

What is Al-Anon. Well Al-Anon is a twelve step program for friends and families of alcoholics. However the program works for anyone who has a friend or family member with any addiction. How does the program work? The program works through meetings, following the twelve steps and getting a sponsor.

In order for me to share how AL-Anon works I would like to share with you a little about myself.

When I first found Al-Anon I was a very broken shell of a person. Like so many who come to Al-Anon I had lost myself. Having grown up in an alcoholic home I had never truly developed as an individual. I am an ACOA, an Adult Child of Alcoholics. At this point it is important for you to know that my parents were not abusive people. They were highly functioning alcoholics. They both worked. My dad worked at the same place for over 35 years and my mom worked part time in the evenings at an upscale women's clothing store. All of my basic needs were met – I had food, shelter and clothing. From the outside looking in we looked like the average American family. But I lacked an intimate relationship with my parents. I did not trust them. I knew if I asked for something and they said not today but maybe tomorrow that the answer was really no. By tomorrow they wouldn't remember that I had asked or they still didn't have any interest in what I was asking for.

As a teenager I discovered that my mother was not a happy person when she drank. She would often get very sad and want to talk. She would always talk about how unhappy she was with her life. I came to believe I was somehow responsible for my mom's happiness. By the time I was about sixteen my younger sister was already on the way to becoming an alcoholic. At this time too my younger sister began getting into trouble at school and out of school. Within in the year she had become out of control and was placed in a foster home after spending a night in Juvenile detention. Her placement was not because of social services but because my parents and sister had tried the tough love program and her placement into foster care was my parent's decision.

This incident left me feeling that I had failed my younger sister. I felt it was my fault she had gotten out of control.

From an early age I knew that my family was different from many families. I was afraid to interact with kids whose families were different from mine. As a result my two best friends from my childhood are also ACOA's. Fast forward into my early twenties and I met my first partner, who was of course, an ACOA and an alcoholic. We, ACOA's tend to stick with what is not necessarily right but what is comfortable.

After ten years of drinking with my first partner I realized that we had an unhealthy relationship and I ended it. I moved up in the world and moved in with a recovering alcoholic. This relationship didn't work either but I stuck with it for ten years: Painting a picture of the perfect couple with a perfect little white ranch in a perfect little neighborhood. That's what we co-dependent people do. We stick around, are loyal to a fault and feel that if we work hard enough we can fix any problem, without actually addressing the root problem. This I later learned is called denial.

Throughout those twenty years my younger sister continued to drink and I was always there to clean up after her. I spent long hours on the phone with her when we weren't in the same state and long nights worrying about her and babysitting her, when she had drank too much, when we were in the same state. I cared for her the best I could because it was my fault she was an alcoholic. This I later learned is called enabling.

The year before I moved to Wichita I was stuck living in the same house as my former partner. We had just bought the house and within one month of moving in he told me he was leaving me. The housing market was stale and we decided for financial reasons to stick it out in the same house until the timing was right to put the house back on the market. During this time I was falling apart. I did get a counselor and I found a book called "Adult Children of Alcoholics". And on the back cover it listed some symptoms such as:

Do you guess at what normal is? Do you judge yourself without mercy? Do you feel different from other people? Do you take yourself very seriously? And do you overreact to changes which you have no control over? Are you super responsible?

All of these things described me and I realized I had a pretty big problem. Before the break up I had been working 40 to 50 hours a week, going to school in the evenings, keeping house – cleaning, getting groceries and preparing all the meals; basically playing superwoman. I had been an over achiever at work never saying no to a new project when I was already neck deep in other work. I was an all around over achiever and I did it all with a smile permanently fixed on my face while on the inside I felt miserable.

Being an over achiever and very self reliant I bought the book and figured I would read the book and be cured. Well after reading the book, much to my disappointment, I wasn't cured. I had even more questions than before. But one thing I learned – I wasn't alone. So I bought more books on the subject certain that I could cure myself if I read enough.

By this time I had arrived in Wichita and was just finishing one of my books that would cure me. I did realize after finishing the last book that I still wasn't cured. In fact I now felt worse than ever before. I was at my bottom. All of the books kept mentioning a program called Al-Anon. I was no longer strong enough to be stubborn. I figured I may as well try this program since AA seemed to be working for my little sister. If AA could keep my sister sober for five years maybe this other program had something to offer me.

So I went. And suddenly at my first meeting all those people my books talked about became real and I truly felt like I was not alone. I did nothing at my first month of meetings, three nights a week, except cry. And the people at the meetings did not judge me. They just handed me the box of Kleenex. There's a lot of Kleenex available at al-anon meetings. In AA they hand out coffee, at Al-anon they hand out Kleenex.

