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Alcoholism, the Family, and the Limits of Love: A Biography of Hope and Healing

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On April 25th, Hallmark Hall of Fame will broadcast the movie “When Love Is Not Enough—The Lois Wilson Story,” starring Winona Ryder and Barry Pepper (CBS, 8 pm CT, 9 pm ET). The movie, which portrays the life of Lois Wilson, co-founder of Al-Anon and wife of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) co-founder Bill Wilson, is based on William G. Borchert’s 2005 book, *The Lois Wilson Story: When Love Is Not Enough*. Borchert’s earlier screenplay was the basis of the acclaimed movie *My Name is Bill W.*, starring James Woods, James Garner, and JoBeth Williams. The premiere of the movie falls during the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.’s (NCADD) 24th Annual Alcohol Awareness Month with its theme, “When Love Is Not Enough: Helping Families Coping With Alcoholism.”

Lois Wilson fell in love with a man whose alcoholism brought his life and their relationship to the brink before he began his personal recovery and helped found Alcoholics Anonymous. Lois and many of

the other wives of early AA members also began to band together for mutual support, formalizing these meetings into Al-Anon Family Groups in 1951. *When Love is Not Enough* is the story of Lois Wilson and her life with Bill Wilson. The reach of her and their stories is unfathomable and inseparable from the larger stories of AA and Al-Anon and the influence their lives would exert on the larger story of the professional treatment and recovery of individuals and families affected by addiction to alcohol and other drugs. As William Borchert suggests:

“In the end, Bill Wilson’s alcoholism proved not to be the tragic undoing of this brilliant and loving couple, but rather the beginning of two of the twentieth century’s most important social and spiritual movements—Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups.”

There are presently more than 114,500 Alcoholics Anonymous groups (with a combined membership of more than 2

million) and more than 25,000 Al-Anon/Alateen groups (with a combined membership of more than 340,000) hosting local meetings worldwide.

When Love is Not Enough is clearly more than a love story, though it is surely that. Readers of *Psych Central* and the people they serve will discover in this movie six profound lessons about the impact of alcoholism and alcoholism recovery on intimate relationships and the family.

1. Prolonged cultural misunderstandings about the nature of alcoholism have left a legacy of family shame and secrecy. Centuries of debates between those advocating religious, moral, criminal, psychiatric, psychological, medical, and sociological theories of alcoholism failed to offer clear guidance to individuals and families affected by alcoholism. *When Love is Not Enough* is in part a poignant history of the hidden desperation many families experienced before the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and modern alcoholism treatment. Lois Wilson and Anne Bingham helped change that history in 1951 when they organized 87 groups of wives of AA members into the Al-Anon Family Groups.
2. Alcoholism is a family disease in the sense that it also wounds those closest to the alcohol dependent person; transforms family relationships, roles, rules, and rituals; and isolates the family from potential sources of extended family, social, and community support. And, it has far reaching, long-lasting effects on the physical and emotional health of the family and children. *When Love is Not Enough* conveys the physical and emotional distress of those struggling to understand a loved one who has lost control of drinking and its consequences. It vividly portrays the disappointment, confusion, frustration, anger, resentment, jealousy, fear, guilt, shame, anxiety, and depression family members experience in the face of alcoholism. The recognition that significant others and their children become as sick as the person addicted and are in need of a parallel pathway of

recovery were the seeds from which Al-Anon and Alateen grew.

3. The family experience of alcoholism is often one of extreme duality. *When Love is Not Enough* poignantly conveys this duality: brief hope-inspiring interludes of abstinence or moderated drinking, periods of peacefulness, moments of love and shared dreams for the future—all relentlessly violated by explosive bouts of drinking and their devastating aftereffects. Memories of that lost person and those moments and dreams co-exist even in the face of the worst effects of alcoholism on the family. It is only in recognizing this duality of experience and the character duality of the alcoholic that one can answer the enigmatic question that is so often posed about Lois Wilson's contemporary counterparts, "Why does she/he stay with him/her?" As clinicians, we can too often forget that these family stories contain much more than the pathology of alcohol or drug dependence (White, 2006).
4. Family recovery from alcoholism is a turbulent, threatening, and life-changing experience. The hope of all families and children wounded by alcoholism is that the drinking will stop and with it, the arrival of an idyllic family life. Lois Wilson's story confirms what research on family recovery from addiction is revealing: recovery from alcoholism can destabilize intimate and family relationships. Stephanie Brown and Virginia Lewis (1999), in their studies of the impact of alcoholism recovery on the family, speak of this as the "trauma of recovery." People recovering from alcoholism, their families, and their children can and often do achieve optimum levels of health and functioning, but this achievement is best measured in years rather than days, weeks, or months. That recognition in the life of Lois Wilson underscored the need for sustained support for families as they went through this process.
5. We cannot change another person, only ourselves. If there is a central, singular message from Lois Wilson's life

and from the Al-Anon program, this may well be it. Al-Anon's defining moments came when family members stopped focusing on how they could change and control their addicted family member and focused instead on their own need for regeneration and spiritual growth, the overall health of their families, and the comfort and help they could offer each other and other families similarly affected. Their further discovery that AA's twelve step program of recovery could also guide the healing of family members marks the birth of the modern conceptualization of family recovery. The 2009 Al-Anon Membership Survey confirms the wide and enduring benefits members report experiencing as a result of their sustained involvement in Al-Anon—irrespective of the drinking status of their family members.

6. The wonder of family recovery. As a direct result of Lois's groundbreaking work in co-founding Al-Anon and the impact it has had on the field of alcohol and drug treatment, family recovery from alcoholism is a reality for millions of Americans today, and the hope, help, and healing of family recovery has become the most powerful way to break the intergenerational cycle of alcoholism and addiction in the family.

The growing interest in the lives of Bill and Lois Wilson—as indicated by a stream of memoirs, biographies, plays, and films—is testimony to the contributions that Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups have made to personal and family recovery from alcoholism and to the ever-widening adaptation of the Twelve Steps to other problems of living (Wilson, 1994). Psych Central readers will find much of value in *When Love Is Not Enough—The Lois Wilson Story*, including the power of Al-Anon as a tool of support for clients living with someone else's alcoholism. A DVD of the movie and a Viewer's Guide, for use as a tool in family and community education, will be available at www.hallmarkhalloffame.com on April 25th, the day of the movie's premiere.

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Resources

- Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., www.al-anonfamilygroups.org, 800-4AL-ANON (888-425-2666), Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., ET.
- Alcoholics Anonymous, www.aa.org.
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc. (NCADD), www.ncadd.org, 212-269-7797.