Talk to Each Other

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Crosstalk—or loving interchange?

The September 2007 Forum presented "Crosstalk—or loving interchange?" by Martha C., from Virginia. In that article, the writer described her experience with crosstalk: "We don't want our meetings to be dominated by one person. We don't want them dominated by two people, one giving advice to the other. But on balance, we may have become too rigid in enforcing the rule against 'crosstalk'—and what we've lost is the loving interchange, which we need if we're going to be a welcoming place for newcomers who are in need."

"Al-Anon BC—Before 'Crosstalk,,'" printed in the December 2004 edition of The Forum offered an additional perspective on this topic.

Thank you to all who responded. In general, there was unanimity in everyone's commitment to Al-Anon principles even though there was disagreement about the term "crosstalk." It could be that the problem lies in the word itself, which has its origins in the world of psychotherapy rather than in Al-Anon literature and tradition. Perhaps Al-Anon members would be better able to focus on Al-Anon principles by avoiding the use of the term "crosstalk," which inserts its own divisive "personality" in a place where it appears that everyone who wrote would prefer unity around our common purposes and principles.

Here's what you had to say:

The following sharings were posted 12/06/07

Our meetings have an understanding that crosstalk interrupts the thoughts of the person sharing. It also takes extra time from the hour-long meeting. We want each person to have an opportunity to share, read, or pass.

When we have someone new, we show them the Al-Anon Video (AV-31) in a separate room with an experienced member who explains the basics of Al-Anon.

After the video, we return to the meeting to listen to the group as they share. After each one has shared we urge the new person to come back soon and often. This is where we find strength and serenity. Our group offers first names and phone numbers if they care to talk to someone between meetings.

After the meeting, we stay and talk casually, helping newcomers understand that we care about them and want to take time for additional conversation.

By John and Margaret, Michigan

Crosstalk (or the lack of it) played a crucial role in my first Al-Anon meeting. A woman cried as she talked, very upset. But when others shared afterwards, they only talked about their own lives. I was appalled. One was even "rude" enough to mention how happy she was! I just couldn't understand. It appeared that they were being cold and heartless for not taking care of that woman—or so it seemed to me.
I came from a home where I felt responsible for making others happy. I was so twisted from living with the effects of alcoholism that the healthy behavior demonstrated in front of me seemed wrong. Though everyone welcomed me, I didn’t return until months later when desperation compelled me.

Here’s the reality of that meeting: it was pure, loving Al-Anon in action. By not giving her solutions, the group showed that they respected the woman; she didn’t need their rescue. They showed their concern for the common welfare of the group by not putting the spotlight on just one member. By keeping the focus on themselves, they gave me two more Al-Anon lessons: it’s okay for me to have different emotions from you; and joy is as valid as pain. Finally, they most certainly treated that woman lovingly. Someone probably touched her arm or gave her a tissue. After the meeting, she got many hugs.

I’m so grateful that my first meeting modeled Al-Anon recovery for me. When I was ready, I knew where to go. If they’d tried to “fix” that woman in the meeting, I might’ve felt more comfortable, but I would have stayed sick a lot longer.

By Casey M., Virginia

Here in our group, we had “loving interchange,” but no one was giving advice, just offering information on how certain situations had helped them. When a new person came to our group, she told us at her very first meeting that crosstalk was not allowed. She became bossy and caused much stress in our meetings.

We were all too shocked to say anything at first, but it became so bad that many of us who had enjoyed the group suddenly didn’t look forward to meetings anymore. We had a group conscience and suggested this woman start her own group, which she did. We are all much happier. We have continued to grow and learn and work our program. Instead of refusing “crosstalk,” we welcome “loving interchange” with open arms.

By Edith

I have been going to Al-Anon meetings and have had some not-so-pleasant experiences with crosstalk. I have found that there tended to be some favoritism with groups where some people could talk on and on whereas others would be cut off mid-stream. I have also found that some people would give advice anyway, even though it was discouraged. I found it necessary to seek out meetings where this was not a feature, and while these meetings were somewhat “dry,” I appreciated the structure and consistency since I struggle with social anxiety.

A few people started a meeting a couple of years ago where crosstalk was eliminated. Reactions were mixed. Some people who felt the need to bring up various therapies did not stick around for long. Some newer people said they got more out of the meeting because it was more structured, which was something that was missing in their lives due to the chaos of their loved one’s drinking. It was much simpler to eliminate crosstalk entirely than to deal with the inconsistencies it entailed.

By S.B., Michigan

I had just started attending a new Al-Anon meeting when I moved to another state. After going a few times, I talked about an incident and said, “If anyone has a thought on how this could have been handled differently, I would love to hear it,” which was something I had witnessed in my previous group. Everyone just froze. I was startled and so frightened thinking, “What did I say? What on earth did I just say?”

Finally, after a long pause, someone said, “We don’t engage in crosstalk here.” I didn’t even know what that was, but it sounded nasty.
A few meetings later, a newcomer sat down and sobbed her heart out while everyone sat there, staring straight ahead. She got a tissue and a routine "thanks for sharing." I wanted to talk to her after the meeting, but she fled.

I quit going after that and have just been reading Al-Anon literature. I’m going to look for a new meeting.

By Nancy P.

