HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
DEFECTS OF CHARACTER AND SHORTCOMINGS

William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com

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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, 2026, p. 11)

Defects of character and shortcomings are terms that are used interchangeably in two consecutive steps of Al-Anon:

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

When Bill W. wrote the Twelve Steps, "defects of character" and "shortcomings" were synonymous (General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, 2012, p. 9). [1]

Character Strengths and Defects

For readers who do not think they have any character defects, consider getting into a relationship and then you'll find out. Character defects are actually character traits—or even survival skills—that are either no longer adaptive or that are used too often (frequency), too strongly (intensity), too long (duration), or in the wrong places (contexts). In this sense, character strengths and character defects are like the opposite sides of a coin. They can also be considered shortcomings that fall short or miss the mark. Defects of character can be character strengths gone awry, often based on survival skills that were once adaptive that now interfere with our relationships.

Principles of the Program

Bill P. once posed a riddle when he spoke at an Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) group's anniversary meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota: "If the principles of Twelve Step recovery are not the Twelve Steps, then what are the principles?" When Bill P. returned to the same meeting about a year later, he was asked by a member: "I've been looking all year, since your talk, in the literature for the principles and can't find them!" Bill's answer to these group members was the same one he gave to those he sponsored: "The principles of Twelve Step recovery are the opposite of our character defects." [2]

What Ever Happened to Sin?

Although we live in a culture that permits everything and forgives nothing, it seems no one likes to talk about sin. The Hebrew word for "sin" is *cheit* (חֵטְא), which refers to an archer or slinger "missing the mark." In Judaism, a section of the High Holiday liturgy is the *Al Cheit*, a confession of ways a congregant has "missed the mark" during the past year.[3]

Preferring the word "vice" rather than "sin," Thomas of Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) wrote, "A capital vice is that which has an exceedingly desirable end so that in his desire for it, a man goes on to the commission of many sins, all of which are said to originate in that vice as their chief source" (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 153, 4). The word *vice* is derived from the Latin *vitium*, meaning "defect or failing." These terms are similar to the "defects of character" used in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Seven Deadly Sins are discussed briefly on pages 48–49 of the chapter titled "Step Four" of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1953):

> "To avoid falling into confusion over the names these defects should be called, let's take a universally recognized list of major human failings--the Seven Deadly Sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. It is not by accident that pride heads the procession. For pride, leading to self-justification, and always spurred by conscious or [p. 49] unconscious fears, is the basic breeder of most human difficulties, the chief block to true progress. Pride lures us into making demands upon ourselves which cannot be met without perverting ourselves or misusing our God-given instincts."

Vices and Virtues

From a purely psychological perspective, it is not so much that we are punished *for* their sins as we are punished *by* our sins" (Doverspike, 2021, p. 2). In other words, it is the *consequences* of our actions that are the punishment. [4] In the words of the Sixth Century Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, [5] our actions eventually become our character. Our actions can also become our character defects.

According to the list of Thomas Aquinas, the seven capital vices (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth) are opposites of the seven heavenly virtues. The deadly sins are a form of idolatry-of-self, in which the subjective rules over the objective, all of which are based on the foundational sin of egocentrism. The deadly sins are also known as *cardinal sins*, derived from the Latin *cardinalis* ("chief," "essential," or "principal"), from *cardo* (genitive *cardinis*), meaning "that on which something turns or depends," and *cardin* ("hinge of a door, pivot, that on which something turns; thus principal, chief"). In other words, cardinal sins are the foundational sins on which all other sins hinge. They have also been called *capital* sins, derived from the Latin *caput* ("head"), because they all begin in the head. The capital or cardinal sins are essentially the opposite of their counterbalancing virtues, which include humility, generosity, patience, gratitude/kindness, chastity, moderation, and diligence. [6] From this perspective, one way of practicing the principles is to put these universal virtues into action.

Using Character Defects as Incentives

The only difference between a stumbling block and a stepping stone is how it is used. Similarly, character traits are neither good nor bad. It is how we use them that matters. Being alert and aware of our character defects can be adaptive if these early warning signs are reminders to consider opposite actions. For example, a flare of anger can be an early warning sign to practice patience. The sting of envy can be a signal to practice gratitude.

