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## *Chapter three*

# PICKING UP THE TOOLS

A newcomer asked a long-time member, “Why isn’t it enough to understand the concepts of Al-Anon in the literature? What is this ‘working the program’ you all keep talking about?” There was a long hesitation as the other woman grappled with the complexity of trying to explain something that can be done, and done well, in a thousand different ways.

Eventually, she explained it this way. “I know I am basically lazy, and I can live in my anger at having grown up in a disease that I didn’t ask to be a part of. It’s not my fault, I say to myself. I want a quick fix. Give me a shot and make me better! But there is no shot for the alcoholic, and none for us either. We have to change habits of behavior and thinking patterns that don’t work and are actually self-destructive. Habits don’t change just by reading about them. Even saying, ‘Yes, that’s a habit I have,’ doesn’t change it. Change comes through practicing something different. Working a program for me means taking one of the tools—a slogan, a Step, the Serenity Prayer, the phone list, my sponsor—and using it in my life. As I worked at making changes in myself, I found that where I used to react with anger and rage, I now react with love and compassion, and it feels good. I am no longer a victim of life; I am a survivor with choices.”

As children growing up in alcoholic homes, we took our-

selves very seriously. Often we did not learn how to relax and have fun. Life—sometimes even survival—was hard work. The last thing we want to hear now is that we have to work at recovery as well. Those of us who are already too responsible, serious, and overworked need to realize that working a program can be as simple as making a list of fun things to do and then doing one. We might want to start out by asking, “How important is it?” and letting something go, or leaving a task undone.

At other times, we who have suffered so much uncertainty or even chaos need the structure and discipline that a spiritual program provides. We wander in the land of pain where all exit doors seem shut. We need to do something to change our attitudes, but what? It can feel incredibly difficult to turn away from well established negative judgments. One member described her negative thoughts as a team of eight horses harnessed to her buckboard, galloping full speed toward a cliff. Turning that team, she said, took courage, strength, and firm determination. At times like this, working the program means picking up the telephone and calling someone, or reading a chapter on a Step and finding a way to apply it to the situation. We can say, “Stop!” to the negative chatter inside our heads, but then we must also replace it with a positive alternative, or the old pattern will rush back into the void as soon as we let our guard down.

The suggestions of the program are like a tool kit. Nothing changes until we change it. The tool kit just sits on the bench waiting for the master craftsperson to take it up. Selecting the best tool requires some skill, but we are not lonely apprentices left to our own devices. We can ask other members for help, read some Al-Anon literature, call our sponsor, attend a meeting, pray, or experiment with the suggestions on our own. As we practice, no lesson is lost and more is revealed. We

can help ourselves to any of the implements at our own pace. We can take what we like and leave the rest. We can dawdle along or charge at breakneck speed.

Eventually, many of us realize we are not going to get a quick cure. After some initial grumbling at the unfairness of it all, we discover that everything is just as it should be, for there is always more to learn and we find our serenity along the way rather than at the end of the journey. Friends come along the way. Fun comes along the way. Challenges? There are always some of those along life's way. Now at least we are equipped with new skills, loving companions, and spiritual support to help us meet them. Finally, love and self-esteem also come along the way.

## **PICKING UP TOOLS AND MENDING OUR LIVES**

*I couldn't just inherit Al-Anon.*

Though my father had been sober in AA for fourteen years and Mom had been in Al-Anon ten years, I didn't really join Al-Anon until I had been away from home for almost a decade. They had taken me to some open AA meetings when I was younger, and I even attended Al-Anon for a while with Mom. At that time I was involved with a man who never wanted to do things with my family, and we never seemed to get beyond the cocktail lounge when we went out to dinner.

I had spent many hours as a child, waiting for my Dad to finish drinking, and I felt a familiar discomfort with my boyfriend's behavior, so I wrote him a letter explaining my feelings. He wrote back saying that when I was around those

“crazy women,” I got crazy. I chose to believe him and quit attending Al-Anon.

That relationship eventually ended, and I married a man who didn’t drink. Nevertheless, I found myself focusing solely on my husband. I tried to “help” him and love him enough to fix him, while my two little children sat in front of the television. One night this picture of my neglected children and my obsession with my husband hit me between the eyes, and I realized my priorities were messed up. Because my parents had continued to work their respective recovery programs, I could see that, even though they had been crazy, they now had sanity and serenity in their lives, and I knew where to go for help.

