of our attention can be addressed for a reasonable amount of time if we recognize that they may not have to be resolved completely and at once. And “Just for Today,” we can make small changes in our actions and attitudes, explore new possibilities and take a few tiny risks, all of which can help us to move forward in a positive direction.

Many Al-Anon members begin by trying to adopt one or two of the suggestions contained in the leaflet entitled Just for Today. It doesn't matter which ones we choose; they can all help us put this one day to use and learn that managing a single day can be the beginning of a new and better life:

"Just for today I will try to live through this day only, and not tackle all my problems at once. I can do something for 12 hours that would appall me if I felt that I had to keep it up for a lifetime.

"Just for today I will be happy. This assumes to be true what Abraham Lincoln said, that 'Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be.'

"Just for today I will adjust myself to what is, and not try to adjust everything to my own desires. I will take my 'luck' as it comes, and fit myself to it...

"Just for today I will have a program. I may not follow it exactly, but I will have it. I will save myself from two pests: hurry and indecision...

"Just for today I will be unafraid. Especially I will not be afraid to enjoy what is beautiful, and to believe that as I give to the world, so the world will give to me

"Let It Begin with Me" The Al-Anon program helps us to stop focusing so intently on what those around us say, do, and feel, and instead to put the focus on ourselves. When we are tempted to blame others for our problems or to justify our own poor behavior by pointing to the poor behavior of others, this slogan reminds us where our focus rightfully belongs. We are responsible for our actions, regardless of how others behave. When we feel the need to change a situation, we can apply this slogan, and start with what we can improve. Would a change of attitude on our part make things work more smoothly? Are we making a positive contribution to what is happening, or merely standing by and criticizing, waiting for others to take care of the situation for us? "Let It Begin with Me" is a way to change the things we can— especially our own attitudes— instead of waiting for everyone else to change to suit us.

Often, a very legitimate need or desire goes unrecognized because we expect that need to be met by someone else. We may be yearning for more honesty in a relationship, or for more pleasurable weekends, yet taking no responsibility for our own part in addressing these needs. This is like going hungry while waiting for someone who doesn't cook to make dinner. "Let It Begin with Me" might suggest that we go ahead and cook for ourselves, go out for dinner, or make plans with someone who cooks. In short, we take responsibility for getting our own needs met.

Thus, if we have a mental wish list of the things we want a parent, child, spouse, friend, or employer to do for us or bring to our relationship, we might consider ways to satisfy those wishes in another manner or with other people. If we have often been disappointed by an undependable friend, instead of waiting for that person to change, we might try to stop depending on him or her. Perhaps someone else in our life would be more reliable when we really need to count on someone. We might also ask ourselves if we have been consistently reliable in all of our relationships. Sometimes the things that bother us most about others are the very things we do ourselves without realizing it. Similarly, what we most admire in others can be the very traits we are capable of cultivating in ourselves.

"How Important Is It?" This slogan helps us gain perspective. If we take the time to think about what really matters to us, we may include such concerns as health, serenity, adequate food and shelter,

and loving support from others. Each of us is free to determine for ourselves what is truly of value, but most of us agree that we often get upset about matters of little consequence. Compared to whether or not we will have enough to eat today, how important is it if we overcook the chicken for dinner? Is forgetting to pick up a newspaper worth the cost of our serenity? What price are we willing to pay to win an argument or prove to other people that we are right? How important is it if a call we have been expecting doesn't come through, or if a loved one makes a choice we do not like? Does a partner's unkind words in the morning merit a whole day of misery, obsession, and hostility? Does it merit even five minutes of unhappiness? Does it really matter? Must we take it personally? Is it worth the price of self-recrimination, resentment of others, or hours of worry? Just "How Important Is It?"

Even if we decide that the situation is important, we can ask ourselves whether it is important today. Are we living in the unknown future, worrying about things that may never come to pass? Today is all we have. Why waste this precious gift of time on trivial concerns when we could be appreciating the fact that we have everything that we truly need? The perspective we gain when we apply this slogan makes it possible to set aside petty worries, minor irritations, and baseless judgments so that we might celebrate the extraordinary richness and wonder that life offers.

"Think" One of the effects of alcoholism is that most of us tend to react to everything we encounter, often perceiving minor incidents as major crises. Rather than choosing to act on our own behalf, we allow other people's actions and demands to dictate what we do and thus show little regard for our own interests. As a result, we often feel victimized, at the mercy of whatever difficulty life puts in our path. This slogan reminds us that instead of automatically reacting to every provocation, request, or demand that comes along, we can "Think" before we act, making choices that are in our best interest.

Some of us are surprised to discover that "Think" is a slogan. After all, some of our most concerted thinking has gotten us into deep trouble. The difference today is that our thinking has changed—we try not to waste our time scheming about how to get others to change or worrying about matters over which we have no control. Instead, we learn to put our minds to work where they can do us the most good. We "Think" about the part we play in creating our own joy or sorrow and what we can do to enhance our lives and improve our interactions with others. We "Think" about the Twelve Steps and try to apply them to our own particular circumstances. We "Think" about how to include our Higher Power in our everyday lives. We are no longer trapped by the distorted, self-destructive thinking of the past. With Al-Anon's help, we are learning to put our thoughts to more productive use.

"One Day at a Time" There are many ways to solve a problem, approach a new undertaking, cope with a fear, and prepare for a change. Many of us have tried tackling such projects by peering into the future and trying to anticipate and resolve every glitch we think we might encounter, making decisions based upon information we do not really possess because the future has not yet happened. Rarely is this a satisfying approach. In most cases, we cannot anticipate every possible turn of events, so no matter how diligently we have prepared, we are eventually caught off guard. Meanwhile, we have expended so much time and energy trying to predict future events, soothe future hurts, and prevent future consequences, that we have missed out on today's opportunities. And the magnitude of the task we have set for ourselves has left us drained, overwhelmed, and distraught.

For most of us, a much more practical approach to our challenges and fears is to take them "One Day at a Time." We can't do anything about the future because the future is not within our grasp today. Worrying about it, trying to manipulate it, anticipating it—all these activities simply remove us from

this moment. We can't change the future, but by making the most of this day, we prepare ourselves to be able to handle whatever comes tomorrow. We may wonder whether or not to trust a loved one's renewed commitment to sobriety, but there is no way to predict what will happen in the long run. We can only choose how we will respond today.

We can respond to the changes we see before us, confronting the new challenges and enjoying the gifts that a loved one's sobriety can bring, or we can allow ourselves to become obsessed with the possibility of yet another slip. We cannot know what will happen, and we needn't deny any possibility, desirable or undesirable. But wasting today worrying about tomorrow will not make us any better prepared for difficulties that may present themselves. If they do manifest, those painful problems will not hurt any less tomorrow, whether we have stewed about them or set them aside today. All of our preparation will not have spared us a single ounce of pain. In fact, it will have lengthened our suffering, since we'll have added all that extra worrying time. So if there is no advantage to trying to live in the future, it only makes sense to stay here in the present and make the very best of every precious moment we are given.

Another advantage in living "One Day at a Time" is that we break huge, overwhelming tasks into smaller, more attainable goals. We may not be able to resolve a dispute with a boss or a loved one for all time, but perhaps we can come to an agreement for this one day. We may not be able to pay off an entire debt right now, but perhaps we can pay a small portion of it, knowing that small portions eventually add up to large sums. We cannot do what we cannot do. Worrying about going hungry tomorrow won't put more food on the table, it will only make us forget to appreciate the food we have today. This day is ripe with opportunities for joy, for sorrow, for experiencing the full range of human emotion and experience. Isn't it time we took advantage of it?

"Keep an Open Mind" Guidance can take many forms, and it often comes when least expected. Words of wisdom may fall from the mouth of a small child or from the ramblings of someone we dislike. We never know where we will find inspiration or help. If we "Keep an Open Mind," we make ourselves available to receive that help, no matter where it comes from. By limiting where we expect to find our answers, we may miss out on important opportunities to improve our lives. Thus, it is best to remember that a newcomer to Al-Anon is as likely as a longtime member to say just the "right" words to spark a new awareness, and sometimes dinner with friends or an evening at a movie may enlighten us about a problem as readily as an hour of concentrated effort to resolve the problem directly.

When we turn our will and our lives over to the care of a Higher Power, we affirm that we need guidance. Our job now is to keep our minds open, knowing that life-changing help can take any avenue, any form, any voice. Our teachers are all around us. Let's make room for every single one.

