HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
THREE OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

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The purpose of this paper is to provide personal observations and a review of the literature that has been created and published by other authors. The paper 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, 2022, p. 12)

The preface and the Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon were originally published by Al-Anon in its P-4 pamphlet, known as *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1961/2005). Although absent from the 2005 version, the copyright page of the original 1961 version of *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* contains this statement "Parts of this booklet were reprinted from Triple A Family Group and Alcoholics the Family Disease" (G. Neidhardt, personal communication, October 03, 2020).

Based on the *Al-Anon Service Manual 2022-2025* (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2022, p. 20–21), the preface sentence and the Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon are described exactly as they appear on page 22 of Al-Anon's 2005 version of *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* (P-4):

> "All Al-Anon discussions should be constructive, helpful, loving, and understanding. In striving toward these ideals, we avoid topics that can lead to dissension and distract us from our goals.
>
> **1. Discussions of religion:** Al-Anon is not allied with any sect or denomination. It is a spiritual program, based on no particular form of religion. Everyone is welcome, no matter what affiliation or none. Let us not defeat our purpose by entering into discussions concerning specific religious beliefs.
>
> **2. Gossip:** We meet to help ourselves and others learn and use the Al-Anon philosophy. In such groups, gossip can have no part. We do not discuss members or others, and particularly not the alcoholic. Our dedication to anonymity gives people confidence in Al-Anon. Careless repeating of matters heard at meetings can defeat the very purposes for which we are joined together.
>
> **3. Dominance:** Our leaders are trusted servants; they do not govern. No member of Al-Anon should direct, assume authority, or give advice. Our program is based on suggestion, interchange of experience, and rotation of leadership. We progress in our own way and pace. Any attempt to manage or direct is likely to have disastrous consequences for group harmony."
> (Al-Anon, 2005, p. 22; Al-Anon, 2022, pp. 20–21).

To Al-Anon's list of three obstacles , I always add a <u>fourth</u> obstacle—*cross-talk*. Cross-talk can be defined as speaking to another person, commenting on or responding to another person's sharing, or referring to another person by name. Presented in reverse order, each of these four obstacles is discussed below:

Cross-Talk

In letters and conversations to Al-Anon's World Service Office (1988), "Cross-talking has been defined as talking out of turn, advice giving, questioning the person who is sharing, holding private conversations, having an individual comment on everyone's sharing, and as being discourteous and intimidating." At best, it can involve being "helpful" or giving advice, both of which are subtle forms of control. At worst, it can involve someone even being bossy or bullying toward others in the meeting.[1]

For purposes of discussion during a workshop at the 1991 World Service Conference of Al-Anon Family Groups, cross-talking was defined as "one member monopolizing meeting time with one-on-one discussions" (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1991, p. 22). This simple definition was formulated at the workshop:

> "Crosstalk occurs when one member monopolizes the meeting with one-to-one responses to another member (advice-giving). This includes the chairperson who feels the need to comment on each sharing (coming off as an expert). Other definitions include: not

using "I" statements, side conversations and mini-meetings within a meeting. Most members agree these types of sharings are not in keeping with Al-Anon principles."
(Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1991, p. 22)

Call outs are a specific type of cross-talk that is more controlling or hostile rather than advising or helpful. *Calling out* someone refers to a group member — other than the designated chair of the meeting — correcting or directing someone during the meeting. It represents both cross-talk <u>and</u> dominance. Calling out a habitual violator of the Group Conscience, when it is done by the designated chair, may be acceptable. In contrast, calling out a newcomer is an affront to the newcomer and to the chairperson and others in the meeting. In contrast to the small harm done by a person's sharing off-topic, a bigger and more enduring harm is done to the newcomer and to the others in the meeting by calling out someone during his or her sharing. The harm done by a call out during a meeting is rarely — if ever — offset by any perceived benefit from doing so. Other than reflecting an attempt to dominate and poor impulse control of the person doing the calling out, there is nothing beneficial or constructive to be achieved in this manner that cannot be accomplished by a gentle word said in private to someone after the meeting has ended.

