

A
Reader's Digest

REPRINT

Life with an alcoholic seemed unbearable to this husband, until he found

An Oasis Called Al-Anon

Condensed from FAMILY HEALTH
ROBERT ELLIOTT
(a pseudonym)

AS WE WERE LEAVING the party late that night, my wife tripped on an outside step. Trying to break her fall, she put her hands out and hit the gravel driveway, palms down and with one leg bent under her. She was too drunk to get up alone.

I helped her into the car, drove home, and helped her to our doorway. By the time I'd put the car away, she had somehow got to the bedroom, pulled the bedspread over herself and passed out.

The liquor wore off by dawn, and she woke me. "We'd better get to the hospital," she said. Her hands were caked with blood and impregnated with little stones like so much buckshot. Her knee was the size of a melon.

After he had examined her, the surgeon, who had treated my wife before, said, "I'm afraid we're in for

another long one. Can't tell till the swelling goes down, but I'll be surprised if she hasn't torn the cartilage this time."

In our 15 years of marriage, it had been a rare year that my wife hadn't spent a couple of weeks in the hospital for some alcohol-related ailment: a sprained back, pneumonia, nervous breakdown, torn ligaments, burns, a spinal fusion. I'd walked this road many times. Trying to be father *and* mother. Car pool. Sitters. Eating out. Psychiatrists. And the awful bitchiness of the detoxifying alcoholic. I couldn't go through it again. I felt so sorry for myself—and so damn mad at her.

Six weeks later, following the operation, the doctor told me that her knee was all right. "But the malnutrition is so bad that her skin kept tearing when I sutured. The blood tests show that her liver is

shot. She's going to be dead in six months at this rate."

Walking to the elevator, I was totally depressed. I knew that, as soon as she got home, we would be right back on the same old merry-go-round. It all seemed so futile! And then I bumped into a former business associate, a recovered alcoholic, who for years had been helping people who had alcohol problems.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Nothing serious, I hope."

Right there in the hospital hall, I told him the whole bloody mess.

"You know," he said, after I'd finished, "if it's as serious as you say, *you* need help, too. Living with an alcoholic can be an impossible load."

I know. I know.

And then he told me about Al-Anon—an organization for people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking problem. He went on to say that Al-Anon provides information and help for these people whether or not the alcoholic seeks help, and he suggested that I go to a local meeting. I was too filled with resentment, though, to really listen. I tried to be courteous but, even as he talked, I was wondering why *I* should go to meetings. *She* has the problem—not I.

But the idea wouldn't go away. "An impossible load," he had said. As time passed, I began to realize how warped my life was becoming. I became aware of a whole litany of destructive emotions—anger, anxiety, disgust, embarrassment—that

were beginning to overwhelm me. I *should* try Al-Anon.

One January evening, I got up nerve and went. In the meeting room were 15 or 20 adults of both sexes and miscellaneous ages. I sat down next to a woman in her 60s who introduced herself as Beatrice. "May I give you this?" she asked, handing me a folded card. "It's the whole thing on the head of a pin."

On one side was the famous prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." On the other side were the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The first step: "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable."

Now the meeting was starting. George, the moderator, asked us to observe confidentiality, to use first names only; and he explained the purpose of Al-Anon as a separate fellowship from AA, designed to meet the needs of the families and friends of alcoholics. He pointed out that the Al-Anon program is based on AA's 12 Steps and is designed to guide its members into personal awareness of their role in relation to the alcoholic. Then he suggested that we take turns trying to figure out, aloud, how far each of us had gotten with Step 1.

I felt confused. "We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol." I thought, *That's my wife's decision,*

THE READER'S DIGEST

not mine. But then, as I listened, I understood. The question for us was: "How well have *we* learned that we cannot control our spouse's alcoholism? What progress have *we* made in learning to control our own anxieties and anger in the face of the problem we live with?"

A pretty young woman with heavy circles under her eyes said, "I've learned not to cover up for him anymore. If he's too drunk to go to work, I don't call up and say he's sick. He may get canned, I know, but that's his problem to deal with."