"Live and Let Live" This is a two-part slogan. In dealing with alcoholism, many of us focus most intently upon the latter part of the slogan, the "let live" part. Having felt so overly responsible for other people's choices and actions, it can be a great struggle to grant others the dignity to make decisions for themselves and allow them to deal with the results. We use this slogan as a reminder to get off their backs and "let" them live. In this way, everyone benefits. The people in our lives benefit because they are finally receiving the respect that is every person's due. Now they are free to enjoy the fruits of their positive efforts and to reap the consequences of their more destructive behavior. Regardless of what they choose to do about it, by minding our own business and getting out of the way, we allow others to be themselves. Meanwhile, we free ourselves from all kinds of burdens that were never ours

to carry. Thus, we, too, have the opportunity to face ourselves. That's where the other part of this slogan comes in—the “Live” part. Many of us have suffered a great deal of neglect as a result of the family disease of alcoholism, much of it from ourselves. Distracted or consumed by the problems of others, we have neglected our own bodies, minds, and spirits. Sponsors and other Al-Anon friends can help us to find ways to address needs that have gone unrecognized or unaddressed in the past. This slogan encourages us to make a special effort to treat ourselves well. It reminds us that making a life for ourselves, regardless of what others are doing or not doing, must be a top priority. Other people are not the only ones who merit our respect. We, too, deserve to treat ourselves with dignity. We have a right to really “Live,” and indeed it is our responsibility to do so.

“Let Go and Let God” This slogan can be an antidote to the desire many of us have to control the uncontrollable. Instead of relying upon our ego or self-will to direct our lives and the lives of others, we draw upon the strength, wisdom, and compassion of a Power greater than ourselves. Instead of hanging on for dear life, we “Let Go and Let God.”

We have often been our own greatest enemies, standing in the way of the help we need. When we put this slogan to work, we get out of the way. We let go of the problem, the need to know what will happen and when, the obsession with other people's choices, the thoughts and concerns that waste our time and energy because we cannot resolve them by ourselves. And we let God take care of them.

When we feel we have run out of options and nothing is going the way we expected, when we don't know what to do or can't figure out what there is to do, we can “Let Go and Let God.” When life is going smoothly and we are trying out new and exciting ideas and actions, we can remember Who is in charge of the results, and “Let Go and Let God.” When an Al-Anon friend goes through a difficult time and we don't know how to show our support, all we need do is to let them know we are available and to “Let Go and Let God.” This slogan gives us permission to replace stress, worry, and suffering with serenity and faith. It's okay to relax and let life happen. We can rest assured that the answers, choices, actions, and thoughts we need will come to us when the time is right because we have placed them in the hands of our Higher Power.

Changed Attitudes

How often have we seen a particular event or even an entire week as either all good or all bad? If the alcoholic drank, or if a friend was depressed, our day was ruined. Likewise, if it rained on the day we had looked forward to a picnic, we were miserable. Now that we are in Al-Anon and learning to focus on ourselves, we find that our world is neither all black nor all white. Now, the difference between a good day or a bad day has little to do with what happens or with what other people do or feel. We can have a good day in sunny or stormy weather, when everything goes according to our plans or when dinner is burnt and we run out of milk and the cash machine eats our bank card. We can even have a good day while the alcoholic in our lives is still drinking, because today we know that the kind of day we have depends on our own attitudes.

The Power of Attitude As Shakespeare suggested, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Consciously or otherwise, our attitudes affect the way we perceive everything that happens in our lives, so that the life we experience often has more to do with the way we interpret what happens than with the events themselves. Nobody wants to get sick; illness can be uncomfortable, sometimes excruciatingly so. But if we wind up in bed with a bad cold or with something more serious, we nonetheless have choices about how we will view the experience. We can once again perceive ourselves as victims, dwell on all of the things we are unable to do, and feel

terribly sorry for ourselves— or we can treat the situation as a blessing in disguise. Being unexpectedly incapacitated may actually leave us feeling unexpectedly relieved, temporarily free from everyday pressures. We can take advantage of the opportunity to rest, to take stock, to catch up on some of the quieter activities we may have neglected, or simply to be good to ourselves. Realizing that we often take for granted both our health and the precious time we have been given in this life, we may develop a fresh appreciation for both, making each day that much more fulfilling.

In other words, as the cliché goes, we can perceive the glass as half-empty or half-full. Our choice will determine the world we experience and will color the way we feel about ourselves and others.

This is especially true for those of us who know first hand the effects of another's alcoholism. Many of us tend to have a habit of negative thinking that causes us to see only the grim side of our situations. When looking toward the future, we imagine the worst, becoming so busy worrying or trying to protect ourselves that we neglect to enjoy ourselves along the way. Rather than turning to others, we brace ourselves for disappointment and withdraw from the joyful opportunities of life. When our expectations are not met or when our plans are disrupted, we feel sorry for ourselves and angry with those we think are responsible, often using these reverses to justify our own unfinished work, broken promises, or neglected responsibilities.

Changing such self-defeating attitudes is essential to recovery, but we have to be honest with ourselves. There is no value in pretending to have a sunny outlook when we really perceive a situation to be painful or frightening, or when we feel the world is a gloomy place. We are seeking genuine change, not denial. And the first step in changing our negative attitudes is becoming aware of them, a process that rarely happens overnight.

Even after we recognize a self-defeating attitude, we may be dismayed to find it popping up unexpectedly again and again. The attitude seems to stand out. We wonder how we ever could have missed it and whether others have been aware of how destructive it is. But before we can take effective action, before we can actually change a negative outlook to a positive one or change self-pity into gratitude, we have to accept ourselves precisely the way we are. We need to admit that the disturbing habit or attitude is a part of us. We need to acknowledge our feelings and perceptions as they are, and we also need to cultivate the willingness to change. Because we cannot do this alone, we ask our Higher Power for help. As we become willing, we search for positive aspects in every situation and find gifts hidden in even the most trying times. Gradually, and at first imperceptibly, our outlook shifts until the world actually appears brighter and more inviting. In time, situations that would have given rise to any number of negative attitudes pass almost unnoticed. We may even find something in these situations for which we can be grateful.

GRATITUDE Actively practicing gratitude is one way we can promote attitude adjustment. Instead of taking for granted the many blessings in our lives, we make a point to mentally acknowledge them until doing so becomes a habit. Writing them down in a “gratitude list” and then reading the list to our Sponsor or sharing it with other Al-Anon members helps us realize that there are many things in our lives for which we are truly grateful. In times of distress, we may see little for which to be thankful, but if we make the effort, we are certain to find a few and thereby shed some light on an otherwise dreary view. Sometimes it helps to start with our most basic or immediate needs— food on the table, a roof over our heads, and clothing. We may then find that we are grateful for more modest incidents and gestures— gestures— kind words, Al-Anon friends, a bit of humor in an otherwise serious situation, a moment of serenity, or an indication that we are beginning to heal. Gratitude enables us to savor the unrecognized good that surrounds us, no matter what the circumstances. As we become accustomed to noticing the positive aspects of our lives, we begin to recognize small, subtle gifts and cloaked

opportunities when they appear in our day-to-day experience. Eventually, as we continue to practice, we actually do find something to be grateful for, even in painful or difficult situations. We replace our victim mentality with an attitude of gratitude. Instead of feeling drained, overwhelmed, and stressed by the circumstances we encounter, we begin to feel empowered and capable of coping, even flourishing, because we have learned that our Higher Power can use every situation, every relationship, every experience, to enhance our lives and foster strength, faith, and personal growth. Thus, everyone and everything has a special gift to offer us. We need only open our eyes to see it.

SERENITY PRAYER New attitudes often evolve from a new way of seeing. One way Al-Anon suggests to gain perspective is to think about the words of the Serenity Prayer as we say them:

**God grant me the serenity,
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference. Amen**
(extended version below)
**Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking as He did, this sinful world as it is, Not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His will.
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen**

This prayer can be extremely helpful because it encourages us to turn to a Power greater than ourselves in sorting out what we can and cannot do.

Often our greatest source of discomfort is our continuing attempt to change people and events over which we are powerless. The Serenity Prayer reminds us that we cannot achieve the impossible. Instead, we can stop trying to play God and accept the very real possibility that the people and events in our lives are part of the greater vision of a Higher Power. In doing so, it becomes easier to accept the things we cannot change.

