

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

Dear Loners

March 2021

My father loved a good argument. Debate was a great delight to him. He liked to argue one point of view. Then, when he had won that argument, he would look at me with a twinkle in his eye, and say, 'But of course, you could argue that...' and take on the other side of the debate.

We have a culture of debate, of taking two sides, of being oppositional in my family. My father and I (and indeed myself and my children) often engaged in discussions, getting more and more excited on proving our position, our voices got louder and stronger as we followed different lines of thought. We were not mad at each other, we were just curious and playful, and if we won, it was like a tennis game, we scored a minor victory, and had a good laugh. But.... But.... My mother, on the other hand, HATED arguments. She could not distinguish between curiosity about true facts and fighting. For my mother, it was a reminder of her childhood. Her timid, simple, immigrant mother, her large, loud and violent father, and I don't doubt, the bottle.

In the book my mom wrote about her childhood there were the odd phrases about her father's drinking, his violent, selfish behaviour... and a few words spoken only to me, in confidence. Only once did my mom talk about incest, phrased in a half-said, throwaway admission, which she never repeated again, but which shocked me rigid. For my mother, a raised voice was not the sign of having fun and enjoyment, but of deep fear, of being unable to protect her beloved younger sister.

So... arguments, conflict. Fun or Fear? What do they bring up in you? I have slowly realized how much time I spend disagreeing with my husband. He repeats something he saw on Facebook and tells it like gospel truth. I disagree. I have different newsfeeds. I get other info. I tell him. He gets upset. What should I do? Should I leave him with the wrong ideas about things? Is it my job to correct the misinformation? Should I get frustrated that he won't listen to me? No, no and no. I need to take my hands off his shoulders and put them on my own. I can decide to NOT get into that no-win argument in the first place... but it does make me wonder what I'm doing with someone who chooses sensational online lies. Then I remember that I love him, and I choose every day to be here. And he is a wonderful fellow, and highly creative and funny and delightful, most of the time.

Even so, my husband and I argue and disagree a great deal. He really is distressed by my constant disagreement. It's as if I keep finding fault with him, he says. I'm not. I just have different ideas. But it's not working. So, I'm trying to stop. Currently, every second sentence I utter to him is a 'Sorry, just my opinion' (which is usually different to his.) So... do I really need to share my opinion? He's not my father. It's not an intellectual game. The daily arguments about petty matters with my husband are pointless. And arguments were never fun for my mother. For some people they are incredibly stressful and threatening. The truth? Arguments can turn hurtful and often dangerous. They can trigger all sorts of buried past events which then come bubbling up to throw our carefully calm world into chaos. Yet in my work with my husband, a lot of our work, our designs, our projects, turn out amazingly well and delight us both... because we argued our points of view and eventually came to an agreement on the way forward... an agreement we were both happy about. But my way of arguing has been **stressful**. And not everyone wants to live like that. **I am amending how I do it.**

In Al-Anon, I have picked up a lot of tips... from Al-Anon readings, guidance, step work, service work and watching, listening and learning.

