

A spiritual perspective can be a source of strength and support for many of us while we are grieving. Although some of us feel more connected to our Higher Power at this time, others may become angry or may even question our Higher Power's presence in our lives. If we are feeling disconnected spiritually, this situation is not cause for alarm or shame. Whatever we are feeling is okay and transitory. As our program reminds us, "This too shall pass."

Grief and loss in the journey toward recovery

When we first entered the rooms of Al-Anon, our attempts at managing our lives on our own were no longer working. By reaching out for help, we took the first step toward our healing. We soon learned that our recovery depends upon our readiness to focus on ourselves. If we're uncomfortable with our feelings, we may try to find ways to distract ourselves from them.

"When I stopped running, I finally had to feel my feelings. I talked to my Sponsor a lot, and trusted that my Higher Power would get me through this rough time."

As newcomers to Al-Anon, we may experience so many feelings at once that it may take some time to sort through them. Similarly, those of us who have been recovering for a while may have moments when we question whether our program is working for us. Although this can feel scary, it doesn't mean our recovery is at stake. If we've been unaware of our losses until now, we may have years of unexpressed feelings to face. We don't have to confront everything at once. We are not in a race to the finish line. With our Higher Power's guidance, we can work our program at our own pace, in our own way. We can be patient and gentle with ourselves, trusting that wherever we are is exactly where we are supposed to be.

In Al-Anon we come to recognize that grief is a natural part of life, not a punishment. If we look around us, we'll see that all living

On Dec 4, 2022 we completed to Page 7 ".....exactly where we are supposed to be"

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creatures experience loss. A robin's egg falls from its nest before it is hatched; a mother deer is hit by a car, leaving her young fawn to fend for itself.

We are not exempt from suffering. Whatever loss we may be grieving, with Al-Anon we don't have to face it alone. We can take comfort in knowing that our grief means we're truly dealing with our loss and not denying it. When our lives feel disrupted and chaotic, the clear and simple principles of our program can ground us. Much like a compass, our slogans, Steps, Traditions, and Concepts of Service can help us navigate through the turbulent waters of grief and loss.

As we learn from experience, it is our grief that connects us to each other. It doesn't have to isolate us. When we share our pain with other people, we are truly heard and understood—perhaps for the first time. As we learn to apply the Al-Anon tools, we discover that no situation is truly hopeless. In fact, many of us have been able to find hope in the midst of despair and serenity in the face of grief.

How to use this book

Like all our Al-Anon Conference Approved Literature, this book represents the collective wisdom of our members. The stories shared here reflect the experience, strength, and hope of hundreds of us. How we choose to incorporate this book into our lives is entirely up to us. Some of us may read it from cover to cover. Others may want to read a chapter that speaks more directly to a specific aspect of their grief. If we are in the depths of grief right now, one page, one paragraph, or a sentence at a time may be all that we can handle. Whatever our present circumstance, respect for where we are and what we need in the moment is of the utmost importance.

All quotes throughout the book are from Al-Anon members, unless otherwise noted. Members' stories are presented at the

conclusion of each chapter, followed by a list of questions intended as suggestions for meditation and reflection. Rather than trying to tackle every question at once, we might choose to begin or end our day by taking time to reflect on one or two that are most relevant to us. We can always return to the other questions at a later time. We may also wish to use these questions as topics for discussion at meetings or with our Sponsor. Turning to the index can be useful if we're struggling with a particular feeling, or if we're seeking insight into the Steps, slogans, or other Al-Anon tools.

Whatever we might be going through right now, we can rest assured that there are those among us who have felt what we are feeling. As the Suggested Al-Anon/Alateen Closing for meetings states, if we keep an open mind, we can find help. We will find "that there is no situation too difficult to be bettered and no unhappiness too great to be lessened." We may struggle at times with believing this to be true, but we can find hope from those who have walked this path before us. As we begin to heal from our losses, we in turn offer this same hope to others. Through our willingness to face our loss openly and honestly, we discover our strength and resilience—not *despite* it, but *because* of it.

