

Let's Talk about Safety in Al-Anon Meetings!

Safety is an important issue within Al-Anon—one that all can address. Open discussion on the topic can aid groups in developing workable solutions to safety issues—solutions that are based on the fundamental principles of our fellowship and that will help keep our meetings safe. [This document applies only to Al-Anon meetings, groups and members: For Alateen safety, please refer to your Area Alateen Safety and Behavioral Requirements.]

When members feel safe and are safe at meetings, the unity of our groups (Tradition One) is maintained.

Al-Anon groups are spiritual entities; they are made up of families and friends of alcoholics who gather and share their experience, strength and hope to solve their common problems. Yet, we are not immune to the difficulties that affect the rest of humanity.

Al-Anon is a microcosm of the larger society within which we exist. Problems found in the outside world can also make their way into the rooms of Al-Anon. As we strive to share in a spirit of trust, both at meetings and individually with our Personal and Service Sponsors and other Al-Anon members, it is reasonable for each member to expect a meaningful level of safety. Those attending Al-Anon meetings benefit other members and themselves when they provide a safe environment in which families and friends of alcoholics can focus on gaining and maintaining serenity. The group can then fulfill its primary purpose—to help families and friends of alcoholics. For this reason, groups and members discuss the topic of safety.

Autonomy and Group Action

There is no government within Al-Anon and no central authority, legal or otherwise, to control or direct the behavior of Al-Anon members. In accordance with the Fourth Tradition, the formation and operation of an Al-Anon group is guided by the group conscience of its members. Al-Anon groups and service entities such as Areas, Districts, Al-Anon Information Service Offices and Literature Distribution Centers are autonomous, except in matters affecting another group or Al-Anon as a whole.

Recognizing that safety is an important issue to their members, many groups have taken action to keep distractions and disruptions to a minimum within the context of the group.

Al-Anon Membership

Al-Anon membership has never been contingent on any set of behavioral or moral standards beyond those founded on common sense, courtesy and the timeless values of kindness, tolerance and love.

Al-Anon's Third Tradition states in part, "The only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or friend." This brings an openness that helps define our character as a diverse fellowship; however, some people come into Al-Anon without an understanding of the type of behavior that is appropriate in meetings or in the company of other members. A person can find serenity in Al-Anon and yet still not understand what is acceptable behavior.

Dealing with Disruptions

While most groups operate with a healthy balance of spontaneity and structure, there are a number of situations that can threaten group unity and challenge the safety of the group and its members. Often these can center on disruptive individuals—those who are confrontational and aggressive or those who are simply unwilling to put the needs of the group first. Such behavior can hijack the focus of a meeting and frighten members, new and old.

Some groups have developed plans for addressing disruptive behavior and have established procedures through their group consciences to ensure that the group's welfare is protected. In many cases, disruptive behavior is preempted by having the Chairperson state the expectations for behavior in the meeting.

Some groups mention in their opening announcements that illegal and disruptive behavior are not tolerated. Still other groups have asked disruptive members to leave the meeting. Additionally, groups and members always have the option to call the appropriate authorities if disruptive behavior continues or anyone's safety is at risk.

Group Safety and Unity

Situations that groups have addressed through their group consciences include: sexual harassment or stalking; threats of violence; bullying; high-pressure controlling behavior; financial coercion; racial intolerance; sexual orientation or gender identification intolerance; and dominance that pressures Al-Anon members to accept a particular point of view or belief regarding medical treatments and/or medications, politics, religion, or other outside issues. In addition, there may be other behaviors that go on outside of typical meeting times that affect whether someone feels safe enough to return to the group.

Some groups develop their own guidelines or procedures to help keep the meeting safe. Al-Anon members can speak to those who are acting inappropriately, being careful to consider everyone's personal safety when doing so. Situations can be discussed at business meetings, where members can come to a group conscience about how to handle concerns: a meeting on the Traditions may be all that is necessary to make the member aware of behavior that is unacceptable to the group as a whole and help the member become willing to change. As a last resort, the disruptive member may be asked to stop attending the meeting for a specific period of time. Groups that take this drastic action do so to preserve the common welfare and to maintain the unity of the Al-Anon group.

In any situation, if a person's safety is in jeopardy, or the situation breaches the law, the members involved can take appropriate action to ensure their safety. Calling the proper authorities does not go against any Al-Anon Traditions. *Anonymity is not a cloak protecting criminal or inappropriate behavior.*

Inappropriate or predatory behavior, such as unwanted sexual attention or targeting vulnerable members, can be especially troublesome. These behaviors may go on outside of the meeting room. While Al-Anon members can be caring and supportive to those affected, we are not professionals trained to handle such situations. Law enforcement or other professional help may be necessary.