I had watched them change throughout the years, as they chose recovery and I chose sickness. The first time I can recall being aware of a change was while I still lived at home. I was twenty-two and my sister was twenty-eight. With both of us totally out of control, we got involved in a terrible swearing, kicking, punching fight. Dad, who had a friend visiting, calmly walked out of the house and continued talking to his friend on the front steps. Even in the middle of that huge fight, I recognized that something had shifted.

The following week, Mom wrote my sister and me a note asking one of us to move out of the house because our behavior was threatening Dad’s sobriety. Resentfully, I moved. Today I can see it was very good for me. When I left my family, I took “me” with me. I got to live with all my character defects and had no one to blame for my feelings of depression and anger. Though I no longer lived with an active alcoholic, I still managed to find unhealthy relationships.

I am grateful to my father for naming the disease and leading the way into AA. My mother helped me face up and begin to work the Steps when she told me, “Many of your problems

may have my name on them, but the solutions all have your name.” She was right. She may have hurt me, but she couldn’t give me what I needed, which was self-esteem. I felt I was less valuable than other people. To regain my sense of self, I had to accept help from my Higher Power, call other people, and work the Steps. Today my anger and rage are melting into grace and human dignity. I have completed college and started graduate school. Today I know I am a valuable person, and when I forget it, I know that in Al-Anon I will find people who will remind me until I can remember again.

Though we all are recovering, heaven hasn’t arrived and we still have to work at peace of mind, day by day, here on earth. My family is still my greatest challenge to working the program. One night on the way to an Al-Anon meeting, my sister-in-law said, “Do you realize we have twenty-three years of recovery in this car?”

“Wow!” I replied, “Just think how much we’d have if the whole family was here.”

“About two minutes!” quipped my brother.

We all laughed, and we keep trying, one day at a time. Life in recovery has had some big challenges—a divorce, the foreclosure on our house, my son deciding to live with his dad—yet the God of my understanding has helped me through them. The people in Al-Anon have held me up. Recently I heard someone say, “God’s will will never take me where His love cannot protect me.” I use this saying daily to remind me that all I have to do is rise each morning and step out in faith. So far it’s worked.

*Detaching was kind.*

I had only been in Al-Anon nine months when I got my first potent lesson in detachment. It was eleven o’clock on

the night before Thanksgiving and I had just gone to bed. My mother, who had been asleep after drinking through the evening, woke up and burst into my room. “Get up and clean out the refrigerator!” she demanded. In the past, I would have been in the kitchen, cleaning, before she had finished her sentence.

This time words from my Al-Anon friends whispered in my head. “Don’t react,” they reminded me. Gritting my teeth, I decided to try a suggestion I had heard in meetings. “Mom, the refrigerator can wait until morning. I’m going to sleep. I love you. Good night.”

She repeated her command, louder this time. I remained calm (at least on the outside) and stated again that I would handle it in the morning. On the inside, I said the Serenity Prayer over and over as fast as I could. My heart pounded. I had always put the needs of everyone else first; standing my ground was a tremendously bold action.

She raised the volume and the force of the furious language, demanding I get up immediately and clean the refrigerator. I focused on members of my Al-Anon group and remembered how they urged me not to buy into crazy thinking. I have a choice, I remembered. “Good night, Mom,” I said.

It wasn’t what she wanted to hear. She pulled out all the stops. She knew my weaknesses well and jabbed at every emotional hot button I had. I winced, but fortunately those wonderful people at my meetings had told me that when we lash out, it is because we are in pain. I could clearly see my mother’s pain as she screamed at me. I did not want to add to it or take it on as my own, so I remained silent.

She stormed out of my room. Soon there was a commotion in the kitchen. She reappeared in my doorway and said, “Well, son, you’ve done it now. The turkey and the rest of the

food are all on the kitchen floor! You'd better go put it away." She retreated to her bedroom, slamming the door.

For a moment, my detachment crumbled. "Oh, no!" I thought, "Tomorrow the family will be eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner, and it will all be my fault!" The Al-Anon members in my head countered: "Why is it your fault? You didn't put the turkey on the floor." Caught up in my guilt, I pushed the voices out and hurried into the kitchen, where I began putting food away. With a nudge from my Higher Power and too many meetings under my belt, the voices came back: "As long as you clean up her messes for her, she'll never have to. Your 'kindness' could kill her."

I left the turkey on the floor where I had found it and went back to bed. I turned my mother, the turkey, and the potential peanut butter sandwiches over to God.

The next morning everything was back in the refrigerator. Mom had taken responsibility for her own actions.

Today my mother is not drinking. Although I did not cause her sobriety any more than I caused her drinking, I feel good knowing that, by detaching with love, I at least did not enable her to keep killing herself. She has my love and the dignity to take care of what she creates. Both of us have more positive lives.