I have benefited in my growth by loving interchange, which has occurred outside the one-hour meeting time via one-on-one conversations, coffee, lunch, e-mail, phone, and sponsorship. My daily reading of Al-Anon literature also occurs outside the meeting time. These interchanges are vital to my recovery.

I have been harmed by crosstalk during meetings. It doesn’t matter what is offered by way of feedback to me, I feel vulnerable if it is happening in the meeting. One time, early in my attendance, I gained enough courage to share that I had read the One Day at a Time (B-6) like a novel and a member commented, "Without regard to the title." As all laughed, I felt humiliated. A comment during a meeting makes me feel uneasy, since it negates the idea of all of us being equal. I heard one time that the reason Al-Anon works is because all of us are not insane at the same time. I still have the ability to be as insane as I was as a newcomer!

I also violated the concept of crosstalk in an on-line meeting. I thanked the member who had introduced me to that meeting. My gratitude had nothing to do with the topic. It was at that meeting where the topic was crosstalk that I learned of my misdeed. No one directed anything at me, but I could recognize my own behavior. I am grateful for that. I could have e-mailed her or phoned her instead.

Somehow we all get what we need when we "Keep Coming Back."

By Bernie J., Montana

The article “Crosstalk—or loving interchange?” brings three topics to mind:

1. Crosstalk
   In my meetings, crosstalk is when people begin responding out loud to someone who is sharing. If it occurs while someone is still sharing, it is an interruption and it is rude. Whatever might be said about what has been shared is a judgment—it reflects what I think about what you said. If something really must be said, it should present itself for sharing through my experience, strength, and hope.

2. Beginners’ Meetings
   Where I live, groups frequently have Beginners’ Meetings before regular meetings. These meetings, about 15 to 45 minutes long, focus on newcomer issues such as the Steps, slogans, anonymity, sponsorship, the three C’s (didn’t cause alcoholism, can’t control it, can’t cure it), and the suggestions to make no major changes for six months, attend at least six meetings, and try several different meetings to find one that is the “right fit.”

The sharing in these meetings is conducted with relaxed rules; crosstalk is permitted to a degree. If a newcomer seems very distressed, the chair may ask a longtimer to explain or suggest the appropriate program tool. The relaxed rules invite longtimers who “feel like beginners again today” to let it all out and be there to help the actual newcomers. If the meeting gets too laid-back, the chair just closes the meeting for one-on-one time until the regular meeting begins. The focus in these meetings is always on the newcomer.

One of my meetings composed a two-paragraph addendum to the Suggested Welcome that covered the basic ideas of our program without discussing the details. It is beautiful to watch in action. We spend our time sharing and listening instead of trying to explain things our beginners didn’t feel the need to know. And the newcomers know what questions to ask!
3. Group conscience

When I see group conscience in our literature, it's usually about taking a vote on a particular issue. Voting is the "group" thing about it. The "conscience" part, however, is personal. Not only are we needed to vote our conscience, but we need to speak it without being asked when we see something we feel is wrong. Beyond all the brave social situations we've heard of, we can and should offer one-on-one help to newcomers at our meetings who are clearly foundering.

By Bob

I have been recovering in Al-Anon for many years and need my regular meetings to stay sane. When I am at a meeting that collapses around a newcomer's needs, I feel cheated out of what I come for. I also feel we fail the newcomer. We fail them because the greatest gift—the only gift we are qualified to give a newcomer—is our program: an opportunity to be still and listen, to hear supportive and effective strategies for "serenity and even happiness," and to belong to our circle, no questions asked.

A newcomer is full of questions—besides much else—but that one hour of meeting time, in my opinion, must serve the needs of all the families and friends of alcoholics present, and that includes the longtimers.

By Sarah

To me, crosstalk would defeat Al-Anon's principles and guidelines. Listening shows respect. When you speak, I can listen without others talking over and around the subject you are bringing to us.

When I came to Al-Anon I didn't have much respect for myself or others. Al-Anon's whole format has taught me to listen, learn, and show respect to the person speaking.

By Elaine, British Columbia

In all of the meetings I attend, we read a "no crosstalk" statement after the Suggested Welcome. Most of the time that statement prevents the giving of advice, the discussion of literature other than CAL, or the quoting of TV personalities. This keeps me focused on the real reason I am there—to take care of myself with the help of Al-Anon.

I learned from my first Sponsor to go to meetings early and stay after to visit. This is where most of the "loving interchange" happens. It is the time for me to share my experience, strength, and hope with anyone who wants it. It also gives me the opportunity to pass on meeting information and literature.

During the meeting, I have one hour to listen to and learn from others about how they work the Al-Anon program. I have noticed in some meetings that if there is a newcomer, the sharing often becomes directed to the newcomer. This can take away from the other members who are there looking for the help they need in that one hour.

If chairing or leading a meeting, I ask newcomers to please stay after the meeting to visit because I would love to share the program that has saved my life with them.

By Jeanette, Texas

My group's policies include the suggestion that we try to avoid crosstalk at meetings. This and other points governing how we wish to conduct our meetings were arrived at by group conscience and are periodically reviewed and revised by the group as it changes.
Before the Suggested Welcome is read, our group has an announcement paragraph. It talks about meeting times, clean up, and how we will continue after the Welcome. It concludes with the following: “Please be courteous to your fellow members—keep in mind that all desire the opportunity to comment. If you are having a particularly difficult time and feel you need individual attention, please see someone during the break about a private mini-meeting during the discussion period.” We don’t specifically say that crosstalk is not allowed, but we do try to lead by example and, if necessary, gently guide someone who needs to vent into private conversations.

