

MANY OF US come to Al-Anon filled with despair and hopelessness. Some of us come to find out how to get another person sober; others grew up in alcoholic homes or left alcoholic partners and no longer live with active drinking. We may not see the impact of having lived with alcoholism until we begin to acknowledge that there are familiar difficulties in our present lives and relationships. Many of us would not have voluntarily walked through the doors of Al-Anon if we were not in some sort of crisis or pain that forced us to seek help. Though we may not have labeled it this way, we come to Al-Anon because our lives are unmanageable – we come looking for relief.

The first word of the First Step illustrates an important concept in Al-Anon recovery: We are not alone. In our early meetings, we realize this is true. As the Al-Anon Suggested Welcome says, “We who live, or have lived, with the problem of alcoholism understand as perhaps few others can. We, too, were lonely and frustrated, but in Al-Anon we discover that no situation is really hopeless and that it is possible for us to find contentment, and even happiness, whether the alcoholic is still drinking or not.” Just hearing those words may help us to feel that there is hope for us, too.

Once we acknowledge that someone else’s drinking has affected our lives, we may want to blame everything on the drinking. We are sure there must be something more we can say or do that will convince the alcoholic to stop drinking, thus resolving our problems. We have no idea that we are as powerless over alcohol as the alcoholic is.

Not understanding that alcoholism is a disease, many of us have tried to take things into our own hands. We may have poured out liquor, made excuses, nagged, pleaded, protected or punished the drinkers in our lives. We may have hidden our feelings, isolated and avoided contact with the alcoholic, thinking our problems would go away. We may have taken

Step One

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.

over the alcoholic's unfinished projects, answered phone calls or covered his or her mistakes. No matter what we did, our lives did not improve and the alcoholic did not change.

In order to take the First Step and admit our powerlessness over alcoholism, we need first to understand and accept that alcoholism is a disease. Medical authorities agree that alcoholism is a progressive disease that can be arrested, but not cured – it is a lifetime disease. One symptom is an uncontrollable desire to drink; as long as an alcoholic continues to drink, that desire will increase. Some alcoholics try to convince family members that they are social drinkers by drinking only on weekends or by abstaining for a limited time. The compulsion to drink usually returns. The only way to arrest the disease is total abstinence. Many alcoholics successfully recover through a variety of treatments. The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program is generally regarded as the most effective. Our experience shows that we cannot force someone to stop drinking. This is an individual choice of the alcoholic.

Alcoholism is a family disease. This means “. . . the alcoholism of one member affects the whole family, and all become sick. Why does this happen? Unlike diabetes, alcoholism not only exists inside the body of the alcoholic, but is a *disease of relationships* as well. Many of the symptoms of alcoholism are in the behavior of the alcoholic. The people who are involved with the alcoholic react to his behavior. They try to control it, make up for it, or hide it. They often blame themselves for it and are hurt by it. Eventually they become emotionally disturbed themselves.” (from *Alateen – Hope for Children of Alcoholics*, page 6).

In Al-Anon meetings we hear the three Cs describing our powerlessness over alcoholism: we didn't cause it, can't cure it, and can't control it. We begin to learn the basic Al-Anon premise of taking our focus off

of the alcoholic and keeping the focus on ourselves. Hard as it is to look at our own part in our problems, acceptance of Step One brings relief from impossible responsibilities. We were trying to fix a disease – and someone else's disease at that!

To find peace and serenity in our lives, we have to change – a challenging, and perhaps fearful, thought. We may have to re-learn to take care of ourselves. When we are focused on another person's alcoholism and behavior, many of us develop the habit of putting that person's needs first. We may suffer from low self-esteem and not believe that we deserve to take time for ourselves. Whether we judge ourselves as good or bad doesn't matter; we are always defeated by alcoholism. In Al-Anon, we will find help.

Admitting our powerlessness may be very difficult for us. After all, we are the competent ones who held the family, the job or the world together while the alcoholics in our lives created chaos. How can it be that we, the responsible ones, are powerless? In Al-Anon, we come to understand that our lives may be unmanageable because we are trying to control the people and situations in our lives. It can be hard to conceive that our well-meaning efforts have been part of the problem, but by the time we reach Al-Anon, we are finally ready to try something – anything – new. We have to admit that nothing we do or don't do can control another person's drinking. How can we help an alcoholic? In Al-Anon we learn to accept the things we cannot change (the alcoholic) and change the things we can (ourselves). To recover we have to learn to keep the focus on ourselves.

As we look back on our lives, we are asked to acknowledge our powerlessness over alcohol, the alcoholic and every person and event we sought to control by our own will power. By letting go of the illusion of control over other people, their actions and their addiction to alcohol, we find an enormous burden is lifted and we begin to discover the freedom and the

power we do possess – the power to define and live our own lives. Unmanageability lessens. We begin to see the paths to our own recovery.

