

Stories from the Forum magazine: November 2011

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Focusing on myself helped me heal

I grew up in chaos. My father drank—but what crushed my self-esteem was my mother's rage and anger towards my brother and me when my father left after their arguing. I learned early on to take care of myself and stay out of the way.

I became the responsible one in the home and as soon as I saw the opportunity, I fled. My body left the home, but my mind did not.

I came to Al-Anon about eight months after my brother died from choking on his own vomit while passed out from alcohol. I received the phone call to identify his body. He was 24 years old. I then had to notify my mother.

The funeral was extremely stressful for me. My parents were now divorced and still angry at one another. I felt very alone even though I now had a family of my own. I sought the help of a counselor. I was depressed, suicidal, and guilt-ridden. I truly believed that somehow, some way, I could have prevented this tragedy. I was supposed to take care of him and I failed.

Someone suggested that I try an Al-Anon meeting. My first meeting was extremely painful. I felt broken, embarrassed, and angry that I had all these meetings and work to do to get better. I truly wished for a different past all together but, that being impossible, I needed to prepare for my future.

Al-Anon is where I felt okay again. I learned to be responsible for my actions—and only my actions. I did the best I could with what I knew then and, thanks to Al-Anon, I know better now. I learned how to feel my feelings again.

I needed to teach myself the values acceptable for my life and to stop blaming my parents for their failings. It was here I was told, "We all are not perfect." I didn't have to try to be perfect anymore, what a relief.

So I decided to give God his job back!

I owe it to myself and to my children to be the healthiest person I can be. I believe we are all here for a purpose. I made it a purpose in my life to be happy and to learn from others who have walked this road before me. If I wanted things to change, I had to be willing to change my behaviors. In so many ways, I had come to act like the people I most wanted to change.

From listening to people speak at Al-Anon, I learned that healing could start if I focused on myself more and other people's actions less. The people in my life were going to act the way they acted if I was around or not. I had to give up my illusion of power and admit that my way isn't the only way.

I'll continue to come to meetings and reach out to members in the program because I'm a work in progress and God is not finished with me yet.

By Lisa M., Massachusetts
The Forum, November 2011

What I learned in my first year...

Finding out that the alcoholic was not the cause of my unhappiness was my first revelation in Al-Anon. Even though he had made me so unhappy, I discovered another window through which to view the situation. I took a good look at myself: at my attitude; my arrogance; my selfishness; and my lack of faith, prayer, and spirituality. Through that new window, I tried to take another look at all my life experiences.

I discovered the power of the written word on the mind: the slogans—brief yet so powerful; the literature, so useful in helping me to see my own defects and, at the same time, a tremendous tool of encouragement and connection to the fellowship.

I still have not truly learned the lesson of detachment but, most important, I've learned that detachment means to turn the focus on myself. Some times are harder than others not to feel sorry for myself because of the alcoholic. At times, it's a real challenge to react lovingly, and not coldly, but I am learning with the help and example of my Al-Anon family.

In our meetings, I was surprised, and moved, by the "thank you's" to one another. I am trying to remember to thank my Al-Anon family when they share. Being on the receiving end of "thank you" is very powerful.

I was introduced to the concept of doing God's will. Somehow, I missed this lesson in my upbringing. It was there, but I guess I did not heed it or really listen. I remember learning that we had a free will, but I guess my mind stopped listening at that point. I thought I could just do what I wanted; God had given me the green light.

I'm learning that to do God's will takes patience, just as growing in Al-Anon takes patience. My Al-Anon family members have all helped me on my road to patience. If I truly take the time to listen to their experience, strength, and hope, I will learn something about recovery. That lesson is not always immediate, but it usually comes.

The slogan "Progress Not Perfection" has helped me to keep moving forward, and to keep trying. These tools are such a gift because they give me hope that I can, and will recover. I must make the effort—over and over again.

I have learned the power of humor. Some situations involving my husband—where I first felt anxiety—were sometimes humorous in retrospect. I have loved to be a part of all the laughter that at times surfaces in these Al-Anon rooms.

I have often heard many of the members say that these rooms are filled with love. Then one day, I knew it to be true. I could feel the love. How did that happen? The members have been very courageous in sharing with me who they were, who they are now, and who they hope to become or continue to be, by practicing the principles of the program. They have given me the gift of being themselves, and this has helped me in my healing.

They have been my comforters. I, too, am learning that I must make the effort, be brave, and share about myself, because maybe something I've experienced and learned can also help someone else. In this sharing with one another, my Higher Power speaks to me. Tradition One talks about the common good, and I think part of that is my realization that I too must do my part in sharing who I am with my Al-Anon Family group.

Throughout my first year in Al-Anon, members have given me these words of wisdom:

- Surrender the problem to God.
- I don't have to react to what other people do.
- Knowing you have a choice is empowering.
- Give love; "Let It Begin with Me."
- Gratitude reduces fear.
- When you change the way you look at things, things you look at change.
- Consider what's in the hula-hoop and what's outside it.
- Relax—God is in charge.

I learned the importance of service. Once I started setting up for the meeting, reading the opening and closing, or choosing a topic for discussion, I really felt like I was a part of the fellowship. Service was the beginning in giving a little bit of myself and helping me feel more comfortable with the members of my Al-Anon family.

The spirituality of the Twelve Steps has helped melt my heart; it has helped me to be unafraid. It has helped me to accept my husband, as well as other people in my life. It has given me the means to maintain a positive attitude.

I have often heard many of the members say that they are grateful to the alcoholic who brought them to these rooms. I am not yet ready to say that I am grateful to the alcoholic. I know it would be my wish that he never had a problem with alcohol. Yet I know that in wishing that, I would have never walked into the Al-Anon rooms, and I probably would never have met the God of my understanding. Perhaps my reluctance to say it is a sign that I still have so much to work on. Perhaps it is a sign that I still have resentments. Should that time ever come where I can say I am grateful for the alcoholic in my life, I will celebrate that milestone with all the members of my Al-Anon home group!

Thank you for sharing in my first year anniversary!

By Catherine R., Connecticut
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A changed perspective led me to serenity

Last fall, I decided to visit my family for Thanksgiving. My decision thrilled my mother since I had declined the invitation numerous times in years past. This time, it felt like the right thing to do. I was ready.

I went home with an open, grateful heart—with no expectations and no lingering resentments. My visit was wonderful. I truly had a great time.

To welcome the New Year, I called both my adult siblings. I wanted to express how nice it was to see them and spend time with them and their families. After our conversation, it was hard to believe that we were all under the same roof during that visit. Why was their reaction so different than mine? Then I thought about perspective—my perspective.

I'd set out on that trip intending to enjoy myself, free from the past, determined to keep things in the present. The only thing I can conclude is that something has changed. I've changed. I'm not better than they are. I'm just different. I am no longer seeking out the negative, holding onto past hurts and resentments.

Today, I navigate in a new way. Just for today, I am willing to work from where I am. I feel more comfortable in my own skin; more accepting of people, places, things, events, and family dynamics for who and what we are. I try to keep the focus on myself and my perceptions. I work at asserting reasonable, healthy boundaries, taking with me a deliberate attitude of gratitude during visits home or when making those phone calls. I take what I like and leave the rest.

I'm so grateful to Al-Anon for having shown me a lighter, better way. The best part—I no longer seek to argue my perspective with others. I am better able to accept and appreciate others exactly where they are. I respect their individual points of view. After all, "How Important Is It?"

By Kimberley M., Michigan
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