



Families Facing Alcoholism

there is hope

An informative publication from
Al-Anon Family Groups Australia

**YOU CAN SEE
WHAT IT'S DOING TO
THE DRINKER**

BUT...

**CAN YOU SEE
WHAT IT'S DOING TO
YOU?**

Families Facing Alcoholism

Al-Anon Family Groups is a unique fellowship that unites members of different backgrounds, races and walks of life in an inspiring endeavor helping themselves and others to lead purposeful, useful lives by overcoming the frustration and helplessness caused by close association with an alcoholic.

Alateen (Al-Anon for younger members) is a vital part of Al-Anon Family Groups. Young people seeking help with problems that arise when alcoholism affects a parent, other close relative or a friend, meet to exchange experiences and to gain an understanding of themselves and the alcoholic.

The stories that you will read in this booklet come from members who live or have lived with the problem of alcoholism. They speak of their angst, pain, anger and frustration and of their hope once they attend their first Al-Anon meeting. Today these members – men, women and children – have courage and confidence. They have found understanding and have learned what to do to help themselves and possibly, indirectly, help their alcoholic relative, loved one or friend whether sober or not.



“Trying to cope with a problem drinker can be a painful and lonely experience. The concept of dependence is difficult to grasp; the return to the same drinking pattern over and over again despite countless promises not to, is baffling and disappointing. Anyone – partner, sibling, child or friend – of a person with alcohol dependence will know how this feels. Everyone looking for support can find it at an Al-Anon Family Group. It is easy to overlook the fallout from alcohol dependence when the drinker is in recovery; as those who provided the support and who bore the brunt of difficult days can be forgotten. Al-Anon ensures that this does not happen. It is an invaluable organization”.

Doctor William Shanahan MB FRC Psych DCH Medical Director of Addictions Unit London
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Anonymity

Anonymity is an important principle of the Al-Anon program. Our members' identities are protected and these articles have been published with each member's permission. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of all those who shared their stories.

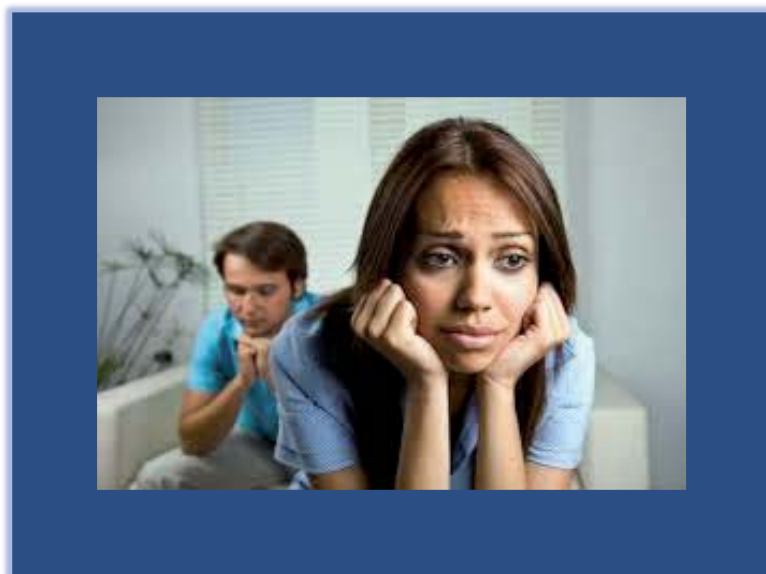
Al-Anon is a mutual support program for people who are living with or have lived with someone whose drinking created problems for themselves or others. Sometimes the problem drinker is a spouse or partner. Sometimes parents are concerned about a child's drinking. Sometimes the drinker is or was a parent, a grandparent, another relative or even a co-worker or friend.

Alateen, part of the Al-Anon Family Groups, is a fellowship of young people whose lives have been affected by alcoholism in a family member or close friend.

How serious does the drinker's problem have to be for Al-Anon to help? From the Al-Anon perspective, it doesn't matter whether the drinker is an alcoholic or not. Instead the more important question is:

Has your life been affected by someone else's drinking?

If the answer is yes, attending an Al-Anon Family Group could be helpful to you. Sometimes, a relationship with a problem drinker can have effects that last long after the drinking has stopped or the relationship has ended. Al-Anon and Alateen's primary purpose is to help people who have been affected by someone else's drinking, whether the drinking is still active or not.



