

ALCOHOLISM – a family disease not a disgrace (stage 2)

Being directed to Al-Anon (Family Groups) became my saving Grace. There is a social stigma and embarrassment associated with alcoholism but there I met the most remarkable people and through them and additional information (I wrote to America for this initially and found *The Booze Battle* by Ruth Maxwell invaluable – unfortunately now out of print) I began to learn about the effects. I was ready to accept that it is a family illness as I had concluded this myself before I joined the fellowship (AA is widely known but Al-Anon is not, regretfully – both in existence over 50 years). It has no dues for membership but exists through voluntary contributions. It is worldwide and there are few cities without at least a weekly Al-Anon meeting to offer for those suffering the trauma of the effects of someone else's alcoholism. You can go anywhere in the world and are welcomed and accepted just as you are in whatever circumstances you find yourself. It was here that I gained support to work effectively and constructively with the alcoholism in my life, which profoundly affects the whole family and anyone closely associated with the drinker. The denial is so strong that we were told at Broadway Lodge, where my children and I went for family therapy, that death can result. With the knowledge that is gained you have to learn to manage with 'tough unconditional love' and this is not widely known. Most people affected by a serious drinking problem in their lives 'enable'



and perpetuate the disease and professionals who do not have specialized knowledge add to this, unfortunately. It is very rare to find people in the UK who are fully aware and it is controversial here in its treatment. Through the Al-Anon groups I learnt how to take care of myself, and my children: it is largely a self-development process. It took considerable time before I began to get to grips with the measure of the disease, which is extremely complicated and creates a lot of anxiety and trauma. The dynamics in the relationship and the games that are played need to be recognized and changed. Examples are:

- I learnt that we do not cause it, cannot control it and cannot cure it.
- It is futile to discard the drink, the person will only find or buy more, wasting money.
- The most effective time to report factually the circumstances through which you lived and how you felt, was waiting for the remorse to come through: usually 3-4 days after a severe drinking bout and

ensure no engagement with argument, which fuels the next excuse to drink.

- It is important not to accept unacceptable behaviour and best not have lengthy conversations late into the drinking night as they are rarely remembered the next day and the experiences are repeated again, wasting time and using up precious energy.
- The person suffering from alcoholism develops a Jekyll & Hyde personality.
- Children of the family can become considerably disturbed and distressed. There can be violence, which it is important not to tolerate, and preparations may need to be made for safety bolt-holes in the event.
- It culminates in financial hardship and fragmentation of the family - and even death.

My life, as a result, has been transformed beyond my wildest dreams. Reaching out for help, which takes enormous courage or comes about due to utter despair, became my greatest strength. I follow the principles and values of the 12 Step Minnesota model with all my heart and it

is a great philosophy by which to live life and has stood me in good stead for all of my life's challenges. I have greater understanding and acceptance of the human condition (and many people have addictions of various kinds) and I am more compassionate and empathetic. It creates an acceptance of the individual as they are and gives courage and support to make the changes that are recommended to be made, in your own time and at your own pace with the choices that you make. It is a path of rigorous honesty. The exploration is one of adventure to discover who you really are and who you want to become and make changes for this to occur. It is a gentle, slow process but very worthwhile.

It saddens me that little is known of the Al-Anon Family Groups. Anonymity is the foundation and it is, tragically, a well-kept secret on this account. There are many leaflets and books of wisdom available for our understanding, effectiveness and personal recovery. Visit the website or telephone to discover more, to find a contact or where your nearest meeting is in your locality. Education is the key: My car states 'Alcoholism is a family

disease not a disgrace - declared by World Health Organisation in 1956'. This is bold education without effort and so the seed planting has begun to sprout.

SALLY

SELF-HELP GROUPS:

Al-Anon Family Groups & Alateen
Confidential helpline 0207 403 0888,
61 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4YF
Website: al-anonuk.org.uk
NACOA: National Association of Children of Alcoholics Confidential helpline tel: 0800 358 3456, PO Box 64, Fishponds, Bristol, BS16 2UH
DrugFAM tel: 0845 388 3855 Local support group information Oakley Hall, 8 Castle Street, High Wycombe
www.drugfam.co.uk
www.coap.co.uk
Children of Alcoholic Parents and People website forum.

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