Many of our members jot down notes when announcements are read to be used in the discussion portion of the meeting or to be kept for review at a later time. Personally, I found this was a good thing for me as I didn’t always listen to what people were saying to me, as I was busy thinking about what I wanted to say.

There is always the tool of Beginner’s Meetings where we try to help newcomers understand what Al-Anon has done for us personally and what they might anticipate receiving from practicing the program. Some newcomers have a lot to say. Others need to be drawn out and made to feel comfortable before they are willing to share any of their thoughts with the group or let out the sadness, anger, and tears they have been storing up.

I don’t know where the term “crosstalk” originates from, but I feel we can have a “loving interchange” while being courteous to one another. There are many more blended methods of dealing with the issue of crosstalk rather than an “either/or” solution. A newcomer or someone with a very serious problem, such as thoughts of suicide, could be given some slack in getting the assistance, sharing, and caring that they need at the time.

By Ann B., Illinois

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I feel I must respond to the article, “Crosstalk—or loving interchange?” in the September 2007 issue, as Martha hit on so many things I agree with. Some of the changes in Al-Anon over the years have been good. But to me, so many of them leave me feeling like a kid who has to raise her hand to be excused. So many people in the program have been in relationships where permission to speak had to be given. To me, crosstalk is good, as well as fun. To be truthful, the “Thanks for sharing,” leaves me cold, as does the, “My name is Judee.” “Hello, Judee.”

What did me the most good early in the program was the loving interchange among members—how the members who had been in the program awhile would let me get off track a bit with the “alcoholic-this” and “alcoholic-that,” but would gently bring me back by asking, “Judee, can you see what your part was in this?” The One Day at a Time (B-6) helped, but hearing the stories of what helped others really worked for me. I had the hope that what worked for others could work for me.

By Judee, Florida

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I read the recent “Crosstalk -- or loving interchange?” article with interest.

The comment that really caught my eye was this one: “Broadly speaking, we have two choices: A small meeting of long-time members, strictly enforcing the “rules” against “crosstalk;” or a meeting where loving interchange is the practice, creating a more positive and welcoming atmosphere for everyone.”

I believe this is a false statement. There are a wide variety of choices made by groups in my Area—and probably many more choices made by groups all over the world. In groups I attend, members thank newcomers for coming, tell them they are the most important people in the room, and make a point of sharing about their early experiences in the program. We pass tissues to those who need them, pat them on the back, and tell them to “Keep Coming Back.” We laugh at each other’s jokes, and celebrate each other’s victories with applause and cheers.
However, we also remember that personal progress for the greatest number depends upon unity. And that means not disrupting the meeting to meet the needs of one or two people. Newcomers are there—whether they know it or not—for what we've gotten from meetings that have structure and boundaries (i.e. the Traditions). And while I know firsthand about the emotional toll that the family disease of alcoholism can take, I go to meetings to learn how to live the program "One Day at a Time."

While "emotional support" is an important benefit of belonging to a fellowship of equals who have had similar experiences, it is not the purpose of our meetings. Before I found the rooms, I got plenty of "emotional support" from people who had no clue about undoing the effects of the family disease. Unfortunately, that support did not help me to learn a new way of living.

I have seen meetings degenerate into small talk and totally inappropriate sharings just because there was extra time and the chair asked if anyone else had something to share. There is a reason that meetings have structure and that various forms of "crosstalk"—side conversations, responding to one person's sharing rather than speaking to the group, speaking out of turn—are discouraged. But structure doesn't have to mean rigidity or lack of warmth—unless the group so chooses.

By Lisa W., Pennsylvania

I have attended meetings in two different states, one without crosstalk and one with crosstalk. I had been trained professionally to give feedback when someone speaks. When I was new to Al-Anon more than 20 years ago, it was difficult for me to sit quietly and listen to what others were saying without commenting. It was in this meeting, without crosstalk, that I was able to grow in the program.

Patience was one of the important tools I learned by listening and only sharing my experience, strength, and hope. When I sit quietly listening to the member sharing, this allows him/her to clarify or change his/her thoughts without interruptions. How many times have I spoken before allowing this other person to finish what they have said? How many times have I interrupted the thoughts of that other member?

Embracing the silence is actually an effective and empowering part of the listening process. When I sit quietly, I am showing respect to the other member, I am telling the member he/she has something of value to share and this empowers the member to find solutions without offending him/her with advice, comments, and solutions.

My new home group does crosstalk. This has been difficult for me and I have expressed my opinion when I chaired a meeting using the article on crosstalk. The good of the whole is they support the use of crosstalk. I embrace the silence of allowing each member to share without interruptions. Even though I cannot change what others want to do, I can "Let It Begin with Me" and do what is comfortable for me.

By Pam, Nebraska

Concerning crosstalk, what happened to "share my experience, strength, and hope" for the newcomers and all others at Al-Anon meetings? Not everyone has had the exact same experience or acted in the same way, but most have been helped by the sharing and caring of others at meetings of how they dealt with the problem. Maybe it was just a slogan or two like "Let Go and Let God" or "Keep an Open Mind." That's how "Keep Coming Back" has helped create many of our longtimers in the program.