A Family Disease:

Andrew Marks, Psychologist, BSc, BEd (counselling) MAPS

Ten years ago I referred a client to Al-Anon. She was struggling to cope with her husband's drinking and the significant impact it was having on the family. At that time I thought of Al-Anon as a self-help group for families and friends of alcoholics. It is that, but now ten years later I know it's also much more.

Al-Anon began in America over 60 years ago by the mostly wives of alcoholics who, having driven their husbands to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, usually in a member's house, sat in the kitchen waiting for the meeting to finish. Through talking to each other they discovered that they shared very similar thoughts and feelings. These had mostly been kept private and were difficult to admit to feelings such as shame, guilt, anger and fear. They also found that talking to each other helped them cope with their family circumstances. The coming together of family and friends of alcoholics to talk and share their experiences, thoughts and feelings, continues today in Al-Anon meetings.

Psychology and psychiatry know a lot more now about alcoholism and addiction than was known sixty years ago. It is generally agreed that addiction is a disease and that the impacts go well beyond the individual suffering the illness. These can include domestic and other violence, financial hardship for the family and legal issues, to name a few. Most damaging psychologically is the emotional abuse, manipulation and control that often occur as a consequence of a person's addiction to alcohol.

Al-Anon considers alcoholism to be a family disease. At first this may seem counter-intuitive as surely it's a disease experienced only by the person with the drinking problem. However, when one considers the emotional impact an alcoholic's behaviour can have on family members, especially in terms of fear, anger, despair, shame, guilt and grief, it becomes clearer that the whole family is suffering. What I now know about Al-Anon that I didn't know 10 years ago is that as well as being a support group, it also follows the 12 Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. This program encourages people to look at their own behaviour, thoughts and feelings, not only in relation to the alcoholic, but in all areas of their lives. Often this results in profound insights and cognitive restructuring that changes behaviour, especially towards the alcoholic. If one considers Systems Theory, that within a system, (say a family), if one element of the system changes, the whole system changes. Then it's reasonable to expect that as a consequence of the family member changing due to engaging in the 12 Step Al-Anon program, the alcoholic's behaviour may change. These

changes may not result in the alcoholic stopping drinking but it may result in less conflict and improved communication. Most importantly for the family, it can lessen the harmful impacts of the alcoholic's drinking on the rest of the family.

Al-Anon is not aligned with any political or religious organisation, neither is it a substitute for professional psychological treatment where that is indicated. It is however a very powerful adjunct to therapy but also stands alone as a powerful support for people suffering the harmful effects of a loved one's drinking. It is a safe place for people to meet others in similar situations where they can talk openly and anonymously in a non-judgemental environment.

If you have patients whom you think could benefit from this program, meeting times and locations can be found at <http://www.al-anon.org.au/meetings>

Wife of an Alcoholic

Many years ago when visiting a counsellor, I came across Al-Anon pamphlets offering hope and insight and so I attended my first meeting. Believing that I was managing my husband's drinking, I shared that my main issue was my husband's infidelity, and therefore, I might be in the wrong place. The firm but loving response was that I was most assuredly in the right place. Being listened to, valued and loved was significant. By attending meetings, I acquired knowledge, namely an understanding of alcoholism and consequently what was wrong with myself and my family.

Alcoholism is a disease, however, the effects are often more conspicuous in the drinker's family. An insidious disease, alcoholism is cunning, baffling and powerful, manifesting itself in innumerable ways and demanding our reaction.

At an Al-Anon meeting a woman shared that she felt unlovely and unloved. I certainly related, and slowly realised that my husband regularly belittled me, especially socially, where it was difficult to respond. After numerous visits to my doctor with assorted ailments, including tension and stress, my practitioner prescribed a tranquillizer. After the birth of our second child, I was diagnosed with cancer. Following surgery and treatment, I was told 'no more children', and to observe other limitations.

I became frustrated that our young son couldn't read, until a member shared that you cannot learn if you're angry or anxious. Our home was filled with tension. As the 'thermostat' in our home, it was suggested that, if I calmed down and changed my behaviour, the household would also calm down. I attempted to do that, and in due course the child who could not read, attained a Master's degree.

My sponsor shared that no matter how painful reality was, she preferred to live there, rather than in the fantasy world created by medication. I ceased taking the tranquillizer.

Value

Listen

Love

After losing our business, home and my inherited money, I decided that I could take care of myself better by myself. Advising our children that they were free to go wherever they chose, both said, "We'll stay with you, Mum." Life was challenging, but in Al-Anon I found a loving Higher Power as well as a second family. I was no longer alone and money could not have bought the wisdom I found there.

