

Al-Anon Family Groups Australia Pty Ltd

Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee
on Family and Community Affairs.

**RE: Substance Abuse in Australian
Communities
(in particular)
The effects on the Family.**

SUMMARY OF REPORT

We in Al-Anon are focused on helping and supporting people who have been effected by some else's drinking. Our service within the community has been active in Australia for 49 years. Our submission focuses on families who live or have lived with problem drinkers. Our experience tells us that for every alcoholic there are at least 6 people directly effected. Constrained by expectations of happy domesticity, families often cannot process the violence as anything but a private, family matter

Al-Anon began in Australia in 1951 and today we have nine area offices operated by committed Al-Anon volunteers who collectively serve over 600 groups. We consider these amounts to about 6000 participants per week attending meetings

Funds are all created within the fellowship, we accepted no outside funding.

The rehabilitation process needs to consider the families who are caught in a destructive reactive pattern of behaviour and don't know how to change.

The hours lost in productivity due to depression, migraine headaches, anxiety not to mention mistakes due to lack of concentration are just some of the symptoms signaling problems at home. It is normal in the alcoholic family for almost every interaction to be destructive. There can be tension and depression, violence or inertia, thoughts of homicide, thoughts of suicide. And above all, FEAR. Living in such an atmosphere is not healthy, but how to get out of it?

The despair felt by the family and friends of alcoholics needs to be replaced with hope.

Learning the facts about the illness of alcoholism is the very first step if a family is to be able to change actions and attitudes so that recovery becomes a real possibility

When knowledge replaces ignorance, when understanding replaces hostility, when courage replaces fear, there is hope for earlier recovery

At weekly meetings, Al-Anon members share what it is like living with an alcoholic plus their hard-won knowledge of what works and does not work in the situation. Newcomers quickly realise that what they are hearing is not a theory, but is real-life experience.

Learning the facts about the illness of alcoholism is the very first step if a family is to be able to change actions and attitudes so that recovery becomes a real possibility.

Much harm is done to all involved by the family's desire to protect the alcoholic, to smooth his path, to hide the truth. Through the sharing of experience, strength and hope in Al-Anon. they will learn courage but not foolhardiness

Within the helping professions, within government departments, within business organisations, within trade unions, within religious bodies, there is often a lack of knowledge of what Al-Anon has to offer to the vast numbers of people affected by the alcoholism of a loved one. There appears to be a lack of understanding that there is an organization called Al-Anon based on similar lines as AA, which addresses itself to the problem faced by the families.

Our vision for Al-Anon is to have a much LARGER and more VISUAL public awareness profile. Our organization ask for no funding but always to be considered as a resource to so many who suffer the effects of alcoholism in silence

5.0 INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to submit vital information regarding the devastating effects of abusive alcohol use in our community.

We in Al-Anon are focused on helping and supporting people who have been affected by someone else's drinking. In Australia our services have been available to the community for 49 years.

Our submission will focus on families who live or have lived with problem drinkers.

We draw our knowledge from many members who are living or have lived with active alcoholism and today enjoy full and happy lives free from despair.

It is a deep concern to us that *families* are the most affected by someone else's drinking, but in general their voices are silent in the current debate.

2.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

When Alcoholics Anonymous meetings were first held in the U.S.A., circa 1935, close relatives usually accompanied the alcoholic. However it gradually became clear that family members had their own special problems, and in 1951 two wives of AAs, Lois W. and Anne B., got in touch with 87 enquirers to co-ordinate groups and to serve them. The name *Al-Anon Family Groups* was chosen, and the 12 Steps of AA, virtually unchanged, and later the Traditions, were both adopted as guiding principles.

Teenage children of alcoholics realized that their problems differed from the adult members, and in 1957 they formed Alateen, the junior segment of Al-Anon.

Al-Anon began in Australia in 1951 and today we have nine area offices operated by committed Al-Anon volunteers who collectively serve approximately 550 groups. We estimate there are 5500 participants per week attending meetings from as far north as Cape York Peninsula and as far south as Tasmania. We print a large amount of our own literature and also import some from the USA. Funds are all created within the fellowship - we accept no outside funding.

Although Al-Anon grew from a need expressed by families of members of Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon and Alateen now offer hope and help for families and friends of alcoholics whether the alcoholic is still drinking or not.

3.0 THE EFFECTS OF SOMEONE ELSE'S DRINKING

Consider, for every alcoholic, how many people are directly affected by their behaviour!. Unreliability, financial insecurity, inability to accept responsibility for their lives and their actions... not to mention physical, sexual and emotional abuse. This is what adults and children as trying to cope with.

Our experience tells us that for every alcoholic there are at least 6 people directly affected. Because the family is covering up, paying their bills or doing for them what they need to do for themselves, the alcoholic continues to deny the problem and depends on others to be involved with their alcoholism.

How many family members are there, whose involvement with an alcoholic has brought them to the point where they can no longer participate in normal daily living? Agoraphobia, paranoia, depression, eating disorders are just some of the destructive symptoms members talk about in meetings as they recover from the effects of living with alcoholism.

The rehabilitation process needs to consider the families who are caught in a destructive, reactive pattern of behaviour and don't know how to change.

3.1 Social Consequences

- **Work**

The hours lost in productivity due to migraine headaches, depression, anxiety - not to mention mistakes due to lack of concentration - are just some of the symptoms signalling problems at home. The non-drinker constantly worries: Will the kids be OK...? Will there be enough money...? Will he/she be home tonight...? Will he/she be argumentative tonight...? As a result, very capable, competent employees start slipping in their duties and expensive mistakes can start to happen.