- 1. We don't need to argue about facts.** A fact check on Google, or Wikipedia can sort it out.  
So, these days I don't bother to get into arguments when others are clearly using different 'facts' to mine. Often, not taking a stand seems best. I learned from my sponsor. She would say something like 'sorry, I haven't got an answer to that' or 'I don't know.' It's okay to not know. I can also say, 'Hey, interesting thought. I will need to check my facts on this. Can we talk about it again sometime?' and change the subject.
- 2. If I'm not arguing about facts, I must be arguing about opinions.** So why argue? Everyone's entitled to their own POINT OF VIEW. Sometimes I don't need to even answer. If someone throws a comment into the conversation and I happen to disagree... that's okay. I could even keep my mouth shut. **Especially** when it's about me. Because what you think of me is none of my business. It's just a reflection of your personal views projected outwards. I'll let you keep it.
- 3. I can listen to the sound level.** When voices rise, it is not necessarily a sign of a good discussion. My mother knew that very well. My mother used to try and make us **not shout**. But once we were in the midst of it, we were too excited to even listen to her, so there is no point trying to make people talk more quietly. I can suggest a change in activity... like 'Hey, guys, supper's ready!' or 'coffee time! Who wants to help make coffee?'  
Distraction. It's what we do with ratty young children who need a nap. Maybe these adults do too. Maybe they are needing to **halt**. Are they **Hungry? Angry? Lonely? Tired? HALT**. A very good time to change the activity. Maybe that's why wives and mothers so often offered everyone tea and cake, and a walk down to the shops or round the garden.
- 4. 'Easy does it' is a great slogan for arguments.** Can I back down and agree? Maybe not, but I can say, 'Hey, you may be right' (and it's okay to think under my breath '*but I think that's extremely unlikely*'). I just don't say it out loud. Ever. Or let it show on my face).
- 5. Does the topic come up often?** If it's a common argument, maybe it would help to talk to my sponsor about it. This kind of talk can be life changing. Some discussions with my sponsor have helped me understand longstanding dynamics in my relationship. Marriage to an alcoholic is not always logical or predictable or even sane. My sponsor, because she really listened, helped me see the reality more clearly. She asked questions that helped me see the injustice in certain situations and asked about alternatives I maybe hadn't thought about. Or she may ask in a kindly way about some bizarre personal behaviour of mine... and I find myself thinking 'where on earth *did* I learn to do that, and *why* did I think it would help?' In fact, it probably did help. Once. But I kept on using it... Or she will support an action I took, and remind me why it was a good move, and not to feel bad about looking after my own needs. All this brings tremendous personal growth for me. I love the way the Universe is hand in hand with my sponsor, guiding my growth.
- 6. Doing my 12 Steps... many times.** Above all, I have found that doing my steps has brought me a great sense of calm and closure. Specially steps 4,5 and 8, 9. Finding myself and what matters to me (step 4). Sharing with my sponsor the things I really feel bad about (step 5). Then as I work through the following steps, I start to see ways to repair things... ways I could behave more constructively. A way of using a talent of mine in a constructive rather than attacking way so what seemed a defect of character becomes a gift instead (Step 6, slightly re-phrased). Different ways of responding. Different ways of talking about stuff that used to cause disagreements. Finding new ways to look after a need of mine. In all of this, in everything, I get support and comfort from the Universe, my personal higher power.
- 7. Thinking about what others need, not just about myself.** I am learning to see that the people round me have needs too, and that sometimes they do things that don't really matter to me but matter a great deal to them. I know now it's important for their needs to be met without my feeling annoyed, or jealous, as I used to. Like my husband going on motorbike trips, or getting to spend quality time with his sister, since she was widowed. They are like kids again, chatting, making things together, learning and teaching each other, looking after each other. It's so healing and life-affirming for them, and I no longer feel jealous and left out, because I have built the connections with my own family, defended them, supported them and made it clear that I had a right to have my own family around. Quite amazing how both our families are healing, as we ourselves are healing.
- 8. Ground rules** are important to make sure that discussions don't turn into heated arguments. The **Al-Anon Traditions** do that, set ground rules for our behaviour with others. It's like setting boundaries for the group. Everyone is entitled to their own voice, and to say what matters to them, but NOT to take over and shout everyone else down. And if I don't feel safe to share my opinion in a particular space, how can I resolve this lack

- of fairness? How can I boost my confidence to just say what I feel? Am I going to be beaten up or shouted down? Then that is really something I need to talk to my sponsor about. Or my priest. Or whoever is safe.
9. Traditions also remind us that we don't argue about **outside issues**. It's cool to be able to point out when something is an outside issue, like how your sister treats her kids, or how my brother spends his money. None of our business... unless I am giving my brother someone else's money that he's now blowing and going wild with... In which case it is probably everybody's business and the start of world war 3.
  10. **Who is in charge of managing the discussion?** When and how does that change? Who can tell who what to do? And if no-one is actually in charge, how do things get done? How does a group manage money? Who does the work? Who gets special privileges? What to do if there are disagreements? All of those are covered by the Traditions. So many arguments we **don't** have to have because we've checked the traditions out and they work, so we're using them.

So. To sum up... I have been using what I've learned in Al-Anon to cut down my arguments, to smooth out disagreements, and find common ground in all my relationships. It is one of the huge blessings in working the Al-Anon program that I have learned little by little, one day at a time, how to manage my relationships with others, ALL OTHERS. As soon as there is another person in the room, in the relationship, we need these skills... and the only place I have ever learned to practice them is IN AN AL-ANON MEETING. That's why it's so glorious that there are so many meetings I can attend all round the world now, so I can get more practice in talking and listening to others in a peaceful, kindly, non-argumentative way. The way I never learned at home.

Conflict and arguments are increasing in many parts of the world. Often by groups who feel they have been disenfranchised or threatened. People can be easily whipped up into arguments, fights and even wars. So we can each play a huge role in helping to calm disagreements down, to reassure people that they are being heard. In Al-Anon we learn how to listen, how to not interrupt, how to not give advice, how to be present with someone who is in pain. Why not take that incredibly rare and important skill and use it wherever we can?

Thank you Bronwen for this share. It is always helpful to look at our communication skills. Constant conflict and arguments can be very destructive.

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Stay Safe, Juliet

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