

Experience, strength and hope from Al-Anon members for times when you can't get to an Al-Anon group

Dear Loners

March 2019

I receive this letter from Linda, She writes:

Waking up to Abandonment.....I suddenly woke up a few days ago to the idea of abandonment. I find I have abandoned people. I shrug them off like old jackets that suffocate me. I drop people like I drop used tissues in the bin. For years I took comfort in Buddhist ideas of detachment (I got it wrong). It was easy for me. I let go of everything. I clung to nothing.

I remember doing an exercise in an adult education class. "We're on a sinking ship. What five things would you take with you into the lifeboat?" Many of the participants chose a precious photo, a wedding ring, an especially meaningful item that had a lot of sentimental value. I chose an Israeli army jacket, a lifejacket, a bottle of water, my meds and dried food. Clearly I was unsentimental and survival orientated. I was fascinated at how different my response was to everyone else's. I thought they were all particularly dumb. How would a photograph or a piece of jewellery help their survival in the ocean?

I have always put survival first. I think of how I will survive before I think of how anyone else will survive. I do always take food first. I dress for the weather more than for appearance. I take the car keys and house keys when I go out with my husband, not depending on him to get me home safely. I carry my meds, my credit card and cash. All the time. From room to room. It's weird. Though I never thought of it as such. Imagine carrying one's handbag from room to room round one's house!

Then suddenly this morning the word 'abandonment' came up in my head. I started off thinking of being abandoned, of the people I have personally abandoned. Why? Was it good or bad? When people cling to me I get so scared. This idea of being clung to... it was like I was drowning, and could only support myself in the water, and would sink if anyone held on to me. I push away to save myself. And I realise now that no matter how 'together' I may appear, I actually feel like I'm drowning much of the time.

I don't think I was abandoned as a little child, but I remember my grandmother's story. She was kicked out of her home in the 1920's. My grandfather found a younger woman and wanted a change. She was forced to leave all her five children including a baby, and, with no skills and very little education, had to support herself alone in a country not of her birth. She finally found a job as a housekeeper in a residential hotel the other side of the country. It was brutal. I remember my grandmother. I used to brush her hair and roll it up into the style she liked. She was sweet and gentle. She survived.

When I was 18 I fell pregnant. My parents insisted that I drop my studies and marry the man (fine with me, but not so much with him). I was edged out of the house and into the inner city. I never thought about how I felt. I think now it felt like abandonment. I have often talked to women I have worked with whose daughters get pregnant, come back home so they can stay at school, they and the baby safe in the family. I couldn't understand it. Why weren't the kids punished? (I am re-examining that judgement of mine too).

When I was 28, my husband found a younger woman, and wanted me out. I knew the drill. One is kicked out. One survives on one's own. I **would not drown**, I promised myself, I would survive. I worked hard, I had a bright smile even when no-one was looking. I was surviving better than my grandmother. I at least fought for access to my kids.

Al-Anon members have suffered so much abandonment. How do we get up and carry on? With great fear and trepidation I think, and not much hope. We just pretend and hope no-one will see through the bravado. And when we follow our parents, our role-models, how well does that serve us? I learned to abandon others when I jumped into the various lifeboats in my life. But there are better ways to respond.

You can find mentions of abandonment in Al-Anon literature, in the daily readers, and more in the book “From Survival to Recovery” [B21]. I see now that I have started to use the 3A’s to help me with this. Who have I abandoned? Who abandoned me? (Awareness) How do I feel about it? (Acceptance) How do I make amends or forgive? (Action). I couldn’t have even thought about this ten years ago, or even one. I see now why people keep coming back to Al-Anon. There are always more things to learn about oneself, more skills to grow to move from survival to recovery.

Awareness, acceptance action. Waking up, becoming aware of the issue of abandonment, has brought a new sense of hope into my life. The things that happened were what they were. I can’t undo what was done to me, or what I did to others. But now I can see how I was and sometimes still am – cold and mean and isolated. Today, I can start to find alternatives. I can make a phone call... It’s in my handbag somewhere, but there’s no panic. I don’t need to drag that huge bag of stuff with me every step I take. This morning, I’m not drowning, I’m actually floating very calmly, and saying thanks.

This year, the theme for Al-Anon in South Africa and here in Gauteng is ‘There is no standing still’. It’s what Lois said. You either go forward or backward. There is no standing still. In Al-Anon I have reached the steps that help me make amends and to take my personal inventory and allow me when wrong to promptly admit it. Doing it on a daily basis is much easier and does less damage than waiting. I have also learned to ask for help... because here I get it. No-one in Al-Anon ever told me to go away and never come back. No-one in Al-Anon ever threw me into the sea. I must stop throwing others into the sea and realise that I don’t have to fear them drowning me.

More than one person can cling to a floating log and if we all kick together we can reach safer waters. It’s like that. Quite dramatic. Together we can make it. But also only if we learn to open our eyes, wipe out the seawater and see we have buddies and a program and notice that we will actually drown if we don’t start building our team and supporting each other.

There are workable ways to move from survival to recovery. Members working the program walk up those harbour steps and out of the raging sea. They find the world of working together, supporting each other, kindness and tolerance for others. We also set boundaries and prevent ourselves from being hurt and abused. We learn to be calmly confident and do not allow ourselves to be used. It’s all there and we will find it, working all the legacies, working this program.

We would love to share your experience strength and hope with other members in the programme. New groups have opened in our area. Please visit our website, www.alanongauteng.co.za it is updated regularly with new shares, blogs and book reviews. Remember help is a phone call away.

The national website www.alanon.org.za has a new members sections with lots of interesting material.

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