

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
DETACHMENT AND LETTING GO**
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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, 2022, p. 12)

One of Al-Anon’s most frequently used and least expensive items is the very popular “Detachment” handout, which is also known as the “Detachment Brochure” although it is not a brochure. The original two-sided paper version of “Detachment” is designated as S-19 and it has the numerals 14-25 on the lower left corner of the back side. It has no copyright or publication date listed. It contains the name and contact information for Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc.

Family members of alcoholics usually do not arrive at Al-Anon by flying in on the wings of victory. More often, they come in feeling angry, defeated, depressed, frustrated, lonely, or a combination of all of these mixed emotions. Sometimes, they come in search of secret knowledge or strategies to get the alcoholic to stop drinking—although that is not what they find. If they stick around, and especially if they begin to work the steps of the program with a sponsor, newcomers often learn that they must focus on themselves rather than the alcoholic.

Arguing, blaming, complaining, nagging, and needling are forms of attempting to control another person's behavior. Nagging a person has the effect of exacerbating rather than diminishing the problematic behavior. Thus, nagging a family member is likely to increase rather than decrease a target behavior such as drinking (Doverspike, 2025a, p. 3). The seemingly paradoxical effect of attempting to control someone is termed *reactance* (Doverspike, 2025b, p. 2), which is beyond the scope of the present article. For purposes of the present discussion, it may be more useful to refer to some underlying components of detachment.

Principle of Least Interest

The *principle of least interest* refers to the idea that the person or group that has the least amount of interest in continuing a relationship has the most power over it (Waller, 1938, 1951). The term was introduced in 1938 by the sociologist Willard Walter Waller, Ph.D. (1899–1945) in his book

The Family: A Dynamic Interpretation. Throughout his research, Waller found that power in a dating couple is almost never equally distributed between the two participants (Eslinger, Clarke, & Dynes, 1972; Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2010).

For a variety of reasons, one person will have more power in the relationship and will use this power to his or her advantage. If the relationship becomes too uneven in power, the person who receives less has less incentive to continue the relationship may eventually threaten to end the relationship unless the other person conforms to their demands. In a sense, it is how one person holds the other person hostage. This dynamic is often seen in alcoholism, in which the alcoholic seems to have more power in the relationship because he or she has less interest in the relationship.

One corollary to the principle of least interest is that the more invested we are in an outcome, the less invested the other person will be. Conversely, the less invested we are, the more invested the other party will be. Addiction counselors know that it is the client who should be the one arguing for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Finding healthy ways to emotionally detach can be adaptive.

Loving Detachment

One approach to addressing problems created by too much attachment is to become less interested than the other person. This state of being is called *detachment*, specifically, *loving detachment*.

Loving detachment involves detaching from the behaviors associated with the disease of alcoholism (e.g., anger, denial, lying, manipulation), not from the person who is loved. In other words, “Detach from the problem, but not from the person” (Al-Anon, 1968, p. 308). One can still care deeply about others while protecting oneself from the harmful actions of others. Practicing loving detachment refers to navigating by spiritual principles and by placing these principles above personalities.¹ DETACH is a reminder: “Don’t Even Think About Changing Him/Her.” The adaptive option is to detach from the behaviors—not from the person. The maladaptive choice of “detaching with an axe” can create alienation or estrangement. The problematic action of “detaching with an axe” involves emotionally reacting, which is a form of enabling the problem behavior, in contrast to pausing before responding.² Taking a PAUSE is a reminder to Postpone Action Until Serenity Emerges.

One way to pause before responding is to use mental counting: “If you don’t know what to say, count to 100. If you do know what to say, count to 1000” (C. Walker, personal communication, October 26, 1996). It can be useful to recall the acronym THINK before responding: “Is what I am about to say Thoughtful, Honest, Intelligent, Necessary, and Kind?” If it does not meet all criteria, then it does not have to be said. It is also useful to consider these three points before speaking: (1) Does it need to be said? (2) Does it need to be said by me? (3) Does it need to be said by me now?³

It may help to operationalize the concept of detachment. Here are 10 ways to detach and not lose your mind:

1. Help only when asked to help.
2. Don’t give advice unless asked.
3. Stop focusing on their behavior.
4. Leave the room if I can’t be quiet.
5. Let them experience their own choices.
6. Compliment what they are doing well.
7. Remove the kids before it becomes unsafe.
8. Don’t nag them about their responsibilities.
9. Let myself off the hook; it’s not my problem.
10. Focus on myself—not what they should be doing.

The advice columnist Ann Landers (1918–2002) once remarked, “Some people believe holding on and hanging in there are signs of great strength. However, there are times when it takes much more strength to know when to let go and then do it.”⁴ A tug-of-war takes at least two people. Letting go of the rope can end the tug.

