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Living with the Family Disease of Alcoholism

“When I first dragged myself into the rooms of Al-Anon, I discovered that alcoholics had three choices: institutions, death, or recovery. I had the same three options. I chose recovery. I didn’t like the alternatives.”

Living with alcoholism can feel like we're in a constant state of mourning. We may have become so adept at living with loss that we go about our days unaware of its presence. When we admit that our lives are affected by someone else's drinking, we are also admitting our grief. Because alcoholism is a family disease, all members of the family are affected, not just the alcoholic. Each person reacts in his or her own way in response to the alcoholic environment. One may try to control, while another may deny there's even a problem. Others will blame themselves.

Before Al-Anon, we kept ourselves busy seeking solutions for the alcoholic. When what we were trying to accomplish wasn't succeeding, we told ourselves to work harder or to try something else. We may even have told ourselves it was our fault if we couldn't convince the alcoholic to get sober. If we could only find the right words at the right time, relayed in just the right tone of voice, then maybe we could get the alcoholic to see things our way. Desperate to fulfill our dreams for a happy family life, we thought that devoting all our energy to the problem was the answer. Little did we know we were actually contributing to the problem by trying to force solutions.

In Al-Anon we learn that we didn't cause the alcoholism in our lives, we can't control it, and we can't cure it. If we're trying to force solutions, we can remember "Easy Does It." Though we can't expect our lives to always be easy, this slogan suggests that everything doesn't have to be so hard all the time either. "Easy Does It" reminds us to be gentle with ourselves. We don't have to try harder or do better. We have tried long and hard enough. Though we may not be able to change the alcoholic, we discover there is one person we can change—ourselves.

A disease of losses

"My first husband died an alcoholic, but I didn't grieve his death so much as I grieved our failed relationship and my dreams of love, happiness, and 'til death do us part' that

hadn't come true. I grieved with anger, resentment, and the 'why me's' for years, not understanding that the disease of alcoholism had been the real problem. This disease ended our relationship and my husband's life."

The effects of alcoholism permeate our relationships and can complicate our grief. We mourn for ourselves, for our dreams, and for our families. If we have young children, they may already be experiencing the consequences of growing up in an alcoholic home. Even if our children are no longer living with active alcoholism, their lives continue to be affected. They may withdraw, blame themselves, struggle at school, or act out in negative ways. Our grown children may also be carrying the painful burden of the family disease into their adult lives. The very qualities that once helped them survive can later cause problems in relationships with family, friends, and coworkers. They might have trouble making decisions. They might struggle with fear and anxiety, or have difficulty maintaining intimate relationships. They often marry alcoholics or become alcoholics themselves.

Living day-to-day with alcoholism damages our self-esteem. By the time we come to Al-Anon, we may feel like we have lost ourselves. It is admirable to be considerate and attentive to the needs of others, but not at the expense of our own well-being. Little by little, we may have neglected our own needs and instead gave all our love, care, and attention to others. We may not be entirely sure how we got to this point.

"I recognized I had not only lost what control I thought I had, but I had lost myself. The very addiction I wanted to end was being fueled by my behavior. Al-Anon has helped me see the part I played in the nightmare I had been living in and gave me the tools to help me wake up and start living life on life's terms, not mine. Today, I can look in the mirror and know I am reclaiming what once had been lost—myself."

Changing the dynamics of our relationships

In Al-Anon we learn how to set boundaries, to say yes when we mean yes, and no when we mean no. We no longer give to others out of obligation, control, or fear, but because we want to give. Once we begin to take better care of ourselves, we can begin to give to others in healthier ways.

Recognizing our part in the alcoholic relationship is a crucial component of our recovery. Before we can make positive changes, we must first become aware of the dynamics of the relationship and the role we've been playing. Perhaps we were enablers who rescued or made excuses for the alcoholic. Or we may have seen ourselves as victims, helpless to change our circumstances. Maybe our role was to accept all the blame for the alcoholic's drinking or bad behavior, apologizing for anything that went wrong. Some of our conduct made a bad situation worse.

We examine our role in the family disease not to blame ourselves, but rather to deepen our understanding and compassion for those parts of ourselves we want to change. We cannot break our old patterns without such understanding. Rather than continuing to feel responsible for others, we begin to take responsibility for ourselves and our own actions. We did the best we could at the time with the resources we had, but now that we are aware, we can see another way. As we apply the principles of our program to our day-to-day lives, we begin to respond to situations differently than we had in the past. We give up our illusions of control and our belief that we can change the alcoholic or force sobriety.