Something began to happen to me as I went to these meetings. I listened as each night they went around the room and each person shared experience, strength and hope. No one judged anyone. No one interrupted anyone as each person spoke. When there was laughter it was not cruel, it was in understanding. I found myself laughing too and eventually I began to share my experience. At this point I did not have any strength or hope. But I began to feel like I was part of something and I began to trust

people. I also bought every book they had to offer because I was sure they must have the right literature to cure me.

At this point I'd like to share a typical reading from one of our books. (Read page 95 in Hope for today.)

This reading introduces us to the steps in al-anon. I will not cover all twelve. I will discuss the first five.

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.

This is the key to the beginning. It doesn't matter if the alcoholic in your life is your parent, spouse or friend. You must admit that you are powerless over the disease of alcoholism or any addiction. We can't fix it and can't cure it. Only the addict can make the decision to get help. No one can do that for them.

Many of us had spent time hiding the alcoholics booze, cleaning up the legal and financial issues of car wrecks, DUI's and other domestic issues. We would call the boss and tell them the alcoholic was in bed with the flu when they were simply too hung over, or still too drunk to go to work. These are the unmanageable parts of our lives. We learn in al-anon that only the alcoholic is responsible for his or her actions. We learn to let go.

Step one was pretty easy for me. I had learned at an early age that I was powerless over alcohol. I knew there was nothing I could do to stop the drinking in my family. I had always thought it was my job to clean up after them. I was a classic enabler.

Step two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. This step may be hard for some UU's. But it is also a key step in the program. It is imperative that you believe in some sort of greater power. It could be the universe or universal energy or god or goddess. The rest of the steps won't work without step two.

Step two was also easy for me. I did believe in a power greater than myself but I had not established an intimate relationship with this power.

Step three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

The last part of this step is important. We use the term God for simplicity's sake. It is God as we understood him or her. This is why we also use the term higher power.

Step three is about developing an intimate relationship with that higher power. It is coming to understand that our higher power is here to care for us not just the rest of the world. It is also about turning over the care of our alcoholic to our higher power. We learn to let go and let God handle it.

Step four: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step four can be one of the hardest steps to work in a twelve step program. It can often take a year or more to get through a thorough a fourth step. Entire books have been written on how to do a step four.

Step four is about taking personal responsibility for our own actions. It is about looking at ourselves and learning how much time we wasted feeling angry and resentful. How much time do we spend wallowing in self pity and blaming others for our situations. How many times have we taken our anger and resentment out on a child or coworker or whoever happened to be in the way at the moment. In step four we figure out who we need to apologize to. Sometimes we even need to apologize to the alcoholic.

Step four took me almost a year. I was full of guilt and felt even guiltier than before. As I worked my step four I discovered that I owed myself multiple apologies. I rarely took my anger out on anyone. I was far too busy painting the perfect picture and showing anger had not been allowed in that perfect picture. I swallowed all of my emotions – never allowing myself to feel much of anything. Before Al-anon I had two emotions: Angry and not angry but I had never let them show – remember I had that permanent smile pasted on my face.

Step four is not just about all of the negative stuff in our lives. It is also about learning what character traits we have that are positive and how to build off of those traits.

Step four taught me how badly I had treated myself.

Step five: Admitted to god, to ourselves and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Having taken almost a year to do my fourth step it took me another couple of months to do step five with my sponsor. I still felt guilty because my list of wrongs seemed to focus on me. After going over my list of wrongs with my sponsor she assured me that it was alright. I still didn't believe her and she was not offended. I needed to hear that it was okay from my sponsor's sponsor who is also an ACOA. She too assured me it was alright and she told me it was very common for ACOA's to need to apologize to themselves and very few if any other people. ACOA's are so eager to please people that we rarely offend others.

Steps four and five are a very cleansing and freeing experience.

Steps six through twelve repeat and build off of the first five steps. These steps are the same in AA and Al-anon. It's pretty amazing how the same twelve steps can work so wonderfully well for two groups of people who appear to be at opposite ends of the spectrum.

And so this is how Al-Anon works, through meetings with other people in the same situation and using the twelve steps to put our lives back on track. Without AL-Anon I would not be standing in front of you today with this presentation or any other presentation. Nor would I have the courage to serve on any committee. Al-Anon has given me back my life and I am grateful for the program. Al-Anon also gave me back the ability to love and respect my parents.

I will be here after the service for any questions you may have and I have several books with me that you are welcome to take a look at. Thank you.