Dominance

Most members have the least tolerance for *dominance*, whether it involves the frequency, intensity, or duration of one's speech or behavior. It manifests as talking too many times (frequency), too loud (intensity), too long (duration), or at the place (context) or time (timing) during a meeting. At best, dominance comes across as bossy. At worst, it comes across as bullying. [2]

Gossip

Most members have the greatest tolerance for *gossip*, especially if it means ventilating and complaining about the alcoholic long enough for the newcomer to make the paradigm shift from a focus on others to a focus on self. [3] For some members, it may take a while to learn to focus on themselves rather than others. At best, Al-Anon members share the message, by focusing on themselves and sharing their own experience, strength, and hope. At worst, Al-Anon members share the mess, by focusing on others and complaining about what others are doing or what they should be doing. As one observer has noted, "An Al-Anon gossip session or pity party with no spiritual solution is a tearful tale of misery told by a self-righteous martyr" (Doverspike, 2023, p. 2). As a general rule, it is best to avoid asking for a topic during an Al-Anon meeting, because usually the sickest person in the meeting will share and the others will try to fix it (Gary N., personal communication, August 08, 2023).

Religion

Most members stand somewhere in the middle ground on *religion*, tolerating it to a degree if it is a brief part of one's sharing in terms of spirituality. For some, it may take a while to discern the difference between religion and spirituality. Regardless, evangelizing, proselytizing, or imposing one's beliefs on others is a form of dominance. Many members are tolerant of someone who shares briefly about their religion, especially if it helps them tell their story about defining or finding God or a Higher Power. At the same time, those members may already have places they go for religious services and sacred rites. They may not want Al-Anon being discussed at their religious services any more than others want religion being discussed at their Al-Anon meetings. [4]

Using the Obstacles as Incentives

The only difference between a stumbling block and a stepping stone is how it is used. Similarly, obstacles are neither good nor bad. It is how they are used that matters the most. Being alert and aware of the obstacles can be adaptive if they are used as early warning signs or reminders to consider opposite actions.

There are several ways the obstacles can be used as incentives and reminders to engage in better actions at home, at work, and with others.[5] For example, the temptation to engage in *cross-talk*, however helpful or innocent it may seem, can be an invitation to

remain silent or to share something with the entire group rather than with one person. The desire for control and *dominance* can be a signal to let go and practice humility. The intrigue and drama of gossip can be a cue to focus on myself rather than others. The desire to share about my religion can serve as a reminder to focus on spirituality. The need to state my education, occupation, or profession can be a reminder to avoid hierarchy and to practice anonymity. After all, anonymity is a cornerstone of Twelve Step recovery: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities" (Al-Anon Tradition Twelve).

Notes

1. The following examples of cross-talk have been taken from *How to Find a Good Speaker* (Doverspike, 2023, p. 4):

Cross-talk includes some of the following **specific** examples:

☑ The Novice Newcomer's inquisitive questions may simply reflect a lack of awareness of how the meeting is not a discussion or process group.

☑ The Monopolizing Old-Timer who acts like a subject matter expert violates the spirit of the Second Tradition ("For our group purpose, there is but one authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants—they do not govern").

☑ The Problem-Focused Whiner takes advantage of a meeting if there is no designated speaker or topic, and asks, "Who has a problem to discuss?" This cue typically results in (1) one person becoming the focus of attention, (2) a problem-focused rather than solution-focused discussion, and (3) blatant advice-giving if others get drawn into cross-talk and dialogue.

☑ The Editorializing Chairperson whose running commentary after each person's share limits the time others have to share while reflecting dominance of the self-appointed commentator.

☑ The Al-Pals who engage in side conversations defuse their focus while excluding others from their secrets.

Cross-talk includes some of the following **general** examples:

☑ Directing comments to the chair (e.g., "correcting the chair") demonstrates attempts to control on the part of the self-appointed director.