*The Serenity Prayer lit my path.*

My father drinks, but while growing up I didn't really notice it. I am the eldest daughter in a family of five children. Our family lacked physical closeness and any semblance of communication, but I didn't equate it with alcoholism. In fact, I thought it was normal. Estrangement defined us all so much that, when I was eight and my older brother ordered me out of his room, I vowed never to speak to him again, and

I didn't until I was married at twenty-one.

My father was distant, seeming to care only for my brothers. He dominated my mother, and I didn't want to be a doormat like her, so I tried to fit into the circle of men by being a tomboy. Once, when my father discovered I had a packet of cigarettes, he stamped on it and hit me hard across my face. I heard my mother saying, "Hit her! Hit her!" I was so hurt by her words, all I could do was cry.

I began to rebel, sneaking out my bedroom window and smoking *dagga* all night long. I spent my time on South Africa's streets with downtrodden people who were the outcasts of society. Eventually my parents caught me. Though that part of my life is extremely shadowy, I did stop taking drugs.

At seventeen, I fell in love. For the next five years, we were reckless, irresponsible, and drunk a good part of the time. I wanted to be somebody, anybody different. I acted, made a fool of myself singing at a night club, and rode at high speed on a motorbike. I enjoyed losing myself—and at last being popular.

On my twenty-first birthday, we got engaged. It seemed the thing to do. We carried on as before, but I began to feel that we should be growing up and acting like a couple. He didn't understand my change at all. We bought a house, and, as I worked for an attorney, I took on the burden of attending to all the paperwork. I was scared! Scared of marriage. Scared that we seemed to be drifting apart. Scared of being alone with all the house-buying responsibility.

Our families busily prepared for the wedding, and I was too scared to disappoint them, so I decided to go ahead with the wedding and get divorced later. Before I ever walked down the aisle, I had accepted that the marriage wouldn't work.

It didn't. We returned from our honeymoon to find all our

friends waiting in our new house with the now familiar bottle. Without the restrictions of parents, everyone drank with wild abandon. I often woke up in a house full of people I didn't even know. After a few months I asked my husband for a divorce. I was surprised at the tears of anguish he shed, but I wouldn't budge.

One thing kept me going. My cousin had given me a copy of the Serenity Prayer for my twenty-first birthday. It hung on my wall like a ray of light. I glanced at it occasionally and the words became familiar. When something happened or I had a problem, I would ask myself, "Can I change this or can't I?" If I couldn't, I turned my attention elsewhere. I survived the troubled sea of my marriage with the Serenity Prayer as my lifeline.

After the divorce, I returned to reluctant parents who didn't really want me home. I felt terrible when I found I was also pregnant, and they reacted with shock. My mother came around and supported me, but my father pretended my condition didn't exist. I felt so guilty, I struggled not to bring up my food in the early months of morning sickness.

Only the Serenity Prayer provided any glimmer of hope during those dark months. I repeated it over and over whenever I could remember. Soon people began appearing in my life who talked to me about God's love.

My mother stood by me through the birth of my baby, and, for the first time in my life, I felt close to her. After my baby's birth, a kind friend of mother's noticed how depressed I was and guided me to Al-Anon.

I bounced into and out of Al-Anon meetings for a long time. Surely my father wasn't an alcoholic, I told myself. Then I watched him one Saturday afternoon as he stood in the road with a hosepipe glaring at two boys who were laughing at him and throwing stones at our dog. He looked pitiful. I could see

that he had been drinking, and shame engulfed me.

I returned to the Al-Anon meetings but soon found other excuses to leave. I decided they weren't talking about alcoholism enough and were talking amateur psychology too much. With compassion and patience, my mother's friend encouraged me to keep trying. My next excuse was my fussy baby, who made it difficult to concentrate. Even when my nerves snapped and I landed in a psychiatric hospital, where another patient thought *I* was *her* baby (and I realized I could become like that), I had difficulty sticking to the program. One night my father's furious behavior at the table scared me so badly, I went to a new meeting just to get out of the house. The warmth of the fellowship surrounded me again and again, as I made my way through all my excuses until I finally decided to stay.

The Serenity Prayer had been my anchor before I came into Al-Anon. Seeing it at my first meeting was like finding a long lost friend. I have a long way to go before I fully understand all that alcohol has done to me, but as I make my way along, I know that Al-Anon and *God as I understand Him* will help me accept the things I cannot change and give me the courage to change the things I can. Al-Anon shines a bright light onto my life and its challenges, and helps me find the wisdom to know the difference between what I need to accept and what I need to change.