Grief as a Process

*"My journey through grief is much like my
journey through recovery."*

We may or may not be aware of our losses when we step into our first Al-Anon meeting. It may take several weeks or many years in the program before they surface. Some of us were taught that it's not okay to cry or to be angry. As a result, we may have become adept at showing the world a smiling face while masking our true emotions. Grief has its own timing. We can trust that we'll become aware of our losses when we're ready to deal with them.

"Before Al-Anon, I was stuck. When my mom died, I pretended to move on, but I felt like a three-year-old in an adult's body. I felt inconsolable, scared, lost, and inadequate."

In Al-Anon, we hear a lot about dealing with our feelings, but getting comfortable with our feelings can take time. The mere thought of having to feel our suppressed emotions might seem frightening at first. It may initially feel easier and more comfortable to let our lives continue as they are, even if we know deep down that this is not in our best interest. However, our anxiety can be lessened as we witness other members sharing their feelings openly. Over time the validation and acceptance we receive in Al-Anon can help us feel more comfortable with sharing our own thoughts and feelings.

It can be helpful to look at our grief in the same way as our recovery. If it took time to get where we are today, we can't expect to get better overnight. "Progress Not Perfection" reminds us that our recovery is not an event, but a process. All that's required of us is to do the best we can today, even if that means just getting ourselves to a meeting or reading a page from our literature. Sometimes the smallest steps are the ones that can bring us the most comfort.

Admitting our grief

"Before Al-Anon, I couldn't face my own grief or loss. Instead, I quickly and totally denied it. To admit my losses would

have felt like I was 'less than.' I believed there was one 'right' way to handle these feelings and I didn't know what that way was."

Though there is no single way to approach our grief, the Al-Anon tools can help us find our way. Step One helps us come to understand that we are powerless over our losses, just as we are powerless over alcoholism. Trying to control our grief has only made our lives unmanageable. We spent years being the responsible ones, trying to hold things together for our families, so we may find it difficult to give up our control. If we've been accustomed to handling everything on our own, we may find it difficult at first to ask for help. Yet the more we try to control our grief, the more we seem to suffer. Admitting that we are grieving is admitting we are *not* in control. Once we realize this, we can begin to feel some relief from the burden of carrying everything on our shoulders.

The recurring nature of grief

"I am invited to grieve with every change in life. Often I ignore the invitation, deciding the particular change is 'no big deal,' or telling myself, 'I can handle this.' Sometimes the culmination of all the 'little' changes I haven't addressed hits me all at once. I find myself overreacting to a person or situation, becoming depressed or just irritable."

It is often these "little" changes that catch us by surprise. They seem to come out of nowhere. The day-in and day-out disappointments and broken promises of living with an alcoholic can become commonplace, until one day we wake up feeling the effect of all those "small" losses. Why, we wonder, do we suddenly feel sad about our situation, especially when we may have spent months or even years living this way?

Many of us have lived with the notion that grief is something we feel when we have lost something tangible—when someone

has died or gone away. In Al-Anon we learn that although the alcoholic may still be living, he or she is unable to be fully present—emotionally, spiritually, or even physically. Recognizing that we are not living the lives we had planned or hoped for with the person we love is a loss that occurs gradually. Each day we lose a little bit more until what remains is merely a shadow of the person or life we thought we knew. Living with ongoing grief of this kind can be particularly trying.

"One Day at a Time" can help us through these difficult days. We get ahead of ourselves when we worry about how we will get through tomorrow or next week. We can't know what tomorrow will bring. What a relief it is to know we only have to deal with today. Though getting through today might feel like getting through all of eternity, we can remind ourselves that we won't feel this way forever. We can trust that our Higher Power has a plan for us, even if we can't see where we are headed.

