

Your First Al-Anon Meeting

From "Love First: A New Approach To Intervention for Alcoholism and Drug Addiction"
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Making the decision to go to an Al-Anon meeting can be difficult for many people. Some people feel intimidated because they don't know what to expect. Others think they don't belong or believe they can handle things on their own. Still others insist that they don't have time or that it's the alcoholic's problem not theirs. And some are afraid they might run into someone they know. This is exactly how the alcoholic or addict is feeling about going to his first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Just about everyone resists going to their first meeting. Knowing what to expect can help you feel more comfortable. When you walk into an Al-Anon meeting, the first thing you'll notice is that the members look like people you see at the grocery store, your church, around your neighborhood, in school, and at work. You'll find homemakers, schoolteachers, shopkeepers, college students, nurses, business owners, electricians, doctors, computer programmers, artists, salespeople, lawyers, clerks, and the list goes on. You'll find retired people, young people, middle-aged people; the rich, poor, and middle class. You'll find people who've been going to Al-Anon for years and those coming for the first time. Despite individual backgrounds, everyone at Al-Anon comes because they have been affected by someone else's drinking. Everyone at the meeting shares a common problem.

Most Al-Anon meetings are held in churches, but they are also found in hospitals, office buildings, schools, and government facilities. Al-Anon is available most days of the week and holidays. There are morning, lunch, evening and weekend meetings. There are men's meetings, women's meetings, and mixed meetings. There are beginner's groups. Some Al-Anon meetings are paired with Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Most meetings are non-smoking. Some meetings offer child care. All meetings are anonymous and confidential.

When you walk into an Al-Anon meeting, look for a display of Al-Anon literature. Ask for the free packet of information for beginners. Some people prefer to listen without speaking during their first meeting; if you're invited to talk and you prefer not to, say "I'll pass." If you choose to speak, let people know it's your first meeting.

Before the meeting begins, a member will read the preamble to the Twelve Steps. This presents an overview of Al-Anon. Next, the group recites the Twelve Steps, which provide ideas and guidance for personal growth and improved relationships. Then a member may read one of the Twelve Traditions. The Traditions guide the group so it can function smoothly. Since Al-Anon is not a structured organization and individuals are not expected to follow rules, The Traditions help ensure that individual decisions don't interfere with the welfare of the group.

Once the Steps and Traditions are read, members recite the "Serenity Prayer" and begin the meeting. Some meetings are called *speaker meetings*. At a speaker meeting, an Al-Anon

member will share his or her story. Stories tell how it was in the person's past, what happened to initiate change, and how it is today. Other meetings are *discussion meetings*. At some discussion meetings, the group selects a discussion topic such as "changed attitudes" or "handling difficulties." At others, the group discusses one of the Twelve Steps or an Al-Anon slogan. Examples of Al-Anon slogans include First Things First; Easy Does It; Live and Let Live; Keep It Simple; How Important Is It?

Members don't give counsel to one another during meetings. There shouldn't be any cross-talk during discussions. In other words, only talk about yourself and don't comment on or advise other members. Members learn how to solve their common problems by listening to what has worked for others. This doesn't mean you'll necessarily agree with everything you hear. Al-Anon suggest you take what you like from a meeting, and leave the rest behind.

Al-Anon is about you, not the alcoholic. By attending meetings you will find support for yourself and learn to detach from the alcoholic's problems. You'll begin to identify the ways you've changed as a result of your relationship with an addicted person. Since many of these changes are incompatible with a happy, contented life, Al-Anon helps you transform defects into assets and broken relationships into healthy ones.

There are no leaders in Al-Anon. A chairperson is a volunteer who opens and closes the meeting. Nobody acts as group facilitator or counselor. Al-Anon is non-professional, non-religious, and has no political affiliations. Al-Anon discourages discussions of therapy techniques, psychology, religious affiliation, non-Al-Anon literature, intervention, and treatment programs during meetings. Discussions focus on the principles of Al-Anon. This preserves the purity of the program. There are no dues for membership, but during each meeting a basket is sent around to collect donations to pay for group expenses. Most members put a dollar or two in the basket but contributions are strictly voluntary.

Before deciding if Al-Anon is right for you, attend at least six meetings. If you don't like a particular meeting, try another one. If you attend a meeting and members are giving each other advice, cross-talking, or discussing the latest pop psychologist, find another meeting. Those conversations can happen before or after meetings, but not during. Look for meeting that uphold the Twelve Traditions and stay focused on Al-Anon literature. Then make a commitment to attend at least once a week. As they say in Al-Anon, "Keep coming back. It works if you work it."

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