Suggestions of Al-Anon literature that may help with a specific problem like references for readings indexed in the back of One Day at a Time (B-6) and Courage to Change (B-16) and other literature can be helpful. Newcomers don't know where to find answers without some sharing by longtimers. Sometimes someone's problem makes a good topic for a meeting.
I, too, came to Al-Anon in the days before crosstalk. The discussion format was one person with a problem and 30 answers. Good format for that one person, but heaven help the second person with a problem—they never got a crumb.

Growing up in an alcoholic home, my feelings were discounted and I was not allowed to talk. With crosstalk comes dominance and interruptions.

My home group has 45-minute discussions and no crosstalk. Fifteen minutes are allowed whenever we have a newcomer.

I was really glad to see someone bring up the subject of crosstalk again. I never really understood the Al-Anon definition of crosstalk. I thought it meant a couple of people having a conversation back and forth during the meeting rather than allowing one person to share at a time.

I have been concerned about the lack of response when a newcomer asks for help. Everyone just sits there and says nothing for fear of giving advice. I thought we were here to share our experience, strength, and hope.

When I first came to Al-Anon, I was really grateful for the advice I was given—things like "Don't stand at the window watching for the headlights to come up the lane," "have dinner at the regular time for the kids whether he is home or not," and "if he passes out, leave him to wake up there." These were things members learned by using the program, things that worked for them.

Page 221 in One Day at a Time (B-6) gives us insight as to the kind of advice we give. It is up to me to choose what I try in my life.

I know that our disease is to try to fix everyone and Al-Anon has helped me understand that it is not my job to do so. But I came to the program many years ago to get help dealing with my husband's alcoholism. I am really grateful that members shared with me their experience, strength, and hope.

In the September Forum there is a discussion on crosstalk. I've been in meetings where there has been crosstalk and I don't believe there is a way to do so without being disrespectful to the one who is speaking.

Many of us who come to Al-Anon have a need for someone to really listen to us. Crosstalk is interrupting and breaks a person's train of thought. The person who crosstalks is either uncomfortable with what is being said or thinks their own experience is more valid. They are not listening. Everyone in the meeting should have a chance to talk about what they feel compelled to talk about. If one is looking for input, they can ask for it after they have said their piece or at the end of the meeting.

The writer of the crosstalk article talks about one person who was feeling suicidal. Something like that requires more than just a kind word or someone else giving their own experience. It should be followed up with after the meeting when there is plenty of time to properly address the issue.
The term “crosstalk” as used in the Al-Anon program has been one that has puzzled me and piqued my interest for many years now. This term was first made known to me when a visitor to a meeting I attended regularly informed our group that we were engaging in “crosstalk.” I have found that there are some members who use the term in meetings to control the meetings and members or to manipulate others into accepting that member’s definition of the term “crosstalk” so they then can go around accusing others of engaging in this practice.

Being an inquisitive type, I set out to discover just what the term meant and how it was used in Al-Anon. I discovered the term “crosstalk” is not part of Al-Anon! In neither our Conference Approved Literature (CAL) nor in the Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual (P-24/27) is this term found. There is no discussion or definition of the meaning of the word.

These are some of the discoveries I made:

1. Loving interchange among members is not crosstalk. -2002 Conference Summary—“Ask it Basket”
2. Sharing our experience, strength, and hope is not crosstalk. -2007 SERSS
3. It is not wrong to respond to what another member says in a meeting as long as one is not giving advice or sharing that what the person said is wrong. -2007 SERSS

Here are some examples of loving interchange:
1. “Thank you, Mary. I found what you just shared to be very inspiring.”
2. “I had a similar problem and this is how I handled it.” -2007 SERSS

Our Fourth Tradition reads: “Every group should be autonomous, except in matters affecting another group or Al-Anon or AA as a whole.” It does not say a group can do what it wants. There is a comma after “autonomous.” It is my belief that using the term “crosstalk” in our meetings does affect Al-Anon as a whole. To me this term has no definition, causes divisiveness, allows unnecessary control, and serves no purpose. I believe rude is rude, not listening is disrespectful, and giving advice is wrong. However, using the term crosstalk with all the problems it presents does not add anything positive to my program.

I believe there are more loving ways we can impart to the members, what is and is not acceptable in Al-Anon. If another member says something that I find objectionable, for whatever reason, I can always “take what I like and leave the rest.” It’s always worked for me.

My hope is that the term “crosstalk” will find its way out of our loving program.

By Judy N., FL

The following sharings were posted 11/01/07

Here are some thoughts that have helped me with the issue of crosstalk:

1. Personal, detailed accounts of my difficulties are best shared with my Sponsors over coffee, on the phone, or in person.
2. My home group adds a remark to our opening that the person chairing the meeting is responsible for the flow of sharing, allowing three to five minutes per person. Rules make me feel safe and help all of us have time to share.
3. We all speak with newcomers and answer their questions after the meeting.

By Mary Jo S., Illinois
As a newcomer, I felt that the crosstalk in meetings saved my life. My thinking was so distorted that I needed that type of loving interchange at the meetings I attended.

If I asked for advice about my situation in meetings they would always suggest I pray about it. They gently confronted me by using “I” statements and asking me probing questions. By doing so, they shared the experience, strength, and hope of their recovery.

