

Taking care of myself comes first

By Roland V., British Columbia

Growing up in an alcoholic home forced me to adapt to situations quickly, often putting my own feelings aside. Surrounded with forceful personalities, I learned it was easier and safer to conform to the needs of the people involved, rather than take care of my own needs.

“... when presented with a situation over which I’m powerless, I no longer have to be the second victim.”

The ocean had always comforted me. When I was a teenager, I had taken a rescue diving course. One of the training scenarios was to rescue an unconscious victim near a rocky shore.

The instructor explained, “You have reached the victim, but both of you are about to be thrown against the rocks, causing certain injury to both of you. You can use yourself to shield them or vice versa.”

I responded quickly, “Surely we should throw ourselves between them and the rocks.” His answer was, “The correct action is to use the victim’s body to shield yourself from injury.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I protested, “We’re trying to save people, not injure them further.” My instructor responded, “Then there would be two unconscious people in the water. Your first responsibility, in any rescue, is to not become the second victim.”

I would not understand the full weight of this error in my thinking until I had been in Al-Anon for several years. How many times had I tried to shield the alcoholic from their disease, only to be thrown against the rocks with them?

Today, with the help of the Al-Anon fellowship, I’ve learned that to be of service to others I have to take care of myself first. And when presented with a situation over which I’m powerless, I no longer have to be the second victim.

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