☑ Directing comments to the speaker (e.g., praising, grooming, or ingratiating the speaker) encourages performance rather than honest and intimate sharing.

☑ Directing comments to newcomers (other than reading the Newcomer Statement) demonstrates attempts at control, dominance, and advice-giving.

☑ Correcting other members when they make a mistake inhibits others who may be concerned about making mistakes.

☑ Calling out a member (with exception of chairperson doing so) demonstrates the character defects of arrogance and dominance.

☑ Referring to "you" rather than "I" as the subject may come across as controlling, as the self-appointed proselytizer avoids placing a focus on oneself.

☑ Interrupting someone by requesting their name ("And your name is…?") violates the tradition of anonymity.

☑ Being bossy or bullying is the worst form of cross-talk and dominance.

2. The following examples of dominance have been taken from *How to Find a Good Speaker* (Doverspike, 2023, p. 5):

Dominance includes some of the following **specific** examples:

☑ Attempting to run the meeting (except when one is the designated chairperson for that meeting)

☑ Monopolizing a meeting by talking too often, too long, or too loud

☑ Double-dipping (or sharing more than once) before all others in the meeting have had a chance to share

☑ Attempting to change the format of a meeting without a Group Conscience

☑ Making a suggestion more than once during a Group Conscience meeting

☑ Trying to control what others decide during a Group Conscience meeting

☑ Correcting someone during a meeting (unless done by the chairperson in accord with the Group Conscience)

☑ Interrupting someone during a meeting (unless done by the designated Time-keeper in accord with the Group Conscience)

☑ Volunteering to be the Chairperson or Speaker so often that others don't have the chance to do so

☑ Making the same announcement at every meeting when everyone present already knows what the self-appointed announcer will say

3. The following examples of gossip have been taken from *How to Find a Good Speaker* (Doverspike, 2023, p. 5):

Gossip includes some of the following **specific** examples:

☑ Focusing on alcoholics or addicts rather than focusing on ourselves results in externalization of blame and diffusion of personal responsibility.

☑ Talking about others who are not in the room rather than sharing about ourselves results in reduced intimacy during the meeting.

☑ Sharing something that someone said in another meeting results in erosion of trust (i.e., How can others trust that their disclosures will be kept private?).

☑ Breaking someone's anonymity by identifying them by name, occupation, or reputation violates anonymity.

4. The following examples of inappropriate topics have been taken from *How to Find a Good Speaker* (Doverspike, 2023, p. 5):

Discussions of religion, professions, outside publications, other philosophies, and other 12-Step programs include some of the following **specific** examples:

☑ Discussing specific religious beliefs may inhibit, offend, or estrange others who do not subscribe to those beliefs.

☑ Imposing or proselytizing one's beliefs demonstrates attempts at control, dominance, and disrespect for the beliefs of others in the meeting.

☑ Discussing one's education, occupation, or profession violates one's anonymity and may create a hierarchical rather than egalitarian culture in the meeting.

☑ Discussing one's involvement in another 12-Step fellowship may confuse newcomers, bore old-timers, and defuse the focus on the present fellowship.

☑ Discussing one's counseling or psychotherapy may confuse newcomers, bore old-timers, and blur boundaries.

☑ Discussing one's ADD, OCD, or PTSD detracts from the spiritual program and suggests that the member may not be spending enough time with their therapist.

☑ Discussing one's medications suggests that the member may not be spending enough time discussing with their prescribing professional.

5. Using the Obstacles as Incentives

The following examples illustrate how awareness of the obstacles to success can be used as incentives to take actions that lead to success. Using the word "I" as a reminder to take personal responsibility, there are several ways the obstacles can be used as reminders to engage in positive actions. Taken from the article *How to Find a Good Speaker* (Doverspike, 2023, p. 6), the order of the following examples corresponds to the order of the obstacles discussed in the present article:

Crosstalk vs. Inclusivity

☑ I can use the pronoun *I* rather than *you* when I share myself with others.
☑ I can avoid *you* as the subject of a sentence, because it can sound like an indictment.
☑ I can speak to the group when I am part of a group.