Yet there are plenty of situations in which we can act effectively to improve our circumstances—changing what we can. It takes courage to see ourselves as we really are and to attempt to make positive, lasting changes, especially when we are reluctant to change at all. We ask the God of our understanding to provide us with the impetus to act, acknowledging that what we can most readily change is ourselves.

The gift of wisdom enables us to know when to act and when to let go. In the Serenity Prayer, we turn to the God of our understanding for the attributes necessary to live life more fully: serenity, courage, and wisdom.

EXPECTATIONS One obstacle over which many of us stumble as we attempt to battle this disease of attitudes is our own expectations. There is no better way to make ourselves feel victimized and helpless than by harboring unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others, or by confusing expectations with needs and insisting that they be met. Attaching our well-being to a particular action

or outcome is very risky. In essence, we make that situation a kind of higher power— we give our power over to other people and circumstances. At any moment, a turn of events could dash the dreams and plans upon which we've built our lives.

Life is far too uncertain for such misplaced faith. So it is in our best interest to examine our expectations. Are they realistic, or based in fantasy? Do we hold them loosely, with the flexibility to let them go or to make adjustments as further information comes along, or do we cling tightly to these flimsy ideas and invest our self-worth, our entire well-being in them? If we allow our expectations to dominate, we set ourselves up to be victims or martyrs again and again.

But here, too, we have the ability to change our attitudes. We can adjust our expectations so that they are more realistic. We can also detach from them, anchoring our well-being and peace of mind in our Higher Power rather than any external situation. By seeking only the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out (Step Eleven), we make great strides toward developing an unshakeable inner peace and a sense of security that cannot be threatened by mere circumstances.

SERENITY This is what some of us mean when we speak of serenity. With serenity, we are no longer limited by fears or illusions. We can be fully ourselves and trust that, with the help of a Higher Power, we will be able to handle anything that happens. We replace the daily dread and insecurity that have dominated us in the past with a new-found confidence and a profound sense of well-being. This is one of the goals we seek for ourselves in Al-Anon. Although we may have come to Al-Anon with very different intentions in mind, by practicing the principles of our program, we can achieve inner peace and become capable of realizing far more than we ever imagined. Many of our hopes and dreams become attainable. Others cease to matter so much. Serenity may be the most precious gift we receive because it allows us to know that our lives are in the care of a Power greater than ourselves and therefore, even in the midst of chaos, there is hope.

Detachment, Love, and Forgiveness

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES Al-Anon recovery is about reclaiming our own lives. We do this by learning to focus on ourselves, build on our strengths, and ask for and accept help with our limitations. But many of us find it difficult even to begin this self-focused process because we have lost track of the separation between ourselves and others, especially the alcoholic. Having interceded for so long on the alcoholic's behalf, constantly reacting, worrying, pleasing, covering up, smoothing over, or bailing him or her out of trouble, we have often taken upon our shoulders responsibilities that don't rightfully belong to us. The result is that we lose the sense of where we leave off and the alcoholic begins. We have become so enmeshed with another person's life and problems that we have lost the knowledge that we are separate individuals. When asked about ourselves, we often respond by talking about the alcoholic. We perceive ourselves to be so connected that, if something happens to the alcoholic, it seems only right, only natural, for us to respond.

Many of us even confuse this absence of personal boundaries with love and caring. For example, from the moment the alcoholic goes out the door, we sit, immobilized, unable to do anything but think obsessively about him or her. We lose the ability to distinguish between the alcoholic and ourselves until the alcoholic's past, current, and potential actions become our sole focus. This is not love; it's obsession. When we cease to live our own lives because we are so preoccupied with the lives of

others, our behavior is motivated by fear. Not only is it harmful to a relationship to hover anxiously or suspiciously over a loved one night and day, it is also extremely self-destructive.

Likewise, when we cancel our own plans and stay home because we fear that the alcoholic will drink if left alone, we may protest that we act out of loving self-sacrifice for the sake of the alcoholic. More likely, it is an effort to feel that we have some power over the drinking. The choice to abandon our own plans for such a purpose is an act of fear, not an act of love. Canceling plans and staying home to avoid the consequences of “defying” the alcoholic is another form of self-abandonment and has nothing to do with love.

Genuine, healthy love isn’t self-destructive. It doesn’t diminish us or strip us of our identities, nor does it in any way diminish those we love. Love is nourishing; it allows each of us to be more fully ourselves. The enmeshment that characterizes an alcoholic relationship does just the opposite.

DETACHMENT is one of the most valuable techniques Al-Anon offers those of us who seek to reclaim ourselves. Simply put, detachment means to separate ourselves emotionally and spiritually from other people.

If someone we love had the flu and cancelled plans with us, most of us would understand. We wouldn’t take it personally or blame the person for being inconsiderate or weak. Instead, in our minds, we would probably separate the person from the illness, knowing that it was the illness, rather than our loved one, that caused the change of plans. This is detachment. And we can use it to see alcoholism in the same compassionate yet impersonal way. When alcoholism causes a change in plans, or sends harsh words or other unacceptable behavior in our direction, we needn’t take it any more personally than we would take the flu symptoms. It is the disease rather than the individual that is responsible. By seeing the person as separate from the disease, by detaching, we can stop being hurt by groundless insults or angered by outrageous lies. If we can learn to step back from alcoholism’s symptoms and effects just as we would from the sneezing of a person with a cold, we will no longer have to take those effects to heart.

Learning to detach often begins by learning to take a moment before reacting to alcoholic behavior. In that moment we can ask ourselves, “Is this behavior coming from the person or the disease?” Although at first the answer may not be clear to us, in time it becomes easier to discern whether alcoholism or our friend or relative has prompted the disturbing behavior. This distinction makes us better able to emotionally distance ourselves from the behavior. We can remember that although alcoholics often surround themselves with crisis, chaos, fear, and pain, we need not play a part in the turmoil. Blaming others for the consequences of their own choices and acting out verbally or physically are some of the smokescreens that alcoholics use to conceal the real source of the trouble— alcoholism. Everyone’s attention goes to the harsh word, the broken glass, or the bounced check rather than to the disease. It becomes automatic to defend against the insult, weep or rage at the thrown glass, scramble to cover the bounced check. But by naming the disease, we see through the alcoholic’s smokescreen and therefore needn’t be distracted by it at all. Instead of taking the behavior personally, in time we can learn to say to ourselves, “That’s just alcoholism,” and let it go.

Simply knowing that alcoholism is the source of the unacceptable behavior is not sufficient, however. We may have to take action to help us achieve greater emotional distance. We might change the subject, leave the room or even the house, or involve ourselves in some physically demanding activity. We may need the support or perspective that only a Sponsor or fellow Al-Anon member can provide. An Al-Anon call or meeting could be just what we need to help us separate ourselves from the symptoms and effects of the disease without separating ourselves from the human being.

At first, we might not detach very gracefully. Many of us have done so with resentment, bitter silence, or loud and angry condescension. It takes time and practice to master detachment. Beginning the process is important, even if we do it badly at first and must later make amends. But it is even more important to remember that establishing personal boundaries is not the same as building walls. Our goal is to heal ourselves and our relationships with other human beings, not to coldly distance ourselves, especially from the people who matter most to us. In fact, detachment is far more compassionate and respectful than the unfeeling distancing or the compulsive involvement many of us have practiced in the past, for when we detach with love, we accept others exactly as they are.

Detachment with love allows us to hate the disease of alcoholism, yet step back from that disease in order to find love for the alcoholic. For some of us, this love was apparent all along. For others, love may be the last emotion we would associate with the alcoholic. Those of us who grew up in an abusive alcoholic environment may be hard pressed to summon any love for the alcoholics we have known.

FORGIVENESS Resentment will do nothing except tear us apart inside. No one ever found serenity through hatred. No one ever truly recovered from the effects of alcoholism by harboring anger or fear, or by holding on to grudges. Hostility keeps us tied to the abuses of the past. Even if the alcoholic is long gone from our lives or has refrained from drinking for many years, we, too, need to learn to detach. We need to step back from the memories of alcoholic behavior that continue to haunt us. We begin to detach when we identify the disease of alcoholism as the cause of the behavior and recognize that our ongoing struggle with unpleasant memories is an effect of that disease. We, too, must find within us compassion for the alcoholic who suffered from this terrible illness.

