

Al Anon, An Anthropologist's Account of Dynamics

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Al Anon has a reputation for being extremely successful in supporting people who have been in a relationship with an alcoholic. In contrast and comparison with support groups for people with other types of problems, Al Anon is undoubtedly quite successful. Groups that form to support people with Alzheimer's, brain injury, parent groups, or dozens of other problems seem to fail, or operate but poorly, or achieve only limited success. Yet Al Anon has proliferated around the world with thousands of highly successful groups that provide genuine and much appreciated support for its many members. We can ask, why is this so?

The following account reports on a participant observation study of several different Al Anon groups, conducted through personal attendance at numerous meetings. I attended at least 30 meetings, which included an average of 12 and a range of 6 to 35 members, during a six month period in 1996 as a personal growth and research project. These observations are based on my own experiences and may be of interest to readers, whether to understand the phenomenon, to assist others in need, or to set a background for further research.

THE BACKGROUND

Al Anon, a support group designed for relatives and friends of alcoholics, appears to be composed of caring individuals, including those from the upper down through the lower social and economic classes and from younger to elderly. The unusually wide range is important, for alcoholism affects people of every ethnic group, even though they may use alcohol differently (Lex, 1987), indeed, more alcohol is consumed by those in higher social and economic classes, and age range. The age ranges (Birckmayer and Hemenway, 1999; Moore et al., 1999) appear to signify that something more is happening than those things that appeal to or affect only a restricted group - there must be something almost universal taking place. Another universal thing or event, from experiential accounts, seems to be that "caring" people get into relationships with those who have or those who develop

problems with alcohol.

To understand the universality of the phenomena, it is essential to have some understanding of the physiological and psychological impact of alcohol. The alcoholic person sooner or later becomes truly addicted to alcohol, often through a long term, subtle, and gradual process. Whether they are steady or binge drinkers, however, the slow increase over time in quantity consumed, the restricted range of alcohol consuming behavior, the increase of tolerance and physiological addiction, and other characteristics tend to indicate that the process is gradual but certain (Wells and Wainwright, 1985). Of course, some variation is the rule, and for some people, decreases in actual physical amounts consumed may be the case, once dependence has been achieved.

Once addicted, the need for alcohol is so complete that an alcoholic person will do virtually anything to continue, and even more, to assure that social, economic, and living conditions are achieved and maintained so that they feel they have a guarantee that they can continue their pattern. These addicted alcoholics are persuasive, they use subtle verbal and persuasive tactics, and they are unrelenting in their pressure upon their physical and social environment, particularly upon their close family members so that everything and everybody supports their need for continued alcohol use. They are or try to be clever enough to avoid any sudden, dramatic, or surprise moves that bring things to a head, rather they persist with continual moves to ensure their alcohol connection is maintained, built and secured. The innocent partners become sucked into their game, so slowly, so subtly, that they do not realize what has happened, how it happened, when it happened, where it happened, or why.

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHODYNAMICS

The psychological characteristics of people who marry or become partners to alcoholics may be that they are basically caring people. Their initial ability to care becomes extended bit by bit, as the alcoholic "pulls their strings," nurturing their caring nature into a pattern of on-going

support for the alcohol connection. These partners lose their resistance or become gullible so gradually that they eventually are engaging in "crazy behavior," behavior that they would have regarded as crazy if the transition occurred all at once. They are pulled in, just as are the members of a cult, into having and believing in bizarre beliefs and life-styles. Alcoholic persons seem to have a rationale and excuse for every bit of their behavior, including driving while drunk, consistently being late, expending large quantities of money on alcohol, and so on.

Further, the spouses and the partners and the family gradually become isolated from the larger society, again just as in a cult. The alcoholic only reinforces and rewards that behavior that builds and supports their alcohol connection. All other behavior is not reinforced or is rejected, unless it is essential to the continuation of the alcohol connection. Gradually the family is isolated from the larger society, as if they were drawn down a sink, a sinkhole that was gradually growing in size and power and influence.

Bystanders typically cannot see the operations of the sinkhole, indeed, even those caught within its boundaries do not realize that they are being sucked in, deeper and deeper. Cult membership is similar, in that people join on the basis of positive face-to-face interaction, the exclusion of others from the partnership or fellowship increases, and the messages are then consistent to support the purposes of the cult with subtle elimination of any competing information. In this case, the continuation of the alcoholic connection is the primary goal, and all else is avoided, eliminated, or more likely, obscured.