As we begin to change, so too will our relationships—not just with the alcoholic, but with everyone around us. In any relationship, when one person changes, the entire relationship is altered. Just as we have been affected by the family disease of alcoholism, those around us will be affected by our recovery as we begin to heal. Even though we may want a change in our relationship, the change itself can be a loss.

Not everyone will be happy about the new changes in us—including ourselves at times. We may reminisce about how things used to be and may even try to convince ourselves that things weren't so bad before recovery. We can expect a temporary period of upset or increased crisis at this time. This doesn't mean we should go back to the way things were, though we may be feeling pressure to do so. Positive changes don't always feel right at first. On those days when going back may seem easier, we can trust that our Higher Power has guided us to this point in our lives. We are precisely where we need to be.

Coping with uncertainty and crisis

When living with active alcoholism, life can sometimes feel like nothing more than one crisis after another. In fact, we can become so accustomed to living in crisis mode that we feel uneasy if we're not in the midst of chaos. When faced with a crisis or traumatic event, many of us became skilled at putting our feelings on hold. Often what we felt came second to managing the crisis. Gradually we may have lost touch with our ability to honor our feelings. Our first impulse may be to react immediately instead of pausing to consider our options. We might tend to perceive minor incidents as major catastrophes.

As we gain more insight, we learn at AI-Anon meetings how to respond differently than we did in the past. We can take a moment to consider our feelings, even in the midst of a crisis. Our slogan "Think" reminds us there are few situations that demand an immediate response from us. We can give ourselves some time—even if it's only a few minutes—to consider how we would like to handle the situation. Rather than simply reacting out of old habits, we find that by examining our feelings, we can better handle any crisis that comes our way. When we stop to "Think" before we act, we are more likely to make decisions that are in our own best interest.

If things at home seem to be falling apart, we can at least attend a meeting where we can be in a place of peace, surrounded by the loving support and comfort of other members. The simple act of going to a meeting can be an act of caring, and the benefits of taking time for ourselves can go a long way.

“Day-by-day, week-by-week, I’m finding bits and pieces of serenity that had been so elusive for so many years. With time, I trust that those pieces will grow as I put the Al-Anon principles to work in my life. I’ve seen and learned enough to believe that this program will take me where I’m meant to go, free me from my misery, and restore my love for life.”

After admitting our powerlessness in Step One, we are becoming ready to let a Higher Power intervene on our behalf. In taking Step Two, we come to believe a Power greater than ourselves can restore our sanity. These Steps offer hope even in the midst of despair.

Whatever our definition of a Higher Power may be, the one thing most of us have in common is our desire for a more serene life. This can mean different things for each of us. For some, it might mean stepping out of our customary roles and learning how to respond differently to our alcoholic families. For others, it could mean making a commitment to take better care of ourselves and to cultivate healthier relationships with people who love and accept us for who we are.

When faced with the next crisis, we may feel uncertain about our decision to respond differently. If we focus on taking care of ourselves, who will take care of everyone else? We can remind ourselves that in practicing any new behavior, we may feel tentative at first; but the more we practice, the easier it becomes. Eventually we realize that we weren’t really in control of anyone else to begin with.

Moving out of chaos

Some of us are so accustomed to living with chaos, it's difficult to imagine our lives without it. Just as the alcoholic has become dependent upon alcohol, we can become dependent upon the chaos. Up until now, we may not have had much experience with serenity. Even when things are going well, we may unconsciously look for ways to sabotage ourselves by creating a crisis. If we feel even remotely peaceful, we may fear it is the calm before the storm. We wait in anxious anticipation that something is about to go wrong. Though this may not feel good, it feels familiar and comfortable. The last thing we want is to be caught off guard and unprepared. Our constant focus on crisis situations—whether real, anticipated, or self-created—ultimately keeps us from focusing on ourselves.

The only way some of us got any attention from our families or friends was when we were in the midst of a crisis. This may have reinforced our belief that we were only worthy of comfort when we were emotional wrecks. It may have taken these repeated encounters with crisis and chaos to get us into the rooms of Al-Anon. Many of us arrive feeling mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausted. Al-Anon may feel like a last resort. But it is here we learn that we don't have to wait until we are completely worn-out or fed-up to give ourselves the attention we deserve.

If we feel shame over the chaos in our lives, we may find it difficult to share what we're going through with others, particularly those closest to us. Not everyone in our lives will be familiar with the effects of alcoholism. Those around us may wonder why we don't do something more drastic to change our circumstances. In Al-Anon we are relieved to find that others can hear our pain without giving advice.

