

Acceptance of Communities, Cultures and Beliefs

Workshop from 2016 WSC

Part I – Introduction

Workshop Leader

We all have our own communities, cultures and beliefs. As our lives unfold, we expand our horizons by reaching out to experience those communities, cultures, and beliefs, just as we did when we first walked through the doors of Al-Anon. We all discriminate (usually unknowingly), believing biases and prejudices help us preserve our personal communities, cultures, and beliefs. The effects of someone else's drinking on us, our environment, and the media can have a negative impact on our lives. Our opinions, actions, and patterns of behavior are coping skills developed to protect ourselves against such negativity. Humans are pack, tribal, and social animals genetically ingrained through millennia of evolution. We discriminate to preserve what we perceive to be our "own kind."

Some cultural differences and diversities may include:

- Differences between people due to age, religion, race, gender, social or economic status, physical or mental status, etc.
- Having or being composed of differing elements or qualities – being unlike.
- Differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, language, sexual orientation and/or geographic area.

A few examples of the differences in the things around us include the fullness of a rich, four-part harmony compared to a simple melody; the complexity of the many characters in a play versus a monologue; or feeling the texture of a soft, padded carpet rather than smooth, hard tile beneath bare feet. So, even though a harmony may be built around a central, simple melody, while a character may engage in a monologue as well as in dialogue with other characters, and while both tile and carpet serve their own unique purposes, each musical note, character, and woven thread is totally necessary to make up the whole "thing" of which they are part. In fact, even the letters that make up our written language are like people: some are short and some tall; some are narrow, others wide; some make soft sounds while others are stronger, and each is completely necessary to complete each individual word.

Remember people in your life. Their names may have started with O' or Mc, or ended with "etti" or "ski." Listen to the languages we share: tomato from Spain, kindergarten from Germany, pasta from Italy, chow from China, and rendezvous from France. And what about all the languages and cultures represented in our very names? The name Kathleen is from the Irish; Patricia is from the Latin; Barbara and Sandi (Alexandra) are from the Greek; Michael and Betty (Elizabeth) are from the Hebrew; Therese is from the Spanish/Portuguese; Marian (Maryon) and Claire are from the French; Karen is from the Danish; and Bud is from American/English.

We may never be able to entirely eliminate our own prejudice, bias, and discrimination but, if we use the "spiritual principles of the program," guided by our Higher Power, these may be noticeably reduced. By practicing being open-minded, welcoming, and non-judgmental, by assuming goodwill and by stepping outside of our own comfort zones, we may become more open to other communities, cultures, and beliefs.

End of Part I

Part II – PowerPoint Presentation: What Is Bias? (Nine Slides)

Workshop Leader

Note: There is no additional commentary on the PowerPoint. Please read each caption aloud.

- (1) What is Bias? And what does it have to do with welcoming various communities, cultures, and beliefs in Al-Anon? <click>
- (2) Bias: Partiality; prejudice; unfair preference for, or dislike of something. <click>
- (3) I see myself as welcoming and open-minded, but: <click>
- (4) I only ask someone I know to lead the meeting.
I only talk to my friends before and after the meeting.
I wouldn't want to meet in a jail or a mental health clinic.
I wouldn't meet in a mosque or synagogue. <click>
- (5) I insist that we close with The Lord's Prayer.
I insist that we do not close with a prayer.
I don't like poor grammar when someone shares.
I insist on saying how long I've been in Al-Anon. <click>
- (6) I don't want to sit next to a homeless person.
I don't like sitting next to a person who has not cleaned up.
I don't like the passive/aggressive sharings of some members.
I cross my arms to keep people at a distance. <click>
- (7) Everyone is welcome, but: <click>
- (8) We meet in a church.
We have steep stairs to navigate.
This is a men's only, or a women's only, or an LGBT only meeting.
We don't allow small children; they're too disruptive. <click>
- (9) Teenagers are difficult to deal with.
Members of other Twelve Step programs are not welcome
We ask, "Are you looking for an A.A. meeting?"
We are a Step meeting, so we don't talk about the Traditions or Concepts <click>

Break for Discussion

Suggested talking points for discussion may include:

- ***Did this section increase your awareness?***
- ***How might you do things differently now that you are more aware?***
- ***Did this section increase your awareness of how your group interacts with members who are different?***
- ***Did you recognize things that you might want to do differently in the future?***

Please focus on how you, as an individual, may look at your own behavior rather than saying, "this group, this district, this person, etc., needs to change something."