Given these characteristics of the alcohol connection, the person who joins Al Anon seeks to reverse the tide. The moment of truth may have come from realization of the crazy behavior on the part of either their own self or that of the alcoholic, it may come from gradual intellectual or emotional awareness about how "crazy" they themselves have become. It could be that someone else recognizes the problem and seeks to refer them. Many Al Anon members claim they knew there was a problem, but they kept hoping, hoping against hope, that one day the alcohol connection would be broken or would solve itself. At some point however, they realize that they cannot continue any longer down the same path. As in a cult, the social pressures to conform are enormous, the gradual nature of the process of going

into the alcoholic connection is such that the person can not easily become aware.

Recognizing the alcohol connection is a situation akin to a frog sitting in a pan of water that is at first cool, but is slowly heated. Not knowing that the eventual rise in temperature will cook him, the frog sits, thinking that the gradualness is such that he is still okay and will continue to be okay. Realization comes late, sometimes too late to make a difference. The opportunity to jump evaporates all too suddenly.

The partner of an alcoholic, because of the strong attachment created by the interaction and the unique style of the alcoholic personality, takes the opportunity to jump only when pressures are so great that there is little other alternative. The first Al Anon meeting attended by a person is often highly emotional, as confirmation of their situation occurs, awareness of the truth as to what happened hits, and "eyes are opened." It is not infrequent that first time attendees get tearful, or cry. Their emotions well up very strongly.

The non-alcoholic partner cannot understand initially what has happened to their life, how it happened, or why. All they know is that they are terribly confused, disoriented, their emotional life is "screwed up beyond belief", and they feel as if they had been almost robbed of their own personalities. Memories or reminisces of the past may flood through, and they realize that they are now far from where they used to be as a child or teenager, or for those who themselves had an alcoholic childhood, they are suddenly aware that they returned to an alcohol influenced environment and life. They may not understand why the changes happened. They have been pulled into exaggerated behavior that supports an alcohol connection. Their behavior has moved so far from normal that eventually they reach a point where they cannot continue, and they realize that they have to detach.

Finding other people at Al Anon who have been through the detaching process is valuable. They listen and the new member can soon realize that many other people have gone through withdrawal from an alcohol connection, that indeed, they realize that they have been part of a "conspiracy" to support the alcohol connection. An alcoholic uses their caring nature to assure that the alcohol connection was built, maintained, and assured. This alcohol connection was such that gradually they had to give up their membership in normal society in order to build the

support. Then, the relative or friend of the alcoholic becomes aware as to just how crazy their behavior really was, then they can understand, then begin to detach, and then eventually withdraw from that strange pattern of living.

AWARENESS AND WITHDRAWAL

Awareness continues to build but slowly, by comparisons of life with those in Al Anon, who are not threatening because they too have been in the same situation, then also with past memories of their lives without alcohol, if they have such, and by comparisons with people in the larger society. People in the larger society are threatening initially however, for they do not understand what the partner of an alcoholic has been subjected to, nor does the partner realize the scope of the gulf between them.

The partner of the alcoholic must make sense of what happened. Understanding is aided in Al Anon by literature, the stories of those who have been there, the ideas of those who are going through the disconnection and those who are also beginning to gain insights into what happened. Understanding is important following detachment. The 12 steps or "rules" of Al Anon provide a framework, a conceptual way to figure out and explain, to attribute causation and effects. Such a framework fits the person's needs for their old ways of living and behaving no longer work effectively.

Detachment and withdrawal from the learned patterns of living in a household dominated by alcohol follows understanding. Often the caring person feels responsible. Their extent of responsibility often includes the alcoholic and the family's obligations. Often, the boundaries are unclear. Defining one's own parameters, one's own self, is essential. The collective wisdom of the Al Anon group offers a great deal of help in sorting out personal boundaries, responsibilities, limits of responsibility, control, communication patterns, and similar issues. In effect, the person regains their identity or forges a new identity.

The partner can break the isolation that they experienced by emotionally bonding with others like themselves, the fellow members of Al Anon. No outsider can understand what a person is going through better than those who have been there, those who are now ready and able to talk about their experience in the company of a support group, and these are of course, also members of

Al Anon. The affinity provides a bond that is extremely strong, and this support for the new identity offers an alternative to the alcoholic connection. Eventually, the dependent spouse transfers dependence from the alcoholic to the Al Anon program and members, and only later moves on to greater independence on their own personality and self.

