

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
HOW TO FORGIVE**
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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 original title of this article (“How to Forgive”) was changed after the content was updated to include Al-Anon. As it stands, the main title 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)

The observations on which my opinions are based date back to my original 1998 article *How to Forgive*. One of the interesting aspects of Al-Anon, as well as its origin in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), is that none of the 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, or 12 Concepts explicitly addresses the topic of forgiveness. Yet anyone who honestly and willingly works the 12 Steps with a Sponsor discovers that they have become able to forgive others, forgive themselves, and to accept forgiveness from God and from others.

An Evidence-Based Psychological Approach to Forgiveness

What does it mean to forgive? From an etymological perspective, the concept of forgiveness is derived from the Greek word ἀφίημι (aphesis), which has been variously interpreted as meaning “to release,” “to set free,” or “to let go.” Yet how do we let go when we feel like holding on to a resentment and never forgiving someone who has hurt us?

Understanding forgiveness involves understanding *resentment*, which is a type of internal revenge. Resentment is one of the strongest forms of attachment. Holding on to a grudge or resentment is like taking a poison and hoping it will hurt the other person. In the words of Anne Lamott, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die” (2000, p. 134). Yet through our resentments, we cannot punish another person without punishing ourselves even more.

What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness can be defined as the process by which we are released from negative emotions such as anger and resentment. The key to understanding how we are released is contained in understanding how we hold on to negative emotions in the first place. We usually hold on to resentment because of the *interest*—the payoff. As long as there is a payoff for holding on to resentment, forgiveness is impossible. The investment in resentment ties us to the problem—and binds us to the person—through anger.

Yet holding on to resentment is like holding on to currency of a country that doesn’t exist anymore. When we lose interest in the investment, we can learn to let go of the anger. When we are able to let go of our anger, we have taken a step toward forgiveness. In other words, forgiveness involves letting go of anger.

The benefits of practicing forgiveness have been studied from a psychological perspective (Smedes, 1984; Enright et al., 1991; Freedman & Enright, 1996). In *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes describes the psychological process of forgiveness:

“Ordinary people forgive best if they go at it in bits and pieces and for specific acts. They bog down if they try to forgive people in a grand manner, because wholesale forgiving is almost always fake. Forgiving anything at all is a minor miracle; forgiving carte blanche is silly. Nobody can do it except God.”
(Smedes, 1984, p. 147)

What Forgiveness is Not

When we say we have forgiven someone, but we still harbor resentment or maintain an attitude of indifference, then we have achieved only “pseudo forgiveness” (Enright, 2001). In contrast, authentic forgiveness involves a complete transformation in attitude toward the offender. It requires a willingness to experience and acknowledge to oneself the hurt, and it involves the development of a more complex view of the offender who inflicted the hurt (Worthington, 2001, 2006).

Forgiveness has little or nothing to do with telling another person, “I forgive you,” which itself can be a demeaning and judgmental statement. Unless a person specifically asks to be forgiven, saying to someone “I forgive you” is just another form of blame. Instead, we can silently say to ourselves “Bless them — change me.” Forgiveness is an internal process of letting go, although it can have profound external consequences.

Forgiving is not the same as denying, forgetting, suppressing, condoning, excusing, pardoning, or reconciling. *Denying* is an unconscious defense mechanism that involves an inability to perceive the harmful injuries one has received. *Forgetting* implies that the memory of a transgression has slipped out of conscious awareness. *Suppressing* is similar to forgetting except that suppression involves a more conscious and intentional effort to push back out of awareness, with an unwillingness to clearly see the injuries that have occurred. *Condoning* implies justifying the offense or the offender, whereas *excusing* implies that a transgression was committed because of extenuating circumstances. *Pardoning* is a legal concept or a warrant granting release from punishment for an offense. Forgiveness is not the same as *reconciling*, which involves a positive change in the relationship between two people. Although forgiveness is a prerequisite to reconciliation, forgiveness can occur without reconciliation (as evidenced in the old Arabic adage, old Arabic saying: “Forgive, but tie up your camel”). In other words, it is possible to forgive without reconciling, but it is impossible to reconcile without forgiving.