*My sponsor taught me to be good to myself.*

Why did I always feel so bad? Impatience with minor frustrations brought me to the point of rage every day. I yelled at my husband and two sons. I often woke in the morning feeling the "black mood" which I knew meant everything would go wrong for me that day. I cursed. I swore. I slammed doors.

Sometimes I locked myself in the bedroom or bathroom for hours, hovering close to tears.

Friends and relatives thought I was a great manager and really had it together, but I was only a competent impostor. My perfectionism and compulsive hard work had them fooled. I did my household chores with a vengeance! I shopped, cooked, and cleaned with grim determination. Every day I felt a little more miserable.

By the time my sons were teenagers, I was in so much pain that I knew I had to do something. My nephew had been sober in AA for five years, and because of him I had read some books about alcoholism. I finally called a friend of his who counseled alcoholics and who already knew a lot about our family. I told her I didn't know what was wrong with me but I felt like I was going insane. I couldn't say no to anyone, and I always ended up doing things I didn't want to do. She suggested Al-Anon.

I'd never considered it. I knew my sister was an alcoholic, but I thought I didn't belong because I didn't think my husband was an alcoholic. Oh, he drank, but he always provided for us, and my life wasn't like those I'd heard of with beatings and drunken rages. He was a very critical person—but an alcoholic?

I started attending Al-Anon meetings and reading Al-Anon literature anyway. Gradually, I began to learn about myself as I listened to others, but something was missing. I called my nephew's friend again. "Do you have a sponsor?" she asked.

"No," I answered.

"Then get one."

At one of my meetings I heard a woman I admired mention that her sister was an alcoholic. She didn't say anything about her husband. It took several weeks to build up enough courage to ask her to sponsor me, and when she replied

enthusiastically, “I’d love to!” my life changed. No matter how rotten I felt, no matter what awful thing I thought I had done, my sponsor said it didn’t seem so bad and pointed out how much better I was getting. I could be honest with her and still be accepted. Only then did I realize how dishonest it was to always say “yes” and then resent it.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” she said often in those first months. I didn’t know I was hard on myself. I’d been that way all my life. “Take care of yourself. You’re worth it!” she said. What a concept!

In my family, where criticism flowed like water, I had been the “sweet” one while my sisters were “pretty” and “smart.” I came to believe I had so much power to hurt, or disappoint, or anger others that it might kill them. I used my sweetness to make everyone like me, and I succeeded so well that I was the favorite niece, cousin, and sister, but the price I paid was never to say “no” to any request or demand. I lived every waking moment for others and felt I had no right to care for myself or think about what I wanted.

Frantically active, with no time for myself, I was utterly out of touch with my own needs. Always pleasing other people left me feeling angry, resentful, and victimized. The notion that caring for myself wasn’t selfish but life affirming came as a big surprise. Focusing on myself was very difficult. I felt guilty and had no idea what I wanted. I learned to feel the guilt and do it anyway.

I hadn’t recognized my parents’ alcoholism because they seemed too perfect. Extremely religious people, they attended daily services and dragged us children along. My father had given up drinking on his own when I was very small, but he remained angry and unhappy. In Al-Anon, I began to realize that my father has suffered from being a “dry drunk” for more than thirty years. My mother had a few stiff drinks every night

before dinner. Even when she slurred her words and talked loud, I didn't connect it to alcoholism. Deeply buried awareness takes time to surface. I heard the Twelve Steps hundreds of times before the day came when the First Step actually made sense. I really *am* powerless over their alcoholism. Not to be responsible for my sister's, my parents', or indeed, my husband's drinking brings great relief, and I hadn't even realized how responsible I felt until Al-Anon.

When I started Al-Anon, I was sure it was too late for my sons—I feared I had been so abusive that they were damaged for life. It hurt to even think about it. One day my sponsor said to me, “Remember the struggles you had when you were a young adult, needing moral support but not someone telling you what to do and what's best for you? Now that you know better, your sons will have the support they need without your meddling in their lives.” I have to admit I'm not a perfect mother and I don't always know what's best. I'm relieved that I don't have to be a perfect mother to love and support my children in their growth.

I cannot begin to enumerate all that I have gotten from working the Al-Anon program. When I have a slip and start saying “yes” when I want to say “no” or trying to fix other people, I can call my sponsor and she will lovingly help straighten me out. A sponsor who loves me enough to tell me the truth with compassion is a priceless gift.