Perhaps crosstalk is getting a bad rap in meetings because there are some members who will comment on another's sharing without using those important I' statements and they don't relate their sharing to their own recovery.

By Sue, Alabama

The first Al-Anon meetings I attended were large, so we would break into smaller groups. These meetings did allow some crosstalk, but it wasn't excessive. Most members shared then passed. It was usually the longtime members who would comment about another person's sharing. Most times the suggestions were meant to comfort and encourage, but there were other times when the comments were negative and not very helpful.

I can remember feeling thrilled if someone made a positive comment about my sharing, but if someone made a negative comment, I would feel the way I did when I was growing up in my alcoholic home—ashamed, stupid, wrong. Depending on the meeting, members in attendance, and/or the topic, there were times I would either refrain from talking or choose my words very carefully. The focus was not on me. It was on what others would think about what I said.

Then I went to different meetings. Even if the group was large, they didn't split up and there was no crosstalk. To me, these meetings were like a sacred circle. Each member had the opportunity to share his or her experiences, thoughts, and feelings without anyone commenting. In that time and space, I felt safe and loved. The loving interchange happened after the meeting. Some members referred to it as “the meeting after the meeting.” We would exchange hugs and talk. My recovery changed, for the better, as a result of attending these meetings.

Over time, I came to see the value of not having any crosstalk during a meeting. When I choose not to crosstalk at a meeting, I believe I am offering love and attention to other members. I don't believe I am ignoring their comments. If there is something I want to share with someone, I do it once the meeting has closed.

By Barb O., Illinois

For me, crosstalk rules are needed and are a form of boundaries. That being said, it does not imply that these rules need be considered strict and laid in cement. After all, the first part of the Fourth Tradition states each group should be autonomous. Perhaps it behooves the group to understand that guidelines for their individual group as well as regular business meetings can be the very thing that offsets the attitude of an unloving interchange.

It is only understandable that a newcomer will have many questions and has not yet put in the time to attend meetings, read literature, get a Sponsor, or use a phone list. During such times when it becomes obvious that a newcomer is loaded with questions, it is the group conscience that can direct such questions to wait until after the meeting or perhaps your group allows for explanations at a beginner’s meeting. Every newcomer who receives a newcomer packet and reads it will have most of their questions answered. The key here is that it be stated in a kind, but accurate, manner.

All of us once were newcomers and we share that wonder expressed in their questions. However, that does not mean the group itself should be distracted from the very reason for the meeting—sharing.
By Laura R., California

I've seen members acknowledge the newcomer and offer a few words of understanding and hope at the beginning of the member’s turn to share. I can feel the loving interchange in the room when this happens. Personally, I've never been attracted to someone who crosstalked. I've been attracted to the collective wisdom and safe structure of the group meetings.

By Annie, Maryland

Listening was not on my priority list when I first came to Al-Anon. At home growing up, listening was just about all I could do so I just tuned it out most of the time. But as time passed, I realized that I could listen when given a chance.

At the meetings I go to, it is suggested that we do not speak out of turn. This is being courteous. We take turns sharing on the subject. This gives us the opportunity to listen to what others have to say. Before and after the meetings we have loving interchange among members and newcomers.

By Vickie C.

The first time I found the rooms of Al-Anon, it was a life-saver. I learned many wonderful new ways to deal with my daughter's alcoholism. However, the crosstalk and well-intentioned “loving interchanges” gave a feeling and atmosphere to the meetings of unprofessional therapy sessions. Some members took it upon themselves to give advice and “tell” others what they should or should not do.

The second time I found the rooms of Al-Anon I was hopeless and angry, but this time no one gave advice or “loving interchanges.” I went to a meeting every day for over three months. I mostly listened. I could never quite explain it, but I always felt better after each meeting. I came to re-learn—only this time on my own, not someone “telling” me what I needed to do to find recovery.

By Luci M., Connecticut

I don't believe crosstalking is practicing a “loving interchange of help among members.” I practice a loving interchange by:

- Personally greeting members as they enter the room and after the meeting
- Offering refreshments when available
- Serving as a temporary and a permanent Sponsor
- Writing my experience, strength, and hope in essays and submitting them to The Forum
- Volunteering for service positions that keep the group functioning well
- Running recovery workshops at conventions
- Giving newcomers free pamphlets and showing them the literature available for purchase
- Giving away CAL to newcomers after asking whether they wish to have it
- Attending at least one recovery get-together a week, where longtime members and newcomers can sit down and ask any questions they have about Al-Anon

Sharing is not about immediately answering questions from the newcomer or longtimers on the spot during the meeting. It’s not about making sure that other people’s feeling are responded to and taken care of right away, in public and it’s not about solving other people’s confusion or discomfort immediately, in front of the group.
Sharing is about sharing our own personal struggles with the effects of alcoholism, our own personal recovery principles and triumphs, and our own feelings and pain. We don’t share about other people’s difficulties, pain, or confusion; we don’t speculate about other people’s solutions and triumphs. We let other people tell their own story and we tell ours.

When we crosstalk, we directly address someone else’s sharing, someone else’s pain, or someone else’s confusion. If I were to crosstalk, I feel that I would be meddling and disrespecting the other member because I have not asked whether they want my experience. And the worst part is I’m disrespecting them in public, in front of a whole group of people.

