

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
LETTING GO OF RESENTMENT**
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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.

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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)

One of the most frequent topics in Al-Anon meetings involves *resentment*. The subject of expectations appears 7 times in the index of *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* (Al-Anon, 1968), 6 times in *Courage to Change* (Al-Anon, 1992), 6 times in *Hope for Today* (Al-Anon, 2002), and 8 times in *A Little Time for Myself* (Al-Anon, 2023).¹ For recovering alcoholics, “Resentment is the ‘number one’ offender” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA World Services, 2001, p. 64).²

What is Resentment?

A starting point is to begin with a definition. *Resentment* is a brooding, simmering, or persistent feeling of anger, bitterness, or hostility that is usually the result of a perceived sense of injury, injustice, unfairness, or wrong done to oneself.

Is it resentment or resentments?

In actuality, there are at least two definitions—resentment (singular) and resentments (plural). *Resentment* is an abstract, generalized feeling of anger, bitterness, hostility, or self-righteous indignation caused by a perceived injustice, unfairness, insult, or injury. *Resentments* refer to individual instances, specific grievances, or past events that someone holds onto. Whereas resentment may be uncountable, resentments may be a countable. They can not only be counted, they can be stockpiled as lists of complaints, grievances, slights, or stored-up memories to which one clings. Resentments can also include memories of certain instances, specific triggers, or “stored injuries” that keep resentment simmering in the background.

Resentment stockpiles erode relationships.

A *stockpile of resentments* refers to the chronic accumulation of unexpressed anger and perceived wrongs that are stored up over time. Rather than resolving conflicts as they occur, some individuals have a habit of counting, keeping score, or storing up their negative feelings, which created an emotional reservoir that eventually erodes relationships as well as one’s own sense of personal well-being.

Holding on to resentment hurts ourselves.

Stockpiling resentments is like accumulating ammunition to be used against the other person. The problem is that it harms the person who holds the grudge. Holding on to resentment is like holding a burning ember while wanting to burn the other person. Focusing on our resentment toward another person is like drinking rat poison and hoping it will kill the rat. As observed by the anonymous author of *One Day at a Time*, “The great danger of admitting resentments into our minds and hearts is that it often leads to retaliation. We feel justified in “evening up the score” and paying others back for what they have done to us” (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1968, p. 149).

Storing resentments gives a sense of control.

Stockpiling resentments can create a false sense of control. Holding onto grievances can make a person feel “right” or morally superior, using past slights as verbal ammunition during future arguments.

Resentment is a projected form of self-pity.

The anonymous author of *One Day at a Time* made an observation that many people find true: “It is only when I compare my lot in life with that of others that the destructive emotion of self-pity is allowed to engulf me. It is only by taking offense at what others do that I will be afflicted with resentment” (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1968, p. 21). This nugget of wisdom reflects three truths: (1) There is no joy found in comparing ourselves to others. (2) Resentment is a form of self-pity. (3) Resentment requires taking offense at what others do.

How Expectations Contribute to Resentments

In understanding resentment, which is a brooding and simmering form of anger, it may be useful to oversimplify: There are two basic thoughts that often underlie anger (Doverspike, 2023, p. 2):

- ☒ Something happened that should not have happened.
- ☒ Something didn't happen that should have happened.

In the case of anxiety, there are two basic thoughts that often underlie the feeling of fear:

- ☒ Thinking we will not get what we want.
- ☒ Thinking we will lose what we have.

In both instances, it is the internal expectation, rather than the external reality, that contributes to the anger. It is the “should” that creates the problem. If we change our expectation, we create room for solutions.

Unspoken expectations can cause resentment.

Resentment often originates when someone expects a partner, friend, or coworker to act a certain way, but never explicitly communicates that expectation to the other person in advance. People often suppress their feelings to avoid conflict, maintain peace, or sidestep an uncomfortable conversation. However, when we don't clearly state our specific expectations in advance, it is as if we expect the other person to read our mind. Unspoken expectations are essentially premeditated resentments, to the extent that others have no idea how to respond if they have no idea of what we expect in the first place.

Take an ongoing personal inventory.

Most people are aware of their disappointments, resentments, and how others have let them down. Most people ignore how they create disappointments and resentments in others. It is easier to keep score of what others are doing wrong than on what we should be doing right. Focus on your own actions and behavior.

Sharing versus hiding expectations.

