

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
HOW IS MY DRIVING?
William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com**

This article is one in a series about how Al-Anon works. Its purpose is to provide personal observations and a review of the literature that has been created and published by other authors. This article is educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research in mutual-help groups.

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, 2026, p. 11) ¹

The observations on which my opinions are based date back to June 6, 1985. When observing myself and when listening to others share their experiences, I have concluded that one of the best ways to measure one’s recovery is by simply watching one’s driving.

I recall two friends who were searching for a parking space at an Al-Anon conference in a large city. The driver said “God, if you find me a parking spot, I’ll finally start working the steps with a sponsor.” Unable to find a spot, the driver continued to circle the block. Again he prayed, “God, if you find me a parking spot, I’ll stop blaming and judging others, and I’ll start doing a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself.” Suddenly, a parking space appeared!

“Never mind, God; I found one.” ²

Carry the Message

My friend's experience gave new meaning to Al-Anon's Twelfth Step: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs—*except when we are driving*." ³

Practice The Principles

What does it mean to practice these principles in all our affairs—including when we are driving? To understand the last part of Step 12, it is important to answer a more basic question: Specifically, what are the principles of the program?

For me, the spiritual principles are the opposite of my character defects that were identified in the "searching and fearless moral inventory" of Step Four. Character defects can also be called *character defaults*—because they are always easily within reach.

Rather than practicing my character defects, I use them as early warning signs or signals to do the next right thing—by using opposite action.

I am not responsible for my first thought, but I am responsible for my first action. I call it navigating by spiritual principles.

I saw a bumper sticker that stated, "God is my co-pilot." For me, God is my navigator—and He doesn't teach me to navigate on calm waters or on empty roads. For atheists, simply use **Good Orderly Direction**.

Use Opposite Action

When driving—or when riding as a passenger—I can use opposite action by practicing actions **opposite** to my character defects. ⁴

When I have to be somewhere, I can maintain realistic **expectations** by reminding myself, "I can't get anywhere in 30 minutes."

When I feel greedy and selfish, I can practice **generosity**, by letting others shift into my lane in front of me, which also allows me to change what I can change.

When I feel like hurrying and notice a sense of urgency, I can practice **patience** and remind myself, "I'm not late until I get there."

When feeling **irritable, restless, and discontent** while waiting at a traffic light, I can silently recite the **11th Step Prayer**, asking only for knowledge of God's will and the power to carry it out that day.

When stuck in traffic, I can glance at the *Just for Today* bookmark that I keep on my dashboard.

"I can do something for 12 hours that would appall me if I felt that I had to keep it up for a lifetime" (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1972).

I can also say it this way: "I can do something for **1 hour** that would appall me if I felt that I had to keep it up for 12 hours."

Remember the Slogans

Let go, and Let God. When I'm a passenger and the driver makes a wrong turn or takes the long route, I can remind myself to just let go.

Easy Does It. When backing out of my parking place early in the morning, I can take it easy because going slow can save more time than rushing.

First Things First. When driving in the winter ice and snow, I can go slow, turn off the radio, place both hands on the wheel, and focus on the car in front.

This too Shall Pass. When a tractor trailer truck is tailgating me on the interstate, I can move over one lane and let it pass.

Bless Them, Change Me. When I notice drivers in other lanes or pedestrians alongside the road, I can pray for them.

Live and Let Live. When someone cuts into my lane quickly, I can let them in and remind myself to live and let live.

Pause and Pray. When the trip seems long, I can consider taking "spiritual time outs" that help make the drive more about the journey than the destination.

Thank You. When I arrive at my destination early, I can practice **gratitude** and take out one of my cards and write a note of thanks to someone.

Notes

1. Although the widely-accepted term *alcoholism* is found throughout AA and Al-Anon literature, it is actually a poor choice of terms for a medical disease. Alcoholism is not a philosophy or religion, like Buddhism, Catholicism, or Confucianism. A better term for a medical condition would have been *alcoholitis*—using the taxonomic style of other medical disorders such as *arthritis* (inflammation of a joint), *gastritis* (inflammation of the stomach lining), or *pancreatitis* (inflammation of the pancreas).

2. This joke has been in the public domain so long that I have no idea where it may have originated. From a theological perspective, I like the truth of it so much that I've used it in my classes, stand-up routines, and one of my articles (see Doverspike, 2025, p. 3). The underlying egocentric theme of the story is that people often pray to God for people, places, and things so that we will no longer need God.