I once directly crosstalked in my sharing about a young woman because I felt her pain and confusion, and I thought my experience, strength, and hope expressed directly to her would be just the thing to help her. I felt that if it had helped me, it would help her too, right?

After the meeting, she came up to me and told me that she had not requested my comments at all, that they had hurt her terribly. She asked me to share about myself, my life, and my recovery and not crosstalk again. I have tried to fulfill that request ever since. So far, it has worked well for me and my recovery.

By Andrew L., Florida

Growing up with alcoholism, I strove to disappear in my home. I believed that the best thing I could do was to go unnoticed because drawing attention to me meant being criticized and blamed. I also felt that I was not worth much; when I spoke, I was often interrupted or my ideas discarded. I learned to survive by keeping quiet.

When I came into Al-Anon, I was relieved to be in a place where I was free to express myself. I never knew of a place where everyone was given the respect and equality of being listened to without interruption or criticism. I was given respectful attention when I spoke. It allowed me to feel accepted. These traits, along with the tradition of anonymity, allowed me to express what was in my mind and heart.

The writer of “Crosstalk—or loving interchange?” suggests: “we have two choices: a small meeting of longtime members, strictly enforcing the ‘rules’ against ‘crosstalk;’ or a meeting where loving interchange is the practice...” But I believe this is all or nothing thinking. If the “rules” for crosstalk are so strictly enforced that there is no flexibility, then I see potential for damage by these group guidelines. I have repeatedly witnessed the crosstalk guidelines being used with flexibility and love.

Guidelines for crosstalk that I have experienced do not include “rules” about sharing on a topic that has been brought up by a member in the meeting. Often a member will share on a topic that will spark relation in another member. I have often shared how topics that have been brought up by another member in the meeting relate to my life. It becomes extremely important to practice keeping the focus on ourselves in these types of situations.

I think a crosstalk statement at the beginning of a meeting could be an effective tool for loving interchange. It can add to the loving interchange in the meeting by communicating the need to omit advice-giving, lecturing, and talking out of turn while also providing open, honest communication and a loving atmosphere in which the newcomer is free to share what is in his/her mind and heart.

By Chloe E., Illinois

The September 2007 Forum, pages 26-27, puts forward the suggestion that we don’t give advice in Al-Anon. That is something I hear frequently at meetings. However, I turn to page 221 in One Day at a Time in Al-Anon (B-6) and I find the following:
"We hear it said that Al-Anon members do not give each other advice. This refers specifically to the kind of advice that suggests taking drastic action to bring about a radical change in a marriage relationship. This we do not—and must not—do. In other ways, we in Al-Anon give a great deal of advice. We suggest looking into ourselves for the causes of our problems; we advise dependence on God's guidance. We recommend lots of Al-Anon reading, the study of the Twelve Steps and the slogans. We suggest spiritual ways to find a new perspective and new strength, and we share our personal experience in applying them."

If we don't give this advice, we are not passing on what has been freely given to us and if we don't give it away, we can't keep it.

By Martha D., Ontario

I have experienced strict adherence to no crosstalk on telephone meetings. I have maintained the strong boundaries (though when I'm on mute, the boundary is already in place). I believe it is so we don't fall into rescuing or enabling and so that we stay detached and on-track. Yet, there is little loving interchange over the phone. What I gain from my phone meetings is a chance to listen and learn different thinking and to express myself, my pain, or my progress. There is some comfort in that and I leave it at that.

For the most part, I have not crosstalked at face-to-face meetings because I realize that it's important to listen to others with respect. I can make mistakes of course—I'm only human—and that is okay. I have laughed at comments and smiled, sometimes teared up, even cried, over a tragic situation, and after the meeting have offered hugs, feedback, The Forum, CAL, or my phone number. This, I believe, is the loving interchange in action.

I have experienced crosstalk in face-to-face meetings more times than I can recall. I've been interrupted while sharing. I realized that those people wanted to draw attention to themselves. Sometimes I have spoken up, other times I have not. Once, I told the member it was crosstalk and continued sharing. Another time I ignored the member. I haven't had any problems since. I just worked my program, and went from anger to acceptance and from standing up for myself to letting it go.

We have a right to speak without being interrupted or given advice. We have been affected by the disease of alcoholism and we need boundaries to keep us safe. But we are not running the show. We are learning and practicing turning it over to let God run our meetings and our recovery. God, expressed by our group conscience, can see the whole picture and has the lesson plan. So, please, respond and help express this group conscience.

If crosstalk rules are so rigid that the meeting seems cold, uncaring, or uninvolved, who would want to come back? Conversely, if there is over-involvement this would be unhealthy and disrespectful. It is about exercising discernment. Perhaps balance, and not extremes, is the key.

By Jill, Illinois

"Crosstalk—or loving interchange?" made me cry for the people so desperately needing help. When I was a newcomer, people, trying to be helpful, said things such as:

- "Counseling doesn't work. Just 'Keep Coming Back.'"
- "Depression can be cured if you work your program hard enough."
- "You shouldn't be taking medication."
- "You don't belong in Al-Anon if you think your loved one is a drug addict."

We, as groups, started to realize that what we were saying was not loving or wise. We are not doctors or counselors. We are a group of people helping each other through our own experience, strength, and hope.
Today we know that Al-Anon works, and that some people need outside help. Also, we find that most people who come to Al-Anon, for whatever reason, realize after a while that there are alcoholics affecting their lives.

