

Adult Children of People With Alcoholism: Healing the Wounds

Growing up in a family where one or both parents have an alcohol problem can be so painful that years later the adult child can still suffer negative consequences. The psychological scars inflicted by parental alcoholism can lead to dysfunctional relationships, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and addictive behaviors. More than 25 percent of children of parents with an alcohol problem develop chemical addictions.

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency estimates that 28 million Americans have at least one parent with an alcohol problem. More than 78 million Americans have been exposed to alcohol's serious adverse effects in their families. One in every eight Americans is an adult child of an alcoholic (ACA).

Negative effects of a dysfunctional family

The family environment into which a child is born has a profound and long-term effect on the relationships that are formed by that child as an adult. Growing up in a dysfunctional family (one where alcoholism or drug addiction, sexual abuse or neglect is present), where many of the child's basic needs are not met, does make a difference whether that child leads a productive and satisfying life.

A dysfunctional family is unable to provide a safe and nurturing environment where basic trust is experienced. Children raised in dysfunctional families have difficulty developing emotionally and socially. Three rules, often unspoken, that govern families where alcoholism is present are:

1. Don't trust.
2. Don't feel.
3. Don't talk.

Children of parents with alcoholism learn at a young age that their emotional, and sometimes physical, survival depends upon learning and following these rules. As adults, they often fail to recognize that these rules are unnecessary and unhealthy outside of the family with alcoholism. They don't trust other people, since they learned they couldn't count on others. They seldom speak their true thoughts, but rather they say what they believe others want to hear. And they blindly maintain a tight rein on their feelings, if they know their feelings at all. The rules of childhood survival become a noose that squeezes the life out of ACAs during adulthood—unless they overcome the menacing power of their dysfunctional family.

Recovering

If your parent had an alcohol problem, you probably haven't learned to trust yourself, identify and express your own thoughts and feelings, learned about healthy

relationships, or developed a sense of yourself as a valued and unique individual. These are the tasks of recovery, a process involving several stages:

- **Survivor stage:** The first step in recovery is to acknowledge that you are from a dysfunctional family. This acknowledgement may be difficult as it dredges up old memories—painful memories you may have worked hard to bury.
- **Identification stage:** Acknowledging that you are an ACA provides a framework upon which you can construct a realistic view of the past. This requires an abandonment of denial and an outpouring of intense feelings, including sadness and anger.
- **Core issues stage:** This stage involves an active exploration of the ways in which your childhood is impacting your identity and relationships in adulthood.
- **Integration stage:** You must develop belief systems that legitimize self-acceptance. New attitudes are now woven into healthier behavior patterns. Trust, honesty, and an assertive expression of needs and emotions become a part of daily life.
- **Genesis stage:** The central focus here is on ceasing to be a passive victim and becoming an active creator of your own world.

Because the ACA recovery process is often a long and difficult one, it is imperative to use education, emotional support and professional counseling. Individual and group therapy, self-help support groups (e.g., Al-Anon) and reading books about ACAs can help you through the recovery process. If you need help locating recovery resources, contact your company's employee assistance program (EAP) or another mental health professional for confidential guidance.

Resources

It Will Never Happen to Me by Claudia Black. Random House, 1987.

Recovery: A Guide for Adult Children of Alcoholics by Herbert Gravitz and Julie Bowden. Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Adult Children of Alcoholic Syndrome: From Discovery to Recovery by Wayne Kritsberg. Bantam Books, 1988.

Al-Anon/Alateen
www.al-anon.org

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