I also discovered that although I grew up in a loving family, it too, was affected by alcoholism. My father became irritable and unreasonable as he took on responsibilities not rightfully his. His brother drank himself to death, after which his son, aged 16, refused to return to school. He came to live in the country with our family, where there were already five children, the youngest of whom had special needs and our grandmother who was recovering from a stroke. Dad also dealt with two extended-family suicides.

Although we assist others, Al-Anon principles provide guidance and wisdom. Whose responsibility is it? Yours, God's or someone else's?

We cannot do for other people what they must learn to do for themselves.

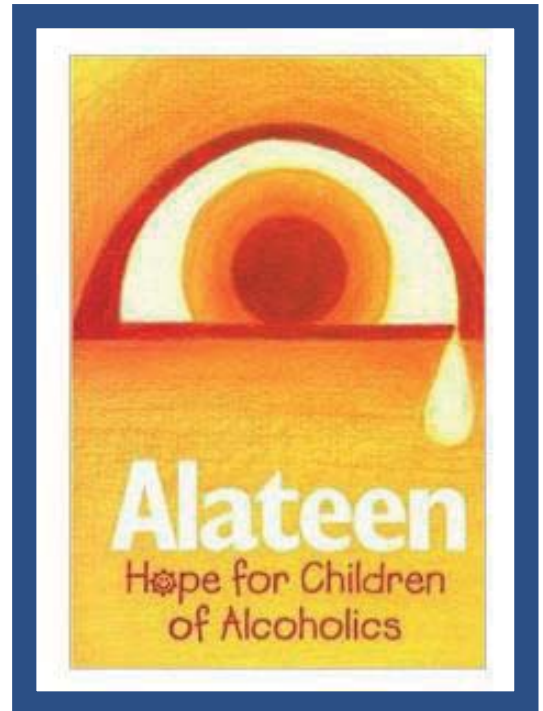
I'm an eternally grateful Al-Anon member.



A Lifetime Disease

Alateen Member, Queensland

I have been a grateful member of Alateen for seven years now. I was eight years old when I started going to meetings and before that, I didn't know what alcoholism was. In a home with an alcoholic father, who was an active drinker, there was a lot of pressure on my mum, myself and my three sisters. The violence at home was sometimes too much and the only thing my mum could do to protect us was to get us out of the house. Having friends come over was difficult, because I would try to hide what was going on so as to make sure my friends still wanted to be my friends.



One memory I have from many years ago was when my mum was away from the house for a few hours and my dad had a friend over. Before she left, Mum asked me to, "Make sure Daddy doesn't drink anything," while she was out. He drank, of course. When I asked him if he was drinking a beer, he told me to keep it a secret from Mummy and that it didn't matter. A child, younger than eight, being told by Mummy not to let Daddy drink, and being told by Daddy not to let Mummy find out. Situations like this caused a lot of stress and resulted in unnecessary worry and guilt for me to cope with as a child.

Trying to figure out why my Dad would do this to our family confused me – I wondered why he couldn't just stop drinking. Getting kisses goodnight that smelt like alcohol wasn't what I wanted, and I'm sure that's not what my dad wanted either – but that's how it was. He became so sick that he couldn't even control himself. In August 2008, I reluctantly attended my first Alateen meeting. After so many years of thinking my family was the only one that had a problem at home, and having kept it a secret – which was so hard – it came as a bit of a shock to me when I spoke to other kids and they had exactly the same problem as I did.

Being able to relate to what they said and learning how to deal with the alcoholic was surprising to me, but I soon came to rely on the meetings to keep me going. I learnt why my dad acted the way he did. I learnt to accept him as he was and not to get so angry and frustrated by his actions. Reading literature with the other kids in Alateen, sharing and playing games, was all part of my growing in the program. I am so grateful for that. I have grown up a bit now and can relate a bit more to what is being said. It still continues to help me. I learn more from every meeting and I can't wait to share with the other members. Some of the Alateen members I have met have become really close friends and I hope they will be my friends forever.

For our Alateen meetings to be able to continue and to spread hope for children of alcoholics, we need to get the message out. Encouraging your children, nieces, nephews or friends to come to Alateen is you playing a part in helping make the fellowship stronger. That can make the world of difference to kids out there who are just like me before Alateen.