Giving Forgiveness

We live in a culture that permits everything and forgives nothing. In contrast, forgiveness is countercultural. Forgiveness is compassion in action. As psychologists Suzanne Freedman and Robert Enright point out, “There is a decidedly paradoxical quality to forgiveness as the forgiver gives up the resentment, to which he or she has a right, and gives the gift of compassion, to which the offender has no right” (1996, p. 483). The process of forgiveness does not change the past; it changes the present and opens the door to the future. Forgiveness is not an expectation that another person will apologize, make amends, or ask to be forgiven. In contrast, forgiving involves letting go of *unrealistic expectations*, which can otherwise serve as premeditated resentments. Forgiveness involves a sense of *loving detachment*, which is the ability to show compassion without trying to control outcomes. In contrast, holding on to resentment is a form of hostile attachment. In the same way that letting go requires opening one’s hands, practicing forgiveness requires opening one’s heart. Just as it is only with an open heart that we are able to forgive, it is only with a forgiving heart that we are able to love completely. In what might be described as the universal law of forgiveness, it is in forgiving others that we ourselves are forgiven.

Asking for Forgiveness

The process of forgiveness works in both directions. We can not only learn to forgive others, but we can learn to ask to be forgiven by others. In contemporary language, we can ask forgiveness for the things we have said or done that have hurt others (acts of *commission*), as well as for the things we have not said or done that otherwise could have helped others (acts of *omission*). Asking for forgiveness involves making an *apology* ("I am sorry"), an *acknowledgement* ("I was wrong"), an *amendment* ("How can I make it right?"), a *commitment* ("I'll strive to not do it again"), and a *request* ("Will you please forgive me?"). Admitting when we are wrong and making amends for our wrongs go a long way toward improving any relationship. To the extent that we become more concerned with being forgiven for our own transgressions, we become less concerned with those who have transgressed against us. To the extent that we are more concerned with the blind spots in our own eyes, we are less concerned with the wrongs we see in others.

Receiving Forgiveness

An often neglected aspect of forgiveness involves *receiving* it from others. Receiving—and accepting—forgiveness requires a humble heart. It is an act of grace. Yet one of the greatest obstacles against accepting forgiveness may involve our own inability to forgive ourselves. If forgiveness is compassion in action, then how can we love others if we have not learned to love ourselves?

Suggested Action Steps

Consider whether there is someone toward whom you experience anger or resentment that causes you harm. Think about the costs of holding on to this resentment, in contrast to the possible benefits of simply letting it go. You can act as if others did the best they could have done with what they had to do it with at the time. If you have a lingering resentment, then ask yourself, "What's my part in it?" Rather than focusing on those who have hurt you, consider making a list of all those whom you have hurt. Consider taking an inventory of your own acts of commission (doing what may have harmed another person) as well as acts of omission (neglecting or not doing what may have helped). Acts of harm and neglect may have been by conscious *intent* (through awareness) or by consequential *impact* (through lack of self- or other awareness). Think about what it would be like to make amends to others without causing them further harm. If focusing on making amends to those in the past seems like an insurmountable task, then start today with making "living amends" to those who are part of your life each day. Going forward, pay attention to expectations that you have of others, and consider whether these expectations ever lead to resentments. Practice loving detachment by showing compassion toward others without trying to control them. You will begin to discover why forgiveness has been described as the ultimate expression of love.