Each of us is worthy of love, and each of us is doubly blessed when we are able to dig down past our grievances and resentments, no matter how justified we may feel in harboring them, and find within ourselves the recognition of that part of the other person that is and always will be lovable. How better could we learn that we ourselves are eternally and irrevocably lovable than by recognizing that same quality in everyone around us?

Yet some of us balk at the idea of adopting such an attitude toward people who, in the past, may have caused us great physical, emotional, financial, or spiritual harm. If we find their behavior totally reprehensible, why should we bother to look for a place within ourselves that can relate to them with love? Aren't some things simply unforgivable?

To answer these questions, we must ask another: What is the purpose of our recovery? If we are truly in pursuit of serenity, of healing, of a sense of inner peace that will help us to deal with and possibly even enjoy whatever life brings, we must improve the way we interact with others. This doesn't mean that we close our eyes to the unacceptable or tolerate the intolerable. It has no bearing on what behavior we will accept, nor on whether or not we continue our present relationships. It simply means that we cultivate the ability to look beneath the surface. By shifting our focus away from the objectionable behavior and looking more deeply, we recognize a part of every human being that remains untouched by disease, the part of each of us that deserves unconditional love and respect regardless of the circumstances. It is equally possible to appreciate this quality in those whom we do not know as it is in someone with whom we hope to spend a lifetime. This is what forgiveness is all about. We don't forgive the actions another person has chosen, because it was never our job to judge the person for those actions in the first place. Instead, we forgive when we acknowledge our common humanity with everyone, even the person we feel the most entitled to condemn. In this spirit, we can even forgive ourselves, no matter what we've done or how guilty or shame-filled we may feel. We, too, deserve love.

Forgiveness is no favor. We do it for no one but ourselves. We simply pay too high a price when we refuse to forgive. Lingering resentments are like acid eating away at us. Rehearsing and re-rehearsing old injuries robs us of all that is precious. Shame never liberated a single spirit. And self-righteousness never softened a heart. Can we afford to perpetuate such self-destructiveness? Surely we can make better use of our time and energy. Although we may despise what others have done, if we keep in mind that everything we are now trying to do has the goal of healing us, we are bound to decide that the best thing we can do for ourselves is to forgive.

Taking Care of Ourselves

Alcoholism is a threefold disease— physical, mental, and spiritual. Many of us have neglected our health on all three of these fronts, so our recovery from the effects of alcoholism must be threefold as well.

TREATING OURSELVES WELL It takes a firm commitment to make our own well-being a priority. In the past, some of us neglected to care for ourselves because we were waiting for someone else to take care of us. And some of us were so concerned with another person's well-being that we failed to attend to our own. But in Al-Anon we are learning to take responsibility for tending to our needs.

At first, few of us felt comfortable giving ourselves such attention. It seemed selfish to make these efforts on our own behalf. We may even have been taught as children that other people's needs rightfully come first.

But how can we take care of others if we are falling apart through lack of the most basic care? In Al-Anon we learn to put "First Things First." Just as airline passengers are instructed to put on their own oxygen masks before helping their children or fellow passengers with theirs, we must learn to attend to our own well-being first. We owe it to ourselves to give ourselves the love, care, and attention we need and deserve, even if the needs of others sometimes have to wait.

For some, the easiest way to learn how to nurture ourselves is to do for ourselves what we would normally do or wish to do for a loved one. We might have a habit of skipping meals or eating poorly and quickly when alone but preparing sumptuous and nourishing feasts when our loved ones are present. By putting ourselves in our loved ones' position, we can see that we deserve much better treatment.

OUR PHYSICAL HEALTH We might consider what we can do to improve and maintain good health. Our physical bodies require rest, exercise, a nutritious diet, and appropriate medical care, and all of these are areas that merit conscientious planning. Something as simple as a daily walk can make a tremendous difference in the way we feel. Perhaps we will get an occasional massage, or take a few minutes for a nap when we are tired. If we often skip meals because we can't seem to squeeze them into our busy schedules, we can make an effort to block out mealtimes in advance and treat those time commitments with the same respect we would give to any other appointment. When we are ill, we can learn to take proper care of ourselves, cutting down on our activities, drinking extra fluids, getting the rest we need, and seeing a doctor when necessary, even if illness strikes at an inconvenient time. By attending to our physical needs, we go a long way toward making our lives more manageable.

OUR MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH Mentally and emotionally, we can find ways to stimulate our minds and validate our feelings. We can read books we enjoy or put our thoughts on paper in an essay or a letter. We might begin a new course of study or learn a new skill and open ourselves to some different interests. We can strive to become more honest with ourselves about what we think and feel; we can find appropriate ways to express ourselves. We might examine our emotions, whether alone, with a Sponsor, or with professional help.

Because recovery involves tremendous inner change and upheaval in addition to whatever outside changes are occurring, many of us need to take extra care of ourselves emotionally. The feelings aroused when denial is challenged, new projects are tackled, and a whole new way of life is adopted can be overpowering. We may experience tremendous fear, rage, guilt, or depression. Change, even wonderful, positive change, almost always involves some grief for the old way of life we are letting go, even if that way of life kept us miserable.

For those of us who have been emotionally shut down for years, the sudden flood of emotion can be frightening. If we keep in mind that this intense emotional turmoil is usually a temporary and natural part of the process of recovery, we may more easily accept the experience and take steps to make ourselves as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. It is especially important to provide ourselves with a place to express these feelings where we will receive the support and encouragement we need, such as a regular Al-Anon meeting at which we feel comfortable sharing. It is also important to be reminded that feelings aren't facts. No matter how intense the feelings may be, they are only feelings. They are reactions to, rather than reflections of, reality. Therefore, they are not necessarily the best basis for decision-making. Other people can help us to value the experience of our emotions without acting on them in ways that we might regret once the feelings have passed.

Some of us begin to remember long-suppressed traumatic events from the past that are emotionally devastating to relive. Suddenly, explosive feelings erupt that we were not capable of handling at the time of the trauma. They seem uncontrollable and terrifying, and we may fear they will never stop. Of course, this experience will eventually pass and the feelings will depart, but in the meantime we need to treat ourselves with extra tenderness. Emotional trauma can be even more disturbing than physical trauma. Just as we would need time to heal after major surgery, we need to recover from the emotional effects of past abuse, abandonment, or violation.

But not all of our emotional experiences are unpleasant. We may also discover new joy, passion, creativity, excitement, and a sense of wonder. It is essential to make room in our lives and in our psyches for all of these new, positive feelings that can energize the pursuit of further growth and make life so much more enjoyable.

OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH The third important aspect of self-care is spiritual. Many of us find it crucial to take time every single day to improve our conscious contact with the God of our understanding. This may be a half-hour of meditation, the repetition of a special prayer, a quiet, thoughtful walk in the woods, or a searching letter to our innermost selves. Many of us find spiritual inspiration and solace that is especially suited to those affected by another's alcoholism in One Day at a Time in Al-Anon (ODAT), Courage to Change, or Hope For Today, Al-Anon's daily meditation books. Artistic expression fosters spiritual growth in some, while organized religion works best for others.

As important as it is to set time aside for spiritual "exercise," it is even more important to recognize that our spiritual selves require ongoing attention. Morning prayers may not provide all of the spiritual sustenance we need for the entire day any more than a mid-morning snack will satisfy all of our

nutritional needs. We seek to make our Higher Power a constant companion, turning to the God of our understanding for guidance and spiritual nourishment throughout the day and night. We actively pursue this goal when we say a prayer before answering the phone or take a moment to listen for that still small voice inside us before making a decision, even a minor decision. And when we notice opportunities and gifts, even in difficult situations, we are strengthened by keeping our gratitude for our Higher Power's loving assistance in the forefront of our minds.

SETTING PRIORITIES AND LIMITS One easy-to-remember acronym for self-care is HALT, borrowed from our A.A. friends. It reminds us that when we are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired, we have needs that require our attention, needs that may be preventing us from acting in a positive, affirming way. We are encouraged to "Halt!" and to tend to these needs as soon as possible. This simple, loving reminder can prevent our saying or doing things we might regret and can help us to avoid rash decisions.

Another way we learn to take care of ourselves is to define our personal limits. This involves determining for ourselves what we will and will not do or accept. It can be as simple as setting our bedtime at 10: 00 P.M. or as difficult as deciding not to tolerate any more verbal abuse. Such limits help us to know in advance what our options are and how we feel about them so that, when faced with a stressful situation where we may not be thinking clearly, we will have some idea of what is in our best interest.