3. Al-Anon's Twelve Steps have been taken almost word for word from the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). In AA, Step Twelve reads as follows: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs" (Alcoholics World Services, 1981 p. 106).

Al-Anon's Step Twelve reads as follows: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs" (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1985, p. 75).

In one sense, the mandate of Al-Anon's Twelfth Step is broader and more inclusive than the original AA version. Whereas Twelfth Step Work for AA members involves carrying the message to other *alcoholics*, Twelfth Step Work for Al-Anon members involves carrying the message to *others*.

In the second printing (1941) of the first edition (April 10, 1939) of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, the word *experience* was changed to *awakening*. The underlying idea is that it is though the *experience* that we understand. From a theological perspective, as one old-timer expressed, "I don't have to understand God in order to experience God."

Although Alcoholics Anonymous uses the endearing term *oldtimer* to refer to a member with long term sobriety, Al-Anon eventually began using the politically correct term *longtimer*. The problem I have with the Al-Anon term *longtimers* is that people can sit in meetings for years, but doing so won't automatically give them serenity. In contrast, Al-Anon *oldtimers* are those who have grown old while learning to live happy, joyous, and free. By whatever name called, newcomers and oldtimers both have unique values as reflected in the following adage:

“Newcomers tell me where I’ve been.
Oldtimers tell me where I am going.
And a sponsor tells me where I am.”
Anonymous

The word “qualifier” does not appear in Al-Anon’s Service Manual nor in any of Al-Anon’s Conference Approved Literature. Personally, I do not like the term because it seems depersonalized and demeaning. I prefer these terms: friend, family member, or loved one.

4. The concept of opposite action has a long history in the fields of philosophy and psychology (Doverspike, 2023, p. 2). For those in AA and Al-Anon, the specific idea of the principles of the program being the opposite of one’s character defects was voiced by Bill P.—not to be confused with Bill W., who was the co-founder of AA. Bill P. once left members of a meeting with a riddle: “If the principles of Twelve Step recovery are not the Twelve Steps, then what are the principles?” When he returned the next year and was asked about his riddle, his answer was: “The principles of Twelve Step recovery are the opposite of our character defects” (Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S., 2005, Introduction, p. xvii). Bill P. quotes himself as follows:

“In recovery, we take the opposite of our character defects and shortcomings and turn them into spiritual principles and virtues. We do the work—with a spiritual director, sponsor, or mentor—to change denial into honesty, despair into hope, fear into faith, arrogance into humility, anxiety into serenity, obsession into detachment, selfishness into service, resentment into forgiveness, criticism into acceptance, and loneliness into fellowship.”
(Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S., 2005, p. xvii)

Acknowledgements

Dedication

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. He 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 she 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.

This article is dedicated to the anonymous sponsor mentioned on page 5 of this article. He is an authentic sponsor who not only knows how to drive with serenity, but he also knows how to navigate by spiritual principles whether he is on the ocean, in the office, or at home. He is also a living example of the Al-Anon definition of sponsorship: "Sponsorship is a confidential relationship between two Al-Anon members who benefit from sharing experience, strength, and hope" (Al-Anon, 2001, M-78).

References

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. (1972). *Just for today* [Bookmark, M-12]. New York, NY: Author.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1985). *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. Madison Square Station, New York, NY: Author.

The 1985 edition does not have a B code or number on the binder or dust jacket. The original edition was published as a brochure (P-17) on March 30, 1981.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2001). *Sponsorship – working together to recover* [Bookmark] (07-01) (M-78). Virginia Beach, VA: Al-Anon World Service Office.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2006). *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* [B-8, Revised]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

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.”

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.”

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Author.

On April 10, 1939, 4,730 copies of the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* were published by Works Publishing Company at \$3.50 per copy. The printer, Edward Blackwell of the Cornwall Press, was told to use the thickest paper in his shop. The large, bulky volume became known as the “Big Book” and the name has stuck ever since. On page 170 of *AA Comes of Age* Bill W. wrote that the idea behind the thick, large paper was to convince the alcoholic he was getting his money’s worth. The second edition was published in 1955, third edition in 1976, and the fourth edition in 2001.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1981). *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. New York, NY: Author.

The version used for quoting the Twelfth Step is the twenty-first printing, May 1981. Copyright © 1952, 1953 by The AA Grapevine, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing (now known as Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.). The first printing of AA’s *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (often called the “12&12”) was in April 1953. There is a general consensus among scholars and historians that Bill W. wrote the essays throughout 1952, and the book was officially released to coincide with the AA General Service Conference in April 1953. To reach people outside the fellowship, AA actually did a dual release by publishing a standard edition for AA members through its own publishing entity and partnering with Harper & Brothers to distribute to bookstores and the general public.