Husband of an Alcoholic

Shared by a New Al-Anon Member

When my wife began drinking alcohol during the day, I spent a long time trying to stop her drinking and trying to find out why she needed to drink so much. It was destroying our lives and my days revolved around whether she was drinking or not. There was no peace and I never knew what was going to happen next. I became ashamed of what was happening in our house. I isolated myself from neighbours, family and then our friends, refusing invitations and making excuses.

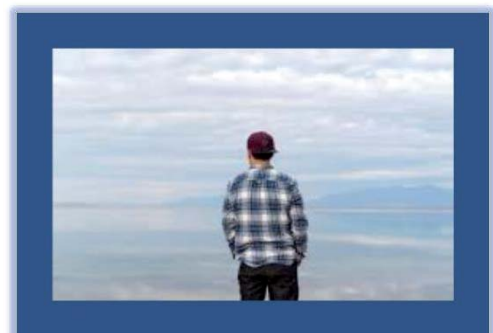
I could not accept that she was seriously affected by alcohol until a friend asked me one day if my wife had a 'drinking problem'. Then I was forced to face the reality: my wife had lost control of her drinking and now other people could see it. I had been in denial all this time. I felt angry, resentful and frustrated.

Finally, after years of futile activity, I realized that I could not handle this situation on my own - my life had become unmanageable. I needed help. I searched and found the Al-Anon Family Groups. I went to a local meeting with some apprehension: who would be there? Maybe someone would recognize me!

But my fears were relieved when it was explained that everyone in Al-Anon was in the same boat, so we all maintained our anonymity outside of meetings. Those people at the first meetings knew all about what I was going through. I learned new ways of coping from their shared experiences and with reading the wonderful Al-Anon literature. I found that there was hope, that I could have a life, and how I could best support the alcoholic.

Eleven years on and thanks to regular attendance at Al-Anon meetings and working with the literature, our lives are better than ever. My wife eventually found sobriety in AA and we found a new depth of understanding between us. Al-Anon kept me going until my wife found sobriety.

I wish I had sought the help of Al-Anon Family Groups much, much earlier.



Daughter of an Alcoholic

Shared by an Al-Anon Member, Victoria

I did not immediately appear an obvious candidate for Al-Anon Family Groups. As a 24-year old, I was running my own business, managing a successful relationship and helping my family overcome challenges. If you'd asked me, I would've said my life was great. I was perfectly in control of everything (even if nothing was going right).

Reality didn't hit until one day a friend who attended AA suggested that my mother might be an alcoholic. I had never thought twice about my mother's drinking before that day. I didn't realise it was uncommon for kids to come home from school to find their mum drinking a bottle of bubbly or to be constantly walking on eggshells in the hope of avoiding an outburst or to have endless circular arguments after dinner that wouldn't be remembered the following day. My teen years were a cycle of fear, confusion and emotional abuse, none of which I'd connected to my mother's drinking, until that day.

I was incredibly apprehensive about attending Al-Anon. I couldn't imagine how a room of strangers could possibly understand me and my journey or how being there would help me fix the aching unhappiness I felt every day. Although I would've 'said' my life was great, really I was depressed. I had left the 'successful' relationship because I hated the partner I'd become, I was drowning in unfiled papers at work and was routinely losing sleep over why my family was so dysfunctional and why I couldn't fix it. Walking into my first meeting was scary, but I was so desperate for something to change that I thought I might as well try this.

Even though no one in that first meeting looked like me, or shared my specific story, I absorbed things that were said. Broken silence on shared challenges faced by families of alcoholics. People listened, with quiet acknowledgement, to every person who needed to speak. Emotions, fears, achievements, and experiences were accepted without judgement or comment. For the first time in my life I was able to stop long enough to reflect on how I was feeling inside. And Al-Anon provided me with a framework to unpack it all.

Nearly a decade later, I am still attending meetings and working the Al-Anon program because there are many layers to the onion! Today, thanks to the work I've put in, I'm remarkably happier, more emotionally resilient and more balanced in my life. It's all because of the tools I learned through Al-Anon. I am so grateful to know today that I have choices and that there truly is hope for me to live a happy, sane, and productive life regardless of whether my mother ever decides to stop drinking.

Mother of an Alcoholic

I was in my Al-Anon home group meeting yesterday when I looked over at a newcomer and saw my previous pain on another woman's face. I remembered the overwhelming heartache, like nothing I had ever felt before, as I realized-my beautiful baby boy is an alcoholic.

