

The beginning: Al-Anon Family Groups comes to be

Just as A.A. was founded on the power of alcoholics helping other alcoholics to recover from alcoholism, Al-Anon pioneers discovered the power of family members, friends and associates of alcoholics to help each other recover from the effects that alcoholism had on their own lives.

A.A. in its early days was a family affair. A.A. meetings were initially held in member's homes, and the family members (most often but not exclusively wives, and often including children) either joined the meetings with the alcoholics, or gathered together in the kitchen or other rooms and shared with each other while the alcoholics had their meeting. Later, when A.A. in New York acquired a clubhouse and began having meetings that were exclusively for alcoholics, family members would congregate together in another room, sharing their stories and experiences with each other. Members of these "family groups" often discovered they reaped personal benefits from living by A.A.'s Twelve Steps, including improvement in their family relationships, which often remained troubled even after the alcoholic became sober.

Bill and Lois were childless; Lois had suffered ectopic pregnancies and was subsequently unable to have children, and their application to adopt a child had been denied due to Bill's alcoholism. As Bill threw himself into working to help other alcoholics, Lois found their home perpetually full of alcoholics, some sober and some still drinking. One alcoholic guest committed suicide in their home after pawning Lois and Bill's clothes to settle his gambling debts. Much of the time that Lois had hoped to spend with her now-sober husband was instead spent at meetings or otherwise without Bill. Lois was grateful for Bill's sobriety and wanted to support him as she felt a good wife should, but she found herself frustrated, unhappy, feeling like she had failed at "her job" of sobering up Bill; and full of self pity, hurt pride, and resentment. Lois's "bottom" came when, in response to Bill's asking her if she was ready to go to a meeting with him, she threw a shoe at him and yelled, "Damn your old meetings." Lois realized that her own life had become unmanageable, and she realized she needed help. Lois made a decision to "strive for my own spiritual growth." In doing so, Lois used many of the principles of A.A. to change her own attitudes.

While grateful for what A.A. was doing for their now-sober loved ones, many family members experienced frustration that things were not as they imagined they would be when their loved one got sober. As family members shared their thoughts with each other, they discovered they had problems, feelings, and experiences in common. Some expressed their frustrations in letters to the "Grapevine," A.A.'s magazine. Some experienced what Lois called "the stirrings of their own regeneration" and embraced the principles of the A.A. program, trying to practice them in their own lives. They discovered that living by A.A.'s Twelve Steps helped themselves, often improved family relationships, and in some cases seemed to encourage an actively drinking alcoholic to engage in A.A. Informal "Family Groups" for wives and other family members began to form, often holding weekly

meetings. Some of these groups met specifically to support an A.A. group by providing refreshments or other support; some met for their own spiritual development.

In 1943, Bill and Lois traveled around the U.S. and met with many family groups. Lois often spoke at open A.A. meetings and at family teas and luncheons, describing how personally beneficial it was for her to live by the spiritual principles of A.A. Anne S., (Dr. Bob's wife) did not travel as extensively as Lois, but prior to her death in 1949 she contributed to the foundation of what would later become Al-Anon Family Groups through her own work with family members.

In 1949, a California Family Group member, Ruth G., started a twelve-page monthly magazine called "the Family Forum," for family members of alcoholics. This formed the first connection between family groups in the USA and later abroad, and eventually evolved into Al-Anon's monthly magazine, the "Forum."

In 1950, Bill W. returned from an extensive visit with A.A. groups in the U.S.A. and Canada with the suggestion that Lois open a service office in New York to connect the increasing number of family groups. The office would allow family groups to register, receive literature, and become more unified, as well as provide a central locus for information dissemination and a place for desperate family members to go to for help. Lois was initially reluctant; she was around 60 years of age at this time, she and Bill had only recently acquired their new home, "Stepping Stones," in Bedford Hills, New York, and Lois wanted time to enjoy having a home and garden of their own. However, the idea grew more intriguing to her, and after the A.A. General Service Conference in 1951, wives of several of the delegates met at Stepping Stones for lunch with other family group members. After this, Lois decided to open a service office for Family Groups. She asked her close friend Anne B. to help her. Anne was the wife of a chronically relapsing alcoholic, and had sought release from her fears and personal recovery from the effects of living with an alcoholic by starting a Family Group in Westchester County, New York.

Although "family groups" began forming as early as 1936, Al-Anon is considered to have begun in 1951 when these groups became unified. Working at Stepping Stones, Lois and Anne rented a post office box, and in May of 1951 they contacted a list of 87 family groups and individual family members who had written to the A.A. General Service Office, seeking their input on unifying the Family Groups and on selecting a name. 48 of these groups and individuals replied that they were interested in uniting in a fellowship and in having their own service office. Two Family Group pamphlets were written and printed, and periodic bulletins were sent to the groups. A meeting of local Family Group chairs and secretaries was held at Stepping Stones in 1951, and a service committee was elected to provide Anne and Lois with help and advice. In less than a year, the number of family groups grew from the original 48 to 200.



Lois W., co-founder of Al-Anon Family Groups and the wife of A.A.'s co-founder Bill W.



Anne S., one of the pioneers of the early "family groups" and the wife of A.A.'s co-founder Dr. Bob S.



Anne B., co-founder of Al-Anon Family Groups

Several of the family groups had developed Steps or guidelines of their own, but collectively the family groups recognized the strength of A.A.'s Twelve Steps, and requested permission from A.A. to adopt the Twelve Steps, changing only one word in the 12th Step ("carry this message to others" rather than "carry this message to alcoholics.") Permission was granted, and Al-Anon's Twelve Steps were born.

A.A. offered the use of a room at their club in New York City for family group volunteers to work, and in January 1952, the family group headquarters moved from Stepping Stones to the 24th Street A.A. clubhouse and became a "clearinghouse" for family group information. Al-Anon headquarters remained at this location until 1957, when it moved to 125 East 23rd Street. Members selected the name, "Al-Anon Family Groups" for their growing fellowship.