Our relationship with a Sponsor can also be extremely helpful as we learn to focus on ourselves. Our Sponsor is someone who has made a commitment to walk beside us on our recovery jour-

ney, someone who can help us as we learn to apply the principles of the program to our lives. This one-on-one relationship built on mutual respect allows us to share our personal stories and struggles in more detail.

Prayer and meditation have saved many of us from the obsession and worry that so often accompany a crisis. When we are in the middle of chaos, it can be difficult to stop and take time out to meditate. One simple prayer that has helped so many of us is the Serenity Prayer. It's easy to memorize, and repeating it can have a calming effect, especially if we're in the midst of a crisis:

*God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

In this simple prayer, the first thing we ask of our Higher Power is the gift of serenity. We ask not for our situation to change, but rather for the power to change how we respond to the situation. This request indicates our desire for peace of mind, for our Higher Power to show us another way to respond. In taking the time to recite this prayer, we are allowing our minds to focus on something else, even if just for a moment. It is possible to find serenity, even in the midst of chaos. We don't have to live in a state of constant vigilance. With the help of Al-Anon, today we have a choice.

Living with chronic illness due to alcoholism

Alcoholism is a three-fold disease: physical, emotional, and spiritual. Long-term alcohol abuse can take its toll on the alcoholic and can lead to chronic illness. But chronic illness due to prolonged drinking does not just affect the active alcoholic. Those who have been sober for years can also be affected. Even before our loved one's illness became a reality, many of us dreaded the

day we might receive such news. A medical crisis could serve as a wake-up call for the alcoholic and can often be the motivation to seek recovery. For others, healthcare professionals have repeatedly warned our loved one of potential health problems, only to have those warnings ignored or denied.

It pains us to see our loved one continue drinking, despite those warnings of impending sickness or even death. Daily we fear for the health of our loved one, and we may feel as if we are witnessing a slow suicide. We find it difficult not to project what might go wrong tomorrow, or what will be required of us if our loved one becomes physically ill. Some of us may have promised ourselves we would leave if the drinking were to become unbearable. But if our loved one becomes sick, we may not want to leave or feel that we can.

Some of us have no support network until we come to Al-Anon. Constantly tending to the alcoholic may have left us with little time to nurture relationships with family or friends. When dealing with the onset of an illness, we may feel we have nowhere to turn. Al-Anon can give us the support and encouragement that's been missing from our lives.

"I felt at home in Al-Anon from the start. Having a supportive place for me was a new experience. It was like a warm, comforting blanket enveloping me. I was surprised to find that the other members were just like me."

With so much of our attention going to the alcoholic, we may have left little or none for ourselves. The continual monitoring of others can make us sick. Unintentionally, we may start neglecting our basic needs, such as eating properly, exercising, spending time alone, or engaging in activities we enjoy. In Al-Anon we learn that we are worthy of the same quality of care we offer others.

If we are caring for a loved one who is chronically ill, we may need to remind ourselves daily to take care of ourselves too. Getting to extra meetings, taking an evening for ourselves, or meeting our Sponsor or an Al-Anon friend for coffee are just a

few ways we can get some nurturing and support. When we can't get to a meeting or talk with our Sponsor, we can turn to our literature, which is always available to us. We may be surprised to find that reading just one or two pages can help us feel less alone. Though chronic illness may continue to be a daily companion in our lives, we can remind ourselves that so too is the Al-Anon program.

Anticipatory grief

Anticipating the next thing that could go wrong is all too common for those of us who live or have lived with alcoholism. We fear getting a phone call in the middle of the night telling us our loved one has been in a car accident. Or we worry whether the alcoholic will fly into a violent rage upon returning home. All sorts of tragic scenarios may run through our heads on any given day. We may fear that the drinking will continue, resulting in misery and heartache for us.

Living with the fear of what might happen can be emotional static. It occupies our minds and blocks us from moving forward. We may be watching our loved one die a slow death before our eyes. Even if our loved one finds sobriety, we may be surprised to find out that our anxiety and fear have not left us. Unresolved resentments and new fears that the alcoholic will relapse can quickly take the place of our previous worries.

“Keep It Simple” reminds us to look at what is actually happening, rather than what might happen. Sometimes a genuine crisis will demand our attention and force us to act immediately. More often than not, we can let go of our sense of urgency. We can take a breath or two, ask our Higher Power for guidance, and decide calmly what step to take next.

Fear is an instinct that often alerts us to danger. In Al-Anon we learn how to practice living in the moment and letting go of our

fears about the future. Before we can do this, we must acknowledge how our former way of life has affected us. For many of us, anticipating what could go wrong may have helped us survive. Staying alert to our environment and the mood of the alcoholic may have protected us from dangerous situations.