Others spoke up: "As long as he can count on you to protect him, he won't change. Don't forget, you're powerless over his drinking. Don't let him make you anxious" . . . "I used to look for the bottles and pour them out, until I realized he'd just buy more and hide them better" . . . "When she's too drunk to cook dinner, I take the kids out. We try to make it fun."

And then it was my turn. Was I in any position to say anything? My palms were wringing wet, and I didn't know how to start. Then the words really came: torrents of bitter words, words of resentment, confusion and anger. It must have sounded like a verbal boil being lanced, but the moderator was matter-of-fact when I finally shut up. "Thank you," he said. "I guess we've all felt that way at one point or another. That's why we're here. Keep coming. If you don't hear something tonight that will be helpful, you will next time."

During the next several days, I read everything the moderator had given me about Al-Anon. I learned that a spouse, having accepted intellectually that he or she cannot solve the alcoholic partner's problem, must take the big step of accepting it emotionally as well. For his own preservation, dignity and peace of mind, he must "let go"—detach from the drinking problem. He must refuse to worry; he must accept what he cannot change; he must seek serenity by avoiding the arguments and anxieties created by alcoholics. It seems so selfish to ignore someone, but as one woman in our program explained, "That's not what Al-Anon means by detachment. It's really 'tough love' we're talking about; to protect our own sanity, we turn away from the drinking problem and the crazy behavior it causes."

The second meeting I attended brought new dimensions. I felt the beginning of fellowship with the group and a clearer understanding of what we were trying to do. I learned that in "working the program," as Al-Anoners call it, one is required to examine one's own motivations carefully—to make an honest self-appraisal of virtues and weaknesses. Contempt, scorn and sarcasm are common personality defects of the alcoholic's spouse. And a determination to run things—to control the alcoholic, to hide the bottles, to keep a stubborn grip on *everything* "because the alcoholic can't do anything"—is often the most

AN OASIS CALLED AL-ANON

serious personality defect of all. "Swell," I said. "But what do I do when I come home and find the sink full of dishes, the hamper full of dirty diapers, and the kids not fed?"

"First, you try not to get angry—but to remember that you are dealing with the symptoms of an illness. Then you do the minimum necessary for cleanliness and health."

And what about the children who have to live with an alcoholic parent? You level with them, even if it makes you feel guilty at first. You explain that their mother or father is as truly sick as a diabetic, and you get them to Alateen—the offshoot of Al-Anon for teen-agers—where they can rap with their peers about their problems.

My 13-year-old daughter was becoming increasingly tense about the problem in our home. One day, she broke down at school. Her teacher called me at the office. I had toyed with the idea of Alateen for Beth, and had even talked with her about it. Up to that point, she had not wanted to try it.

But there was an Alateen meeting scheduled for that night, and Beth agreed to go. I sat across the hall at the Al-Anon meeting with a lump the size of a watermelon in my stomach. Would it help my daughter? Scare her? What were those ten kids talking about? I couldn't concentrate on a thing in our meeting.

When I asked her later how it had gone, she broke into a smile. "Great, Dad! Can I come back next week?"

As I WRITE this, it has been 19 months since that first January night. Taking it a step at a time, I'm still with Al-Anon. It offers no magic solutions, but rather a whole new philosophy of living, to be learned slowly and patiently. There is a spiritual aspect to the program that can be a stumbling block for some people. It requires that one submit his personal will to that of a higher power and stop trying to play God in his own house.

In my case, I am learning to put things in perspective. I have two wonderful children, a good job and the ability again to enjoy a sunset, a good laugh, a pleasant meal. I am no longer consumed by that part of my life that I cannot do anything about.

My wife is wrestling privately with her alcoholism. She may yet reach out for help. I do not know. But I do know that I no longer blame myself or her. Our home is a happier place now that my children and I have learned about the disease of alcoholism. The problem is in its place, not pervading everything as it did before—because I, like many thousands before, have found an oasis called Al-Anon.

For further information about Al-Anon and Alateen, consult your local telephone directory or write to: Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. (or Alateen), P.O. Box 182, Madison Square Station, Dept. D, New York N. Y. 10010.

Reprints of this article are available. Prices, postpaid to one address: 12—\$1.00; 50—\$2.50; 100—\$4; 500—\$15.00; 1000—\$25. Address Reprint Editor, Reader's Digest, Pleasantville, N.Y. 10570