*Love is an inside job.*

I was born in a place I fondly refer to as “The Rock.” Until three years ago, when I found Al-Anon, this was the one and only thing that gave me any sense of who I was. If nothing else, I was from “The Rock,” and I could be proud of that.

My home as a child was just like everyone else's, or so I

thought. I had a Dad who drank daily and a Mom who was deeply affected by it. Whenever Mom and Dad got together for more than five minutes, there was a racket. When I was young, I did everything I could not to rock the boat because I feared that some of the garbage might fly my way. I thought Mom had the problem. If only she would leave Dad alone, everything would be just fine. I was terrified I might grow up to be like her.

The most potent lessons I drew from my family situation were to stuff all my feelings deep in my subconscious and to become adept at the art of non-communication. I decided that surely there was more to life than this, and I charged out to find it.

My serious quest for love and acceptance began at age fourteen. I hung around with an older crowd, where I met a guy who paid a little attention to me. I felt so lucky to have my first real boyfriend that I didn't look too hard at him. If I had, I would have gotten a clue about what kind of men I would choose for a long time. The lady he had been involved with before me was four months pregnant at the time, but he said it was over between them and I was the one he cared for. I ate it up and closed my ears to everything else.

Already having been introduced to booze and drugs, with him I added sex. It was a heady combination for one so young. I thought that losing my virginity made me a grown-up. I equated sex with love and maturity—a big mistake.

He also introduced me to a bunch of guys in the bike club on "The Rock." They weren't exactly the Hell's Angels, but they weren't angels either. My so-called boyfriend started spending time again with his old flame, so I spent my time with the *b'ys* in the club. I started dating the club's president. With him I felt protected and also felt that I was *someone*. I rationalized away the fact that he had a live-in girlfriend, and

I learned how to lie effectively the few times we were caught.

Being with the president did give me the status of “no one messes with her,” whether we were at a bar, a party, or the clubhouse. At home with my parents it wasn’t much help. My parents gave me lots of flack about my choice of friends. So I solved the parent problem by moving in with a girlfriend. Even though I was just sixteen, I worked at a bar where the bikers hung out. Sometimes I went to school.

I spent the better part of ten years in an on-again-off-again relationship with one of the *b’ys* whom I thought I loved. Every time I was convinced I had him out of my system, he’d show up again, and I’d climb back on that emotional roller coaster. I visited him in nearly every jail in that part of the country. Without ever stopping to think of the consequences to me, I smuggled drugs into jail for him. He ran and I followed across the continent.

When we finally broke up, I found another alcoholic and jumped on another emotional roller coaster. We moved from place to place, and each time we moved, I thought we had left his drinking buddies behind and could get on with our lives together. I somehow missed the point that there were always new drinking buddies in every new town.

He called me a fat, hoggy dog, and at 215 pounds, I hated myself. One night I snapped. I pounded on his chest with both fists like a maniac, shouting, “Your purpose in life is to drive me crazy! Well, are you happy? Look at me! I’m nuts!” That night *I* started to look at me and to look for help. I found it in Al-Anon, where I learned I didn’t cause alcoholism, I couldn’t control it, and I sure couldn’t cure it. Even though I wasn’t drinking it, booze controlled me. The things I swore I would never do, I did. Things that had gone on in my home as a child now happened in my own home.

For the first time in my life, in Al-Anon I fit in. The only

thing they wanted me to do was to keep coming back. I did. The people in those groups showed me the love I had never known but had searched for all my life. They gave me tools I could use to help me recover—Steps, a sponsor, meetings, friends, and slogans. On a daily basis, I clung to the slogans “Think,” “Easy does it,” and “Live and let live.” I learned the Serenity Prayer and said it over and over. I found a Higher Power I could entrust with all things, even the most personal. As I worked the Steps, I learned to clear away the wreckage of the past and live every day for all it was worth. I even began to believe I was worth something.

All the things I had wanted and searched for in other people, I finally found in myself. What a relief. I could stop searching, sit back, and enjoy life on life’s terms. It’s a simple concept, but I have to work at it to keep it.

I leave the door open for good things to happen. I met the man who is now my husband. My parents traveled six thousand miles to attend our wedding. I now have a relationship with them I never dreamed possible. I am a lot like my Mom, but today I am proud of it. I can accept that they are real people with problems, not just my parents.

My husband and I are real people too. We have problems, but we share a set of principles that helps us deal with them. Acceptance of my husband’s worth as a human being, and thus my own, is one of the greatest gifts I have gotten from Al-Anon. When I forget my right to be, or another’s, I remind myself I am God’s child in God’s universe and I have a right to be here. I keep coming back because it works!