An Al-Anon Literature-Based Approach to Forgiveness

One Day at a Time

Al-Anon's oldest daily reader, *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* (ODAT; Al-Anon Family Groups, 1968) contains a single index entry on the topic of forgiveness. Yet on page 120, the anonymous author¹ of ODAT provides an insightful twist on how one's lack of forgiveness begins with one's judgmental attitude as a starting point: "We are asked to forgive those who have injured us. Unless we have first judged and condemned them for what they did, there would be no reason for us to forgive them. Rather we would have to forgive ourselves for judging" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1968, p. 120). The remainder of this passage for the day is grounded in three different but relevant verses of Scripture—that is, Matthew 7:1; Matthew 22:39 (as a restatement of Leviticus 18:19), and Luke 23:34). The passage of the day ends with a quote from the life of Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955): "Forgiving is not forgetting; it's letting go of the hurt."²

Courage to Change

Al-Anon's second daily reader, *Courage to Change* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1992) makes a direct link between loving detachment and forgiveness:

"The most loving form of detachment I have found has been forgiveness."
(Al-Anon Family Groups, 1992, p. 289)

Remember the adage, "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace."³

How Al-Anon Works

In the 406-page *How Al-Anon Works* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1995), which is perhaps the most definitive texts for newcomers, Chapter 11 (Detachment, Love, and Forgiveness) contains two pages (pp. 85–86) devoted to the topic of forgiveness. This section explicitly connects forgiveness with loving detachment, implicitly suggesting that lack of forgiveness is connected with attachment to resentment.⁴ Here are two of the most salient sentences in this section that could be subtitled "How Forgiveness Works."

"Each of us is worthy of love, and each of us is doubly blessed when we are able to dig down past our grievances and resentments, no matter how justified we may feel in harboring them, and find within ourselves the recognition of that part of the other person that is and always will be lovable. How better could we learn that we ourselves are eternally and irrevocably lovable than by recognizing that same quality in everyone around us?"

(Al-Anon Family Groups, 1995, p. 85, para. 40)

Paths to Recovery

In a more explicit manner than Al-Anon's other books, *Paths to Recovery* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1997) addresses forgiveness on five separate pages (pp. 68, 90, 95, 96, 123). Three pages (pp. 90, 95, 96) are explicitly part of Step Nine. Placing the focus is on making amends to others clearly complicates our ability to continuing blaming others.⁵

What is the payoff for not forgiving? For some, the "payoff" may be the ongoing investment in blaming others and maintaining grievances, grudges, and resentments.

It is noteworthy that Al-Anon's *Paths to Recovery* addresses the "payoff" for not forgiving. In a story about the Six Ps of Step Six (i.e., perspective, pain, prayer, patience, process, and payoff), an anonymous member addresses the payoff of not forgiving:

"If I remain unforgiving, the payoff is that I can savor thoughts of revenge. I can feel sorry for myself for the hurt that was inflicted on me. I can justify my actions and remain distant. I don't have to work toward a closer relationship with that person if I remain unforgiving."

(Al-Anon Family Groups, 1997, p. 68)

Hope for Today

Al-Anon's third daily reader, *Hope for Today* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 2002), contains more than twice the number of pages devoted to forgiveness that its two predecessors.

Blueprint for Progress

Al-Anon's original *Blueprint for Progress* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1978) contains no index and no sections related to forgiveness. In the section on Character Traits (pp. 36–47), the extensive bi-modal list of 92 traits (almost all of which are adjectives), the word "forgiving" never appears. Neither does it appear in the 92 bi-modal descriptors contained in the Character Checklist (pp. 49–51). Whereas the process forgiving—others and oneself—may be one of the outcomes of working the Steps with a Sponsor, it is not part of Al-Anon's "fearless and searching" Fourth Step inventory.

Blueprint for Progress

Expanded from the original 64-page version (P-5) published in 1976, the revised 96-page version (P-91) includes additional sections on fear, anger, control, intimacy, sex, finances, and spirituality—but not forgiveness. Unlike its smaller, easier-to-hide, "book-shelf sized" 5.5" x 8.5" predecessor, Al-Anon's revised *Blueprint for Progress* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 2004) 8.5" x 11-inch spiral-bound workbook did not have room for the topic of forgiveness. In the section on Character Traits (pp. 73–80), the extensive bi-modal list of 94 traits, the word "forgiving" never appears. Neither does it appear in the 94 bi-modal descriptors contained in the Character Checklist (pp. 81–83).

