

CHOSEN AGENDA ITEMS

Prior to this year's World Service Conference (WSC), the Conference Leadership Team invited Conference members to submit Chosen Agenda Item topics for discussion that are general in nature and pertain to Al-Anon worldwide.

Before the Conference, the submitted topics were combined into a single document by a Thought Force of two Delegates and one member of the Conference Leadership Team and sent back to the members. From this list, each Conference member was asked to select two topics for 60-minute discussions. The two topics receiving the most votes were placed on the agenda. A Conference member was invited to give a brief presentation of each topic, followed by open discussion.

Chosen Agenda Item #1

Bette R.
Panel 50, Oregon

Topic:

How do we empower the average Al-Anon member to speak up at meetings when someone else's sharing is not Al-Anon?

Topic:

Tradition Five states that "Each Al-Anon Family Group has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics." However, many newcomers to Al-Anon have family members with multiple addictions and/or mental disorders. This is not a new issue; however, the percentage of multiple addictions seems to be increasing each year.

Topic:

How do we ensure the Al-Anon message remains clear as we continue to expand our membership both within our Conference structure and within other service structures as well? How do we lovingly encourage members to only use our Al-Anon language when sharing their Al-Anon spiritual journey?

The Delegate opened her presentation by saying, "Today we have people coming to Al-Anon who are speaking about things other than Al-Anon. Some individuals are coming in from treatment centers and others are family members of individuals with multiple addictions or disorders. The reality of newcomers coming into the program includes dealing with multiple addictions. A 2005 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA) National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services found that 47 percent of clients in treatment were addicted to both alcohol and illicit drugs. A 2011 SAMHSA report shows that "alcohol dependence is four times as likely to occur among adults with mental illness than adults with no mental illness and that the rate of alcohol dependence increases as the severity of mental illness increases."

"Treatment jargon is usually fresh in the minds of those who join an Al-Anon meeting in the same facility or who were referred to a meeting from a treatment facility. There are differences between the treatment center approach and the Al-Anon philosophy of recovery. Clarity about those differences upholds our Twelve Traditions. The *Service Manual* indicates that occasional discussion of drug abuse by family members 'is acceptable at an Al-Anon or Alateen meeting as it may be one of the results of living with alcoholism.'

"Some members of other Twelve Step organizations tend to bring their other programs into the meeting. Others want to change the language of our Legacies to fit their background. As our cofounder Lois W. once said, "We realized if the Steps were altered once, they could be altered again and again. Their meaning and power might be lost."

"Newcomers often do not understand the Al-Anon focus and want to share the details of their current situation and particularly the specifics about their family members' treatment or current situation. A recent speaker meeting featured a relatively new Alateen who was excited about finding the Alateen program, but was only beginning to experience recovery. His sharing was focused on the current horrific conditions in his family and although there were several AMIAS present in the room, no one stepped forward to assist and support him, even though the contents of his lengthy sharing were specific enough to have possibly engendered a report to authorities by a mandated reporter. How can we support Al-Anon and Alateen newcomers and help them to understand the Al-Anon focus as they enter our culture and begin to learn the language of Al-Anon recovery?

At the 2011 WSC, we heard from Dr. Vivian Jackson that each culture has its own language and as newcomers come in, learning the language is what makes them part of the group. Al-Anon does

speak a different language and we have reasons for that. The language of Al-Anon is the language of our three Legacies and CAL, not outside literature or terms used in counseling or other outside treatment discussions. Treatment centers and the mental health community also have their own language that reflects their approach to recovery that is often focused more on the alcoholic or person directly receiving treatment as opposed to the Al-Anon approach to recovery for families that is focused on the recovery of the family member affected by the disease of alcoholism.

“Members want to support newcomers and encourage them to keep coming back but at times, we are so “nice” that the entire meeting or event loses the Al-Anon focus. Other times members are so abrupt in attempting to correct those who do not use our language that newcomers do not return. How do we find a balance where we are unafraid to speak clearly about the Al-Anon focus to newcomers while at the same time providing a warm and safe atmosphere for newcomers in pain?

“The fact that variations on the theme of outside topics and/or language at meetings was discussed at the 2001, 2007, and 2008 WSC suggests that keeping the Al-Anon focus in meetings and avoiding dilution of the program continues to be an issue for members.”

The floor was opened for discussion on the following questions:

How do we empower the average Al-Anon member to speak up at meetings when someone else's sharing is not Al-Anon?