In Al-Anon we discover principles that work for us and help us relate to others. Al-Anon helps us learn new ways to have healthy relationships in all areas of our lives. Step One reminds us of our proper relationship with others – we are powerless over them. It places us in correct relationship with ourselves – when we try to control others, we lose the ability to manage our own lives. Step One is the true beginning of our path to recovery.

Members Share Experience, Strength, and Hope

I ACCEPTED
THE TRUTH

I ADMITTED my life had become unmanageable, but for a long time I could not believe that I was powerless over alcohol. I was certain I could make the alcoholic stop drinking by saying, “If you loved me, you would never drink again.” Several statements like that made sense to me at the time. I was a very demanding person. Before Al-Anon, I did not know that my demands were beyond the alcoholic’s ability to respond. I didn’t know that alcoholism was a disease. He told me that I didn’t understand. He said it was not as simple as I thought it was for him to stop drinking.

Some tough questions haunted me and disturbed my peace of mind. What happens if I admit my powerlessness and let go of the situation? Will he drink more if I stop trying to control the drinking? Will he feel I don’t love him any more if I stop questioning him about his drinking? Will he think I have lost interest in him and that I may be attracted to someone else? Will he spend more money on alcohol?

What finally enabled me to take Step One was the fact that it made no difference what I did or didn’t do. For example, I could cry, plead, get angry, or whatever and he still continued to drink. Gradually he

became worse. It took a long time to realize I had no power over this disease. My days in Al-Anon turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months. The more I listened at meetings, the more I knew that I had to “Let Go and Let God.” I had to “Live and Let Live.” Finally, I let go of the situation and admitted my powerlessness.

I realized if things didn’t improve, we would no longer be together. He was extremely ill from the disease of alcoholism, both physically and mentally. I gave up begging and controlling and left the situation alone. I accepted the truth that I did not have the power to stop his drinking. Thank God and Al-Anon that I finally got it right. The alcoholic in my life went to a 28-day program, sought counseling and is now a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. He has been sober for 10 months now. It has been a wonderful 10 months in many ways. Although sobriety is not all roses, thanks to Al-Anon I am able to deal with the changes.

STEP ONE was the hardest thing for me to accept. Powerless over alcohol? A can of beer? A bottle of vodka? They’re just objects – lifeless nothings. How could I, a living, breathing human, be powerless over a bottle of alcohol? How could I admit a bottle was the winner, that it could defeat me again and again?

MY LIFE IS
JUST THAT,
MY LIFE

It felt like I was admitting I was powerless over a bar of soap or some other inanimate object. It hurt my ego, it went against all my beliefs. Powerless over alcohol? I hated alcohol. It turned my mother from a nice, rational lady, into a cursing, screaming madwoman. Alcohol caused my husband to lose five jobs in seven years and to have two accidents in the space of two months. I hated the smell of it, the taste of it. I hated looking at it. But I thought I could lick it, that I would be the victor – not alcohol.

It wasn’t until I read a passage on page 76 in *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* that it hit me. Accepting

this Step didn't mean a weakness of character. It meant honestly admitting there are things that we can't change. Accepting that I am powerless over alcohol puts an end to struggling. It frees me to work on things that can be changed. It means saying to my Higher Power, "I can't do it alone. I need Your help."

Reading that passage was like seeing the light. I could finally be honest with myself. I was powerless over alcohol. I am powerless over alcohol and I always will be powerless over alcohol. My admission took the burden off me. I no longer had to fight and struggle constantly. I could work on other things, such as myself, and free my mind from all-consuming thoughts of the disease.

Before coming to Al-Anon, I could never accept Step One. After being in Al-Anon for over 20 months, I find it is very easy to say this Step and to believe it.

My life had become unmanageable. Thanks to Al-Anon and practicing this Step again and again, my life is just that, my life – to concentrate on and to live the best way that I can.

I COULD
SEE THE
EFFECTS

BEFORE AL-ANON I wouldn't have accepted any part of Step One. I thought I was fine and that everything would be perfect if I could only get the alcoholic to stop drinking. As I began to study and work the First Step, I found it easier to admit the first part of it than the second part.

I am a visually oriented person. As I looked at Step One and the word alcohol, I visualized a bottle of whiskey. Later, I visualized a person drinking from the bottle. I could see alcohol going into the person and changing him into the alcoholic. I could see I was powerless over the alcoholic when he was drinking, but learning that I was powerless over him at all times took longer. Later my visualization showed me the bottle, the person drinking it, the alcohol flowing from that person to me to family members and busi-

ness associates, etc. I could see all of us swimming in a sea of alcohol – then coming out, shaking ourselves off and spreading the disease to even more people.

It took time for me to admit that even though I didn't drink the alcohol, the disease could come through me and affect other people. As time passed and I learned more, I came to recognize that anything I contacted could be affected by the alcoholism coming through me. My reactions to other things could be the same as the ways I reacted to the drinking. I began to see how my own reactions had made my life unmanageable. I saw how my role of martyr had taken a sense of responsibility away from other people and lowered their egos. I saw how I had done this not only to the alcoholic, but also to other people in my life.