Reaching for Personal Freedom

For those seeking to do an aspirational “searching and fearless inventory,” *Reaching for Personal Freedom* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 2013) fits the bill. This 176-page 8.5” x 11-inch spiral-bound workbook is almost twice the number of pages than the revised 96-page *Blueprint for Progress* (Al-Anon Family Groups, 2004). The added depth of this workbook provides opportunities to work the Twelve Steps (pp. 7–61), Twelve Traditions (pp. 67–117), and the Twelve Concepts of Service (pp. 123–168). Because Step Nine is the step most traditionally associated with forgiveness (i.e., making amends to others rather than blaming or resenting them), it is fitting that forgiveness is addressed in the introductory paragraph of Step Nine: “The purpose is to free ourselves from feelings of guilt and over-responsibility, not to receive forgiveness from someone else. We need to forgive ourselves to move forward” (p. 47).

Table 1.Frequency Count of Page Numbers for the Word *Forgiveness* in Index of Al-Anon Literature

	Frequencies	Pages
<i>One Day at a Time</i> (1968)	1	120
<i>Alateen—A Day at a Time</i> (1983)	3	162, 187, 255
<i>Courage to Change</i> (1992)	3	75, 178, 289
<i>How Al-Anon Works</i> (1995)	2	85, 86
<i>Paths to Recovery</i> (1997)	5	68, 90, 95, 96, 123
<i>Hope for Today</i> (2002)	8	57, 95, 114, 130, 237, 274, 291, 344
<i>Reaching for Personal Freedom</i> (2013)	6	33, 47, 48, 49
<i>A Little Time For Myself</i> (2023)	?	?

Note. This word frequency count was calculated by the author using careful visual inspection. For this reason, there may be a margin of error in the word counts. The frequency of the word “forgiveness” reflects only the number of pages indexed for this word, rather than the number of times the word “forgiveness” might appear on the indexed pages. The frequency count for *Reaching for Personal Freedom* includes the words forgiving (p. 33), forgiveness (p. 47), forgive (p. 47, 48), and forgave (p. 48, 49).⁶

Notes

1. Alice B., an Al-Anon member, spoke with many pioneers who shared their experience, strength and hope to provide the fundamental principles for this work. Alice B. was 72 years old when she wrote the book known as the ODAT. After receiving Conference approval in 1966, *One Day at Time in Al-Anon* was first published in 1968. Alice was a self-taught writer who contributed to the *Ladies Home Journal* and other Hearst publications. She also put her life experiences into a series of short stories such as “Wannamaker Ladies Wear Hats,” but none of these stories were ever successfully published. As a member of the Al-Anon literature committee, Alice edited and reviewed books on alcoholism that were published by Al-Anon. She felt there was a need for a book that could inspire, comfort, and sustain people who were living with alcoholism. She spent more than a year, sitting hour after hour at her typewriter in a little cubbyhole at the top of the stairs in her house. She said that she would just sit down at her typewriter and wait for it to come.

In a 1972 edition of *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*, Lois W. inscribed a copy to Alice B., referring to her as “the transcriber” and acknowledging a Power greater than themselves as the author. Lois W. wrote this inscription in the 1972 edition of ODAT: “*To Alice, the transcriber (for I know a Power greater than ourselves is the author) of this book. With all gratitude and love, Lois*” (Pennsylvania Al-Anon/Alateen Family Groups, 2021).

2. Born as the fifteenth of seventeen children in a small log cabin on a rice and cotton farm, Mary McLeod Bethune (née McLeod; 1875–1955) became an American educator, philanthropist, humanitarian, and civil rights activist. Her most famous quote is, “Faith is the first factor in a life devoted to service. Without it, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible.”