Before Al-Anon, nothing else was as much a priority as keeping my son alive. In my mind, he could die at any time from this disease, and a good mom would do anything to help her child. I was embarrassed that people would think I had done something wrong in raising my son. I begged, cried, and obsessed about finding help for him and his drinking.

This included behaviors I had long ago abandoned, because as a child I was not allowed to express opinions and have feelings. I had also grown up in a home tainted by this disease. As an adult I knew that was the wrong way to raise a family. I thought I knew the exact answers on how to have a successful loving family. Much of my thinking was based on a television show that I had watched as a child to escape my reality.

My son's addiction challenged my whole identity. I remember begging my Higher Power for a book that would tell me exactly what to do. I would do it exactly that way, no matter how grueling and tiresome.

I was willing to lose my home to send him to rehabilitation. I neglected my husband and my other three children. My best friend at the time abruptly stopped talking to me. My husband wanted our son out of the home. Even my son wanted out of the home and went so far as to try to get social services to remove him.

The worst reality was that my son resented me. His resentment and dislike sent me back to the rooms of Al-Anon. I had been there years before because of the effects of my husband's alcoholism. It just never occurred to me to go because of my child.

I now have my own life, with no time to immerse myself in others' lives. I learned through working the Steps to recognize my feelings, without stifling them to the point they began to own me. I remember doing everything as fast as possible and feel as little as possible. I thought I had to work in servitude to others. In Al-Anon, I learned that if I was resentful in this made-up slavery, it wasn't a gift or service to others.

The hardest part was learning to be still with myself. At first, I would have to do needlework during meetings, just to sit that long. The greatest thing I learned was that I could not control all my defects of character, but my Higher Power could and would, if I asked. In my mind I would visualize that my Higher Power loved my son as much if not more than I did. Daily, I would imagine my Higher Power surrounded by children. I would swaddle my son with a blanket and hand him over to his Higher Power.

Today, the biggest reward is my relationships with others. If not for Al-Anon, I would have alienated everyone I knew. My oldest daughter and I are true friends. She has forgiven me for the neglect she had to endure and the responsibility she had to assume. My youngest two children are finding their own identities. My husband is allowed to have his own opinion and actions separate from mine. My son and I don't have long, heartfelt conversations, but he will spontaneously hug me, and I know I have overcome his resentment.

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The Drinking Behaviour

Sharon Anderson, Psychologist and Hypnotherapist

Often families exposed to the unpleasant and sometimes aggressive behaviour of loved ones, after they have been drinking heavily, find it difficult to decide if their loved one is in fact “an alcoholic.” This is often made difficult because, in many cases, the drinker is in denial. They can be very convincing and often have very good “reasons” to blame everyone or everything for their drinking behaviour.

The diagnosis is not important. The bottom line is that the drinking behaviour and subsequent difficulties are causing YOU to feel distressed and are affecting your life. A much respected colleague who taught me much about A.A. claimed that it is not how much or how often the person drinks, but rather, the effect that drinking has on his/her life, that is the indicator of alcoholism.

A useful assessment of alcoholism is the Four ‘L’s test. If alcohol has affected that person’s Livelihood (i.e. job), Love (i.e. relationships), Liver (i.e. health) or Legal status (e.g. driving disqualification or criminal behaviour) then it is a significant problem. Thus if someone drinks only occasionally but it has a severe detrimental effect, then that person can be considered to be an alcoholic.

The sad part is that it is not just the problem of the “Alcoholic.” It is a disease that affects every family member and every friendship/relationship. The wonderful thing about Al-Anon is that working the program enables family members and friends to find ways of disconnecting emotionally from the problem so as to enable the “Alcoholic” to find ways of managing their disease themselves, rather than trying to control it for them. This also enables family and friends to focus on their own lives and health and not to be damaged by the often destructive behaviour of the alcoholic. As a professional I find that the concepts in the Al-Anon program (and the AA program) often help my clients with problems.

People coping with the dilemmas and emotional distress in their lives find it helpful to live one day at a time and avoid taking action or making important decisions when hungry, angry, lonely or tired.

The Al-Anon Family Groups
offer help to families and friends
of an alcoholic.

Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination,
political entity, organisation or institution.

There are no dues for membership.

Al-Anon is self-supporting through
members' voluntary contributions.

Al-Anon has but one purpose:
to help families and friends of alcoholics.

We urge you to try the Al-Anon program
.....you will find help.



If you believe your
life has been affected
by someone else's drinking....

then Al-Anon Family Groups can help.

Contact Al-Anon Family Groups

1300 ALANON (1300 252 666)

there is hope



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