

# Group, District, and Area Autonomy

When I first came to Al-Anon, I heard the term “autonomy” and was confused. How was I to get or give any help if I remained self-sufficient? What I soon realized was that my definition of autonomy was incorrect and distorted. Imagine that! Today, I think of autonomy as a welcome principle that helps me understand my role in my home group as well as how the will of my home group is shared at the District level through the voice of the Group Representative (GR).

The dictionary defines autonomy as being “self-governing”—having the freedom to direct oneself and exercise “moral independence.” At first, this seemed both scary and empowering. I thought that, as the GR, having autonomy meant I was “in charge.” I am so grateful for the patience of other Al-Anon members who had more experience than I did. They explained that the “one authority” for our group is a Higher Power as expressed through the will of the group during business meeting discussions.

Autonomy at the group level means that the group can decide on issues that affect the group as a whole. We can decide how we want to welcome newcomers. We can decide to create new service positions to help the group remain healthy. So much can be done within the groups to support Al-Anon’s primary purpose of making sure help is available to anyone affected by the drinking of a family member or friend.

At the District level, the GRs have opportunities to serve on different committees to continue to carry the Al-Anon message. Here, autonomy means that informed discussions among the GRs representing the will of the groups determine the will of the District. Each District has the freedom to decide on matters affecting that District, such as creating subcommittees to gather additional input from other members of the District. A member need not be a GR to chair or serve on such a subcommittee.

Area-level service further demonstrates the importance of collective decision-making and the concept of “Al-Anon as a whole.” Service in the Area was an opportunity for me to broaden my perspective on the needs and wants of Al-Anon members. Every step of the way, I heard that “the right of decision makes effective leadership possible.” My decision-making was based on informed discussions in my home group and with others at the District level. The difference between acting on my personal preferences and representing the will of the group or District became clearer with each meeting.

As I progressed in Al-Anon service, along with the understanding of autonomy came the responsibility to be obedient to Al-Anon principles. Our Legacies and the General Warranties of the Conference provided the guidance I needed. Over time, my thinking changed from “I can do whatever I want” to “What can I do to support Al-Anon principles?” Ultimately, I have come to realize that our collective Al-Anon autonomy is what is truly powerful!

*By Sue P., Associate Director—Group Services*

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