Constantly anticipating the next violent episode makes it difficult to find time to reflect on our choices. Some of us have found that time apart from the alcoholic helped us discern what steps to take in order to turn our lives around for the better. If we are living with violence, we may need to seek professional help or make immediate choices to ensure our welfare and the safety of our children. We do not have to tolerate abusive behavior. If necessary, we can leave. Whatever we decide, Al-Anon will be there to support us. Many of us have found that as we apply the Al-Anon principles, solutions come to us that we couldn't have seen on our own—no matter how much thinking we did.

Once we become aware of our propensity toward fear and worry, we can begin to take steps to change our attitudes. In Step Four, we make a “searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” By applying this Step to our fear and worry, we gain insights that might otherwise go unexamined. In this Step, we can reflect on what might be preventing us from letting go of our anxiety. We can thank our fears for protecting us and ask our Higher Power to remove them.

As many of us can attest, giving ourselves over to stress, anxiety, and worry doesn't make our lives any easier. “One Day at a Time” reminds us that we can handle most situations for a 24-hour period. Putting this slogan into practice can be especially helpful as we strive to manage our fear and worry. If we think about any endeavor in terms of forever, it will seem insurmountable—but “Just for Today” we can handle almost anything.

The quality of our recovery depends so much upon our changed attitudes. The alcoholics in our lives may or may not get sober.

They may continue to drink despite their failing health, and despite our trying to convince them to change. But we don't have to give up on ourselves. Al-Anon reminds us that we do have choices, even when it seems like we don't. Though we may not be able to abolish our fears altogether, we don't have to let them control us. We no longer have to submit to a life full of fear, apprehension, and anxiety.

The gift of detachment

In Al-Anon we hear a lot about detaching with love. Nevertheless, we may find this particularly difficult to do while we are suffering a sense of loss. We may have been so accustomed to exerting our will and energy trying to make things better, it may now seem like we're being asked to do nothing or to stop caring. It can help to remember that when we detach, we are putting in our Higher Power's care that person, place, or thing we cannot control and never had control of in the first place.

Detaching may simply mean taking a moment to decide how we want to respond, rather than immediately reacting. It may mean not taking everything the alcoholic says or does personally. Detaching with love means that we can hate the disease of alcoholism, yet still feel compassion for the alcoholic. We can let them know we love them, even though we don't love the actions they are taking.

"Let Go and Let God" can help us as we begin to practice loving detachment. Admitting we are powerless doesn't mean we are helpless. We can still take positive action by praying for the alcoholic and ourselves, by respecting ourselves and setting limits. Detaching with love doesn't mean we stop loving the alcoholic, nor does it imply passivity on our part. On the contrary, detachment is a powerful act of love—for us and the alcoholic.

“I placed my husband in God’s hands where he has a much better chance at a sober life.”

Members share experience, strength, and hope: Living with the family disease of alcoholism

I walked into my first Al-Anon meeting because I was in so much fear that my spouse would die from the disease of alcoholism. I wasn’t able to sleep at night because this was all I could think and dream about. My grief would come at any moment of the day, and I would suddenly find myself crying. This worried me because I had always been a happy and positive person. Because of the disease, I started to become mean and isolated. I didn’t want to have friends and didn’t want to talk to anyone.

Al-Anon changed my life. When I shared my fears of the alcoholic’s death, people listened. Soon I found that I didn’t have anything more to say about my fears. I started listening to others. People seemed to be happy. There was laughter at meetings. So I kept coming back. I began to work the program and to ask my Higher Power for help. Eventually my anger and fear of losing my spouse lifted. My favorite slogan is “Let Go and Let God.” This helps me keep the focus on myself and helps me mind my own business. As for my feelings of loss, I know now that I can feel these feelings, but I can also go on living.

I came to Al-Anon to try and stop my mom from drinking herself to death. As her firstborn child and only son, I felt a strong sense of responsibility for her. By the grace of my Higher Power and the help I received from the program, by the time she did die, I had been in Al-Anon for 20 years. Neither of us were the same as when I first joined.

The last years of my mom’s life were sober, but not without health problems. Many of them were probably caused or worsened

by her drinking years. I became her primary caregiver. Fortunately by then, I had learned the difference between caregiving and caretaking. Nonetheless, there were times when I struggled with my role. Why was I the one who was relied on most of the time? Why weren't my siblings doing more of their fair share? Shouldn't I be taking care of myself instead of once again looking after my mom, as I had as a child during the drinking?