There are several ways that character defects can be used as incentives and reminders to engage in better actions at home, at work, and with others. The desire for control can be a signal to let go and practice humility. The intrigue and drama of gossip can be a cue to focus on ourselves rather than others. The need to state my education, occupation, or profession can be a reminder to avoid hierarchy and to practice anonymity. [7] After all, anonymity is a cornerstone of Twelve Step recovery: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities" (Al-Anon Tradition Twelve). What are the principles of recovery? They are the opposite of our character defects (Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005). [8]

Notes

1. When Bill W. wrote the 12 Steps, "defects of character" and "shortcomings" were synonymous (General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, 2012, p. 9).

What is the difference between "defects of character" in Step 6 and "shortcomings" in Step 7?" According to G.S.O.'s archives, Bill W. commented about his use of "Defects of Character" and "Shortcomings" interchangeably in the Steps in a personal letter he wrote dated March 7, 1963.

> *"Thanks for your inquiry, requesting to know the difference between 'defects of character' and 'shortcomings' – as those words appear in the Steps. Actually I don't remember any particular significance in these phrases. In my mind, the meaning is identical; I guess I just used two ways of expression, rather than to repeat myself. It's just as simple as that."*

In another letter, dated November 16, 1965, Bill replied to a similar inquiry. He wrote, in part:

> *"When these Steps were being done, I didn't want to repeat the phrase 'character defects' twice in succession. Therefore in Step Seven, I substituted 'shortcomings', thereby equating 'shortcomings' with 'defects.'*
>
> *When reading most people do equate that way and there seems to be no difficulty. I used them as though they both meant exactly the same thing – which they appear to many people.*
>
> *I guess it's a problem in semantics, all right. For example, it is possible to say that each time you fall short of an ideal, to that extent is your character defective. Looking at it in the other way, 'shortcomings' can be read as a mere failure to do what should have been done. So I guess you have to take your pick."*

2. In the Introduction section of *Drop the Rock* (Bill P. et al., 2005, p. xvii), he clarified his answer to the riddle:

> "In recovery, we try to take the opposite of our character defects and shortcomings and turn them into principles. For example, we work to change fear into faith, hate into love, egoism into humility, anxiety and worry into serenity, complacency into action, denial into acceptance, jealousy into trust, fantasy into reality, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, judgmentalism into tolerance, despair into hope, self-hate into self-respect, and loneliness into fellowship. Through this work, we learn to understand the principles of our program" (Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005, Introduction, p. xvii).

3. In the Tanakh (i.e., the Hebrew Bible), the Hebrew *cheit* (חֵטְא) is used in Judges 20:16. A Greek term for "sin" is *harmartanō* (ἁμαρτάνω), which is also an archery term meaning "missing the mark." In the King James Version of the Protestant Bible, this word is translated as sin (38 times), trespass (3 times), offend (1 times), and faults (1 time).

4. This behavioral and psychological truth is also cited as a theological truth by Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber (2016) in *Accidental Saints*:

> "But honestly, I'm much more tortured by my secrets, which eat away at me, than I am concerned about God being mad at me. I'm more haunted by how what I've said and the things I've done have caused harm to myself and others than I am worried that God will punish me for being bad. Because in the end, we aren't punished *for* our sins as much as we are punished *by* our sins." (Bolz-Weber, 2016, p. 120)

5. Laozi ("the Old Master"), also Romanized as Lao Tzu (b. 571 BCE), was a semi-legendary ancient Chinese philosopher and author of the foundational text of Taoism—the *Tao Te Ching*.