It is entirely up to us to determine what is acceptable to us and what is not. The same behavior that is intolerable to one person won't bother another person at all.

Our personal limits, however, do not dictate a code of behavior for others. Limits are not threats or methods of manipulation. They are merely facts. They state, "I will leave the party if I feel uncomfortable around other people's drinking," rather than, "I'd better not catch you drinking at this party," or "Promise me you won't drink this time." Certainly, there are times when it is highly appropriate to communicate our limits to those who might be affected by them, but we should consider our motives first. Are we informing them of factual information they deserve to have, or are we using limits as a way of trying to force change? We might also pause before voicing these limits to be sure we are prepared to follow through. Otherwise, we risk seriously diminishing our credibility and diminishing our own self-esteem.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM At some point in our recovery, most of us must confront our low self-esteem. Years of abuse and neglect, not only by others but by ourselves, have often left us with a poor self-image. We feel inconsequential, hopelessly flawed, doomed to failure, and unworthy of the kind of care and attention we would give to those we love. We certainly don't love ourselves. In order to overcome these feelings of inadequacy and self-hatred, many of us must force ourselves mechanically to go through the motions of taking care of ourselves. We learn to act as if we love ourselves and behave accordingly. We don't have to feel worthy to see the dentist, we merely have to show up for the appointment. Our teeth get just as clean, and perhaps that will lift our spirits just a bit. We may be uncomfortable about taking the time for a massage or a bubble bath when we could be worrying on behalf of someone else, but improving our lives may not always feel comfortable at first. When in doubt, we can try to choose the action most likely to enhance self-esteem. Even if we are only going through the motions, our loving behavior will help us to feel better about ourselves. In time, our actions will become more comfortable, and we will begin to feel more deserving until our self-esteem gradually reaches a healthier level.

Other Al-Anon members can also help us to learn to build self-esteem. Sometimes we have to surround ourselves with those who accept and love us before we can learn to love ourselves. Those of us who have been told or have told ourselves for so long that we are awful, pathetic creatures may not be able to recognize how magnificent we really are, how courageous, warm, lovable, fascinating, and loving we are at heart, until we see those qualities reflected in those who can see us more clearly than we see ourselves. When those we admire treat us as worthwhile human beings, we tend to be more open to the possibility that they could be right. We learn by their example. We may never have had role models who cared for themselves properly, or we may have forgotten how it was done. But we do have the right to learn these skills just as we would any other, and one of the best ways to learn is to observe others who have mastered the art and are willing to share with us what they know.

COPING WITH PHYSICAL ABUSE One of the most dangerous consequences of low self-esteem is that it allows us to tolerate abusive behavior because we feel we deserve no better treatment. This is wholly untrue. No one deserves abuse. Each of us is doing the absolute best we can all the time, and that is enough. We must make an effort to alter our self-image and combat self-loathing so that we will no longer feel at all inclined to accept the unacceptable.

But such an undertaking won't happen overnight. In the meantime, it is critically important that any of us dealing with physical abuse take steps to insure our safety and the safety of our children. Again, we may have to act as if we felt we deserved better treatment, and we owe it to ourselves to make that effort. We need time to recover, time to heal enough to be capable of making rational decisions, and we must do what we can to allow ourselves that time. For example, we might choose to remain in a potentially violent or abusive environment but provide ourselves with an escape route by hiding car keys, money, and other essentials where they can be retrieved at a moment's notice. We could arrange with a friend to have access to a shelter at any hour if the need arises. Or perhaps we prefer to remove ourselves from harm's way altogether, at least temporarily. We might seek a restraining order, request police assistance, or seek therapeutic or legal help. Al-Anon doesn't advocate any particular course of action. We are not urged either to stay or to go. Our concern is that each of our members has the opportunity to gain enough recovery to make clear, well-thought-out decisions about our lives. Some behavior, such as physical abuse, is never acceptable. All of us deserve to remain safe long enough to discover this for ourselves.

Communication

Once we are able to take care of ourselves, we have much more to bring to our relationships with others. The way we relate to others depends in large part upon the way we communicate, so it is useful, when examining our relationships, to consider what we say and how we say it. For instance, do we say what we mean and mean what we say? Do we state our needs and desires or sit back and wait for others to read our minds? Do we agree to do things that we really don't want to do, saying "yes" when we mean "no"? Do we express our feelings and communicate our appreciation for those in our lives, or do we keep silent or deny what we feel out of fear or habit?

RECOGNIZING OLD PATTERNS Many of us have formed patterns of communication that linger even though they may have outlived their usefulness. For example, before recovery, many of us kept quiet or agreed to unreasonable requests in order to avoid conflict. At the time, we lacked the ability to take a stand or act on our own behalf. Today, we might perpetuate that behavior out of habit even though we have other alternatives.

Now that we are working to improve our lives, we may want to stop making promises and threats we will not carry out. For example, swearing that the alcoholic will have to leave if he or she ever takes

another drink undermines our credibility if it is merely an idle threat. Before uttering such vows, we would be wise to ask ourselves whether or not we mean what we say. We may also have to learn to say “no” some of the time, even if it means disappointing others, even when the request is important to them. Such honesty is not only good for us, it’s much more respectful of other people than grudgingly offered favors laced with resentments.

Some of us keep our wants, needs, thoughts, and feelings to ourselves, expecting that anyone who truly loved us would somehow figure them out, or at least ask the right questions at the right time. But people, even those who love us a great deal, cannot always guess what is in our hearts and minds, nor is it their job to do so. Part of our obligation to ourselves is to stop putting life on hold while waiting for others to allow us to live it. Communicating what we want others to know about us is strictly our responsibility.

Sometimes we may hesitate to speak out because we fear the consequences of doing so, yet we overlook the consequences we pay by keeping quiet. Such silence can perpetuate our frustration, reinforce our fear of conflict, and cause us to believe that what we have to say really is unimportant. In this way, we demonstrate a lack of respect for ourselves and for other people. All we have to offer to anyone is ourselves. If we hold back and timidly refuse to risk being ourselves, we diminish our relationships.

It is worth noting, however, that if we are dealing with someone who is drunk or violent, this kind of honesty may be ill-advised. Real communication requires at least some participation by both parties, and if one of those parties is not in his or her right mind, the effort is likely to be wasted. It may even be dangerous. In such a case, talking things over with a Sponsor can help us determine an appropriate course of action.

Then there are those of us who never hesitate to say what is on our minds. We don’t stop to think about what we wish to convey, or how best to say it, we just automatically spit out the words. Not everyone needs to know everything that comes into our minds, and some circumstances are not always suitable for personal discussions. Honesty is a great gift to give to any relationship, but diplomacy and consideration for the feelings of others and the appropriateness of the situation are also important. Many of us benefit from learning the value of silence.

This is especially true of those of us prone to dispensing unwanted advice or criticism. Since we can’t truly know what is best for other people, our opinion about what they should or shouldn’t do is likely to do more harm than good. We can be supportive without trying to influence other people’s choices. If asked, we can share our own experiences without insisting on appearing to have all the answers. We can communicate our faith in the ability of other people to solve their own problems rather than trying to do it for them. We can learn that sometimes it is best to keep our mouths shut.

Likewise, those of us who rarely have anything constructive or positive to say may have to be quiet until we can find a more balanced way to talk to others. If the only attention we have ever received was critical or negative, we may know no other way to relate to others. But such negativity is destructive. Gossip is equally destructive. Not only do we avoid focusing on ourselves when we gossip, but our disrespect for others reinforces self-defeating attitudes about relationships. When we gossip, we create a judgmental and competitive atmosphere in which no one can feel comfortable about being themselves or expressing feelings. Because gossip undermines Al-Anon’s healing nature, it is considered one of three obstacles to success in Al-Anon. The other obstacles—dominance and discussion of inappropriate topics such as specific religious tenets at Al-Anon meetings—are also communication problems that we need to take seriously if we hope to grow and heal in Al-Anon. Pausing before we speak and thinking about what we are really trying to say can be the beginning of healthier interactions.