Ultimately the answer I arrived at was that it was my *choice* to care for her. It didn't matter if anyone else was doing it, because when I really thought about it, I knew I wanted to be there with her. Giving care to her—through the convalescent home stays, the hospital visits, and the first days back home recuperating—was also a way of giving to myself. I knew that eventually there would come a day when I would give anything in the world to have even one more minute with her, and that it would no longer be possible.

Giving myself that time with my mother was a special gift that I now look back on with gratitude and love. Thanks to Al-Anon, I could pay attention to my despair and frustration as the daily caregiving wore on me and take little breaks when possible. But I could also enjoy each moment—"One Day at a Time"—that I still had with her. As a result, I have had no regrets, knowing that in my actions I was being true to myself as well as to my mom.

When my husband went into a treatment program, I experienced living alone for the first time in 27 years. Everything seemed so much harder—walking the dog alone, paying the bills, mowing the lawn. I'd always considered myself a competent woman, but these ordinary jobs made me feel incompetent and insecure. I feared that if I didn't return from my walk, no one would miss me. When I paid the bills, I felt overwhelmed by how much money we spent each month. One day, after numerous failed attempts to start the lawn mower, I stood in the garage fighting back tears of frustration. It was then I knew I needed to ask for help.

When my husband returned home, he was a different man—very fragile and anxious—and I realized that our relationship would have to change. I worried about burdening him even more with my issues. He then told me that at the treatment center he had replaced drinking with smoking. I was shocked and terrified. He had quit smoking 15 years earlier when his doctor told him he wouldn't live to see 50 if he didn't. I felt overwhelmed again by his decision.

In Al-Anon I've learned to stay in the day. Every day I remind myself to be grateful for the good life I have. I do have a sober husband who loves me, and I do have today, which is as good as I choose to make it. If I dwell in those dark places of fear and apprehension, I miss out on opportunities for joy.

My grief and loss started three years before my husband's death, when he became a full-blown alcoholic. I felt the loss of doing fun things together, and for the way our lives used to be. Being blamed for everything—especially “driving him to drink”—turned into madness on my part. What could I do to stop this? My oldest son dragged me to Al-Anon, and what an awakening I had. I learned that I didn't cause my husband's alcoholism. He was a very sick man whom I could neither help nor cure. With Al-Anon's help, I became somewhat happy again. I found that I wasn't alone in this sad situation. My husband died of a massive heart attack while I was walking our dog. It was hard on me, but with Al-Anon, I got through it. Now, I can even remember our happy times together, and I know my husband is in a better place.

By the time I came to Al-Anon, I had lost most of what was near and dear to my heart. My wife's drinking had gotten worse. She had been in and out of rehab and only continued to relapse. I saw no way out of the situation. I was unable to see my part in all

this chaos and didn't think I needed any help with what I felt was her problem. I couldn't see how sick I had become—so filled with anxiety and resentment. When my wife agreed to attend an out-of-town rehab, I thought my troubles would be over.

After she left, I felt a tremendous sense of loss. I wasn't sure if she was ever coming back, and I had no one to take care of anymore. I had spent so many years focused on saving her that I had lost who I was. Soon after, my mother took her own life. She had also struggled with alcoholism, and it became too much for her. The loss was more than I could have imagined. I was out of answers.

Then I remembered that my wife had suggested Al-Anon to me on several occasions. I finally surrendered and went to my first meeting—apprehensive, but willing to listen. What a surprise! People were laughing and smiling, some with even worse problems than mine. I made a commitment to try six meetings, and I've been going ever since. As I began to read the literature and talk to other members, I started to see that I was not responsible for my wife's drinking. She had her own Higher Power and her own path to follow.

What kept me sane and coming back that first year was "Progress Not Perfection." I used to feel I always had to be perfect, but in Al-Anon no one expected perfection from me. Today I turn to my Higher Power, recognizing that I'm no longer in charge. I have a Sponsor and work the Steps to the best of my ability. My life has gotten better and my wife came back. We have recovery in our home today. I couldn't imagine three years ago that I would be where I am today. I have Al-Anon and my Higher Power to thank for that. I lost my mother to this disease, and I almost lost my wife, but I have gained peace of mind and serenity.

Questions for reflection and meditation

- Am I still focused on finding help for the alcoholic in my life in a way that might take my focus off my own recovery?
- If I am caring for a chronically ill alcoholic, what are my own needs and how can I get them met?
- If there were a legitimate crisis occurring in my life today, what Al-Anon tools might help me deal with it constructively?
- In what ways have I ever created or contributed to a crisis situation?
- If there is a particular loss I fear will happen in the future, why does this potential loss attract my attention so strongly?