

Preface

Alcoholism is a disease of many losses. For those of us who are the relatives and friends of alcoholics, these losses affect many aspects of our lives and remain with us over time, whether or not we are still living with an active alcoholic. In *Opening Our Hearts, Transforming Our Losses*, we share the hope we have found with the help of Al-Anon Family Groups as we came to acknowledge, understand, and accept the losses we experienced.

This book is an exploration of issues that concern everyone who has struggled with someone else's alcoholism. We experience loss from not having had the happy childhood we wanted, from a marriage that fell short of our hopes and dreams, or from the disappointments of other personal relationships that did not meet our expectations.

In coping with these problems, we wondered why unfortunate things were happening to us. We learned to ignore our feelings, create fantasy solutions, and minimize our problems. We assumed that somehow we were at fault—and that no one else could understand our despair. With each loss, we felt more alone and isolated.

This book helps us to acknowledge the painful reality of loss and grief. It encourages us to acknowledge sometimes hidden thoughts and fears, to recognize the truth of our feelings, and to seek solutions that ease our pain and lead us to inner peace.

We experience Al-Anon Family Groups as safe and supportive

places to find shelter along with others who are also on a similar path of self-discovery based on honest searching and sharing. Release from the burden of past trauma is not achieved by denying that those losses occurred. We can move forward to a brighter future by acknowledging the pain of what happened and then leaving it behind. We learn to let go of fantasies of what might have been and to open ourselves to the realities of what is. We find that others have had similar feelings of over-responsibility and guilt. As we come to understand how others have made progress, we gain the inner resources to pull aside the emotional curtain that has kept us separated from the peace of mind that we yearned for and the rich and full life that we deserve.

May this book help you on your journey toward release and hope. As our slogan says, “Together We Can Make It,” and as the Suggested Al-Anon/Alateen Closing invites, “. . . Let the understanding, love, and peace of the program grow in you one day at a time.”

Introduction

"I finally understood that I needed to give myself permission to grieve."

Grief is a natural response to the many losses that we suffer as a consequence of someone else's alcoholism. Some of us may believe we are to blame for our losses, or that they happen as the result of bad luck. We may find ourselves saying or thinking, "What did I do to deserve this?" Under the cloud of alcoholism, it's easy to lose our dreams of a happy family life and our hopes that the alcoholic will find recovery. We may no longer feel the same intimacy we once felt with our alcoholic partner, child, family member, or friend. Over the long-term, we tend to lose perspective on how alcoholism affects our relationships and our quality of life. The grief that follows in the wake of alcoholism may not seem so obvious a consideration.

Loss as part of the family disease of alcoholism

"Alcoholism robbed me of who I was, caused injury to my daughter, and almost completely destroyed my best friend. It took bits and pieces of us all during those first six years. Those were tremendous losses that took a long time to work through. My grief was immense. I felt inconsolable."

Living with alcoholism on a daily basis affects our sense of dignity and self-respect. Daily we are reminded of how our lives are

different than we had hoped or expected. Before long our trust and intimacy begin to erode, and our relationship with the alcoholic starts to deteriorate. Over time the culmination of losses can take its toll on us.

Those of us who grew up in alcoholic homes grieve for our childhoods. Painful memories from our past can consume us with grief, or we may spend years without realizing we are grieving. As children, any change could trigger feelings of loss.

"I wanted everything to stay the same and I didn't accept change well. I resented it; talked about how things used to be; and longed for old homes, toys, pets, and fun times."

Even memories of good times with our families can trigger sadness, since those times were often tainted by the awareness that they wouldn't last. We may feel a sorrow so deep we often can't find the words to speak of it.

It's not just about death

When we first begin to understand how alcoholism has affected our lives, we may not fully recognize our feelings of grief and loss. We may tend to minimize or deny the pain by telling ourselves, "Well, at least she isn't dead," or, "Things could be worse." True, things probably could be worse, but they're also probably tough enough just as they are.

We may understand that we are grieving, or we may be confused by the sudden onset of emotions. One member didn't know why she felt the way she did when her son left home until her Sponsor suggested she might be grieving. Initially startled by this suggestion, she came to realize how her son's years of alcohol abuse had taken him away from her emotionally long before his physical absence. Being able to recognize and name our losses is a vital first step toward facing our grief.

“Before recovery, I used to think grief only happened when someone died. I had been in Al-Anon for several years before I read about grief in relation to alcoholism. It started to make perfect sense to me when I understood that much of my sadness, anger, and mixed-up feelings were signs of grief. I was losing my battle with trying to control the alcoholic in my life. At last I could see I was grieving. As I got more and more honest, I saw that I had been in grief much of my life, but had no name for it. Recognizing my grief seemed to offer me a sense of dignity. I finally understood what was happening to me. I now use this knowledge when I experience small losses or big ones.”

Physical, emotional, and spiritual symptoms of grief

Living with the disease of alcoholism affects us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Many describe the pain of grief as unlike anything they’ve ever felt before. Although we may experience similar symptoms, grief will affect each of us differently. Some of us may find it difficult to function, while others are able to continue with routine daily activities.

“Some days all I could do was sit on the floor and cry uncontrollably. Yet funeral arrangements had to be made, and I needed to tend to daily life. Bills had to be paid and laundry had to be done. I had to eat. I conducted all my activities through a veil of grief. During that time, I learned that doing the next right thing was enough. I also learned that support was only a phone call or a meeting away. Some days the only thing I was capable of doing was meeting an Al-Anon member for a cup of coffee. I learned to be gentle with myself. On any given day, working my program to the best of my ability is all I can do.”

One overwhelming fear for many of us is that we'll always feel this way and that we will never recover. Or we may, for a time, not *want* to feel better. One member felt this way after her husband's death: "It had been a willful refusal on my part to allow myself to be consoled. I met every attempt with the words, 'Yes, but.' Though it may be true that others could be consoled, I believed my loss was so much greater than theirs. My grief had turned into the 'Poor Me's,' which kept me from taking action to help myself feel better."

Grief is exhausting. It can make us sleepless or make it difficult to get out of bed. We may forget to eat, or we may overeat. We may not feel like taking a shower, going to work, or preparing a meal. Grief is unpredictable. We may feel sad one minute, then angry or confused the next. When we have a moment alone, we may find that we can't stop crying. One day we may wake up feeling some relief, and the next find ourselves depressed.

"I would find myself crying any time I became relaxed—as in not busy. I couldn't just sit and rest because I would start crying. I would even cry while I was driving. I would get angry with myself for grieving, telling myself I shouldn't feel that way!"

Fear, confusion, and lack of concentration can accompany us for months. We may become forgetful and irritable. One member couldn't remember how to perform the simplest tasks, like turning on an electronic appliance. Depression and anxiety are also common. We may lose interest in activities we once found enjoyable and may need to isolate for a while. We may need to spend some days in our pajamas. At times like these, family and work demands can feel particularly burdensome. If we can't take care of ourselves, how can we possibly take care of anyone or anything else? Some days we may question how we'll get through the day. If our depression continues to worsen, if life seems too much to bear,