On the other hand, cold, angry silence can be more biting than vicious words. Are we silent because it is in our best interest to say nothing or because we have nothing to say, or are we using silence as a weapon? Here, too, care must be taken to be clear about our motives. We are also wise to examine our motives when we find ourselves repeatedly airing the same thoughts. It is marvelous to be able to express ourselves, but do we have a hidden agenda? When we state our feelings about the actions of another person for the fourth time, it's likely we are trying to make that person change those actions rather than simply trying to share openly. Or perhaps we are attempting to influence other people's reactions to someone we love. Do we reiterate the same point hoping to find just the right words or just the right moment to get a particular response? This is not self-expression. This is manipulation. By examining our motives, we can better stop ourselves from sabotaging the healthy interchange of ideas we are trying to cultivate.

HOW WE SAY WHAT WE SAY But not all of our communication is determined by what we do or do not say. It also depends upon how we say it. Not only our choice of words, but also our attitudes, facial expressions, and tone of voice can either open a channel or slam a door, regardless of the subject being discussed. All people, from the cashier at the drug store to our children, deserve our courtesy. Any message can be conveyed with courtesy, even one of outrage. If we treat people well when we speak what is in our minds and hearts, they are much more likely to hear what we have to say.

This takes courage. It is much easier to let our words convey compliance while our tone of voice expresses contempt. This is a way of communicating anger without taking responsibility for it. Instead, we have the option to say exactly how we feel with as much respect as we can muster. We are apt to get better results this way, but even if we don't, we will know that we have behaved with integrity. As we become the kind of people we can admire, we learn more appropriate ways to express our thoughts and feelings.

LISTENING Of course, communication is a two-way street. Not only is it important to improve the way we express ourselves, we must also examine the way we allow others to express themselves. We needn't always respond to what is said nor accept everything we hear as truth, but we do hope to develop relationships in which all concerned can be themselves and say what is on their minds and in their hearts. Are we good listeners? Do we grant other people the time to say what they need to say, to clarify their thoughts, even to say things we don't like to hear? Or do we interrupt, finish other people's sentences for them, or stop listening altogether while we prepare our response? Are we open-minded about what others have to say, or do we quickly become defensive? Most of us find that if we want others to hear what we have to say with courtesy, we must extend the same consideration to them.

But being a good listener is more than a matter of courtesy. Al-Anon's slogan, "Listen and Learn," reminds us that if we have the self-discipline to be quiet and pay attention to others' words, we can learn a tremendous amount about ourselves and our world.

FOCUSING ON OURSELVES Our goal is to build healthy, respectful relationships. By applying the Al-Anon slogan, "Let It Begin with Me," we can see that it is not good enough to wait for others to treat us well before we are considerate of them. Most of us find that after a while we begin to attract what we give out. If we are consistently warm and respectful, we tend to attract respect and warmth from

others. It may not take the form we expect or come from everyone we encounter, but if we focus on ourselves, choose behavior we feel is appropriate, and let go of the results, our communication as a whole is bound to improve.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT Does this mean that we never engage in arguments? Of course not. Conflict is part of every relationship. In fact, the more we recover, the more likely we may be to encounter conflict. We are bound to have increasingly strong opinions and to stand up for them because we believe in ourselves. Arguments can be constructive experiences that help to clear the air or they can be brutal attacks that undermine the connection between two people. The choice is ours to make. We can argue in order to win, to exert power, to prove the other person wrong and to mete out punishment for any slight we might have perceived, or we can argue for the purpose of making peace.

Few of us look forward to a disagreement, much less an argument, but when faced with conflict we have the option to embrace it, realizing that we are each doing the best we can. And we can accept our differences. We can even accept that not all conflicts can or should be resolved, and allow ourselves and others the right to do, think, and say whatever each believes without demanding agreement or resolution. Keeping in mind the fact that arguments are not the only option available when a conflict arises, we can engage in discussions that permit both parties to air their views and learn from one another. As we learn to exchange and build upon ideas, we develop the ability to work together toward common goals and to interact with others in a more intimate, more meaningful way. We can treat one another with respect, especially when we disagree.

PUTTING LOVE INTO ACTION We hear a lot in Al-Anon about unconditional love. Such love makes no demands, exacts no payment, has no expectations. We are free to give it without anticipating or even wanting anything in return because the experience of loving in this way is so rewarding in and of itself that we are grateful for the opportunity. Often without being aware of it, we receive love of this kind without any sense of obligation to pay it back and without fear that the bill will come tomorrow. There is no “If you really loved me, you would _____,” no “After all I’ve done for you....” Unconditional love asks for nothing except expression. It blesses both the giver and the receiver.

Love with no strings attached is a foreign concept for many of us. Some of us experience it for the first time when we come to Al-Anon. As the Suggested Closing to our meetings states, “After a while, you’ll discover that though you may not like all of us, you’ll love us in a very special way—the same way we already love you.” Our survival as a fellowship depends on unconditional love. We are brought together through a common problem and united by a common goal. We need each other. Each member is important, yet nothing is required of any member except what he or she freely wishes to give. There are no strings. And we respond to this freely given love by feeling that it is safe and desirable to keep coming back. Surrounded by this unqualified support, we who are so vulnerable and so wounded begin to heal.

It takes practice to learn to love unconditionally. An exceptional opportunity to put this new way of relating into effect is by volunteering to help an Al-Anon group through service work. Every contribution has value for the group and enables us to grow as individuals. From putting away chairs after a meeting to representing the group at the local, district, or Area level, Al-Anon provides a wide range of opportunities to practice giving unconditionally. Perhaps we will speak at a meeting or become the group’s Secretary. We can make the coffee, set out the Al-Anon literature, or read the Suggested Welcome at the start of the meeting. We can serve by reaching out to welcome a

newcomer. Another form of service is to submit our thoughts and experiences to the Literature Service at the Al-Anon World Service Office. Such contributions are essential to the creation of new, up-to-date, relevant literature. Sponsorship is another superb and rewarding form of service.

All of these and many other activities help Al-Anon as a whole, our group in particular, and ourselves. It might seem that we, who have received so much from this wonderful program, have an obligation to do just that, to help Al-Anon, to repay what we have been given. But this is not the case. Again, service is the practice of unconditional love. There are no “shoulds,” no obligations. We are welcome to contribute to the well-being of our individual groups and our fellowship as a whole, but it is not required, no matter how far we have come or how much we have received. This frees us to give only what we wish, knowing that we do so for our own growth.

Service in Al-Anon allows us to stretch ourselves and to practice the Al-Anon principles while we connect with others with whom we can be ourselves. It is an opportunity to attempt something we actually can achieve and to gain self-esteem by doing something of value. At a time when many of us find ourselves easily preoccupied, service provides a way to keep busy without getting ourselves into trouble, adding structure to an otherwise scattered or disorganized schedule and providing an anonymous and nurturing environment in which to explore and to grow.

We discover that when we reach out to others, our own pain diminishes and our recovery begins to soar. Although there was a time when many of us shied away from such activities, fearing that we had so little we could hold on to without giving part of ourselves away, this is no longer a concern. Today, as we continue to practice all we have learned, we care for ourselves physically, mentally, and spiritually far better than we had ever thought possible. Part of that self-caring involves understanding that love is not lessened when given away. In fact, the more love we offer, the more love we will find within ourselves. Thus, whenever we truly give of ourselves, almost magically we find that there is more of our selves to give.

Ironically, the only real way to keep the riches we receive is to give them away. By taking advantage of these opportunities to practice unconditional love, we make love an ongoing part of our lives and we learn that by giving, we always receive.

Al-Anon’s booklet, *When I Got Busy, I Got Better* offers invaluable information about this crucial area of recovery. And nowhere is the spirit of Al-Anon service more clearly articulated than in the prayer on the back of the Just for Today bookmark:

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. “O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Keep Coming Back

WHY WE KEEP COMING TO AL-ANON Newcomers to Al-Anon are often surprised to meet so many longtime members. Many of us continue to attend meetings years after the problems that first brought us to Al-Anon have passed, because the program continues to enrich our lives. We continue to change and we are changed by circumstances we encounter, but because we have practiced the Al-Anon principles in all our affairs, our lives have improved beyond imagining. We can’t afford to take

these changes for granted. What was once learned is quickly forgotten without continued renewal, practice, and support.

So we keep coming back. For some, Al-Anon becomes a spiritual home. Others of us simply love the way we feel when we are with people who speak so openly and so sincerely about what really matters to them. The friendships we make in Al-Anon are often extremely close and enduring. But most of us keep coming back because Al-Anon helps to keep us sane and serene, even in the midst of difficult challenges, as long as we continue to use the Twelve Steps to work on ourselves.