- “Let It Begin with Me.” Many times modeling is the best way.
- Have a meeting on the topic of the need to use Conference Approved Literature, not just during a business meeting. Draw on longtime members to discuss the advantages. Include reminders at the beginning of the meetings. At business meetings, discuss or use role-play to act out how to respond. It's the job of the Chairperson to bring the meeting back to Al-Anon.
- One-on-one approach is the best. I have done damage control in the parking lot after the meeting, in hopes that the member will come back after being corrected during the meeting. We can be too rigid.
- My home group is a strong Tradition-based group and we practice the Traditions in every aspect of our group. We hold a group conscience using Tradition One as guidance to know how to respond to this situation. We have to consider the common welfare of the group. It's not one member's responsibility to keep the meeting Al-Anon, but that of the entire group.
- A group was changing the words of the Legacies, and the WSO directed me to the Reoccurring Questions on e-Communities. I think the reoccurring questions should be available to the membership at large.

Conference members are asked to use the Reoccurring Questions on e-Communities as guidance to help answer questions and concerns. Conference members are asked not to hand out these documents as sometimes new information or insight evolves that can revise or change an answer, in which case, we could have incorrect information out in the fellowship.

- Talk about it, and work it out within the group. Have the *Service Manual* handy and when something comes up, look it up in the *Manual*, which helps to maintain principles above personalities.
- We had a workshop called “Bad Meeting and What to Do.” We began by having members at tables doing all the things that divert the focus of the meeting, followed by a discussion on how to handle these problems.
- Follow the same format by asking members to leave outside issues outside. We had a good discussion at our last Assembly about the need to approach in a sensitive way. One way is to use the pamphlet, *Al-Anon Spoken Here*. Remind members to keep other affiliations outside, including other addictions. Suggest that we keep the focus on Al-Anon. When I first came to Al-Anon, people kept using the word “spouse” and it was my parents, so I had to change the terminology in my mind.
- We have solved these problems by having a Beginners' Meeting before our regular meeting and all of this is mentioned there. When someone jumped on something I said as a newcomer, I was too embarrassed to walk out. Thankfully that person stayed after the meeting and I was able to express that she had hurt my feelings.
- I have been taught to use the literature and not make it personal. I approach the person after the meeting and share the *Hope for Today* August 16th page. Some people ignore me and begin by saying, “I know I'm not supposed to say it, but . . .”

How do we ensure the Al-Anon message remains clear as we continue to expand our membership both within our Conference structure and within other service structures as well?

- I hear, “He’s my qualifier, you know,” regularly at meetings. I used “what is Al-Anon and what isn’t” as a meeting topic.
- We use the *Groups at Work* booklet and that helps to change the entire dynamics of the meeting. We read the paragraph at the end of the Opening that includes asking members of other anonymous fellowships to remain anonymous and focus on the Al-Anon program. I get worried when we’re trying to be “language police” because the language is not as important as the Al-Anon message. It’s one thing to talk spirituality and another thing to live spiritually. We need to model the program with our behavior.
- My home group has a Beginners’ meeting and we use the Beginners’ Meeting guideline (G-2). This has really helped. We talk about CAL and sponsorship.
- We have so much already. The Board’s Mission and Vision, the Traditions, and the Concepts. If we stay focused on these things, we’ll remain clear.
- When I first came into Al-Anon, my home group did not pay much attention to the Traditions. As we have studied the Traditions as a group, we are more aware of what is the Al-Anon message and what isn’t.
- Language is a virus—it’s always changing. For me to try to pin down what is “good” today may not be so tomorrow. Nowhere is there a list of words we can and cannot use, and I would hate to see that. If we would just follow the Traditions, we don’t really need to do much more.
- Many social issues and outside issues are about language and how it influences us. I am concerned about the language that we use at WSC and in our groups. It has great potential to change the spiritual structure of our meetings. We fully inform the members that each one has the responsibility and we would never embarrass them during the meeting, but should lovingly approach them after the meeting. We could be a bit more patient with newcomers and just let them go for a couple of weeks.

How do we lovingly encourage members to only use our Al-Anon language when sharing their Al-Anon spiritual journey?

