

Loners' Letter *Gauteng & Districts*

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

January 2023

Dear Loners

When I started learning about the Twelve Steps at the Al-Anon group I was attending, I thought Step One was easy.

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

It was easy to admit that I was powerless over alcohol ... I had tried so many ways to help my daughter... coaxing, threats, money, rehab... And my life most certainly had become unmanageable... the family life I had, in no way the resembled the family life I had set out to have.

Over time however, I have come to understand that there is more to Step One than first meets the eye. Intellectually stating that I am powerless over others is a very different matter to really believing that I am powerless over others. And, maintaining that belief requires ongoing work.

After being in Al-Anon for about two years, things were going well for me. My daughter was working her own Twelve Step programme and our family life had become more peaceful. She was the one who had decided it was time to change and to accept help. And, it certainly helped my peace of mind that she made a decision to turn her life around.

Despite this, I found myself feeling exhausted and wiped out after spending time with family members over the Christmas Holidays.

Determined to regain my serenity, I started off the New Year off by doing some Twelve Step work and realised that I had no idea what Step One actually involved. As the holidays had progressed, I had put everyone first and neglected my personal routine. By the time everyone left, I was very frustrated with myself and them. My daughter, who had been working her own recovery programme, was calm and coped well with the family gathering.

I realised then that I was struggling with the concept of powerlessness and that it was not just an issue with my daughter. I was reverting to my role in my family of origin which is to put myself last and look after the needs of others, whether they want me to or not.

Through attending Al-Anon meetings and listening to others share, I had come to understand that I am powerless over other people but I still struggled as a mother, a daughter and a wife with the boundary of where I am responsible and where I am not. I am protective and I care about the well-being of my family and at times, I still tended to veer well over this line with lots of judgment and advice. While intended lovingly, the unasked for advice was usually taken as criticism.

With my daughter, I had been progressing. She was working her Twelve Step programme and I was learning to let her work her own recovery in her own way. I say "learning" to let her work her recovery journey, because I still sometimes found myself standing in judgement and jumping in with unwelcome and, probably unhelpful, advice.

Back to the post-Christmas blues: I was surprised to see how having relatives stay with me made me regress. I dropped me and put them first. They didn't ask me to do it, they didn't demand it. I just automatically fell into old patterns from my childhood and neglected what I needed to be doing for myself. I was completely and utterly focused on making them happy. This was an eye opener for me.

My journey of recovery at Al-Anon was helping me to understand why I found it so hard to do certain important things for myself.

As a child I was very responsible and given a lot of responsibility. There was an assumption that I could always cope but I didn't always feel good about having adult responsibility thrust on me. I have gradually become more aware that I have always felt fear and anxiety due to coping with situations I was not comfortable dealing with. Along the way, I also decided that my needs were not important, that it was more important to keep others happy. As a result I am very good at sorting out other people's problems. However, if I have to tackle something that means a lot to me personally, I have to clamber over mountains of self-doubt and self-criticism which can be exhausting.

I also now understand why I struggle with accepting that I am powerless over other people. Helping others results in approval which makes me feel good about myself. Helping myself on the other hand, is sometimes very frightening.

Understanding this is helping me to internalise Step One at a deeper level. I am working on accepting that I am powerless over everything except myself. So I am working on breaking the habit of looking after the interests of others first and beginning to prioritise myself. It has been eye-opening how quickly I want to step in and do things for others and how anxious I get about prioritising myself. These days, I wait to be asked for help instead of assuming that my help is needed.

Admitting to powerlessness is actually about me understanding what I can and cannot change. It is about acknowledging my inability to cope with things beyond my control. Internalising Step One helps me to put the focus on me, and helps me to take my judgemental focus away from others and on to myself. I focus on me and try to do things for me that I previously put aside out of fear.

I hope my developing understanding of being powerless provides you with some experience, strength and hope to help you on your own journey.

Best wishes

Clare

P.S. If you would like to send a share for possible publication in the Loners' Letter, please forward your contribution to alanontvl@absamail.co.za with the subject "Loners' Letter Submission".

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