We change with every new moment of every day. Most of us come to meetings to make the most of all these changes in our lives, to experience them with the love and support of our friends in Al-Anon, and to grow in a positive, healthy direction.

We know that Al-Anon is not a magic shop that makes all our problems vanish so that we can live happily ever after. Rather, it is a program through which we learn to better cope with our problems, celebrate our joys and our triumphs, feel all of our feelings, and know that everything that happens—the happy and the sad alike—will eventually pass. Again and again in life, we will pass through periods of great difficulty and periods of serenity and confidence. Change can be just as painful after 20 years of recovery as it is for a newcomer. The difference is that after 20 years, we know from our own experience that “this too shall pass.” The pain will eventually ease.

Since there is no “arrival,” no magical day on which we suddenly achieve serenity and live on forever free from stress or strain, most of us eventually learn to be patient. We find that we can trust the process of recovery to move us ever forward, even if it sometimes feels as if we’re moving backwards. We learn from each experience, and over time we build quite a storehouse of wisdom as a result. Pain may hurt as much as ever, but as time passes, we can put that pain in context so that suffering no longer dominates our whole life. We can separate ourselves from our pain, so that pain—as well as happiness and every other emotion—becomes merely another vehicle for growth. WHERE DOES THE AL-ANON JOURNEY BEGIN? So where do we begin this monumental task of changing our lives? For most of us, it has already

Al-Anon's History

The marvelous thing about Al-Anon is that it was founded by people just like us, people who struggled with the pain and isolation of involvement with an alcoholic, people who needed help. Certainly, Al-Anon's pioneers gave of themselves with great courage and generosity. Without their dedication and hard work, our program would not exist, and we remember them with a gratitude that extends beyond words. But when we acknowledge the contributions made by Al-Anon's founders, we look to the examples they themselves have set. What better legacy could we receive than the knowledge that ordinary men and women like ourselves can truly make a difference?

When Alcoholics Anonymous began in 1935, almost nothing was known about the effects of alcoholism on anyone other than the alcoholic. A.A.'s cofounders, Bill W. and Dr. Bob S., were not experts on alcoholism, they were men in the grip of the disease who came together to help one another stay sober. Like so many other family members, the wives of these men, Lois W. and Annie S., had done everything they could think of to get their husbands to stop drinking, but to no avail.

Lois, in fact, had been advised to give up. Her husband, she was told, was a hopeless alcoholic who would surely die or be institutionalized as a result of his drinking. But when Ebby T., a dear friend of Bill's who was also an alcoholic, miraculously found sobriety, both Bill and Lois had reason to hope.

Bill's friend had found help through the Oxford Group, a Christian movement with which Bill and Lois soon became involved in New York. In Akron, a city southeast of Cleveland, Ohio, Annie S. persuaded her husband to join this same spiritual movement that had a reputation for helping alcoholics. Although neither Bill nor Dr. Bob embraced every aspect of the Oxford Group and although both eventually left the movement, many of the spiritual principles of A.A. and Al-Anon are based upon the tenets of the Oxford Group.

Lois attended these meetings with her husband but gave little thought to applying the spiritual principles to her own life. As far as she was concerned, her life would be fine if Bill could maintain sobriety. To her dismay, Bill's sobriety didn't bring Lois the happiness she expected. After playing a central role in his life during the drinking years, she felt that in sobriety he no longer needed her. Like so many of us, Lois became increasingly resentful and full of self-pity. Her house was filled with displaced alcoholics her husband brought home, and he spent more time with them than he spent with her! When she hurled a shoe at Bill in the heat of an argument, Lois realized that her own life was out of control. She needed help, the same kind of spiritual help that her husband had found, first in the Oxford Group, and subsequently in the Twelve Steps.

Lois wasn't alone in this discovery. Other wives of alcoholics were expressing frustration and confusion through their letters to A.A.'s magazine, *The A.A. Grapevine*. At the time, it was customary for wives to accompany their alcoholic husbands to A.A. meetings and take charge of refreshments. (In those days, most A.A. members were men.) All across the country, wives would congregate in kitchens or anterooms and talk about their common experiences and common problems.

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Alcoholics Anonymous, from which much of our program was derived. When A.A.'s "Big Book," *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was published in 1939, many wives of recovering alcoholics read about A.A.'s spiritual principles and began discussing them with one another. As they witnessed the remarkable impact A.A.'s Twelve Steps were having on their spouses, these women wondered whether the same Steps might benefit them. Those who had tried to apply the Steps to their own lives by themselves had made only limited progress, since all they knew about the Steps came from alcoholics who were trying to stay sober. They didn't understand their own reactions to another's alcoholism, or how the disease could continue to affect their lives even after their spouses had found sobriety. So, in cities across the nation, women began to meet in their homes to study A.A.'s Twelve Steps. These informal gatherings were the forerunners of Al-Anon meetings.

The original Family Groups were linked together for the first time in 1950, when one enterprising wife created *The San Francisco Family Club Chronicle*. This magazine, which included editorials, correspondence from families of alcoholics, and inspirational quotations from a wide variety of philosophers, would later be known as *The Family Forum* and subsequently, *The Forum*. Within a year, its pumpkin-colored pages connected the Family Groups not only across the U.S., but as far away as Australia and South Africa.

The need was great to come together in fellowship and to discuss how A.A. principles might be adapted and applied to the lives of other family members. But it was still not clear whether these groups existed primarily to help the alcoholics or to seek recovery for their own members, and much debate ensued. A.A. encouraged family participation, and family members who were finding help in these groups began telling others about their experiences. Wives of actively drinking alcoholics began to learn about the family groups and as time passed, the membership grew to include men, adult children of alcoholics, parents, and others with various relationships to alcoholics. Soon, groups calling themselves "Non-Alcoholics Anonymous" or A.A. Auxiliaries were springing up at an astonishing rate.

During this time, Lois and Bill traveled all over the world to speak to A.A. groups and they found Family Groups forming everywhere they went. In 1950, Bill suggested to Lois that she open a service office through which all these groups could register, communicate with each other, receive literature, and become more unified. This office could also provide the public and the professional community with information about the effects of alcoholism. And it could be a source of comfort and strength to which confused and despairing relatives and friends of alcoholics could reach out for help. At first, Lois wasn't interested. A few years earlier, after 33 years of marriage, she and Bill had finally purchased their first home, "Stepping Stones," and Lois had more domestic plans in mind for her immediate future. But the need for such an office was great, and as time passed, the idea sounded more and more appealing. After speaking with the wives of A.A. Delegates to the 1951 A.A. General Service Conference, Lois decided to take on the project. The result was the formation of the Al-Anon Clearing House, later incorporated as Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. and subsequently known to the fellowship as the World Service Office for Al-Anon and Alateen.

Leaning upon each other because there was no one else in the beginning, Lois and her friend, Anne B., the founder of Westchester County's first Family Group, began working together to respond to the correspondence that was pouring into A.A.'s Alcoholic Foundation. Anne, a painfully shy woman, began seeking recovery with other wives of alcoholics when she realized that fear dominated her life, fear that was intensified by living with an actively drinking alcoholic. Anne's involvement with this fledgling Family Group and her commitment to the Twelve Steps helped to release her from a lifetime of this nearly incapacitating fear and inspired her to become Lois's "Little Man Friday" in Al-Anon's early days.

Lois and Anne rented a post office box and worked in the second-floor study at Stepping Stones. Contacting each of the 87 groups registered with A.A., they suggested coming together as a single fellowship. Their letter sought suggestions regarding a name for the organization and requested the groups' permission to adopt the Twelve Steps of A.A. The vast majority responded enthusiastically, and the name "Al-Anon," a contraction of "Alcoholics Anonymous," was soon chosen.

A.A.'s Twelve Steps were adopted, word for word, with the exception of the Twelfth Step. Since Al-Anon's purpose was to help friends and family members of alcoholics rather than to help alcoholics achieve sobriety, the Twelfth Step was altered so that it spoke of carrying the Al-Anon message to "others" rather than to "alcoholics." This single word change helped to give Al-Anon its own purpose and laid the groundwork for a later adaptation of the Twelve Traditions of A.A.