When an old loss revisits us

Our grief from past losses can come upon us unexpectedly—sometimes after many years. If we faced a loss in the past, we may be wondering why we are still in pain. We may have thought we had worked through our grief, and here it is again. Without realizing it, we may start reacting in old, familiar ways. Our former habits and fears return—the same response we had when reacting to alcoholism. We may become overly focused on others to the point of neglecting ourselves, and our attempt to control can quickly take over. Our obsessive worrying may return, and we find our time and energy going toward anticipating tomorrow's troubles.

Often, acceptance of our losses arrives in stages. Such realizations would likely overwhelm us if they were to occur all at once, just as trying to grasp the entirety of the program all at once would be too much for most of us. In this way, the cyclical or recurring nature of grief may be our Higher Power's way of protecting us

from having to face too much all at once. Just because an old loss has resurfaced doesn't mean we are back where we started. It simply means we're being asked to face another aspect of our grief that we may not have been ready to face until now.

Questioning our recovery

After we've been recovering for a while, there may come a time when we question whether the program is still working for us. We may find ourselves wondering why we don't feel happier. After all, we tried so hard to accept our situation, worked the Steps, and attended meetings. We wonder if sadness is all there is to show for our efforts.

Such feelings may be frightening and alarming. Our first impulse may be to dismiss them. However, many of us have discovered the importance of honoring what our feelings are trying to tell us. Questioning can actually be an important turning point in our recovery. It can teach us about where we are headed, can signal us to slow down, or can prompt us to take better care of ourselves. Just as a marathon swimmer needs to float in order to rest and regain strength, so too will we need to find moments to renew ourselves. We may need to take mental and emotional breaks here and there to allow ourselves to regroup or refocus our energies.

Experience has taught many of us that recovery is not a straight and narrow path. Undoubtedly, we will be asked to make unexpected, but necessary, turns along the way. As we strive to turn our will and our lives over to the care of a Higher Power, we will be given many opportunities to practice doing so. We may not always know where we are headed in our recovery or grief, but we can learn to trust that we are being led to a better place than where we started.

Giving ourselves time to grieve

The time each of us needs to grieve will vary from person to person. We may have been told that it takes a year to grieve the death of a loved one, only to find ourselves still in pain three years later. We don't need to set deadlines for our grief, and we don't have to accept anyone else's timelines. While one person may be able to apply the Steps and find serenity in a matter of hours or minutes, for another, it may take months or even years. Chances are we will have to re-apply the wisdom of the Steps and slogans to our particular situation not just once, but again and again. Just as each of us makes progress in Al-Anon in our own way and pace, so too will each of us approach grief differently.

One member kept her husband's belongings in her garage for over a year after his death. Letting go of her urgency and allowing the belongings to stay in her garage were crucial to her grieving process. Her understanding of the program allowed her to keep his things for as long as she needed. After some time passed, she was able to make decisions about what to keep and what to donate. We do ourselves a great disservice when we compare our grief to anyone else's. While we gain hope from others, it helps to keep in mind that no two losses are alike and that no one has experienced our loss. We can trust that whatever time it takes for us to grieve will be exactly what we need.

"Gradually, I took Al-Anon's suggestions to get in touch with my feelings, and for a while I felt worse than ever. As I started to see what I was gaining instead of just what I was losing, I didn't feel quite so bad. But it was a slow process made slower by my reluctance to follow the suggestions of fellow members."

There may be times when giving ourselves over entirely to our feelings might prevent us from being able to function in our daily lives. At such times, one member decided to allow herself 15 minutes to be totally and completely immersed in her grief. After those

15 minutes, she would let it go and move on to something else. If she struggled to let go, she would allow herself another 15 minutes and would try again. This exercise allowed her to express whatever she was feeling without allowing her feelings to control her.