In 1994, a colleague and friend handed me a photocopy of a typed poem whose origin and author were unknown. It was titled “To Let Go Takes Love” and listed as “Anonymous.”⁵

**To “Let Go” Takes Love
by Anonymous**

To “let go” does not mean to stop caring;
it means I can’t do it for someone else.

To “let go” is not to cut myself off;
it is the realization I can’t control another.

To “let go” is not to enable,
but to allow someone to learn from natural consequences.

To “let go” is to admit my powerlessness,
which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To “let go” is not to try to change or blame another;
it is to make the most of myself.

To “let go” is not to judge,
but to allow another to be a human being.

To “let go” is not to be in the middle of arranging the outcome,
but to allow others to affect their own desires.

To “let go” is not to be protective;
it is to permit another to face reality.

To “let go” is not to deny, but to accept.

To “let go” is not to nag or argue,
but to search out my own shortcomings and to correct them.

To “let go” is not to adjust everything to my desires,
but to take each day as it comes and to cherish myself in it.

To “let go” is not to criticize or regulate anyone,
but to try to become what I dream I can be.

To “let go” is not to regret the past,
but to grow in the present and live for the future.

To “let go” is not to fix someone,
but to be supportive of someone.

To “let go” is not to care for someone,
but to care about someone.

To “let go” is to fear less and to love more.

Notes

1. With regard to placing principles above personalities, “Practicing the principles is easy to say, but difficult to do. Dealing with difficult people is often a matter of attitude, expectations, perspective, and putting principles above personalities. The practice of putting principles above personalities usually means *responding* effectively rather than *reacting* emotionally” (Doverspike, 2023, p. 3). Remember the adage: “Respond rather than react.”

2. In the case of “axe” versus “ax,” “axe” is the preferred British spelling, whereas “ax” is technically the preferred American spelling. However, “axe” is still widely used in the U.S. and is still a correct way to spell the word.

3. For many people, *detaching from* people, places, and things is more difficult than *attaching to* something else. *Letting go* of a person, place, or thing can be more challenging than *holding on*. Attaching to something else can involve an activity as simple as focusing on a door knob, politely leaving the room, or taking a healthy break. Attaching to a healthy activity can also involve reciting a prayer silently, writing a letter of gratitude, journaling for a few minutes, reading some literature, calling one’s sponsor, attending a meeting, taking a walk, or all of these activities. By learning to attach and hold on to some of these healthy actions, activities, and interests, we learn how to let go.

To let go does not mean to stop caring about someone, but to admit we can’t do for someone else what they must do for themselves.

The slogan “Let go and let God” is an adage that encourages us to release our worries and anxieties to God, trusting in His power and guidance. It involves letting go of the illusion of control, accepting that there are things outside of our control, and surrendering those situations to God’s will. It involves letting go of our will and striving for God’s will.

4. Esther Pauline “Eppie” Lederer (1918–2002), was much better known by the pen name Ann Landers. She was an American advice columnist and eventually a nationwide media celebrity. She began writing the “Ask Ann Landers” column in 1955 and continued it for 47 years, by which time its readership was 90 million people. Her twin sister, Pauline Esther Phillips (née Friedman), was better known as Abigail Van Buren (1918–2013), who was an American advice columnist and radio show host who began the well-known Dear Abby newspaper column in 1956.

As it relates to attachment, Ann and Abby began life as almost inseparable twin sisters, raising families a mile away from each other in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. They grew up doing everything together, although they eventually became bitter professional rivals.

At its peak, the column “Ask Ann Landers” was reported to have 90 million readers in 1,200 newspapers. The column “Dear Abby” was reported to have 110 million readers in 1,400 newspapers. As of 2025, the “Dear Abby” column is still syndicated and published in some newspapers.

5. The poem “To Let Go Takes Love” is variously listed as “Anonymous” or “Author Unknown.” At least one writer (Barrington H. Brennen) attributes it to Robert Paul Gilles, Jr., as it appeared in his book *Thoughts of the Dream Poet* (Vol. 1) (Copyright 1997). However, it is unclear whether the poem itself or the book was copyrighted in 1997.

In a newsletter article dated November 7, 2002, counseling psychologist and marriage and family therapist Barrington H. Brennen, MA, NCP cites the poem as do most others (i.e., “author unknown”). In an updated and online version of the poem, Brennen (2012) attributes the poem to Robert Paul Gilles.

Counselor and book editor Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD recalls that she received a printed copy of the poem (“To Let Go Takes Love”) in a packet of materials for a graduate course in professional counseling. She said she received a hard copy of the poem “no later than 1994 and probably in 1993” (D. Midkiff, personal communication, September 22, 2025).

In any event, I [WFD] first saw and received a copy of the poem (“To “Let Go” Takes Love) in a print version on an 8.5 x 11-inch paper in 1994 and it was widely distributed by the next year (1995).

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