☑ I can share what I do, but not what I think you should do.

☑ I can avoid giving advice, unless I am specifically asked for it.

☑ I can remind myself that side conversations exclude others.

☑ I can avoid correcting others when they make mistakes, unless it is in my role.

Dominance vs. Humility

☑ I can practice letting go.

☑ I can avoid giving advice.

☑ I can avoid interrupting others.

☑ I can keep my suggestions short.

☑ I can remember to listen and learn.

☑ I can avoid talking too much or too long.

☑ I can respect silence so that others can have time to share.

☑ I can respect silence so that others can have time to think.

☑ I can remember to say, "You may be right" (outside of a meeting).

☑ I can avoid bragging about service I've done.

☑ I can make a suggestion once and then let go of the outcome.

☑ I can avoid correcting others, unless it's part of my role as a Chair or Director.

☑ I can make it explicit when I am invested in advocating for an agenda or outcome.

Gossip vs. Anonymity, Intimacy, and Privacy

☑ I can focus only on the people in the room.

☑ I can keep the focus on myself and not others.

☑ I can avoid talking about others in a negative manner.

☑ I can ask myself: "What is the purpose of my disclosure?"

☑ I can ask myself: "What would I say if they were listening?"

☑ I can avoid forwarding a member's email that is not intended for others (outside of a meeting).

☑ I can avoid sending a blind copy of an email reply—except to myself (outside of a meeting).

Discussion of Religions vs. Spirituality

☑ I can stay on task at board meetings and committee meetings.

☑ I can avoid going off on tangents during my sharing in meetings.

☑ I can live my beliefs rather than impose them on others.

☑ I can live my faith in action rather than talk about it.

☑ I can focus on my relationship with God rather than talk about my religion.

☑ Atheists can focus on spirituality rather than brag about their atheism.

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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.

Resources

The following material was taken from page 4 of the Connecticut Area 7 *Newsletter for Al-Anon & Alateen* (2015):

As part of their opening format, some meetings read the following statement on cross talk.

No Cross Talk Please!

Cross Talk is: talking out of turn; advice giving; questioning the person who is sharing; holding private conversations; having an individual comment on everyone's sharing; and being discourteous and intimidating. If you want to speak on what you hear, speak of your own recovery only, addressing a topic with "I" instead of "You."

All Al-Anon discussions should be constructive, helpful, loving, and understanding. In striving towards these ideals, we avoid topics that can lead to dissension and distract us from our goals, including discussions of religion, other philosophies, programs, nonconference approved literature, therapies, or gossip.

Please remember that we have no cross talk in our meeting, which means we do not interrupt, criticize, or give advice, nor do we comment directly on another member's share, ever keeping the focus on ourselves.
(Connecticut Area 7, 2015, p. 4)

Connecticut Area 7. (2015, December). No cross talk please! *Lifeline: Newsletter for Al-Anon & Alateen*.
https://www.ctalanon.org/images/lifeline/web_lifeline_dec-2015.pdf

References

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1961, 1964). *Alcoholism, the family disease* [Brochure, P-4]. New York, NY: The Clearing House.

Author and historian Gary Neidhardt has a third printing of *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* [P-4] that carries the copyright date of 1961. On the copyright page of the original pamphlet, there appears this statement: "Parts of this booklet were reprinted from Triple A Family Group and Alcoholics the Family Disease." The original pamphlet is physically smaller than the latest (2005) version. Bill W's quote "A person who makes no mistakes usually does not make anything" does not appear in the 1961 original, although the quote is contained in a 1972 version (G. Neidhardt, personal communication, October 03, 2020).

The original 1961 edition is physically smaller in size than the 2005 pamphlet, which was published by Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters in Virginia Beach. The 2005 edition has a section titled "The Three Obstacles to Success." This passage has helped many groups to resolve group problems. Listed in the order in which they appear in the pamphlet, the three obstacles include discussion of religion, gossip, and dominance (which includes giving advice and cross-talk). These three obstacles are also listed on page 22 of the *2018-2021 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. 2018). They are also listed on pages 20-21 of the *2022–2025 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* [P24/27].

