

## One Al-Anon Journey: A Spouse's Experience with Addiction

### Thoughts on Communicating

It's challenging to find the right words to express thoughts and feelings during a highly emotionally-charged time. Here are some strategies I learned through many mistakes and missteps. As they say in the program, take what you like and leave the rest.

#### Strive to avoid

- Taking over your loved one's life so you can fix and/or control everything. This comes from fear, which brings up the overpowering urge to manage things. In your panic to make things better, you may be tempted to give lots of advice, such as "I read that what you need to do is go to 90 meetings in 90 days, find a sponsor, and start counseling. I found a list of meetings online. The one at 5:30 at this place could work with your schedule."

#### Instead,

- Write down your thoughts and show them to a trusted friend in the program or your sponsor, so you can get it out of your system.
- When you are speaking with your loved one, as much as possible, come from a place of compassion and empathy, and strive to be positive. Think about creating a loving container or space for someone rather than giving advice.
- For example, you can say:
  - o "I can see this is so difficult. Is there anything I can do to help?" or "How can I be helpful?"
  - o "I can see you're making an effort. I appreciate it. Thank you (*if appropriate*). I'm sorry it didn't work out" (*if appropriate*).
  - o "I notice that you have done \_\_\_\_\_. Good for you/thank you/I'm grateful/I honor your commitment."
  - o "I'm sorry this is happening. What a disappointment (*if appropriate*). It must be so frustrating/discouraging/annoying."
- Also, it is usually NOT helpful to say to your loved one (or actually, anyone), "I know how you feel."
- In the middle of a discussion, you can turn it over to God/Higher Power. You can ask to have an open heart and open mind – the other person can have insights just as much as you can.

#### Strive to avoid

- Counting the meetings your loved one has attended or not, asking whether your loved one has called or met with his/her sponsor, and the like. Remember that your loved one's recovery is his/her business. However, if you have an agreement that your loved one will share with you what's happening in the recovery process, then this might look different.

### Instead,

- Focus on YOUR OWN recovery. Go to as many Al-Anon meetings as possible, talk to people in the program, get phone numbers from people who are willing to support you outside the meetings, and find a sponsor. Also, make it a practice to read some Al-Anon literature every day – there is a lot of help already available from people who have walked this road. You can also move towards establishing a relationship with your Higher Power, if you don't already have one, or devoting more time and energy to it, if you do.
- Remember that you are your own full-time job.

### Strive to avoid

- “Savior behavior,” which doesn't save anyone. This includes protecting loved ones from the natural consequences of their own choices, such as interfering with or manipulating an outcome in order to rescue them. You can't live someone else's life for them. Everyone has his or her own journey. Also, it is not helping anyone if you become so preoccupied with how your loved one is doing that you neglect your own life and start drowning yourself.

### Instead,

- Learn how to “detach with love.” The more you detach from someone else's recovery, the more this allows the other person to take ownership of what he or she needs to do. You are not detaching from the person, but from the situation. Remember, this is your journey as much as it is your loved one's. Discover what brings you joy. Nourish your own body, mind, and spirit.
- Let go of choosing someone else's path for them.
- Realize that it is an illusion to believe you are in control of other people, places, and things. This belief can give you a false sense of security. It is better to accept that you can't control things outside of yourself.

### Strive to avoid

- Letting our own well-being and happiness depend on how your loved one is doing in recovery.

### Instead,

- Pay attention to your own health, including the basics of food, sleep, and exercise.
- Find something you love, that gives you joy, that you have control over, independent of your loved one, and do all you can to carve out time and save energy to nurture that. It will help you maintain perspective and give you a sense of accomplishment, in spite of everything else that is happening in your life. It can also help you detach with love.
- Volunteering can be extremely helpful and healing, as well as put your problems in perspective and give you something else to think and talk about.
- Think about self-care. Spending time outside in nature is very healing. Is counseling something to consider? What about scheduling a monthly treat, like bodywork, or an outing with friends.
- A successful relationship needs to allow space between the path of each person. It is important to retain your own integrity, and honor the other person's.

### Strive to avoid

- Serious discussions when emotions are already running high.

### Instead,

- When you are both calm and can listen to each other, establish ground rules for disagreements when things become heated. For example, either person could call for a time-out of some period of time, perhaps 5 to 15 minutes, where you move to separate rooms and write down what is bothering you. However, if this is new behavior for you, then be prepared for a learning curve – it takes practice to learn new things. Honor the intent.
- Going for a walk together can be a way to reduce emotion when you are trying to have a discussion. Not only are you moving, you also aren't looking at each other all the time, which makes it feel more neutral.
- Role play with a trusted friend or your sponsor can be very helpful, if you are worried about how to bring up something with your loved one.

### Strive to avoid

- Questions that begin with “why.” “Why did you do that?” can sound harsh and judgmental, even if that isn't your intent.

### Instead,

- Use a softer approach. “Please help me understand what's happening. Can you tell me more about your thinking that led to you making that choice?”

### Strive to avoid

- Threats and retaliation.

### Instead

- Establish boundaries for yourself. You do not need to accept unacceptable behavior. Is there something you can't live with? If so, find a time when you both can listen, and communicate this to your loved one calmly and clearly. Make sure you are prepared to follow through if your line in the sand is crossed. Remember, say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't be mean when you say it. One way to think of a boundary is that you are building a bridge, not a wall.
- Don't give in to begging and pleading. It can backfire if you lose heart when the time comes to take action, because then it can seem like there are no consequences if your loved one makes a poor choice. However, if you can't follow through, recognize that perhaps you made a mistake when you set the boundary. Communicate all this to your loved one at the time when the boundary has been violated. Don't ignore what has happened.

### Strive to avoid

- Using physical intimacy as a weapon.

### Strive to avoid

- Making big decisions quickly, in the heat of the moment.

### Instead,

- Wait three days before making big decisions. This gives your whole self, including your body, the time it needs to consider all the factors. Involve your Higher Power. Insights can come from friends or chance encounters, in dreams, or from your stomach.

Strive to avoid

- Always coming up with solutions to a particular problem ahead of time.

Instead

- Sometimes, it might be appropriate to let your loved one wrestle with an issue and figure out his/her own strategies.

Strive to avoid

- Sharing what is happening with a lot of people, especially those who are not in Al-Anon or AA. Word can get around, which can cause enormous repercussions for everyone.

Instead

- Be very careful who you confide in. Committed people in the program will understand and honor the importance of anonymity.

Strive to avoid

- Dismissing the Al Anon slogans.

Instead,

- Pay attention to the words and the meaning behind them. They came to be for a reason, and contain a great deal of wisdom.

Possible other things to say to support communication

- "It sounds like you're angry. Is there anything you need from me?"
- "What you said touched me/had a big impact on me."
- "I want to explore new ways of making contact with each other."
- "I'm constantly in fear of your anger, and I don't want to live like that anymore."
- "I love you, and I need to do this." You can make this statement calmly and clearly when you feel secure in your own motivation; there is no need to feel defensive. You can be present and honor yourself, even when you believe your loved one won't be happy to hear what you have to say.

I found this book extremely helpful, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. Perhaps your family of origin was not the best when it came to communicating. The principles and ideas in this book work for everyone, not just parents.