The process of awareness, detachment, understanding, and emotional sorting out so as to bond with others may lead to an enhanced ability to act - i.e., to gain the courage to change. This process is exactly what Al Anon deals with and is all about. The 12 step process (Steigerwald and Stone, 1999), the rituals and beliefs, the literature, the group meetings, are all capable of fitting the needs of the person going through withdrawal from an alcoholic partner, in parallel with the programs that work for alcoholics involved with Alcoholics Anonymous (Valverde and White-Mair, 1999).

AL ANON AS AN INTELLECTUAL AND EMOTIONAL SALON

Al Anon serves as an intellectual and emotional salon as well. The advent of television nearly did away with public and private places where people of diverse backgrounds could meet and discuss matters of mutual interest. The spectacle of local, national, and international events, shows, drama, and advertisements for the "good life" has been so entrancing that many people literally gave up a private life of their own, as well as a public life where ideas and emotions were shared with other people. European and early American cross road locations, public spaces, had often offered peaceful settings where friends and strangers, or locals and travellers, could share their hard won ideas, their observations of life and meaning based on their daily round, and all sorts of information.

More recently, the Internet has opened up a new technologically advanced opportunity to create diverse groupings, to share information and observations via chat groups, e-mail, and messages, and even build emotional bonds through continued communication between people of diverse backgrounds, locations, and interests. Perhaps the old tradition of intellectual salons can be re-established through the miracles of modern technology.

Another option, however, has been in exi-

stence for some years, and still serves many as a public and private forum, a place where sometimes lonely, sometimes shy, sometimes alienated, sometimes co-dependent people can meet, talk freely, and build relationships with others who are similar, or even somewhat different from themselves. This special place is Al Anon.

Interestingly, Al Anon typically does not seek to promote its cause and does not promote membership freely to all. The organization encourages those who would join to demonstrate their personal interest first, and then if they choose, to continue to attend.

The intellectual side of the forum is an ongoing debate about the nature of alcohol, those who drink, and dependency upon alcohol, as well as the impact of this chemical on all people. A diversity of theories, the lived experiences, the research and popular literature, even the nature of human beings and their propensity to use addictive substances, all are debated extensively and intensively - and in virtually every large city and small town in most of the world. In keeping with the traditions of Al Anon, confidentiality is maintained during these discussions, and participants use only their first names. In addition, they respect each other's privacy. In that way, people feel free to discuss matters that would normally be kept private or confidential.

Another side of Al Anon is that the group meetings serve as an emotional exchange, where those overwhelmed with feelings of rejection, anger, anxiety, depression, frustration, and much more, can attend and express these feelings and in turn, be accepted and even respected. The groups are not run by nor dominated by professional therapists, although such people may attend. Professional therapy sessions are something else, and do not occur in Al Anon meetings, although the more natural and free flowing discussions and expressions of feelings may well be therapeutic for the participants. After all, those who have alcoholics in their families are often tormented by guilt, anger, sadness, and other emotional reactions. Al Anon offers an emotional refuge with others with similar experiences, albeit not necessarily exactly like-minded, people to share, to teach, to learn, to express, and to accept feelings.

The opportunities for people to engage in meaningful discussions about important matters in life are relatively few for many. Al Anon offers an emotional and intellectual salon that, although

focused on one chemical and its social effects, covers experiences, bodies of knowledge, and feelings in creative and positive ways. Professional therapists may well encourage their patients who do happen to have spouses or family members with problems related to alcohol to consider and try this inexpensive, but helpful, resource, available in almost every community.

In conclusion, Al Anon is an intriguing social movement that seeks to help those in distress as a result of alcoholics and alcoholism. The group is worth study as is, but in addition, social scientists may well go beyond current observations to explore the larger ethos around alcohol, including the political and economic "powers that be" who determine policy and reap benefits of taxes on manufacture, sales, and purchase of alcohol. Those who define the problem (Humphreys and Rappaport, 1993) could and should be examined much more carefully, for not all is as it seems. Elites seek to cover what is being seen. Finally, the precursors and the many issues related to prevention (Moskowitz, 1989) need to be addressed.

KEYWORDS Alcohol. Al Anon. Support Groups. Meetings

ABSTRACT Alcohol has been produced and drunk for thousands of years, creating both joy for consumers and frequent problems for relatives, friends and society at large. For those related to or friends with a person who consumes alcohol, particularly in excess, one readily available, and very helpful traditional support has been the organization, Al Anon. This group provides partners, family members, friends, and relatives with support, understanding, and an on-going intellectual and emotional salon. The continuing discussion about the problems encountered, and ways of dealing and coping with alcoholic persons is a worldwide phenomenon.

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