



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 endeavour; 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 afflicts a parent, another 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.



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 friend.

Alateen, part of the Al-Anon Family Groups, is a fellowship of young people whose lives have also 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 so, 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.





PEOPLE WHO SHARE A COMMON BOND

Professor Patrick McGorry AO MD PhD FRANZCP

"I have seen first-hand in my own family and friends the destruction and tragedy that alcohol abuse and dependence leaves in its wake and understand that this is an illness that affects not just the person with alcohol dependence but also those close to them. There is nothing more bewildering for the friend or family member of someone who is wrestling with this addiction than the unpredictability and consequent anxiety that goes along with the problem. The person affected needs some assurance that they are not to blame, that they are not in some way responsible, but that with persistence and support they can overcome the huge threat to their survival and well-being. Al-Anon provides sanctuary and respite for family and friends, and hope through a fellowship of people with a common experience. This coming together of people who share the common bond of understanding, of having lived, loved or cared for someone in the grip of alcoholism is a potent force and can dissolve negative emotions of shame, anger and hopelessness. Al-Anon asks nothing more of its members than to remember that its primary purpose is to help family and friends of people with alcoholism, deal with the assault of problem drinking and hope for a better future."



NAOMI'S PERSONAL STORY

At five years old and one of 8 children, trying to cope with the confusion and chaos in a home that was weighted down with poverty, sadness and fear, Alcoholism was only mentioned as a criticism to make Dad feel guilty and inferior. We knew nothing about the concept of this being an illness which he was unable to control like cancer, diabetes, or epilepsy. My father was unable to control his drinking after the first drink. This is the disease of Alcoholism.

At nine years old, I was already suffering from depression as I reflect today. There were now 12 children and my mother had become extreme with her emotions, either, very loving and caring with no discipline, or screaming with out of control emotions and physically hurting us. Confusion reigned in our home and every one of us was living in our own emotional isolation. The life skills of communication, love, discipline and compassion were learnt in a much distorted way. We were all suffering from Alcoholism the Family Disease.

I felt very frightened but quickly transferred this feeling to control and self-will. I felt trapped and powerless as a child and somehow just accepted that whatever happened I just had to bear it. This was a pattern of behavior I carried into my adult life along with many other distorted ideas.

Unfortunately, I continued with my self-destructive self-pitying pattern of behavior for many more years, choosing unhealthy relationships and cultivating an external personality that I thought everyone would like. I was like a chameleon with no identity of my own. Control and self-will was what I ran on, and it was what almost destroyed me. I left home at the age of 14 and started to carve a life of my own. I became a compulsive workaholic and high achiever believing that poverty was the major problem in my life. If I had enough money I would achieve a sense of belonging, have good friends and a perfect life. However there was a constant feeling of sadness within me. Whenever I made a wish it would always be that I wanted to feel happy.

I hit my rock bottom when I was confronted with the disease of addiction in my only child. After running away from my family I continued to run from people who had addiction problems, always after a very torrid time and great emotional upheaval. But I couldn't run from my son. I couldn't turn off the love I had for him.



NAOMI'S PERSONAL STORY (cont.)

By the grace of God I was brought to Al-Anon by a dear friend, and there I listened to my whole life being shared by different people: the childhood issues, the adolescent behavior, the destructive relationship pattern, the compulsive behaviors, the obsessive thinking and the low self-esteem. Here was where I dropped my guard and started to allow the frightened child within to heal. I felt hope, I felt incredible awareness coming to me and the jigsaw puzzle of confusion in my head was being put together. Al-Anon gave me the ability to take the action I needed to start to get well. The first for me was detachment from my son. I knew I was of no help as I was. Focusing on myself was essential. Al-Anon members encouraged me and accepted me as I was.

Today I accept I am responsible for my own happiness, health and self-confidence. I need to focus on my recovery each morning before I start my day, acknowledge I only need to deal with this day, eat three healthy meals each day, and forgive myself if I stuff up and know I can start the day again at any time. My life has completely changed. I have a great love of life, acceptance of the total sum of who I am and do not carry shame into the future with me today. I have gone back to study to build my self-confidence. I developed a friendship with my dad I never thought would be possible for someone who always said she would be dancing on his grave. My son is still in his disease. I have the ability to love him without judgement or criticism. Tough love is what I practise on a daily basis and when I feel the sadness of the reality of alcoholism, I have Al-Anon friends and the Al-Anon program to help me work through my emotions. The love of a Higher Power carries me on this journey of self-discovery and I know today I am worth it.

I am a very grateful member of Al-Anon and pray that I will always be able to carry the message of hope to the many that are yet to come.

“Al-Anon’s strength today is in the courage of each and every Al-Anon and Alateen member willing to face Alcoholism the Family Disease and build a better attitude about themselves and their alcoholic.”



A LIFE-TIME DISEASE

Alateen Member, South Queensland Area

I have been a grateful member of Alateen for 7 years now. I was 8 years old when I started going to meetings and before that, I didn't know what alcoholism was. Living in a home with an alcoholic father, who was an active drinker, 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 8, being told by Mummy not to let Daddy drink and being told by addy not to let Mummy find out, is a lot of stress and leaves unnecessary worry and guilt on that child.

