

Al-Anon—after everything else failed

Anyone who doubts the progressive nature of this disease and its power to destroy lives - even without active alcoholism - should take a look at my family. There was no drinking in our home until I was 15, when my mother had a major stroke. Her doctor, knowing nothing of her family history, told her to drink every day as an antidote to stress.

But even before the alcohol, the alcoholic behaviors were there long before I was born: fear, rage, guilt, shame, isolation, and emotional abuse. My mother's father and two of her sisters ended their addiction to alcohol with a bullet through the brain. My father's sister slit her throat with an old-fashioned straight-edge razor. A cousin hanged himself.

My adolescence was a nightmare of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse. I turned to food to ward off depression—struggling with starvation diets and bulimia.

Denial, secrets, and lies reigned supreme in our home. My parents refused to face the sickness in our family, even when my sister wound up in the psychiatric ward of a local hospital and finally had to be confined to the state insane asylum.

When my parents brought my sister home, their response to the situation was a stern lecture to the effect that she was going to have to “straighten up.” She got no professional help. By her 40s, she was in and out of psychiatric wards about eight times.

I believed there was something terribly wrong with me. But I thought if I could just get away from my family, I could make a better life for myself. At 18, I left for a famous professional theatrical school.

It was a devastating shock to discover that, despite my academic achievements and artistic talents, I was emotionally incapable of independence. I was unable to relate to my peers and suffered from clinical depression. At the time, there was little effective treatment.

Physically and mentally ill, I returned home in disgrace. I remained sunk in the depths of depression, unable to live anything approaching a normal life. I couldn't sleep; I lay awake at night praying for death and suffered from severe respiratory infections five months out of each year.

I gave myself totally to my religious faith, the only way I could bear days and nights of sleeplessness, chronic fatigue, and emotional agony. Though it didn't “fix” me as I'd hoped, my faith at least provided me the strength I needed to get from one day to the next.

With the help of a good doctor, my health problems receded, but not the crippling depression that I hid from everyone. After ten years of medical treatment, good nutrition, and the pursuit of God failed to provide a cure, I abandoned my religion.

By the time I got to Al-Anon, I was 50 years old. I believed that I was the problem. I had two failed marriages behind me. Rage, envy, self-hatred, and despair were eating me alive. I'd had 20 years—off and on—of psychological counseling. I had thrown myself wholeheartedly into a myriad of self-help theories. Nothing helped.

I was devoid of hope, full of anguish that I would never have the peace of mind that I sought. The only bright spot was my instinctive response to an Al-Anon friend who told me that I was an adult child of an alcoholic.

That certainty alone sustained me during the years I kept coming back before I began to experience an occasional whiff of happiness and serenity.

Because of Al-Anon, the last 15 years have been happy, although fraught with trials. Every trial, however, has carried with it blessings. Life no longer terrifies me, because Al-Anon has given me the tools to deal with it in a healthy manner.

Al-Anon has given me myself. Of all the treasures the program has given me, this is the one I prize most. Al-Anon has healed my relationship with God and made available to me the riches I knew my religion possessed, but was unable to access because of sick attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors.

The program also healed my relationship with my sister, a relationship I had believed would never be restored. My sister also chose to enter the program herself and has made enormous progress.

Alcoholism is a disease that not only kills the drinker, but can, and often does, destroy the lives of those affected by the drinker. Because of Al-Anon, I know that it doesn't have to destroy mine.

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