I finally realized my life had become unmanageable because I was so busy taking care of others that I had no time to take care of me. I laid out clothes for family members so they would be well dressed, but that left no time to see that I was at my best. I arranged for others to have doctor and dental appointments but then I neglected my own. I didn't realize all of these things overnight. They came slowly, but finally I could understand the First Step. I realized that I too have a disease – caused by my contact with all of the alcoholics in my life. Today I know I am powerless over all the nouns and pronouns in my life – other persons, places and things.

By process of elimination, I discovered what I am not powerless over – myself. I am responsible for me. I am not responsible for another person's happiness, nor are they responsible for mine. I know that no one else can control my emotions. No one can make me angry, sad, happy or anything else without me giving them permission to do so. My feelings are my own.

Today I understand that I am powerless over alcohol and that my life is unmanageable. I know with the help of Al-Anon and my Higher Power,

whom I choose to call God, my life is becoming more manageable.

THE THREE
CS MADE
THE MOST
DIFFERENCE

WHEN I came into Al-Anon, I was involved in a special relationship with a man whose temper erupted unexpectedly and inappropriately. It especially bothered me to be a passenger in his car. If the person driving the car in front of us didn't take off the instant the traffic light turned green, my friend's temper would explode. If another car cut in front of us, the same thing happened.

Initially, I felt positive my friend was really angry at something I said or did, or at something I had failed to say or do. I was positive that I was at fault. Surely I could fix what was happening. At the very least, I could control the level of his explosion. So, I would get angry and point out his indiscretions on the road, such as not using turn signals when he changed lanes. I chattered about other things to distract his attention from what had occurred. I thought surely there was something I could do to remove my feelings of guilt. Just by being there, I had to have done something that sparked his anger.

Someone in Al-Anon shared the three Cs with me: I didn't cause it; I can't control it; I can't cure it. Slowly, a new perspective, attitude and behavior crept into my awareness. When I thought about it, I could see I hadn't caused the situation. I wasn't driving the other car and I hadn't provoked any anger. I began turning my face toward the passenger window, repeating over and over inside my head "I didn't cause it. I didn't cause it." During this recitation, my stomach flip-flopped all over the place. Declining to take responsibility for my friend's temper was new for me. It gave me a very uncomfortable feeling.

Even though I was completely convinced that I hadn't caused his inappropriate behavior, I still had an overwhelming desire to control or cure what was happening. Once again, I had to sit and feel the discom-

fort from letting go of his temper tantrums. I watched his behavior over many weeks and I realized that he wasn't concerned with the behavior. He blew off steam and then acted as though nothing unusual had happened. He didn't seem to notice my old behavior of jumping right in to make things better or my new behavior of silence.

With my new awareness, I began to apply the three Cs in many different environments. Sometimes it was more difficult than others to handle the butterflies fluttering in my stomach. But I always survived after applying the three Cs in new situations. That gave me the courage to examine interactions in all areas of my life. I started to make conscious choices about what part I played in various situations. Eventually I learned to say that inappropriate temper tantrums upset me. I learned it was okay to take separate cars. To this day, I still use the three Cs. I am very grateful for many Al-Anon tools.

Working Step One

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.

EACH OF US is free to create our own solutions using the experience, strength, and hope of those who have gone before us. The following questions for self-study or group study may help you with Step One. As you work each Step, remember to appreciate yourself for the effort. Call a friend or Sponsor and share your success, too.

- * Do I accept that I cannot control another person's drinking? Another person's behavior?
- * How do I recognize that the alcoholic is an individual with habits, characteristics and ways of

reacting to daily happenings that are different from mine?

- * Do I accept that alcoholism is a disease? How does that change how I deal with a drinker?
- * How have I tried to change others in my life? What were the consequences?
- * What means have I used to get what I want and need? What might work better to get my needs met?
- * How do I feel when the alcoholic refuses to be and do what I want? How do I respond?
- * What would happen if I stopped trying to change the alcoholic or anyone else?
- * How can I let go of others' problems instead of trying to solve them?
- * Am I looking for a quick fix to my problems? Is there one?
- * In what situations do I feel excessive responsibility for other people?
- * In what situations do I feel shame or embarrassment for someone else's behavior?
- * What brought me into Al-Anon? What did I hope to gain at that time? How have my expectations changed?
- * Who has expressed concern about my behavior? My health? My children? Give examples.
- * How do I know when my life is unmanageable?
- * How have I sought approval and affirmation from others?
- * Do I say "yes" when I want to say "no"? What happens to my ability to manage my life when I do this?

- * Do I take care of others easily, but find it difficult to care for myself?
- * How do I feel when life is going smoothly? Do I continually anticipate problems? Do I feel more alive in the midst of a crisis?
- * How well do I take care of myself?
- * How do I feel when I am alone?
- * What is the difference between pity and love?
- * Am I attracted to alcoholics and other people who seem to need me to fix them? How have I tried to fix them?
- * Do I trust my own feelings? Do I know what they are?