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (1991). *40 years: Sharing the vision* [Conference Theme]. Al-Anon Family Groups World Service Conference. Stamford, CT: https://al-anon.org/pdf/P46_1991_web.pdf

This 71-page document contains the proceedings of the 1991 Al-Anon Family Groups World Service Conference held on April 29 to May 4, 1991 in Stamford, Connecticut.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2010). *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual (2010-2013)*. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. Page 24.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2018). *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual (2018-2021)*. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. Page 24.

"The group conscience requests that all present refrain from gossip, dominance, and the discussion of religion, treatment centers, self-help programs, counseling and the use or mention of material other than our Al-Anon conference approved literature" (Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual, 2018, p. 25).

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2005). *Alcoholism, the family disease* [P-4]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. Page 22.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2022, March 25). *2022-2025 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* [P-24/27]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. Pages 20–21. https://al-anon.org/pdf/P2427_online.pdf

This 2022-2025 edition of the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (P-24/27) replaces any previous editions. Page 20 contains a section titled "The Three Obstacles to Success" and page 21 lists in the order in which they appear in the pamphlet. The three obstacles include Discussion of Religion, Gossip, and Dominance (which includes giving advice and cross-talk). With regard to avoiding discussions of religion, "Al-Anon is not allied with any sect or denomination. It is a spiritual program, based on no particular form of religion" (p. 21). With regard to gossip, "Careless repeating of matters heard at meetings can defeat the very purposes for which we are joined together" (p. 21). With regard to avoiding attempts to control or dominate others, "No member of Al-Anon should direct, assume authority, or give advice" (p. 21). This passage has helped many groups to resolve group problems. These three obstacles are also listed in a section by the same name in pamphlet titled *Alcoholism, The Family Disease* (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 2005).

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2005). *Alcoholism, the family disease* [P-4]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

Here are some interesting facts about one of the first Al-Anon pamphlets published as Conference Approved Literature (CAL) in 1961: The pamphlet was originally a booklet developed by Harold Black, a non-member, with the participation of members of the Prestonsburg, Kentucky Al-Anon group in 1953. The Clearing House (Al-Anon's first World Service Office) distributed this pre-CAL version until 1961. In July 1961, when groups received a summary of the first World Service Conference, they also received copies of the first two pieces designated as Conference Approved Literature: *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* (P-4) and *The Twelve Steps and Traditions* (P-17). The new version of *Alcoholism, the Family Disease* (P-4) was "a happy merger from the Literature Committee" that combined new material developed by the Literature Committee with the title and some sections from the Kentucky group, and additional content from the *Triple A Family Groups* booklet from Arizona. When first printed, the "Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon" was titled, "Three Enemies of Al-Anon." The pamphlet was revised in 2005 to include an adult child's story that had been removed from *Al-Anon Sharings from Adult Children* (P-4) when that pamphlet was revised.

Comment from Clara: Literature was not CAL until 1961 before being named The Word Service Office then it was the Clearing House. The first CAL approved literature was "Alcoholism, the Family Disease" and the Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions. Before revision The Three Obstacles To Success were Three Enemies To Success.

Source: Al-Anon Family Groups. (2021) *Alcoholism, the family disease (P-4) -Happy 60th anniversary.* https://al-anon.org/blog/alcoholism-the-family-disease-p-4-happy-60th-anniversary/

Connecticut Area 7. (2015, December). No cross talk please! *Lifeline: Newsletter for Al-Anon & Alateen.* https://www.ctalanon.org/images/lifeline/web_lifeline_dec-2015.pdf

Doverspike, W. F. (2023, July 15). *How to find a good speaker.* *http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_find_a_good_speaker.pdf*

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Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Al-Anon: Three Obstacles to Success.," Sept. 01, 2024. http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/

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