People who create conflicts with others often keep their expectations to themselves—so that the other person has no idea what is expected. The other person is almost guaranteed to fall short and not the unspoken expectations. In its most benevolent form, a person may not even be aware of their expectations until they are unmet. In its most malevolent form, this dynamic can be one way for a dominant or controlling person keep a submissive person off balance. It may also give the dominant person a sense of power. In contrast, when we state our expectations in a clear and direct manner that takes into consideration the rights and feelings of others, we foster effective communication (Alberti & Emmons, 2001).

Strive to control yourself—not others.

When we engineer the outcome of a situation with someone, we are trying to control. Even if we get a loved one to agree to do something we want—or not do something we don't want—we are likely to be disappointed later when they do not comply with what we expect. It is our expectation—not our loved ones—that has let us down.

Managing Expectations in Ourselves

In Al-Anon literature, one of the most memorable nuggets of wisdom is contained in *Courage to Change*:

“Turning to an alcoholic for affection is like going to a hardware store for bread. Perhaps we expect a ‘loving’ spouse to comfort and hold us when we are afraid. While these loved ones may not meet our expectations, it is our expectations, not our loved ones, that have let us down.”
(*Courage to Change*, Al-Anon, 1992, p. 2, January 2)

Unrealistic expectations lead to resentments.

If we are prone to be *intropunitive*, with a tendency to turn our anger inward by blaming ourselves, then our unrealistic expectations lead to disappointments. If we are prone to be *extrapunitive*, with a tendency to turn our anger outward by blaming others, then our unrealistic expectations lead to resentments.

When we take an inventory of our resentments, we discover that many of them are based on unspoken expectations that were not met by others. This dynamic is the basis of the idea that unrealistic expectations are *premeditated resentments*. To use an old adage, “Resentment is the strongest form of attachment” (Doverspike, 2024a, p. 10). Resentment is angry attachment.³ Forgiveness is the antidote: “Forgiveness can be defined as the process by which we are released from negative emotions such as resentment and anger” (Doverspike, 2008, p. 1). Forgiveness and resentment cannot exist in the same space. If we change our expectations of others, we can reduce our resentments. A good measure of whether our expectations were realistic is how we feel later.

Realistic expectations require acceptance.

When we notice that we are appreciative, delighted, or happily surprised by the outcome of a situation, then our expectations may have been exceeded. One of the cornerstones of realistic expectations is *acceptance*. Without accepting people, places, and things as they are—rather than as we would have them be—we cannot have realistic expectations.⁴

Expectations are more easily held than let go.

It is often easier to hold on to unrealistic expectations—perhaps because of their nostalgic familiarity—than it is to let go of them. People in unhappy relationships often say, “At least I know what to expect.” Virginia Satir (1916–1988), known as the mother of family therapy, observed: “Most people prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty.”

Letting go requires the uncertainty of change.

Certainty—even when painful—gives a sense of control, whereas uncertainty activates anxiety. Yet growth requires stepping into the unknown. Change begins when the discomfort of change is outweighed by the discomfort of remaining the same. For some unfortunate individuals, the uncertainty of change may be worse than the misery of staying the same. As one psychotherapist observed, “A problem cannot be solved if it is the solution” (L. Buchanan, personal communication, February 28, 2025).

Managing Expectations in Others

In a book on clinical, ethical, and legal guidelines for successful practice (Doverspike, 2015), the concept of *managing expectations* of others is mentioned 30 times. The best ways to manage others' expectations is through clear and proactive communication, realistic boundary-setting, and follow-through on deliverables. Although we cannot control what others think, we can do our part to contribute to others having reasonable expectations of us.

Take an ongoing personal inventory. Most people are aware of their disappointments, resentments, and how others have let them down. Most people ignore how they create disappointments and resentments in others. Focus on your own actions rather than behavior.

Know and respect your own limits. Before agreeing to a request, take an honest look at your schedule, workload, resources, and skills. Be honest with yourself about what you can deliver and when. Be open and transparent about your limitations. Clearly state what you can and cannot do, based on your available time, resources, or expertise. Even Jesus did not heal every blind person in Nazareth. ⁵

Be willing to say “no.” Learn to say “no” firmly and kindly. Politely declining a request that will overextend you is much better than accepting a request and failing to deliver it satisfactorily. In many cases, it may be possible to offer an alternative solution (e.g., “I can’t take on the whole project, but I can handle this smaller part in two weeks”). Here is another respectful way of saying no: “I’m not able to do it right now, but I can help with X.”

Respond rather than react. Resist complying due to a sense of urgency (e.g., “If you need an answer right at this moment, then the answer is ‘no’ because I would need time to think about it”). Whether accepting a new obligation or not, it never hurts to take a pause (“I’ll need to think about it”).

