
Al-Anon/Alateen Fact Sheet

Introduction

When family members need support from others who are also struggling with a loved one's substance use issues, referring them to Al-Anon or Alateen is a great option.

What They Are

Al-Anon is a mutual support group for people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking. It was founded in 1951, and its name was created from the first syllables of its parent organization **Alcoholics Anonymous** (AA). Alateen was founded in 1957 as a branch of Al-Anon for teenage relatives and friends of people with alcohol addiction.

How They Work

Like other 12-step groups, Al-Anon and Alateen are non-professional, peer-run fellowships, with meetings led by long-time members. The groups work with the idea that alcoholism is a family illness, but they do not aim to alter the drinking of affected loved ones. Rather, members admit they are powerless over their loved one's drinking and keep the focus on their own well-being by working through the approach's 12 steps. Al-Anon/Alateen help frustrated family members to realize that the drinker's behavior is not their fault. The groups also provide education about how not to enable drinkers, emphasizing that allowing them to experience the consequences of their actions can lead them toward recovery—often described as a “tough love” approach.

Website

<https://al-anon.org/for-members/members-resources/literature/feature-publications/>

Key Publication

How Al-Anon Works for Families & Friends of Alcoholics

Pros

- Group meetings are free (donations are encouraged but not required) and widely available, with more than 24,000 Al-Anon groups and nearly 1,400 Alateen groups worldwide.
- Online and phone meetings are available.
- Meetings are potentially open to loved ones of people struggling with drug (as well as alcohol) addictions.

Cons

- While Al-Anon/Alateen are effective for emotional support, they are not very effective at encouraging loved ones to enter into treatment for their addictions.
- The Al-Anon/Alateen approach teaches detachment. Members may perceive helpful or necessary actions (such as driving their loved one to the emergency room) as a form of enabling. They may feel that the loved one needs to “hit rock bottom” before they can improve, which can have serious consequences and is not supported by evidence.

Clinical Pearls

- Recommend Al-Anon/Alateen for family members needing emotional support. Recommend community reinforcement and family training (CRAFT) for families wanting to focus more on encouraging loved ones to get into treatment. (See “How to Help Families of Alcohol Users: An Overview” for more on CRAFT.)
- Al-Anon/Alateen meetings are often held at the same time and location as AA meetings—but in a different room—so that family members can attend Al-Anon/Alateen while the person with alcohol use disorder (AUD) attends the AA meeting.
- Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA; <https://adultchildren.org>) is another 12-step mutual-help group to keep in mind. ACA's focus is recovering from the aftermath of growing up in a family affected by AUD.

Interesting Fact

When Love Is Not Enough: The Lois Wilson Story (2010) is a film about the early years of AA and Al-Anon, co-founded by Bill W. and his wife Lois W., respectively.