End of Part II

Part III: Questions - Part 1

Workshop Leader

(Suggest members to break up into groups of 5-6 individuals and give them two minutes to write answers after each question)

1. How is a newcomer, who appears to have a different cultural background from the majority of the group's members, welcomed? Did we talk with them before and after the meeting?
2. Were they offered comfort? Did we share our experience, strength, and hope?
3. What happens when a newcomer with differing beliefs/opinions expresses himself/ herself during the Al-Anon meeting?
4. Do we demonstrate understanding and sensitivity to people of all ages, religious beliefs, biases, fears, etc., for the greater good of Al-Anon Family Groups? Did we talk with them before and after the meeting?
5. Would the newcomer agree that they were warmly welcomed and offered comfort regardless of their community, culture, or beliefs?

Break for Discussion

End of Part III

Part IV - Questions - Part 2:

Workshop Leader

(Suggest members to break up into groups of 5-6 individuals and give them two minutes to write answers after each question)

1. Is it possible that my group has practices and beliefs that might implicitly show a bias towards people who appear, believe, or act differently than our "usual" members. Do members always sit in the same places, next to the same people? Is there separation by gender, age, race, or sexual orientation? Are conversations before and after meetings unintentionally exclusive of "strangers"?
2. Do we feel uncomfortable when someone shares something that is outside of our "normal" belief system? For instance, if a person shares about their sexual orientation, their cultural heritage, their unique view of a Higher Power, or objects to our Closing prayer, do we feel uncomfortable? How can we step outside of our comfort zones with different types of people, their communities, cultures, and beliefs?
3. If we know and accept that we all carry a certain amount of bias and prejudice by virtue of our humanity and cultural conditioning, how can we better recognize our implicit biases and find ways to circumvent their effects on how we carry the message of Al-Anon, and practice the principles of our program in all our affairs?
4. What can we do to overcome our own discomfort and reach out to people that are not "like us"? How can we avoid separating into cliques, familiar groupings, or being territorial at our meetings? How can we actively demonstrate at our meetings and in public outreach that we are a recovery support group available to everyone everywhere?
5. Do we insist on doing things the way they have always been done? Do we defend our way of doing things, or are we open to the possibilities of doing things differently? Can we accept other communities, cultures, and beliefs?

Break for discussion

End of Part IV

Part V – Skit: Meeting before the meeting

1 Narrator

5 Regular Al-Anon members: Pastel Colors and some sort of “pendant” differentiating them from Newcomers.

Chuck (man)

Abdia (woman)

Bob (man)

Annalisa (woman)

Simone (woman)

3 Newcomers to a meeting: Bright Colors and some sort of “pendant” differentiating them from Regular Members.

Jesse (man)

Liz (woman)

Kaila (teenager)

Narrator: The regular attending Al-Anon members are gathering, greeting each other and socializing, while newcomers stand separate from the group and from one another, wondering if they’re in the right place.

Chuck: Hi, Annalisa, how ya doing?

Annalisa: Doing good, Chuck. It’s been a good day. I just got off the phone with my Sponsor and I know that acceptance is the answer to all of my problems.

Abdia: Hi, Bob. I need a meeting. I just had it out with my son.

Bob: Hey, Abdia. I can relate; I’m going through the same thing but, like my Sponsor says, I can start my day over anytime.

Simone: Hi, everyone. What’s with those people over there? Has anyone said anything to them?

Annalisa: No. Do you think they’re here for a meeting? Should we say something to them?

Chuck: Not me. I’m busy talking to my friends, and newcomers make me feel uncomfortable.

Bob: Yeah, just look at them and the way they act. They’ll get what they need or not. Attraction not promotion.

Abdia: Well, I went to an Al-Anon workshop not long ago and learned that we need to actively welcome and accept people from other communities, cultures, and beliefs. I’m going to go talk to those newcomers. Did all of you forget how you felt at your first meeting?

Simone: No, I remember; and I read recently in *Many Voices, One Journey (B-31)* that I need to close my eyes and listen with my heart. I’m going to go talk to that young woman.

Annalisa: OK, I’ll talk to the man. I can overcome my fears, “Just for Today.” Bob, will you come with me?

Bob: I’m coming with you, Annalisa. I read in *As We Understood... (B-11)*, “To keep it you must give it away.”

Abdia: I can talk to the teenager. I just don’t need any more attitude; I get enough of that from my son.

Chuck: No, thanks! I like things just the way they are. In *How Al-Anon Works (B-22)* it talks about taking care of yourself first. I’ll set up for the meeting.

Narrator: The regular members talk with the newcomers, and Chuck sets up for the meeting. Then they all come together.

Abdia: Hey, everyone, this is Kaila. This is her first meeting. She was looking for an Alateen meeting but, since we don't have one tonight, I invited her to join us. Plus, I think she might be able to help me understand my son.