Under-promise and over-deliver. Set realistic expectations by under-promising and over-delivering. Avoid making promises and build a buffer into any promise that you make. At all times, avoid over-promising to please others; it will inevitably lead to disappointment. When estimating a deadline or time or outcomes, give yourself extra time and room. Provide regular updates, especially when timelines or circumstances change. Meeting a deadline early or delivering more than expected is an excellent way to manage expectations positively. If you exceed expectations, then everyone is pleased. If you simply hit the target date, then you’re still right on time.

Be specific rather than vague. Rather than contributing to a misunderstanding, define expectations early and be specific. For example, “I can get it back to you by next Monday” is better than, “I’ll try to get it back to you soon.”

Put it in writing. When possible, document your agreements with others. In professional settings, written confirmation helps prevent miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Notes

1. Al-Anon's (1968) first daily reader, *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* (ODAT), refers to the subject of expectations _ times (pp. __) in the print version. The digital Kindle® version of the ODAT refers to the subject of *expectations* 6 times (pp. 243, 324, 335, 389, 390, and 400, including the index itself). Although the ODAT's anonymous writer (Alice B.) frequently referred to disappointments and resentments, she referred less often to expectations. One indirect reference can be found very late in the daily reader—December 12—where there is a sentence containing the word *expected*: “Why couldn’t he have done what I expected?” (ODAT, Al-Anon, 1968, p. 347). Interestingly, the context of this sentence indicates that blame and disappointment refer to “the way I reacted” (which would imply an emotional reaction after an event) rather than what was expected (which would imply a cognitive set prior to an event).

A review of the indexing of three other Al-Anon daily readers indicates the following references to the word expectation(s):

One Day at a Time in Al-Anon (Al-Anon, 1968)
Resentments: 21, 149, 154, 222, 235, 251, 266

Courage to Change (Al-Anon, 1992)
Resentments: 153, 1788, 218, 289, 347, 352

Hope for Today (Al-Anon, 2002)
Resentments: 57, 95, 205, 258, 263, 355

A Little Time for Myself (Al-Anon, 2023)
Resentments: 47, 162, 190, 206, 220, 238, 254, 292

2. The risk associated with resentment is stated in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous:

Resentment is the ‘number one’ offender. 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.
(AA World Services, 2001, p. 64)

3. Angry, hostile, or malevolent attachment is the opposite of loving detachment.

4. Acceptance is an attitude that is fundamental to the Al-Anon way of living: “*Acceptance* means simply admitting there are things we cannot change. Accepting them puts an end to our futile struggles and frees our thought and energy to work on things that can be changed” (ODAT, Al-Anon, 1968, p. 76; emphasis in original).

Acceptance is also a cornerstone of unconditional love. The correlation between acceptance and love is expressed in a quotation by the American Trappist monk and priest Thomas Merton (1915–1968), whose words are cited in two of Al-Anon's daily readers. In *One Day at a Time* (Al-Anon, 1968), Alice B. not only quoted Merton but she also cited the book from which the passage was taken:

“The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.”

Thomas Merton: *No Man is an Island*

Merton (as cited in *One Day at a Time*, Al-Anon, 1968, p. 165).

In Al-Anon's *Courage to Change*, an abbreviated version of Merton's words are quoted:

"The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves and not to twist them to fit our own image."

Thomas Merton

Merton (as cited in *Courage to Change*, Al-Anon, 1992, p. 249).

In its complete form, Thomas Merton's quote appears in Chapter 9 ("The Measure of Charity") of his book, *No Man is an Island* (Merton, 1955 p. 83):

He alone holds the secret of a charity by which we can love others not only as we love ourselves, but as He loves them. The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, with the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be love?"

Merton (1955, p. 83).

5. Jesus did not heal everyone—especially in his home village of Nazareth. The synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe Jesus's record of performing no miracles in Nazareth due to the people's unbelief and skepticism.

Matthew 13:58: ⁵⁸And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief."

Mark 6:5-6 ⁵He could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶He was amazed at their lack of faith."

Luke 4:23-24: ²³Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

²⁴"Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown."

The people of Nazareth were familiar with Jesus as a local carpenter. The absence of any recorded miracles in Nazareth was attributed to the peoples' lack of faith and honor in him as a healer, prophet, or Messiah.

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Merton's original book was published 1955. Copyright 1955 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani [sic]. Copyright renewed 1983 by The Trustees of Merton Legacy Trust. In this 2003 version of the book, the quoted material is from the bottom of page 168 in Chapter 9 (p. 164-187), which is titled "The Measure of Charity."

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