

# The level of well-being in families attending al-anon groups and its effect on the attention of their alcohol dependent relatives

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects on alcohol-dependent families attending Al-Anon groups to help them manage and overcome this situation, raise their quality of life, and that of their alcoholic relatives. The design of the study was with a qualitative approach; the interpretative framework used was of the symbolic interactionism and the method of the Grounded Theory. The study sample included 10 relatives of people dependent on alcohol, which came to the Al-Anon Groups of 4 municipalities from the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico. From the qualitative analysis of the ten interviews, three main themes emerged:

- a. The meaning of alcoholism in the family
- b. The process followed by the family
- c. Family support and the recovery process in the Al-Anon mutual aid group. Results show that it would be more difficult to deal with the situation if they were without the support of the Al-Anon Group. Well-being in the alcoholic relatives was associated with positive interpersonal relationships with others in terms of feeling integrated, accepted, having people who contribute to their problem. Participants reported that the experiences shared in the group gave them tools, to better understand and support their family member's dependent on alcohol, which increased the quality of life both in them and their family members.

**Keywords:** well-being, alcohol dependence, families, al-anon groups

Volume 4 Issue 1 - 2017

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**Received:** September 11, 2017 | **Published:** October 04, 2017

## Introduction

The suffering of a chronic disease such as alcohol dependence does not only affect the person who carries it, but also the overall family.<sup>1</sup> The suffering experienced by the principal relative (wife, mother, sister, and daughter) of the alcohol's dependent can be identified and perceived by him. It is possible that initially he denies or hides the existence of the problem for not knowing how to front facing the feelings of fear, guilt, shame, resentment and contempt that the behavior of the dependent family member generates in them because of their form of consumption.<sup>2,3</sup> In the relationship of the dependent person with his family, there is a continuum of affective feelings that can go from positive to negative, which translates into stress, moral and emotional suffering, and even the destruction of relationships and communication within the family nucleus.<sup>2,4-7</sup> In these families, the alcohol dependence of their family member symbolizes the unknown, the ambiguous, the dangerous, the suffering, the guilt, the chaos, the anxiety and the stress.<sup>7,8</sup> This led us to conduct a study with the purpose of knowing the level of well-being<sup>9</sup> in relatives of alcohol dependents attending Al-Anon groups and the effects on the attention of their alcohol dependents relatives. The design of the study was with a qualitative approach, the interpretative framework used was the symbolic interactionism<sup>10-12</sup> and the method used was of the Grounded Theory.<sup>13,14</sup>

## Methods

The study sample was form with 10 relatives of people dependent on alcohol, which come to the Al-Anon Groups<sup>5,15</sup> of the municipalities

of Matamoros, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo and Victoria in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, in which ten women participated. The data collection was through a semi-structured individual interview. The ages of the interviewed women ranged between 22 and 54 years old, in relation to the education level, one had primary level, four had secondary level, three had high school, one had technical career, and one had a bachelor's degree. As to the type of activity they developed, five of them reported working outside the home and five mentioned dedicating themselves to housework. In relation to the parental relationship with the person dependent on alcohol, six were wives, three mothers and one the dependent's aunt.

## Results

From the qualitative analysis of the ten interviews, three main themes emerged with their respective categories: Meaning of alcoholism in the family, which identifies three categories:

- i. Living in an alcoholic family
- ii. Recognizing the disease, and
- iii. Children with alcohol dependence

The process followed by the family that leads to Al-Anon, which identifies five categories:

- a) Feelings or emotions
- b) Attitudes
- c) Losses or consequences

- d) Codependency
- e) Expectations of recovery

Family support and recovery process in the Al-Anon mutual aid group and the categories that emerged were:

- a. To recognize that he needs help.
- b. To receive help from Al-Anon.
- c. To recommend Al-Anon to other family members.

Regarding the first issue related to the Meaning of alcoholism in the family and the first category about living in an alcoholic family, most of them reported in their families' origin, the presence of dependence on alcohol either by their parents, siblings, or in their partner and even in the children. The lived experience refers to the fact that they lived in a complex family environment; some of the participants said they had experienced since childhood negative effects and forms of abuse derived from being part of a dysfunctional family where substance abuse was present. In relation to the second theme identified in the study concerning the process followed by the family that leads them to Al-Anon, it was found that this process refers to a first category that tells us that they internalized emotions such as anguish, pain and terror, fostered by the uncertainty and stress derived from the experiences of daily living with the alcohol dependent couple or family, and having no control over "when and how it will come, if it comes". This also implied uncertainty, impotence, hopelessness and affliction.

As for the third issue that emerged from the data that refers to the process of family support and recovery in the Al-Anon mutual aid group, according to the participants, living with their alcohol dependent family member would be very difficult, if they could not count with the social support of Al-Anon. They mention that this search for support does not occur spontaneously and quickly, they mention that it was necessary to overcome resistance and social stereotypes regarding the role of women. They reported that were gradually building the confidence in the Al-Anon Groups to have new friends who support them in the aid process, but this happens once it is recognized that help is needed (first category) to control their emotions and handle the blame. The knowledge learned in the Al-Anon group helped them to better understand and support their family member dependent on alcohol.

## Discussion

In general, it can be argued that the women in the study currently find themselves at a relevant level of psychological well-being, in contrast to some time ago. If they were without the support of the Al-Anon Group it would be more difficult to deal with the situation. Well-being is associated with positive interpersonal relationships with others in terms of feeling integrated, accepted, having people who contribute to their problem. In revising their situation, they were able to give social coherence to their lives through the understanding that they are not the only ones in this situation, that they do not have to be ashamed, and that in addition, one can leave or overcome it, if they

do the things in a suitable form. They also pointed out that all the experiences shared in the group gave them tools to better understand and support their family member's dependent on alcohol, which increased the quality of life both in them and in their family members.

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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