6. Summary of Vices and Virtues

Vices	**Virtues**
Pride	Humility
Greed	Generosity
Wrath	Patience
Envy	Gratitude / Kindness
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Moderation
Sloth	Diligence

7. Ama nesciri (Latin, "love to be unknown" or "do not seek fame") was the motto of Father Luke Marion Kot, (1911–2014), monk of the Cistercian (Trappist) Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. I was honored to be present for the celebration of his 100th birthday (2012). He died peacefully at age 102 in the monastery infirmary in the company of his brothers on Thursday evening, January 9, 2014. The burial service took place on Monday January 13, 2014 at 9:00 AM in the monastery church. Fr. Luke was the last surviving member of the 20 founding monks who came to Conyers, Georgia, in 1944 to build a Trappist monastery. He was blessed with the gift of 76 years in religious life, 66 years as a priest, when the Lord called him. Fr. Luke was the oldest monk of the worldwide Cistercian Order (OCSO).

8. Not to be confused with Bill Wilson (1895–1971), co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Pittman (1947–2007) was one of the foremost authors in Alcoholics Anonymous history and Twelve Step recovery. He was an historian and publisher of numerous books about the history of alcoholism and recovery through AA. He was known for his generous help to other scholars in the field of alcohol history. In 1993, he founded the Hazelden-Pittman Archives in Center City, Minnesota, a major repository of pamphlets, newspapers, tracts, and books on temperance history dating from the late 18th century. During his 10 years at Hazelden, he founded the Hazelden-Pittman Archives Press and was instrumental in the publication of many books about AA pioneers.

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Resources

"How's My Driving Test" is a 10-item non-standardized and non-validated quiz designed for discussion purposes only. It is not intended to be used to get a discount on automobile insurance, although it may increase one's self-awareness and even help to reduce road rage.

How's My Driving Test

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Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2022, March 25). *2022-2025 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* [P-24/27]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. Pages 20–21. https://al-anon.org/pdf/P2427_online.pdf

This 2022-2025 edition of the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (P-24/27) replaces any previous editions. Page 20 contains a section titled "The Three Obstacles to Success" and page 21 lists in the order in which they appear in the pamphlet. The three obstacles include Discussion of Religion, Gossip, and Dominance (which includes giving advice and cross-talk). With regard to avoiding discussions of religion, "Al-Anon is not allied with any sect or denomination. It is a spiritual program, based on no particular form of religion" (p. 21). With regard to gossip, "Careless repeating of matters heard at meetings can defeat the very purposes for which we are joined together" (p. 21). With regard to avoiding attempts to control or dominate others, "No member of Al-Anon should direct, assume authority, or give advice" (p. 21). This passage has helped many groups to resolve group problems. These three obstacles are also listed in a section by the same name in pamphlet titled *Alcoholism, The Family Disease* (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2005).

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2022, March 25). *2022-2025 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* [P-24/27]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

Page 12 contains the "Suggested Al-Anon Preamble to the Twelve Steps." Page 20 contains the "Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon," and page 21 lists them in the order in which they appear in the pamphlet. This text of the three obstacles is from the pamphlet, *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* (P-4), © Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., Virginia, 2005.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2026, January 22). *2026-2029 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* [P-24/27]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. https://al-anon.org/pdf/P2427.pdf

The 2026-2029 edition of the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (P-24/27) replaces any previous editions. Page 11 contains the "Suggested Al-Anon Preamble to the Twelve Steps." Page 20 contains "The Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon."

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1953/2010). *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. New York, NY: Author.

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Based on the principles behind Steps Six and Seven, *Drop the Rock* combines personal stories, practical advice, and powerful insights to help readers move forward in recovery.

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Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber is the founding pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado. She is also the author of the *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Patrix*.

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Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson is the rabbi of Beit Baruch and executive director of Chabad of Belgravia, London with his wife, Chana, and children. He was an editor at the Judaism Website—Chabad.org, and is also the author of the popular books *Seeds of Wisdom*, *People of the Word*, *A Time to Heal*, *Positivity Bias*, and *On Purpose*.

Rabbi Zalman Abraham is a member of the leadership team of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute (JLI), author of several JLI courses, and director of The Wellness Institute—a division of JLI dedicated to youth mental health. He previously served as a writer and editor at Kehot Publication Society and as Editor-in-Chief at AskMoses.com. He lives with his wife, Leah, and children in Brooklyn, New York.

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