In my home group, we give the newcomer a warm welcome. We practice no crosstalk as we understand it, and we respect each other. In sitting quietly and letting people share, we listen and absorb each person's opinions and feelings. We don't tell people that they can't speak up or ask questions. People have shared that Al-Anon is the only place they have ever been where everyone allowed them to speak and not try to interrupt.

The meeting always has a topic to discuss, but we adapt the topic or at least consider the newcomer in our sharings. We offer one-on-one meetings for anyone who needs them. We ask newcomers to stay after the meeting and someone always takes the time to share with them. We give them our names and phone numbers.

I have grown and changed through Al-Anon, learning to keep an open mind while keeping to the principles of the program. Al-Anon has grown and changed, too, but it continues to work for those who work it, newcomers and longtimers alike.

By Mary K., Kansas

My experience with crosstalk is that groups have different ways of defining it. Interrupting, giving advice, responding to another's sharing by name, or having a side conversation are ways I have heard it described. What is discouraged in one meeting as crosstalk may be acceptable in another. Since our meetings are autonomous, this is in line with our principles.

I never heard of crosstalk before coming to Al-Anon. Some groups I have attended have provided a definition and others have not. I notice that newcomers are sometimes confused by this word, but if we have done our job, greeting them before the meeting, inviting them to coffee after the meeting, and asking if they have any questions about Al-Anon, the newcomers usually come to understand the norms of the group.

Al-Anon has taught me to stop interrupting people. I learned this because my home group allowed everyone to have a chance to share without being interrupted or receiving comments. I had spent years feeling that no one ever heard what I said and at each meeting I had a few minutes where I felt that people were really listening to me. This felt good and helped me to "Keep Coming Back."

The kind of sharing I like at meetings includes enough of the problem so I can identify with the speaker and a lot of the solution so I can listen and learn. I like it when each speaker focuses on their own struggle and how they use the tools of the program.

At my home group we emphasize our individual responsibility for reaching out to others. If someone is expressing pain, we might say, "I can identify with the sharing tonight," without putting that person on the spot by specifically reacting to their story. We search them out after the meeting and offer comfort and support. We also encourage sponsorship. Loving interchange doesn't look the same all the time—it varies.

Unlike the author of "Crosstalk—or loving interchange?" I think there are more than two choices when it comes to how crosstalk affects meetings, but I agree with the author that being rigid is unproductive. The journey through the Steps and the study of the Traditions and Concepts has helped me become more flexible, less controlling. Am I "strictly enforcing the rules"? Perhaps I need to be more tolerant. Am I forgetting that "personal progress for the greatest number depends upon unity"? Perhaps I need to check my motivation and make sure I am not trying to rescue someone.

By Anonymous
I just read the letter in the September Forum discussing crosstalk and I appreciated it so much. I agree with what was said and I felt a need to respond. Ever since my first meeting, I have heard about crosstalk, but have never decided what they were really talking about.

If crosstalk is talking to someone while someone else is talking, talking out of turn, or jumping in while someone else is talking, I am definitely against that. It is rude and disruptive. It can cause strain in a group. But for some reason, I don’t think that is what is meant by crosstalk.

If someone wants to address what another has said, to share their own experience, strength, and hope about a similar problem, I think that would be loving interchange. But if that causes the meeting to abandon a suggested topic and concentrate on one person’s problems, that is crosstalk and I am against it.

Our meetings should be sharing our experiences and what tools of the program have helped us. I don’t see how this can happen if we are not allowed to speak when we hear someone’s problem that is so similar to one we have conquered.

Each group is autonomous and that means we can run the group the way that is best for the group. We are also reminded to “Keep It Simple,” and I believe that means to have a relaxed atmosphere where anyone can speak at any time during the meeting as long as they practice the basic principles of courtesy.

By Mary G., Florida

I admit sometimes the difference between “crosstalk” and “loving interchange” can be subtle, although there is an important difference. The backbone that keeps Al-Anon going is the Traditions. They are suggestions and they keep Al-Anon what it is.

The Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual (P-24/27) outlines what a meeting should look and sound like. On page 47, it says: “Our discussions center on solutions for our own difficulties.” This means we don’t give advice and we don’t take turns solving each other’s problems. If we need to get into our problems more deeply, we should talk to an Al-Anon friend before or after a meeting. Better yet, talk to a Sponsor.

But even Sponsors don’t solve our problems. Al-Anon is a program where we learn to solve our problems ourselves with the love and support of others in similar situations. Everyone should have the opportunity to share, rather than focusing on one person, no matter the seeming urgency. If someone were to come to Al-Anon in genuine need of more that Al-Anon has the ability to offer, we have the responsibility to refer them to other resources. Focusing on one person’s problems doesn’t help anyone, including that person. In fact, it is similar to enabling. We aren’t responsible for solving the alcoholic’s problems or anyone else’s.

Our Steps, Traditions, and Concepts all work together and are intertwined. When we separate them and take them out of context, we get a distorted view of Al-Anon. Tradition Twelve states: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities.” I came face to face with this recently in my own recovery. I was afraid to talk about something that happened in my life that was pertinent to the topic because of my perceived reaction of the members of the group. I didn’t want them to pity me, and fear of what someone else might do kept me quiet. After talking with my Sponsor, I discovered that once again I had given away my power. I cannot control what others do, but I can control how I respond. I do not have to let others back me into a corner. To me, that is an example of “principles above personalities.” On page 135 of Al-Anon’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (B-8), it states: “When we act and think as members of Al-Anon, we are able once more to see that our will alone does not determine the reality of a situation.”