Bill P., Todd W., & Sara S. (2005). *Drop the rock: Removing character defects* (2nd ed.). Center City, MN: Hazelden.

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. The original book was published in 1993 by Glen Abbey Books in Seattle, Washington.

Doverspike, W. F. (2023). *How to navigate by spiritual principles.*

https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_navigate_by_spiritual_principles.pdf

Doverspike, W. F. (2025, September 10). *How to understand Al-Anon: The sense of humor.*

https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_al-anon_-_the_sense_of_humor.pdf

How Is My Driving?

This quiz is designed to be educational in nature. It is not intended to provide professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If consultation is required, it is recommended that the reader get a sponsor and discuss the Twelfth Tradition: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs – including our driving" (Tradition 12, modified version)

1. I am driving down a two-lane road when an oncoming vehicle begins making a left turn in front of me.
 - a. I speed up just enough to get the other car to make the turn faster.
 - b. I slow down just enough to allow the other driver more time.
2. I am minding my own business when someone cuts me off in traffic.
 - a. I ask myself, "How could someone be such a jerk to others?"
 - b. I ask myself, "How many times I may have done the same thing to others?"
3. I am driving the speed limit when someone zooms past me at a high rate of speed.
 - a. I think to myself, "That jerk is going to cause an accident."
 - b. I think to myself, "I am so glad most folks don't drive that way."
4. As I am driving through a single lane in a parking lot, I notice someone backing out of a spot.
 - a. I tap lightly on my horn to let the person know that I have the right of way.
 - b. I slow down and don't take the chance that I may not be seen by the driver.
5. On a six-lane divided highway, I am in the middle lane and someone is tail gating me.
 - a. I tap my brakes to let the driver know that they are tailgating me.
 - b. I take my time and shift to the right lane to let the driver pass.
6. With two cars in front of me after the traffic signal turns green, the first car does not move.
 - a. I lightly tap my horn to let the first driver know that the signal has changed.
 - b. I wait *patiently* until both cars begin to proceed forward.
7. I approach a 4-way stop at exactly the same moment a car to the right of me stops at the sign.
 - a. I stop and then proceed through the intersection so I don't keep the other driver waiting.
 - b. I take my time and wait for the other driver to proceed forward if there are no other cars.
8. I notice construction workers changing a tire on the right shoulder of a low-traffic 2-lane road.
 - a. I blow my horn so that they will know I am passing by.
 - b. I slow down a bit and move to the left side of my lane if possible.
9. As soon as I leave home, I notice that I am running late for work.
 - a. I notice how heavy the traffic is today compared to usual.
 - b. I remind myself to leave earlier and allow more time tomorrow.
10. I am running about five minutes late for a meeting.
 - a. I speed up so that I can make up for lost time.
 - b. I remind myself that I am not late until I actually get there.

Scoring: Total the number of questions that have been answered with the choice of **b**. The higher the score, the more likely one is driving with patience and serenity rather than with a sense of urgency and irritability.

~ Bill D. (02-10-2024)

This quiz is also linked to the article [How to Navigate by Spiritual Principles](#) (Doverspike, 2023).

Resources

“How Is 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 Is My Driving Test](#)

This document “How’s My Driving Test” is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: Forms - How Is My Driving Test.doc

Server path:

https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/forms_-_how_is_my_driving_test.pdf

Server file name:

forms_-_how_is_my_driving_test.pdf

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Navigate by Spiritual Principles
[Link is embedded on Page 8].

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2026, May 10). *How to understand Al-Anon: How is my driving?*

<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Al-Anon: How Is My Driving?," May 10, 2026.

<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Al-Anon: How Is My Driving?," 10 May 2026.

<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, some instructors still ask for it, so check with your instructor to determine his or her preference.

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Understand Al-Anon – How Is My Driving.doc

Server path:

https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_al-anon_-_how_is_my_driving.pdf

Server file name:

[how_to_understand_al-anon_-_how_is_my_driving.pdf](#)

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Understand Al-Anon: Driving

Workshop Presentation Deck:

N/A

Webinar Presentation Deck:

N/A

Workshop Handouts:

N/A

Published May 10, 2026 | Updated May 11, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

Content and references last updated 2026.

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2026). *How to understand Al-Anon: How is my driving?*

<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>