HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

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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 the most frequent topics in Al-Anon meetings involves *expectations*. The subject of expectations appears 4 times in the index of *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* (Al-Anon, 1968), 8 times in *Courage to Change* (Al-Anon, 1992), 8 times in *Hope for Today* (Al-Anon, 2002), and 13 times in *A Little Time for Myself* (Al-Anon, 2023).[1] In addition, many unofficial slogans are about expectations. For example, "Expectations are a disguised attempt to control the future" (Doverspike, 2025, p. 5).

How Expectations Affect Emotions

In understanding complex emotional responses, it is useful to oversimplify: In the case of anger, there are two basic thoughts that often underlie anger (Doverspike, 2023, p. 2):

- ☒ Something is happening that we think should not be happening.
- ☒ Something is not happening that we think should be happening.

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

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

Mind-reading is a cognitive error.

Mind-reading is a cognitive error that occurs when a person believes that he or she knows the thoughts or feelings of another person without asking the other person (Doverspike 2007, p. 3). This cognitive error can contribute to conflicts in relationships, especially when we don't clearly state our expectations but instead we expect that others should read our mind. Unspoken expectations are essentially premeditated resentments, to the extent that others have no idea how to respond to us if they have no idea of what we expect in a specific situation.

Sharing versus hiding expectations.

To create conflicts in relationships, we can keep our expectations of others to ourselves—so that others have no idea what we want. In this way, others are almost guaranteed not to meet our expectations of them. In contrast, when we state what we expect from others, in a clear and direct manner that takes into consideration the rights and feelings of others, we usually have more assertive and effective communication with others (Alberti & Emmons, 2001).

What assertiveness is and is not.

Assertiveness is neither *aggression* (violating the boundaries of others) nor *submission* (letting others violate our boundaries). Assertiveness involves a direct, honest, and appropriate expression of feelings, opinions, or requests. When we are assertive, we say what we mean, we mean what we say, but we don't say it meanly. When we talk assertively, we take control of our actions and accept responsibility for ourselves.

We strive to control ourselves—not others.

Taking control of our actions and taking responsibility for ourselves does not mean trying to control the actions of others. Whether intention or not, when we try to engineer the outcome of a situation with someone, we are trying to control. Even if we are effective in getting 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. When they do not meet our expectations, it is our expectations—not our loved ones—that have 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*, p. 2, January 2)

Unrealistic expectations lead to resentment.
If we are prone to be *intropunitive,* with the tendency to turn anger inward (blaming ourselves), then our unrealistic expectations lead to disappointments. If we are prone to be *extrapunitive*, with the tendency to turn anger outward (blaming others), then our unrealistic expectations lead to resentment.

When we take an inventory of our resentments, we often discover that many of them are based on unspoken expectations that were not met by others. It is the basis of the idea that unrealistic expectations are *premeditated resentments*. Focusing on resentment toward another person is like drinking rat poison and hoping it will kill the rat. 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. In taking a daily inventory, a good measure of whether our expectations were realistic is how we feel later.

Realistic expectations require acceptance.
On the other hand, if we notice that we are appreciative, delighted, and surprised at the outcome of a situation, then our expectations of others 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. [1]

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." 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.

Expectations are not the same as hope.
Expectations are related to specific outcomes, whereas hope refers to something being better in ways that we have no way of anticipating: "Hope is the expectation that positive change can occur, although it is unspecified how it will occur. Hope is not wishing, longing, desiring, or yearning for change. Instead, it is a realistic vision in which one sees the possibility of change and a path to move toward this destination" (Doverspike, 2024b, p. 4).

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.

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. With others, be open and transparent about 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. [2]

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 do 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 4 times (pp. 217, 242, 298, and 399) 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)
Expectations: 217, 242, 298, 309

Courage to Change (Al-Anon, 1992)
Expectations: 2, 19, 39, 66, 76, 110, 153, 244

Hope for Today (Al-Anon, 2002)
Expectations: 22, 78, 87, 106, 180, 188, 248, 320

A Little Time for Myself (Al-Anon, 2023)
Expectations: 11, 108, 122, 144, 155, 164, 235, 239, 253, 303, 313, 331, 341

2. 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).

3. 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: "58 And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief."

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

Luke 4:23-24: 23 Jesus 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.

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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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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N/A

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N/A

Published Oct. 12, 2025 | Updated Oct. 12, 2025

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2025). *How to understand Al-Anon: Managing expectations.* https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/