

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:  
RELIEF, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE**

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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)

Newcomers to often think of Al-Anon meetings as a place where family members of alcoholics come in order to learn some ways they can get their loved ones to stop drinking. As they learn to apply the Twelve Steps to their own lives, many newcomers keep coming back for themselves. As old-timers<sup>1</sup> often disclose, “I came for someone else, and I stayed for myself.” In terms of the three stages of spiritual awakening, there is another adage: “I came for relief and I stayed for recovery.” The disease is progressive; recovery is also progressive. For those who stay for recovery, resilience and serenity are often found.

## Relief

Most people do not come into their first meeting flying on the wings of victory. Many come in with a crash. Yet almost everyone who comes in for the first time leaves an hour later feeling better than when they arrived. When new arrivals see others smiling and laughing—regardless of their circumstances at home—newcomers learn it is possible to feel better. This relief is associated with a two-fold sense of connection and hope.

## Hope

There is a difference between hope and expectations. Unmet expectations often lead to disappointment and resentment, whereas hope is a positive expectancy without being attached to a specific outcome. Hope is the future tense of faith—the evidence that good things are in store. It is sometimes said that expectations are tied to our own will, whereas hope is aligned with God’s will—whatever it may be. Thus, one of the first experiences in Al-Anon is the shift from a pessimistic sense of despair and hopelessness to an optimistic sense of hope for the future. Hope is also contained in the words of the Suggested Al-Anon/Alateen Closing (2022, p. 18): “You will come to realize that there is no situation too difficult to be bettered and no unhappiness too great to be lessened.”

## Connection

A second experience involves a shift from isolation and loneliness to connection and belonging. As the family disease progresses over time, alcoholism replaces intimacy with isolation. Attendance at Al-Anon meetings breaks the sense of isolation and replaces it with connection. Over time, connection

evolves into a sense of belonging, which can sometimes occur within the first six meetings. Even at the first meeting, newcomers learn they are not alone. Group psychotherapists refer to this experience as *universality*,<sup>2</sup> which refers to the realization of group members that they are not alone in the problems they face and—more importantly—that others can provide the emotional support that helps them move out of isolation and into connection with others. Even without working the steps with a sponsor, attending meetings and sharing with other members can facilitate the ABCs of *fellowship*: a sense of attachment, belonging, and connection. It is by no accident that members of Al-Anon refer to themselves as a fellowship.

Relief can also be associated with owning one of Al-Anon’s conference-approved daily readers, such as *One Day at a Time* (Al-Anon, 1968), *Courage to Change* (Al-Anon, 1992), *Hope for Today* (Al-Anon, 2002), or *A Little Time for Myself* (Al-Anon, 2023). A step farther into the relief stage, one might engage in some occasional reading, although not necessarily any commitment to daily reading or journaling (usually more associated with recovery than relief). In any event, people cannot simply read themselves into recovery.

Even if the family situation does not improve—which sometimes it does not—members learn that they are not alone. This stage of involvement in Al-Anon is about feeling good by attending meetings occasionally. Although some members move from the relief stage to the recovery stage in a week or two, there are others who may remain at this stage for several years. It’s all about relief—feeling better.

## Recovery

Attending meetings and sharing stories with other members is like an emotional tune-up: One feels better but it doesn't last long. At some point, which can be earlier for some members and years later for others, a person may shift from only seeking relief to actually *being in recovery*.

### Having a Home Group

To those in the fellowship, *being in recovery* is associated not only with regular meeting attendance and feeling better after a meeting. Recovery is also associated with having a commitment to a home group, which one attends whether feeling like it or not. Recovery also involves sometimes—or frequently—enjoying the fellowship before and after the meetings (i.e., the meeting-before-the-meeting and the meeting-after-the-meeting).

### Having a Sponsor

The best definition of sponsorship is also the one that is the simplest: "Sponsorship is a confidential relationship between two Al-Anon members who benefit from sharing experience, strength, and hope" (Al-Anon, 2001, M-78). Whereas members who are in the relief stage use meetings as a place to share their problems, members who are in recovery are more likely to use meetings as a place to share their progress. As one member said it, "I take my progress to the meetings, and take my problems to my sponsor." Over time, a one not only discovers the value of having a sponsor but also the value of being a sponsor.

### Working the Steps

In addition to making a commitment to meetings, another component of recovery involves working the steps with a sponsor. Whereas the relief stage is sometimes known as the Al-Anon Waltz,<sup>3</sup> the recovery stage moves into "making a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" (Step 4) and then "admitting the exact nature of our wrongs" to another person—usually a sponsor (Step 5). Recovery is also about making a list (Step 8) and making amends (Step 9) to others who have been wronged. In contrast to the relief stage, recovery is not only about feeling better but also about functioning better.

### Practicing the Principles

Recovery also involves practicing the principles of the program in one's daily life. What are the principles of the program? In a significant way, the principles are the opposite of one's character defects and shortcomings identified and shared in Steps 4 and 5. Practicing the principles is easy to say, but it is often difficult to do.

### Putting Principles Above Personalities

Dealing with difficult people is often a matter of attitude, expectations, perspective, and putting principles above personalities.<sup>4</sup> The practice of putting principles above personalities usually means *responding* effectively rather than *reacting* emotionally. The old adage is "Respond rather than react." The difference between reacting and responding is often separated only by a *pause*: Postpone Action Until Serenity Emerges.