Trying to figure out why my Dad would do this to our family would confuse 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.





A LIFE-TIME DISEASE (cont.)

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 and not 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. Alateen 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 will hopefully be so 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 to make this fellowship stronger and that can make the world of difference to children out there who were just like me before Alateen.



Husband of an Alcoholic

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 realised 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 recognise 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.





WIFE OF AN ALCOHOLIC

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE IT BETTER?

Of course I'm talking about my daily experience of living with or having lived with an Alcoholic.

One of the things I discovered in Al-Anon that I could change was keeping calm and speaking quietly without peevish overtones. For many years I had been distressed by the smell of my husband's socks when he took them off at night. I realized it had to do with the amount of alcohol he had consumed – the greater the consumption, the worse the smell. Well, one night I asked him if he would mind putting his socks in the laundry when he took them off? I told him I had trouble sleeping because of the smell and from then on he did take them out.

I became seriously depressed towards the end of my husband's drinking and found I couldn't let go of the bad news that comes to us so graphically every day from TV and newspapers. My mother would insist on reading out aloud the worst tragedies. Finally I had to tell her to stop doing that. I didn't want to upset her, but it was necessary for my health's sake. Then we were visited for a few weeks by an elderly cousin of hers who had the same habit – I had to ask him to stop it too! I also gave up reading newspapers for about 18 months.

My mother was a very negative person, and only saw the bad side of things. I couldn't make a difference to how she felt and how she expressed herself,

but I decided to make a kind of game out of it, and started counting the number of negative statements she made in a day. When I got up to 11 or 12 I would start laughing to myself, and that made me feel much better. I wasn't hurting her by pointing it out, so the game made it bearable.

Another thing I learned in Al-Anon was to serve the meals at a normal time, not as in the past waiting for the alcoholic to come home and share meals with us. Al-Anon is so practical! Members pointed out that a meal could be dished up and placed on a plate, then heated over a simmering saucepan...or even left for him to heat up himself. Then the children and I could have our meal together in peace and even with some fun.

I also learned that adult human beings can go alone to a cinema or a restaurant when the alcoholic doesn't want to share an outing. This felt a bit like disloyalty at first, but I soon got used to it, and it stood me in good stead when after many years I got a divorce. Then, after a reconciliation 10 years later, and also when my husband died, I found to be true to the motto an Al-Anon friend had given me, **"With God behind us and His arms beneath us, we can face whatever lies before us."**

Now I am facing some health issues – not too serious – but have had trouble accepting the inevitability of decline in my senior years. So it is time to use the wonderful Al-Anon Slogans such as "One Day at a Time" and "This too shall pass" with large doses of the Serenity Prayer. They all make me feel better.

"ONE DAY AT A TIME"

Family of an Alcoholic

I am the wife of an alcoholic. Alcoholism is a family disease. When a member of the family has a drinking problem the other family members suffer from the effects of the drinking.

My parents were daily drinkers and although I had every material possession, I was not emotionally supported. I believe this had a direct bearing on my choice of husband. When my husband came and told me he loved me, I felt he would make me happy. We married, worked, bought our first home and had our first child. I expected my husband to be supportive and responsible. Even though he was employed we were having financial problems. I then took over the budget, hoping to limit the amount spent on alcohol.

After two more children and the continued drinking put us in the situation of not having enough food, I often called upon family or welfare agencies to help feed us.

I knew alcohol was the problem and proceeded to nag, scold, scream, cry and plead for my husband to stop drinking. Every promise he made was broken. I lost weight and became physically ill with classic migraines.

My son grew nodules on his vocal cords. In times of stress he would clear his throat constantly, causing the nodules to expand and he would then lose his voice. My daughter began to wet the bed. These physical symptoms, which seem like a normal family life, were due to being affected by the drinking at home.



Family of an Alcoholic (cont.)

At this point I reached out for help and joined Al-Anon Family Group, which is a self-help recovery program for families and friends of Alcoholics, whether the alcoholic is drinking or not. I found and still find Al-Anon a tremendous help dealing with my situation. I also sought professional counselling when necessary.

Having three children in high school with a drunken father was too much to bear, so at this point in our lives we separated. At this time my husband went into a detox unit to dry out. I immediately used his absence to keep him out of the home, sought legal advice and asked my husband to find other accommodation, which he did for 9 months.

Today he is home sober and working his program with Alcoholics Anonymous. I continue to attend Al-Anon meetings on a regular basis as I feel this program helps me most in dealing with an alcoholic. Two of my children attend Alateen which is the junior part of Al-Anon.

My husband's drinking affected us physically, which was treated by the medical profession. Our mental state was treated by counselling, financial help was given by welfare agencies and emotional support was found through Al-Anon, Alateen and AA which have helped and continue to help us as a family.

To any professional who is contacted by someone for help, ask your client if there is a drinking problem within the family and if so please refer them to Al-Anon Family Groups to supplement your professional help. You may save a family with the help of Al-Anon.



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.

“Just for today” and “Don’t get hungry, don’t get thirsty and don’t get tired” often help people cope with many dilemmas and the emotional distress in their lives.



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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