Of course, newcomers cannot possibly know how Al-Anon works. They need love and encouragement to “Keep Coming Back.” It is our experience, strength, and hope that we offer them and not abandoning a meeting to answer questions or discuss their problems. It is my observation, at least in my district, that there are not enough newcomer meetings
available where freedom to ask questions exists. However, one of the reasons I kept coming back was because no one would answer me directly and most of all they didn't tell me what I should do.

By Deanna C., Nebraska

I think crosstalk is a subject to which our Fourth Tradition applies: "Each group should be autonomous, except in matters affecting another group of Al-Anon or AA as a whole."

I hear Martha's frustration over occasions when a member's deep personal concerns were deferred in her group until after the meeting and would not want any guidance that required her group to adhere to a no crosstalk rule in those occasions. However, I believe that, for the groups I attend, a no crosstalk rule has been very beneficial. I would not want to discourage groups from having such a local practice either.

The "loving interchange" that we all wish to encourage is not limited to exchanges during the meetings. It includes all occasions for loving interchange among members, including immediately after meetings, at dinner before meetings, over coffee after meetings, on the phone, in a Sponsor relationship, and any other occasion where loving interchange is possible.

The following passage from CAL also encourages loving interchange during meetings: "Let us remember that our First Tradition says, 'Our common welfare should come first.' If one member monopolizes the time and attention of the group, the meeting is not serving others. Someone's helpful message may be lost. We must consider the welfare of the entire group." We read this at the beginning of every discussion, along with the sentence that includes crosstalk among gossip, dominance, and other subjects from which our group conscience requests that we refrain.

Our group conscience is that crosstalk does more to enable one member to monopolize the time and attention of the group than to encourage loving interchange among members. I would hate to see any group adopt guidance that discourages a group from adhering to our approach to loving interchange among members.

By Tom A., North Carolina

I am blessed with belonging to a strong and healthy home group. We follow the "no crosstalk" policy and it serves us well. It is not unusual for newcomers to be unaware of this policy even if they are present at the beginning of the meeting when these things are explained. Likewise, they don't often realize that at our meeting we share in turn around the room and don't get to speak again until everyone has had a turn.

Newcomers come because they are in pain and crisis. They don't always listen. I know this because I was once a newcomer myself. But listening is what Al-Anon is about for me. It is not about responding. In fact, to respond to a newcomer's panic and crisis might not give him/her anything new. If I have a chance to speak I can empathize and share a related experience if I choose. But if it is not my turn and others share only whatever is going on for them at the moment, I do not feel that is inappropriate.

I have no way of knowing if the newcomer will hear something in another's sharing that he/she relates to. Perhaps by not reacting to his/her current needs, we are actually helping her to look at things in a new way. Maybe she will leave feeling her situation is not an emergency; maybe she will start to "Think" before talking only about the alcoholic; maybe she will start to want the smile and serenity she sees in others at the meeting.

Also, I have no way of knowing how much the member who has "only" shared what was going on for him really needed the time he/she got to be heard today.
I do know how much I have changed my behavior outside of meetings as a result of "no crosstalk." Now when my husband and I talk, I can actually keep my mind off my response and take in what he is saying. When I listen to him, I notice that he's often saying what I need to hear and not what I'm preparing to defend against.

How rare it is to be listened to in today's world; even less so for those growing up with or living with the family disease of alcoholism...listened to in silence—no feedback, no response, no crosstalk—only love and acceptance. Maybe loving interchange can happen without discussion, answered questions, or dialogue; maybe it happens between our hearts.

By Peggy S., Maine

Although Al-Anon has no opinion on this issue, I came across an article on crosstalk written by F.M.M. in the June 1995 *Forum*, which I kept because it gave a great definition of crosstalk.

The definition was: "Formulated at a workshop at the 1991 World Service Conference: 'Crosstalk occurs when one member monopolizes the meeting with one-to-one responses to another member (advice-giving). This includes the chairperson who feels the need to comment on each sharing (coming off as an expert). Other definitions include not using "I" statements, side conversations, and mini-meetings within a meeting. Most members agree these types of sharings are not in keeping with Al-Anon principles.'"

By T.A.G.

Editor's Note: In 2004, the following two questions were raised and answered about crosstalk in the "Ask-It-Basket" feature of the Conference Summary:

15. How do we define "crosstalk"? How can we deal with "crosstalk" without becoming rigid or controlling? Does the WSO have an official stand on crosstalk? How is crosstalk defined?

It is within the autonomy of the group to define crosstalk. The World Service Office has no official stand on this practice. Reviewing the group's definition during the group's periodic inventory will help the group members maintain flexibility.

16. What is the difference between loving interchange and crosstalk?

A group, at its business or inventory meeting, could determine its own group conscience as to the amount of interchange appropriate for the meeting. The size of the group, the length of the meeting, and the group's desire to hear from everyone in attendance are all factors for the group to consider. Reading and study of the "Three Obstacles to Success in Al-Anon" in Alcoholism, the Family Disease (P-4) and The Twelve Steps and Traditions (P-17) may help.