- **Family members**

It is normal in the alcoholic family for almost every interaction to be destructive. No matter what is tried, things go from bad to worse. There can be hatred, a desire for

revenge, rage - or apathy. There can be tension and depression, violence or inertia, thoughts of homicide, thoughts of suicide. And above all, FEAR. Living in such an atmosphere is not healthy, but how to get out of it? People seem to operate in patterns of behaviour that preclude rational thinking about their situation. All this reactive behaviour becomes a huge cost on our social system. Depression and personality problems can perpetuate an inability to interact in our society. This in turn becomes a drain on our social system.

- **Loneliness and isolation**

Secrets and lies become the norm for many families. The alcoholic's violence towards their family further exacerbates the family's isolation and loneliness. Constrained by expectations of happy domesticity, families often cannot process the violence as anything but a private, family matter. This is a major element in what Barrett and McIntosh (1982) refer to as the 'anti-social family'.

- **Alcoholic violence**

The blackouts experienced by the alcoholic can have profound effects on the family. The actions that can accompany the blackouts are seldom remembered and therefore leave families (especially children) quite bewildered with their reality. One minute the family is dealing with uncontrollable violence, or emotional and/or sexual abuse, then the next morning the alcoholic is loving and friendly. The breakdown of the family leads to very destructive 'acting out' behaviour, particularly in teenagers, and this is where Alateen proves so effective.

4.0 THE SOLUTION

The despair felt by the family and friends of alcoholics needs to be replaced with hope. May we ask – are family and friends of alcoholics being considered and offered help in the same way as the alcoholic?

It is difficult for a non-alcoholic to realize that a person does not deliberately and willfully become alcoholic, rather the drinking has become an uncontrollable, compulsive urge. The alcoholic needs encouragement and understanding.

But the non-alcoholic member of the family also needs to receive understanding and care.

4.1 AWARENESS

Learning the facts about the illness of alcoholism is the very first step if a family is to be able to change actions and attitudes so that recovery becomes a real possibility. Few realize that alcoholism flourishes in negative situations, and that the response of spouse/child/parent or 'significant other' may need to change if there is to be any hope for improvement. As long as there is someone emotionally involved; as long as the consequences of drinking are absorbed by the family; as long as the real problem is hidden or denied, then neither alcoholics nor those who love them will seek treatment. Much harm is done to all involved by the family's desire to protect the alcoholic, to smooth his path, to hide the truth.

In Al-Anon, people learn that destructive ways can be overcome. When knowledge replaces ignorance, when understanding replaces hostility, when courage replaces fear, there is hope for earlier recovery.

4.2 ACCEPTANCE

At weekly meetings, Al-Anon members share what it is like living with an alcoholic, plus their hard-won knowledge of what works and does not work in the situation. Newcomers quickly realize that what they are hearing is not a theory, but is real-life experience. They are able to recognize similar problems to their own. Members, some of them still living in difficult situations, share the very core of their day-to-day life. They care deeply about the new member because they remember what life was like before Al-Anon. They have felt the pain, the anguish, the tension and the depression. And having applied certain healing actions to their own lives, and risen above the turmoil and misery that is the general accompaniment to living with an alcoholic, they are able to transmit hope and the desire for a better life to the newcomer. By embracing the reality of their lives Al-Anon members let go of denial and start to become empowered with choices and hope for the future. People need to know that making a better life for themselves cannot possibly harm another human being. They need to know that they did not cause the disease and cannot cure or control it. They need to know that they are responsible for their OWN life. They need to know that many of their previous ideas about alcoholism were erroneous.

4.3 ACTION

Through the sharing of experience, strength and hope in Al-Anon. they will learn courage rather than foolhardiness (it is not courageous to fight or argue with a drunken person, it is foolish). They learn to side-step violence, to avoid provocation, to withdraw into discreet silence when argument would be futile. But they will also learn that weak-kneed acceptance of unacceptable behaviour will not lead to recovery for anyone, least of all the alcoholic – and a whole family is at risk. They learn to state their truth quietly, but not to argue when it is not accepted. They respond, rather than react to another. They plan, but remain flexible enough to change plans when necessary. They gain serenity, and this has a definite calming effect on the entire family. They learn to love, and how to hold with an open hand. They learn that jealousy, anxiety, resentment and hostility are poisonous, and must be avoided if health is to be maintained. They learn to hope, and come to believe that a better life can be built, starting today!

CONCLUSION

There have been many articles written on the effects of alcoholism on the family and the influence of Al-Anon as a solution.

However, within the helping professions, within government departments, within business organizations, within trade unions, within religious bodies, there is often a lack of knowledge of what Al-Anon has to offer to the vast numbers of people affected by the alcoholism of a loved one. Most are willing to agree that Alcoholics Anonymous is essential in the successful treatment of alcoholics, but there appears to be a lack of understanding that there is an organization called Al-Anon based on similar lines which addresses itself to the problem faced by the families.

Al-Anon wants always to co-operate with those working in the field of alcoholism. Encouraging family members to attend Al-Anon on a regular basis does not mean that other treatment will not be needed - but it increases the chances of that treatment being effective. And those who, through a caring doctor, psychiatrist, nurse, policeman, counsellor or colleague have been directed to Al-Anon, feel tremendous gratitude.

Our vision for Al-Anon is to have a much greater public awareness of what we have to offer. Our organization asks for no funding, but does ask to be considered and recognized as a resource for so many who suffer the effects of alcoholism in silence.