- I said, “You can’t say that,” and she said, “I just did, and I can.” I got good at Step Ten—making a lot of amends. I have learned how to say something gently after the meeting. I know when to keep my mouth shut and give the person a little leeway. Read the body language and wait until after the meeting.
- In open discussion meetings, we get more treatment talk. After I had been at my home group for some time, I suggested a group conscience and asked that we have a topic meeting each week. That has removed most of the other language. I am very aware when I speak of how to keep the focus on me. I give the newcomer a bit of a respite, a little bit of time to understand what we are doing.
- A member was using non-CAL, and I sat down next to him before the meeting and said, “We only use CAL at an Al-Anon meeting. You are welcome to use it in your personal recovery, but not at the meeting.” I suggest using a gentle, sit-next-to-the-person approach.
- As a new Group Representative, someone was talking about religion so I had a meeting on Tradition One. That member didn’t show up for the education I was going to give. When I have knowledge, I have responsibility. Sometimes I just say it in a proactive way, “I am so grateful that when I come to this meeting, I only hear Al-Anon.”
- The language is not as important as the Al-Anon message. We had a gentleman who didn’t speak for the first eight weeks or so. When he did speak, he thanked us for not pushing or preaching—we just used Al-Anon.
- I’m bothered by the last question because I feel like there is an agenda about this question. It takes time to learn our language and you can’t possibly know it coming into Al-Anon as a newcomer. I never saw anyone telling people what sort of language they could use. I love and appreciate the patience and love of the members.
- I was intrigued by this question. When we were in Iceland, one of the members asked if there was a specific language we use in Al-Anon meetings. The answer is no, the object is to com-

municate. Part of using plain language is to avoid using treatment terminology.

- Sometimes it just takes time. The language just starts to come. Encourage sponsorship. By watching and observing my Sponsor, I learned a lot of things I needed to know. Be knowledgeable about speakers chosen for Conventions. In my Area, we no longer invite speakers unless we've heard their tapes. Do your homework.
- My home group had a member who changed the wording in the Steps. After the second time, I connected with him after the meeting and told him it was important to read the words that are written. He said, "I'm dyslexic and I didn't know that I did that." I'm so glad I had spoken to him privately. He did keep coming back and we have a special bond. I model behavior when I share in a meeting—speaking in principles and not detail. It's much easier for the listener to apply this to their life. I share details with my Sponsor. I serve as an answering service volunteer, and that helps.

A Delegate summarized the discussion:

- Approach members after the meeting in a gentle, loving way.
- Allow newcomers time to learn the program.
- Use Conference Approved Literature and study the Legacies.
- Model the behavior—"Let It Begin with Me."
- Hold business meetings.
- Have Beginners' meetings.
- Encourage sponsorship.

Chosen Agenda Item #2

Topic:

How does WSO see social networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, as a way to attract and retain new members to our fellowship?

Topic:

After 60 years of Al-Anon, we are still not well known. How can we get Al-Anon and Alateen "out of the closet"?

The two Conference members opened their presentation by saying, "At the end of 1951, Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, said that he expected that Al-Anon would someday grow to be as large as A.A. At Al-Anon's first World Service Conference, Bill reiterated his expectation that Al-Anon would grow larger than A.A., a statement that he frequently repeated. Nevertheless, despite Bill's optimism and enthusiasm, Al-Anon is still a fraction of the size of A.A.

"Why has Al-Anon *not* grown larger and why aren't more people aware of our program? This broader question encompasses the chosen agenda item questions: How does the WSO see social networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, as a way to attract and retain new members to our fellowship? After 60 years of Al-Anon, we are still not well-known. How can we get Al-Anon and Alateen "out of the closet"?"

"This is a *déjà vu* of Al-Anon's sixth World Service Conference held in 1966. A Conference Approved Public Relations statement appears on page 107 of *the 2010-2013 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual*. The statement was so important that it was reaffirmed by the 1971 WSC. The statement describes our Public Relations policy, our continued existence, and our future growth as being reliant upon attraction without promotion and cooperation without affiliation. It defines these terms and warns us that 'There can be no standing still without retrogression.' Here we are, 46 World Service Conferences later having a similar conversation as to how we can attract more newcomers, inform the general public, and increase professional referrals to our program.

"Our pioneers saw media solely as a tool to help us fulfill our primary purpose—attract newcomers, offer hope, and to comfort the relatives and friends of alcoholics.

"Lack of awareness of Al-Anon is only one of the many reasons why friends and families of alcoholics have not joined Al-Anon in greater numbers. The family's denial is also a powerful obstacle to family recovery and the need for our program. An online survey of non-members conducted by the WSO in 2009 shows that aided awareness of Al-Anon appears to have increased to 45 percent, which

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Panel 51, Nebraska

Claire R.

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