

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:  
ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

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The title of this article is simply one I use in the document filing system for my articles that I post. There are no implications contained herein that this article has received—or that the author has applied for—Al-Anon Conference Approval. I make no claim that the contents, opinions, or statements expressed herein are free of error. In fact, my opinions may be wrong. I welcome any corrections, deletions, or edits in terms of any empirical or factual inaccuracies.

As a preface to understanding Al-Anon, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with Twelve Step recovery programs, it may be useful to review how Al-Anon works. The “Suggested Al-Anon Preamble to the Twelve Steps” provides this brief description that is read at the opening of almost all meetings:

“The Al-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. We believe alcoholism is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery.

Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination, political entity, organization, or institution; does not engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any cause. There are no dues for membership. Al-Anon is self-supporting through its own voluntary contributions.

Al-Anon has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps, by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics, and by giving understanding and encouragement to the alcoholic.”

(Al-Anon Family Groups, 2022, p. 12)

The foundation of Twelve Step recovery is contained in Tradition 12: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.”<sup>1</sup> Yet many members do not fully understand exactly how anonymity provides the spiritual foundation. Al-Anon’s Conference Approved Literature often conflates the terms *anonymity* and *confidentiality*, which have slightly different meanings—although both are important principles of the program.

### **Anonymity**

As a spiritual principle, anonymity allows members to be on equal footing in meetings. As intimate strangers with a common purpose, <sup>2</sup> members bring into the meeting their experience, strength, and hope. They leave outside the door their other affiliations, religions, professions, politics, and other identities that may be divisive. There is no hierarchy, no ranking, and no use of titles – all of which can erode equality among members who are present because of a singularity of purpose.

Anonymity allows members to focus on the message rather than the messenger. It allows those present to focus on the words shared rather than the one sharing the words. Many long-time members in the fellowship are reluctant to openly state the number of years they have been in the program, lest in doing so they hold themselves out as being different than newcomers. In some groups, a Newcomers Statement is read at every meeting regardless of whether there are any newcomers, just as a reminder that everyone was once a newcomer. <sup>3</sup>

Anonymity is not the same as secrecy within the fellowship. In her memoir, *Lois Remembers*, the cofounder of Al-Anon provides this insight: “Let us not mistake anonymity for secrecy....The degree of anonymity we practice is a personal matter. Most of us, I believe, do not wish to be anonymous within our own Fellowships. Anonymity here hinders our availability to help our fellow members” (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1979, p. 194).

### **Confidentiality**

At almost any Al-Anon meeting, the Anonymity Table Card sits as a centerpiece with this reminder: “Whom you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let it stay here.”

Confidentiality refers to the ethical principle of keeping a confidence and not revealing anything that has been disclosed or shared by other person. Confidentiality provides a basis for trust, which allows members to be vulnerable in their sharing within meetings. One of the biggest threats to trust is gossip, which is considered one of the Three Obstacles to Success (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2022, p. 20). As emphasized in the Service Manual, “Careless repeating of matters heard at meetings can defeat the very purposes for which we are joined together” (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2022, p. 21).

The bookends of an Al-Anon meeting are reminders of the principle of confidentiality. The Suggested Al-Anon/Alateen Closing provides a reminder of the principle of confidentiality: “The things you heard were spoken in confidence and should be treated as confidential. Keep them within the walls of this room and the confines of your mind” (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2022, p. 18).

Whereas anonymity allows members to identify with rather than compare themselves to others, confidentiality provides a safe place for doing so.

## Notes

1. The fourth printing of the second edition (January 1, 1973, pp. 561–566) of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* had a new appendix that contained both the long and short forms of the Traditions. However, this printing mistakenly listed the short form version that had been published in the November 1949 *AA Grapevine* instead of the version of the Traditions published in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953. The error was not fully corrected until the sixth printing of the second edition of the Big Book in 1963. When compared to the version in the November 1949 *AA Grapevine*, there were two differences that appeared in the sixth printing of the second edition of the AA Big Book and these two changes have endured in subsequent editions of the Big Book:

- (1) AA's 1973 Tradition 6 (contained in the Big Book) ended in "primary purpose," whereas AA's 1949 Tradition 6 (contained in the *Grapevine*) ended with "primary spiritual aim."
- (2) AA's 1973 Tradition 12 (contained in the Big Book) ended with "principles before personalities," whereas AA's 1949 Tradition 12 (contained in the *Grapevine*) ended with "principles above personalities."

When Al-Anon adopted its own version of the Traditions, it had to have used the 1949 version from the *AA Grapevine*, which clearly used the terms "primary spiritual aim" in Tradition 6 and "principles above personalities" in Tradition 12.

2. The common sense of purpose is the presence of a problem of alcoholism in a relative or friend, as stated in Tradition 3:

"The relatives of alcoholics, when gathered together for mutual aid, may call themselves an Al-Anon Family Group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation. The only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or friend."

3. The Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual contains some anonymity guidelines when newcomers or visitors are present:

"Members use their full names within the fellowship when they wish. The degree of anonymity a member chooses (first name, pseudonym, or full name) is not subject to criticism. Each member has the right to decide.

"Regardless of our personal choice, we guard the anonymity of everyone else in the fellowship, Al-Anon/Alateen, and A.A. This means not revealing to anyone—even to relatives, friends, and other members—whom we see and what we hear at a meeting."

"Anonymity goes well beyond mere names. All of us need to feel secure in the knowledge that nothing seen or heard at a meeting will be revealed. We feel free to express ourselves among our fellow Al-Anons because we can be sure that what we say will be held in confidence."

(Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2022, p. 19).

### **Acknowledgements**

**Gary Neidhardt.** I would like to express my appreciation to author and historian Gary Neidhardt for providing information, inspiration, and insight into the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups. Gary is not only the author of several books that reflect meticulous research and eloquent command of the English language, he is one of the few excellent writers who can also write computer code.

**Deborah Midkiff.** I would like to express my appreciation to book editor, counselor, and spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD for providing text editing and proofreading of this manuscript. Because Deborah is an avid reader who has been assessed as having a 40,000 word vocabulary, she was also helpful in providing some margin notes with alternative word choices.

## References

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The Anonymity Table Card contains no copyright or publication date on it. It reminds members of confidentiality and the Al-Anon Twelfth Tradition. The card contains this statement: "Whom you see here, what you hear here, when you leave there, let it stay here."

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The *Grapevine* has been continuously published every month since the first issue appeared in June 1944. By charter, the *Grapevine* is entirely self-supporting through the sale of the magazine and related materials. It receives no group contributions sent to the General Service Office. The 1986 General Service Conference, through an Advisory Action, recognized the *AA Grapevine* as *The International Monthly Journal of Alcoholics Anonymous*. The *Grapevine* is produced by a professional staff of editors, writers, and artists, all members of AA, and the charter of the General Service Conference guarantees the editor the right to accept and reject material for publication.

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Published Oct. 30, 2024 | Updated Jan. 01, 2025

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**Content and references last reviewed 2025**

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2024). *How to understand Al-Anon: Anonymity and confidentiality*. <https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>