Al-Anon's founders knew from A.A.'s example that some guidelines would be essential to maintain unity and stability. Lois wrote asking for input from the groups and outlined Al-Anon's commitment to anonymity. The Traditions went through four drafts before being approved for adoption by the A.A. General Service Conference in 1955 and subsequently accepted by Al-Anon at its first trial World Service Conference in 1961.

There was an immediate need for literature that answered frequently-asked questions and clarified Al-Anon's principles. With guidance from Bill, Lois and Anne wrote Purposes and Suggestions for Al-Anon Family Groups, a pamphlet that emphasized the importance of focusing on oneself in meetings and cautioned against gossip and complaining about the alcoholic. Their first effort at a hardbound book, Al-Anon Family Groups, appeared in 1955.

Correspondence rapidly increased in volume. More help and more office space were needed to keep up with the demand. Unsolicited donations that trickled in from time to time helped Lois and Anne to open a tiny office. On January 9, 1952, the newly-named Al-Anon Family Groups moved into a second floor loft in the Old A.A. Clubhouse in New York City. It soon became affectionately known as "Lois's icebox" in the winter and "Lois's sweatshop" in the summer because of the conditions the early

volunteers endured while trying to meet the needs of this young organization. Although short on money, furniture, and supplies, they were the proud owners of a two-drawer filing cabinet and a half share in a mimeograph machine.

A small group of dedicated volunteers made it possible for this tiny operation to grow and to flourish. Some of these men and women came to play a prominent role in Al-Anon's later history, such as Margaret D. who served as editor of *The Forum* for 20 years, and Henrietta S., Al-Anon's first General Secretary. Before holding that position, Henrietta became Al-Anon's first paid worker in 1953, receiving a scant \$ 35 for three full days of work each week.

Lois and Anne had personally financed the initial expenses of the Clearing House, but they couldn't continue to do so indefinitely. Letters requesting financial support for the office received a mixed response. Some groups responded enthusiastically, while others, having established their own local area network upon which they relied for information and unity, declined. Money continued to be tight. Volunteers saved wrapping paper and string to cut down on mailing costs. One member "donated" typing paper from her employer's office. Lois saved the cardboard that came with Bill's shirts when they came back from the cleaners to use in packaging literature orders! Yet there was always enough money to keep going for another day.

More and more Family Groups were started as people noticed the changes in friends and family members who were finding serenity and sanity in Al-Anon and wondered how they could make such changes in their own lives. As membership grew, Al-Anon headquarters adjusted accordingly, moving to larger and larger spaces and hiring paid professional staff to keep up with the ever-growing needs of the fellowship. Individual groups recognized the importance of their individual contributions, and literature sales added to the organization's relative financial stability. But fiscal concerns have always been part of Al-Anon's history and continue to force cutbacks and changes, especially in the difficult economic times of the 1990' s.

Committees were required to oversee Al-Anon's various special services, including literature, budget, policy, and publicity. Local Al-Anon Information Service offices were later established to disseminate local Al-Anon meeting information and to handle inquiries from friends and family members of alcoholics who reached out to Al-Anon for help. Anne and the volunteers compiled a World Directory so that Al-Anon's help could be found almost anywhere in the world. Today, the World Directory is accessed through a toll-free telephone number, further assisting all who need Al-Anon to find a meeting wherever they may travel. From 87 original groups, Al-Anon has grown to many thousands of groups meeting in over 130 countries around the world.

In the early years, Anne B. became chairman of the Prison Groups Committee, forerunner of the Institutions Committee. Even in those days, making information available to those who didn't know how to find help was a critical aspect of Al-Anon's existence. Like many of us, Anne was quite shy and had difficulty speaking in public. Yet because of this ordinary woman's extraordinary efforts, many thousands of relatives of alcoholics found help and personal growth in Al-Anon and, when the whole family situation improved, many of the alcoholics found it possible to achieve and maintain sobriety.

The need for literature far exceeded Lois and Anne's ability to produce it in those early days, so they often recommended the writings of others, including Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie. A.A.' s "Big Book" was an important source of information to early Al-Anon groups. Some of the Al-Anon pamphlets still in use today were written by non-members. *So You Love an Alcoholic* was developed by the Texas Commission on Alcoholism. *Alcoholism, a Merry-Go-Round Named Denial* and *A Guide for the Family of the Alcoholic*, were written by a good friend and advocate of Al-Anon, the Reverend Joseph Kellermann, the former director of the Charlotte, North Carolina Council on Alcoholism. Local

Al-Anon groups also developed their own literature. Freedom from Despair, for example, was created by the San Diego Family Group. But the vast majority of the literature was developed by Al-Anon's Literature Committee. One Day at a Time in Al-Anon (ODAT), was written in the late 1960's by a self-taught writer, Alice B., the youthful, 72-year-old chairman of Al-Anon's Literature Committee. This extraordinary daily reader became a favorite of members worldwide and has been translated into 28 languages.

But some of the literature was inconsistent with Al-Anon's Traditions, approaching the family disease from a religious or political slant. The need for a unified literature policy became apparent and led, in 1963, to the adoption of a Conference Approval process by which literature that consistently reflects Al-Anon principles is developed.

Today, Al-Anon's body of literature continues to expand to meet the needs of a growing membership in a changing world. Our books and pamphlets, such as From Survival to Recovery: Growing Up in an Alcoholic Home, Living with Sobriety, ...In All Our Affairs, and As We Understood..., are compiled by Al-Anon's Literature Service from the personal thoughts and experiences of our members.

In 1957, a California teenager named Bob was the subject of an article in the AA Grapevine. Bob, whose father was in A.A. and whose mother was in Al-Anon, had struggled unsuccessfully with problems of his own until his parents urged him to apply the principles of their programs to his life. Alateen began when Bob joined with five other young people who had been affected by the alcoholism of a family member. Bob and Bill M., an A.A. member and prime mover in the establishment of Alateen, kept in close touch with Lois, who urged the newly forming groups to immediately adopt Al-Anon's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Typically, these groups were sponsored by an Al-Anon member who provided structure and support while allowing the Alateens to run their own meetings. The Alateen Committee, formed in 1959, sent a questionnaire to each Alateen group and published the results, outlining Alateen's policies on membership, the function of an Alateen group's Al-Anon Sponsor, funding, and other such matters. Like Al-Anon, Alateen grew rapidly, despite fluctuations in membership due to competing interests, summer vacations, and inconsistencies inherent in teenage lifestyles. Magazine articles brought national publicity and inquiries about help for youngsters. In time, Alateen began publishing its own literature, releasing the hardcover book, Alateen— Hope for Children of Alcoholics in 1973. Regional conventions continue to unify and spark the enthusiasm of Alateen members.

Although Al-Anon literature developed first in the U.S., it addressed a universal need. In the 1960's, members voluntarily began translating Al-Anon literature into the languages of other countries, and Al-Anon groups began to appear in all corners of the earth.

The forerunner of today's Lone Member Service was started by an Al-Anon member through a publication originally known as World Hello. This publication made it possible for Al-Anon members to have "Al-Anon meetings by mail" in communities where no meetings existed or where members were physically unable to attend meetings. A similar service for inmates was started in 1991 by the Institutions Service of the World Service Office.

In order to achieve a wider group conscience, a trial World Service Conference met in 1961. Representing Al-Anon membership as a whole, the Conference sought to focus on mainstream Al-Anon experience and to keep the program unified and on course. So successful was the experience that the Conference became a permanent institution, charged with guarding the Traditions and overseeing Al-Anon policies.

With an annual budget in the millions of dollars, Al-Anon's World Service Office supports a salaried staff, many of whom are Al-Anon members. These members oversee each activity, including reaching

out to the public and professionals, development of Conference Approved Literature, archiving historic materials, connecting lone members, producing The Forum, providing support for groups and electronic meetings, planning the annual World Service Conference, coordinating with General Service Offices throughout the world, and providing Alateen services. Volunteers continue to play a vital role, serving as Trustees, committee members, and Delegates, answering phone calls, assembling literature packets, and generally keeping Al-Anon operating.

Al-Anon may not look the same as it did in 1951, but its purpose hasn't changed. We exist to offer help, comfort, strength, and information to those whose lives have been affected by the disease of alcoholism in a relative or friend. No matter how large our organization grows, we are committed to making sure that each person who comes in contact with Al-Anon receives the same individual, personal attention that they received when only a handful of Family Groups existed. When we look back to the dedicated pioneers who gave so generously of themselves, we see men and women just like us, the men and women who create Al-Anon's future.