Victims of inappropriate behavior, harassment or predators can let the group know about such situations, often through a Sponsor or trusted friend. This way the group is informed, and members can help address the situation and curtail further problems. Group discussion should focus on how to create an environment where all family members and friends of alcoholics can find and maintain serenity.

Al-Anon and the Law

Al-Anon membership does not grant anyone immunity under the law; being at an Al-Anon meeting does not put anyone beyond the jurisdiction of law enforcement officers. As individuals, Al-Anon members are also "citizens of the world," and as citizens, we are not above the law.

Through the group conscience process, many groups have established guidelines identifying when it may be appropriate to call authorities and handle a given situation within the legal system. No Al-Anon group has to tolerate illegal behavior, and any activity within an Al-Anon meeting is subject to the same laws that apply outside the meeting. In the past, groups have had to confront illegal acts such as violence, embezzlement, theft of property and more.

Emergencies

Injuries, accidents, fires, etc., sometimes do occur during meetings. To accommodate these situations, groups can also develop plans and procedures, often in consultation with their meeting location or local authorities. Addressing an emergency situation is more important than continuing the meeting, and members should not hesitate to call emergency personnel in critical situations.

Keeping the Focus on Our Primary Purpose

Tradition Five states: "Each Al-Anon Family Group has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps of AA ourselves, by encouraging and understanding our alcoholic relatives, and by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics." It is hoped that our primary purpose will transcend most issues and curtail negative behaviors. However, sometimes issues of safety jeopardize group harmony.

Safety is important to the functioning of the group. When members maintain order and safety in meetings, the group as a whole benefits, and all those involved are able to focus on recovering from the family disease of alcoholism and learning how to live a serene life.

Ultimately, the experience of how these situations are handled can be as varied as our fellowship. Using good judgment and common sense, while adhering to the Twelve Traditions, seems to provide the best guide.

What Can Groups and Members Do?

Groups and members can discuss the topic of safety to raise awareness in the fellowship and seek through sponsorship, workshops and meetings, to create as safe an environment as possible for the newcomer and other members or potential members. This can be the subject of sharing in groups, Districts and Areas.

Here are some helpful suggestions and reminders:

- It is always a good idea to talk about issues of safety before they arise.
- Each member attending an Al-Anon meeting is responsible for being mindful of safety.
- The Chairperson of each meeting can communicate clearly what Al-Anon is and what it is not.
- Sponsorship plays an important role, and Sponsors can be helpful in pointing out warning signs or unhealthy situations to Sponsees and newcomers.
- Al-Anon members who are concerned about the words or actions of a Sponsor or another member may find it helpful to speak to someone they trust, such as their Al-Anon group or a professional, as needed.
- It may be helpful to include "Safety in Al-Anon" as a topic in a group inventory.
- Groups may benefit from developing guidelines and procedures on safety.

In all discussions about safety, keep the focus on our primary purpose and our common welfare, and place principles above personalities.

A Special Word to Anyone Confronted with Violence

Al-Anon's gentle process unfolds gradually, over time. But those of us facing violent, potentially life-threatening situations may have to make immediate choices to ensure the safety of ourselves and our children. This may mean arranging for a safe house with a neighbor or friend, calling for police protection, or leaving money and an extra set of car keys where they can be collected at any time in case of emergency.

It is not necessary to decide how to resolve the situation once and for all—only how to get out of harm's way until this process of Awareness, Acceptance and Action can free us to make choices for ourselves that we can live with.

Anyone who has been physically or sexually abused or threatened may be terrified of taking any action at all. It can require every ounce of courage and faith to act decisively. But no one has to accept violence. No matter what seems to trigger the attack, we all deserve to be safe.

Helpful Resources for Al-Anon Members and Groups

- *The Dilemma of the Alcoholic Marriage** (B-4)
- *...In All Our Affairs: Making Crises Work for You** (B-15)
- *From Survival to Recovery: Growing Up in an Alcoholic Home** (B-21)
- *Sponsorship, What It's All About** (P-31)
- *Using Al-Anon Principles to Resolve Conflicts Kit** (K-70)
- *Sponsorship—Working Together to Recover** (M-78)
- *Al-Anon/Alateen Is & Is Not Bookmark** (M-44)
- *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual** (P-24/27)
- *Taking a Group Inventory* (G-8a)
- Contact your District Representative or Area Delegate for local shared experience.

**May be available at your group or local Literature Distribution Center;
is available in the Al-Anon Store at al-anon.org*

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