In Al-Anon we learn not to deny our feelings. We can be honest with ourselves and others about where we are in our grief. We don't have to pretend that everything is fine or that we're handling everything perfectly. When asked about how she was doing after her husband died, one member responded, "Not good. But I'm just trying to do what I need to do until I feel like doing it." While some of our friends, family, or coworkers may question why we are still grieving, in Al-Anon we are not judged or rushed through our grief.

"What a relief to be able to cry and not have to worry that people were thinking I should be 'over that' by now. My Al-Anon friends listened to me and accepted me right where I was."

Members share experience, strength, and hope: Grief as a process

When I think of grief, I think of awareness, acceptance, and action. Sometimes when I feel annoyed, irritated, or angry, these feelings are a mask for my grief. I often deny my grief because it is too painful. I try to remember that acting out by yelling at my child or blaming my spouse is more painful in the long run than feeling the grief. I try to pause when I get annoyed and ask myself what's really going on within me.

My Sponsor says that what we resist persists. When I choose to push away my feelings of grief, they keep coming back in various forms. Acceptance helps. Treating myself like a best friend or small child who is grieving gives me permission to accept that I am hurting. When I ask for help, I am taking action in my own best interest. I surrender to my feelings, give myself a big inward hug, and

let myself cry. I pray to my Higher Power or call an Al-Anon friend. If I am not ready to surrender, I pray for willingness. My Higher Power gives me the time and space to grieve when I am ready.

For years I felt like I was carrying around a huge weight. My life was totally out of control. Finally, I realized that I needed to feel the feelings of grief and loss I had been running from. I had to stop trying to mask and dull my emotional pain. I knew I had years of feelings to catch up on. My search to make sense of what I was experiencing led me to the rooms of Al-Anon. There I discovered that the true source of my intense pain was not so much the losses I had suffered, but rather the ways I had attempted to cope with them by trying to control other people and events.

What's helped me heal are feeling my feelings, reading on the subject of loss, sharing at meetings and with close friends, taking gentle care of myself, and journaling. Al-Anon's slogans have been central to my healing. I repeat them whenever my feelings seem overwhelming or a situation seems too much to bear. I still carry the memories of my losses, but I have healed so much. I've learned not to let the fear of loss take control of my life anymore. I keep turning it all over to God and working the program, and my life continues to get better.

Questions for reflection and meditation

- What am I grieving today?
- Have I admitted my powerlessness over my grief, or am I trying to control it?
- Am I giving myself time to grieve without worrying about how long it "should" take?
- When was the last time I shared my grief with a trusted loved one, my Sponsor, my Higher Power, or at an Al-Anon meeting?
- What can I do today to be gentle with myself?

The 12 Promises Of 12 Steps of The PA-A:

The promises are from pages 83-84 of the Big Book and cover the promises of what will happen when we diligently work the steps of the 12-step program. Note that these promises from the Big Book come in the context of working Step 9, the step of making amends.

“If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through ” (i.e., referencing the step 9 described in the previous paragraph of the Big Book)

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| Promise 1 | <i>We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness.</i> |
| Promise 2 | <i>We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.</i> |
| Promise 3 | <i>We will comprehend the word serenity.</i> |
| Promise 4 | <i>We will know peace.</i> |
| Promise 5 | <i>No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others.</i> |
| Promise 6 | <i>That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear.</i> |
| Promise 7 | <i>We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows.</i> |
| Promise 8 | <i>Self-seeking will slip away.</i> |
| Promise 9 | <i>Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change.</i> |
| Promise 10 | <i>Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us.</i> |
| Promise 11 | <i>We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us.</i> |
| Promise 12 | <i>We will suddenly realize that OUR HIGHER POWER is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.</i> |

From the PA-A Website: Our description of Parental Alienation, coupled with our personal adventures before and after finding recovery, make clear three pertinent ideas:

- That we had serious problems—relationships—that we could not solve despite our best efforts.
- That no accessible human power had relieved our relationship problems.
- That reliance on God, a Higher Power, or a higher purpose could and would restore us to sanity and set us free.