## Resilience

If relief is about feeling better and recovery is about functioning better, then resilience is about serenity. It is less about achieving serenity as a trait and more about experiencing serenity as a state of being. It's about the default state of being happy, joyous, and free.

When people first hear about serenity, an image that is often reported is of some guru in a Lotus position, sitting on the top of a mountain, with a blissful smile on his or her face. Instead, serenity is often more like a sense of balance and stability that one is about to experience even when the waves of chaos are surging and splashing around. As an old-timer once self-observed, "I can be in the storm, but the storm doesn't have to be in me."

## The Promises

The only promise made in the Twelve Steps is the implicit one suggested in the first part of Step 12 ("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"). Notice that the definite article *the* (i.e., rather than the indefinite article *a*) is used to emphasize that a spiritual awakening is the result of working the steps.

Although Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters has never endorsed any official promises, many Al-Anon members refer to the unofficial "Al-Anon Promises" contained in the conference-approved *From Survival to Recovery* (Al-Anon, 1994, 269-270; Al-Anon, 2007, pp. 267-268). It is quoted verbatim below from the 2007 edition of *From Survival to Recovery*:

If we willingly surrender ourselves to the spiritual discipline of the Twelve Steps, our lives can be transformed. We can become mature, responsible individuals with a great capacity for joy, fulfillment, and wonder. Though we will never be perfect, continued spiritual progress can reveal to us our enormous potential. Many of us discover what our fellow members already know – that we are both worthy of love and loving. We learn to love others without losing ourselves and we accept love in return. Our sight, once clouded and distorted, can clear enough for us to perceive reality and recognize truth. Courage and fellowship replace fear. It becomes possible for us to risk failure and develop new, previously-hidden talents.

Our lives, no matter how battered and degraded, will offer hope to share with others. We begin to feel and know the vastness of our emotions, without [p. 268] being slaves to them. Our secrets no longer have to bind us in shame. As we gain the ability to forgive ourselves, our families, and the world, our choices expand. With dignity, we stand for ourselves without standing against others. Serenity and peace will have new meaning as we allow our lives and the lives of those we love to flow day by day with God's ease, balance, and grace. No longer terrified, we discover that we are free to delight in life's paradox, mystery, and awe. We laugh more. Faith replaces fear and gratitude comes naturally as we realize that our Higher Power is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Can we really grow to such proportions? As we accept life as a continuing process of maturation and evolution toward wholeness, we gradually begin to notice these changes. We may see them first in those who walk beside us. Sometimes these changes happen slowly or haltingly, and occasionally with great bursts of brilliance. As we work the Steps, we move ever closer toward light, toward health, and toward the Higher Power of our understanding. As we watch others grow, we realize we are also changing.

Will we ever arrive? Will we feel joy all the time? Can we really be free of all cruelty, tragedy, and injustice? Probably not, but we can acquire growing acceptance of our human fallibility, as well as greater love and tolerance for each other. Self-pity, resentment, rage, and depression can fade into memory. A sense of community rather than loneliness defines our lives.

We come to know that we belong, we are welcome, we have something to contribute, and that this is enough.

(Al-Anon, 2007, pp. 267-268)

## Notes

1. 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*. 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

2. One of Irving Yalom’s (1970) 11 primary “therapeutic factors” present in all group therapy and in mutual-support groups is known as *universality*, which is the realization—often for the first time—that one is not alone in their distress and that others share similar feelings, thoughts, and problems. In the sixth edition of this book, Yalom and Leszcz (2020) list universality as the first common factor, underscoring its importance in therapeutic change. Although neither AA nor Al-Anon are forms of group psychotherapy, they are both mutual-support groups that can lead to positive change. One of the most commonly heard statements in mutual-support recovery groups is the following: “I don’t need a self-help group. If I could have done it alone, I wouldn’t have needed you” (Doverspike, 2017, p. 1).

3. The Al-Anon Waltz refers to the tendency of some members to avoid—intentionally or otherwise—doing a moral inventory or taking the Fourth Step. As a result, such members get stuck in the repetitive dance steps (i.e., 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3) until they are ready for change. Recovery is not merely a matter of time spent in meetings. It is possible to remain in the Al-Anon Waltz for many years.

4. When the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) were first printed in the November 1949 issue of the *AA Grapevine*, Tradition 12 ended with “above personalities.” Coincidentally, the November 1949 issue, which was entirely devoted to the Traditions in preparation for the First International Convention in Cleveland (July 28–30, 1950), included the request that Thanksgiving week be set aside as “Traditions Week” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1974, p. 213). The initial wording of the short form of this AA Tradition was a bit different from that which members hear in meetings today. Here is an excerpt of the Tradition Twelve taken from a transcription of pages 15-16 of the November 1949 issue: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.”

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- 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 we often call ODAT. After receiving Conference approval in 1966, it 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 were ever successfully published. As a member of the Al-Anon literature committee, Alice edited and reviewed books on alcoholism which 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.
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Irvin David Yalom, M.D., is an American existential psychiatrist who is an emeritus professor of psychiatry at Stanford University.

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