

Loners' Letter

Gauteng & Districts ▪ ***Never alone in Al-Anon***

September 2024

Dear Loners

I've been on a journey of self-love since I walked through the doors of Al-Anon a few years ago. Explaining how I ended up needing to teach myself how to love myself for the first time in my life, in my 50s, involves going back to the beginning...

My mom was a beautiful, fragile, insecure woman who never understood her worth and value. A close friend of hers died in a tragic car accident, leaving behind a baby girl and a widowed husband. My mom married him, knowing he had been abusive to his wife, but believing she could fix him and wanting to be there for her friend's daughter.

Of course she couldn't, and my biological father, who was a heavy drinker as well as a womaniser, put my mom through hell for the three years they were together. He kicked her in the stomach when she was pregnant with me, dragged her around the garden by her hair, beat, belittled and humiliated her constantly, until she eventually left, even more insecure and fragile than she had been to begin with.

She met my first step-father when I was six years old, and immediately fell madly in love and married him. He too had a drinking problem and was physically abusive, but he was also schizophrenic. My memories are vague about that period of my life but I remember the fighting, the screaming, the crying, the terror, the fear and the night he held a gun to my head and told my mother he was going to shoot me.

Just like with her first marriage, they divorced after three years together, and she remained single until I was 15 years old and she met my second step-father. He was actually a really good person, but also had a drinking problem, and although he wasn't actually an abusive man, my mother's traumas came back to haunt her, and she would pick fights and antagonise him constantly, until one day he snapped and actually hit her. I think it only happened once, but it just added to her insecurity and fragility.

I lost my grandmother at the age of 15, but up until then, she and my grandfather were my safety net. My mom and I lived with them on and off for the first 14 years of my life and they gave me the unconditional love and calmness I so desperately craved growing up.

I was fiercely independent as a child and my mom always said I never needed anyone. I sought the attention I needed as a child by always being the drama queen, the actress, the singer, the clown, the attention seeker. I learned at a very young age, to be a people pleaser... making other people happy gave me a sense of fulfilment. And, as sweet and kind as a trait like that can be, it also taught me that focusing on others was more fulfilling than focusing on myself and what was happening in my life.

I learnt to deal with the traumas I experienced as a child (including sexual abuse by a family member and two close family friends) by sweeping it under a rug, pasting a smile on my face and getting on with life... a coping mechanism I still struggle with.

I met my husband when I was 20 years old. He was divorced with two very small children, and I threw myself into the role of being a mother, wife and homemaker with absolute vigour, determined to make up for what I felt I had lacked in my own life as a child. The only problem was, I was so focused on making everything perfect, that I neglected to give my step-children the love they so desperately needed, and I ignored the red flags in my relationship because of course I could fix everything with love, perfection and a smile.

My husband was a heavy drinker, but this was normal, this was what I knew. It took 26 years for me to realise he was an alcoholic... up until then I just made excuses for all the fights, the accusations, the bad and embarrassing moments, the ruined special occasions or family holidays. He was retrenched and spiralled out of control. His decline was rapid and it was ugly... and I eventually walked through the doors of Al-Anon in search of help.

At that point I had tried everything in my power to fix what was going on. I had taken my husband to a GP, to a psychologist, to AA and to rehab. I researched and tried to find ways to help... I removed all alcohol from our home. I encouraged, I loved, I supported, I gave and gave and gave... and then I changed. I became angry, bitter, resentful and mad. I became that crazed person that rises up out of frustration, the one who spends their lives looking for signs that he had been drinking... searching for his stash, smashing bottles, throwing alcohol down the drain, screaming, hitting, hating. I was depressed, anxious and teary, and I couldn't function.

It was only when my husband went into rehab again and my children were asked to write him letters about the impact his drinking had had on them, that I understood and realised that I hadn't managed to protect them the way I thought I had. They had experienced the trauma throughout their entire lives and it had left scars and hurt and pain that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. That broke me and made me feel that I had failed as a mother.

I needed healing, I needed help, I needed to fix myself and learn to love myself again. But how do you undo 50 years of learned behaviour? How do you learn to be a little bit selfish and attend to your own needs instead of the needs of others if that is how you have conditioned yourself? Well, it came with great difficulty and is still very much a work in progress.

The first step I struggled with was detaching with love, which I needed to do in order to draw my focus inward instead of focusing on what was happening around me. I struggled with this concept because of the anger and the hurt, so in the end I simply detached in order to retain my sanity, and this left me a little more in control of my feelings.

The second step I needed to learn was taking care of myself and attending to my needs... in other words, self-love. I had no idea how hard this was going to be, and how long it was going to take, and still is taking.

As mothers and wives our lives are consumed with attending to the needs of others. The needs of our children, our husbands, our friends and our homes, all take preference over our needs, so we eventually forget what our needs actually are.

My husband and I had separated at this point and I found myself alone and trying to navigate this foreign road at the same time. I found the simplest things, like deciding what I felt like for dinner, difficult. I had always catered to everyone else's tastes, and realised I had no idea what I would like to eat for dinner.

Music became my saving grace... I have always loved music, so as soon as I walked in the door after work, I would put on my playlist and listen to music, until one day I eventually threw caution to the wind and found myself dancing around the kitchen all by myself, laughing and smiling at the pure beauty of my actions and the joy I was feeling by doing it without fear of judgement. It's something I still do often... but I make sure the blinds are closed in case my neighbours spot me through the window.

Al-Anon meetings were and still are a great source of comfort and inspiration to me, and I draw a lot of my strength from the experiences of those I share these meetings with... people who I consider friends, who are holding my hand and walking this road with me.

I still find myself hesitating over big decisions, but have learned so much about myself and what I am capable of, that I feel my confidence growing in leaps and bounds as I navigate each new challenge that life presents. I am stronger, I am better and I am learning and growing each and every day. I still need to learn to focus a little less on the needs of others and more on my own needs for my mental wellbeing, and I sometimes battle with setting boundaries, but I know I now have the capacity and the tools needed to do this.

I wake up every Saturday and Sunday and take my dogs for a walk just as it starts getting light, when the world is quiet and peaceful and another new day is dawning. I find pleasure in the beauty and the stillness around me. I process thoughts and feelings and focus on my blessings and how lucky I am to be alive and to be able to live in the moment. I've realised that happiness can be found in the simplest things in life.

I am truly blessed, and I've realised that, even though I still have a lot of trauma I'm trying to heal from, and a lot of pain I still carry around, I can still wake up each day and choose to be a better version of the person I want myself to be for my own personal growth.

Best wishes

Anonymous

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