3. This adage is often attributed to Jonathan Lockwood Huie (b. 1945), who posts a daily online motivational series on his website. Widely circulated as originating from an “anonymous” or author unknown, there has been attributional drift associated with the adage. It has been attributed to Lao Tzu (Laozi, (b. 604 or 570 BCE), Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, c. 563 BCE – c. 483), Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens, 1835-1910), and even Mel Robbins (b. 1968).

4. Resentment is not only an obstacle for those in Al-Anon, it may be a matter of life or death for those in AA. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous clearly states the implications of resentment in Chapter 5 (“How it Works”):

“Resentment is the “number one” offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976, p. 64).

5. A story in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous describes the implications of working Steps Eight and Nine in Chapter 1 (Bill's Story"):

"We made a list of people I had hurt or toward whom I felt resentment. I expressed my entire willingness to approach these individuals, admitting my wrong. Never was I to be critical of them. I was to right all such matters to the utmost of my ability."

(Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976, p. 13).

6. Because Al-Anon does not provide its literature in conventional PDF format, the word frequency count was done by careful visual inspection of the content and index sections of each book. For this reason, there may be a margin of error in the word counts. If the interested reader determines a different count, please notify the author of the discrepancy.

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. 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.

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- In the 19th printing of the ODAT (May 1985), the most cited work is Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, which is never credited or referenced at all. However, the 16 quotations attributed to Kempis are from *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418-1427). There are 11 quotations from Proverbs, the second most cited source quoted in the ODAT. Ralph Waldo Emerson has 7 quotes. Marcus Aurelius has 6. William Shakespeare and Thomas Merton have 5 each. The diversity of names otherwise is pretty remarkable including Hoagy Carmichael, Martin Buber, Kahlil Gibran, Friedrich Nietzsche, and many others. Books of the Bible that are cited include a total of 16, which include four from the Old Testament (Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah) and one from the Apocrypha (The Wisdom of Solomon). From the 12 quotes derived from New Testament, there are citations from two Gospels (Matthew, Mark), five Pauline Epistles (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Thessalonians), as well as the Epistles of James, I Peter, and I John.
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Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. (2019, April 30). 2018 Al-Anon membership survey summary. <https://al-anon.org/pdf/Membership-Survey.pdf>

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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."

Doverspike, W. F. (1998). *Putting prayer into practice: Reflections on a spiritual journey*. Atlanta, GA: Author.

Chapter 4 ("Confessions of a secular priest: A story of forgiveness") is contained on pages 27-29. In contrast to secular perspective on forgiveness, the 2025 update of this article provides a personalized and religious perspective on forgiveness.

Doverspike, W. F. (2005). Confessions of a secular priest: A story of faith turned inside out. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 24(3), 278-280.

Enright, R. D., & the Human Development Study Group (1991). The moral development of forgiveness. In W. Kurtines & J. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Moral behavior and development*, Vol. 1, 123-152. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

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Ellen C. identifies herself as Literature/Forum Coordinator, Panel 64, Pennsylvania, Al-Anon/Alateen Family Groups. In this article, Ellen C. provides this bit of history about the author of the ODAT:

In a 1972 edition of *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*, Lois W. inscribed a copy to Alice B., referring to her as “the transcriber” and acknowledging a Power greater than themselves as the author. Specifically, Ellen’s piece contains this information:

Lois W. wrote this inscription in the 1972 edition of ODAT: “To Alice, the transcriber (for I know a Power greater than ourselves is the author) of this book. With all gratitude and love, Lois.”

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N/A

Workshop Handouts:

N/A

Published Sept. 15, 2026 | Updated Oct. 01, 2026

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Content and references last updated 2026.

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2026). *How to understand Al-Anon: How to Forgive*.
<https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>