

Adult children of alcoholics

If you grew up in a home where alcohol was a problem, you may still be feeling some of the effects. By trying to understand your past, you can better understand who you are, why you behave in certain ways, and where you're headed in the future.

As a child

Although most parents do their best to provide their children with the love, caring and discipline they need, alcohol abuse by a parent can interfere with the normal family system. If your home life was affected by someone's alcohol use, you probably coped in the best way you knew how.

"Don't talk, don't trust and don't feel" is a way of describing how many children cope in homes where alcohol abuse is a problem. In order to cope, children often take on one or more of the following roles.

The responsible child

These children are the ones that the family counts on to take over when others flounder. They are successful at home and at school. They win a place in the family by taking care of others, by becoming a junior mom or dad. They are good leaders and decision-makers, but may have difficulty listening and negotiating with others.

The adjuster

Also known as "The Lost Child," these children do not seem to care what is happening within the family. They spend a great deal of time on their own, away from the family. They try very hard not to draw attention to themselves. They are flexible and easygoing, but may have difficulty making decisions.

The placator

These children work at minimizing the negative feelings experienced by other family members. They are warm, empathetic and sensitive individuals, but they tend to put up with inappropriate behaviour from other people. They may also have difficulty focusing on themselves.

The acting-out child

These children are often involved in unacceptable behaviour, such as fighting, stealing or acting out. They get their attention in negative ways. Frequently, these children understand what is going on in their family better than others do. They tend to be strong leaders and creative individuals. However, they may have poor social skills and have difficulty dealing with authority.

As an adult

Children of alcoholics often find that the ways of coping they have used for years don't work as well once they reach adulthood. For example, responsible children may find that years of being in charge have left them unable to loosen up and have fun.

Adult children of alcoholics may deny their own feelings in order to survive. They may experience unexplained depression. They may have difficulty with close relationships. Some, in spite of vowing "it will never happen to me," develop problems with alcohol or drugs. Some of them marry problem drinkers.

The first step in dealing with being the child of an alcoholic (or in dealing with any problem arising from a dysfunctional family) is to become aware of the issues. For some people, just knowing how growing up in an alcoholic home affects them, allows them to understand themselves in a new way.

Others find they need to explore their feelings with people who understand and care about them. Support groups such as Al-Anon and Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) can be tremendously helpful. By getting into one of these groups, you will find that you are not alone in your situation. Professional counselling is another option.

The solution you choose is not as important as the fact that you are open to change. Remember, your parent's drinking is not, and never was, your fault. The first part of your life may have been affected by family alcoholism. The rest of your life doesn't have to be.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.