Kaila: Hi! I'm here because my mother's drinking bothers me. I'm not sure about this; you're all so much older than me; I'm not sure I'll get anything from what you have to say, but maybe you *can* help me deal with my loneliness and confusion.

Abdia: Yes, the age difference may be great but we're more alike than we are different. Our feelings are feelings just like anyone else's. We have anger, sadness, fear, and all the feelings that you probably have. Just "Keep an Open Mind" and "Keep Coming Back." Oh, and there's an Alateen meeting here on Tuesday evenings, so you'll be able to share with younger people, too.

Kaila: OK, I'll give it a try.

Simone: I'd like you all to meet Liz.

Liz: Hey! I'm here because it feels like my sister is killing herself. I just want to beat her 'til she gets that through her head, so I guess I'm also here to get some help with my anger. By the way, when I looked on line, looking for a meeting, I noticed that most of your meetings are held in churches and this one's in a synagogue. Is Al-Anon a religious organization? If so, I want nothing to do with it!

Abdia: No Liz; Al-Anon is a spiritual program not a religious program; in this way it works for all faiths or no faith at all. We also meet in treatment centers, schools, correctional facilities, and so on. It's not important *where* we meet, but that we *can* meet. The places that we meet are just buildings.

Liz: (Nodding) Ok. I can accept that. That works for me.

Annalisa: And this is Jesse.

Jesse: Yeah. Hi. I want to find a way to get my wife to stop using drugs. I know that Al-Anon is for families and friends affected by someone else's drinking because I heard about it in another Twelve Step program. In fact, I'm a recovering alcoholic. Can Al-Anon still help me with my wife?

Annalisa: Sure, Jesse. Al-Anon is for anyone who has been affected by someone else's drinking and I have yet to meet an alcoholic whose life hasn't been affected by someone else's drinking. The only thing we ask is that we keep the focus on ourselves. We don't talk about our own recovery from drinking, other recovery programs, religion, or treatment centers.

Jesse: Ok, I can do that. Now, what do I have to do to get her to stop?

CHUCK APPROACHES THE GROUP

Chuck: Welcome, everyone. Here are some Newcomer Packets with the phone numbers of members willing to receive calls, a meeting list, a *How Al-Anon Works* book and even a bookmark explaining some of our Al-Anon acronyms for each of you. Let's all take a seat

and start the meeting with a moment of silence.

Narrator: We start the meeting with the Serenity Prayer, followed by the Suggested Al-Anon Alateen Welcome. After the meeting ends, the regular members hang around, talk to and answer questions for the newcomers.

After the newcomers leave, the regular members share with each other.

Chuck: Wow! What a great meeting. Hey, Bob, did you notice that those newcomers aren't so bad? They're more like us than we are different. I think I benefited from having the newcomers here as much as they did from being here.

Bob: Yeah, it's great to see things from a new perspective. They reminded me of where I came from, and they added a lot to the meeting. Our Higher Power does give us what we need, if we're open to it.

Abdia: I talked with Liz afterwards and we're going to work on our anger issues together.

Annalisa: Kaila's coming back tomorrow for the Alateen meeting and to talk to my daughter. Maybe they'll become friends. And I really didn't realize the terminology I've been using is so outdated; I thought it was OK until Kaila gently enlightened me.

Simone: I wonder why I hesitated to welcome diversities? How did I let myself become complacent and resistant to change, good or bad? I think I'll take a chance and get out of my comfort zone. I'm going to make it a point to overcome my

prejudices and welcome people from other communities, cultures, and beliefs into my recovery.

Break for discussion

End of Part V

Part VI – Wrap up:

Workshop Leader

Two more dictionary definitions of diversity include these descriptions, each demonstrating the importance of including and encouraging members of different backgrounds:

- Characteristics of individuals that make them unique and able to offer different perspectives, skills, and talents.
- All the ways in which people are different from one another; to honor these individual attributes is to value and respect each other.

Let's remember that someone else's drinking can affect *anyone's* life. Al-Anon and Alateen are Twelve Step recovery programs for *anyone* who feels his or her life has been affected by someone else's drinking, either currently or in the past, directly or indirectly, and that Alateen is designed for members in their teens. Alateens are members of the Al-Anon fellowship. Where there is no Alateen meeting available, young people are encouraged to attend Al-Anon meetings. As we reflect on how we welcome people from different communities, cultures, and beliefs into our meetings, let's also think about how we welcome younger members.

In closing, let's especially remember these three very important principles of the Al-Anon program:

- (1) The Suggested Al-Anon Preamble to the Twelve Steps includes these words:
"Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination, political entity, organization, or institution".
- (2) Tradition One states, "personal progress for the greatest number depends on unity."
- (3) Tradition Five states, "we have but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics."

Thank you.

End of Presentation