

Adult Children of Alcoholics

It is estimated that there are 28 million children living with alcoholic parents in the USA. There has been much research demonstrating the detrimental effects on these children. Children of alcoholics (COAs) are more likely to have substance abuse problems themselves, be abused and neglected, have mental health diagnoses, and have more health problems than children who are not raised by alcoholics. When COAs grow up, these problems often persist. The good news is that the majority of COAs actually do not have significant problems with their functioning, but a significant minority (around 40 percent) does have long term difficulties.

Rules in Alcoholic Homes

Claudia Black, noted authority, has identified three often unspoken rules in alcoholic families: Don't Talk, Don't Trust, Don't Feel. As denial is a common problem for alcoholics and their families, talking about the alcoholism is not allowed or tolerated. The message the children learn is that you don't talk about problems, even when everyone knows they are there. COAs also learn that what their parents tell them cannot be trusted. Children look at their parents as the most trustworthy and important people in their lives, but promises made in alcoholic homes are often not honored. It is then easy for COAs to conclude that since they cannot even trust their own parents, they cannot trust anyone. Finally, emotions are not tolerated in alcoholic homes. Because the denial system is so strong, emotions can be seen as a threat. Therefore, children learn that their emotions are unacceptable and that they should not have them at all, let alone express them. COAs often internalize these rules which can have a profound impact on how they function in all aspects of their lives. When the COAs grow up they continue to carry these rules with them which can lead to ongoing dysfunction.

Characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics

Janet Woititz, in her book "Adult Children of Alcoholics", identified the following common characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOAs).

Adult Children of Alcoholics...:

- *guess at what normal is.* Growing up in an alcoholic family does not give one a perspective of what normal and healthy functioning is.
- *have difficulty following a project through from beginning to end.* ACOAs have been taught, and their role models demonstrate, that promises are not kept and that what gets started doesn't get finished.
- *lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth.* Lying and denial are central to alcoholic families. Also, children often find life much more comfortable in alcoholic homes if they lie.

- *judge themselves without mercy.* Many ACOAs were directly taught that they are worthless and bad. Many more ACOAs blame themselves for not being good enough and feel responsible for their parents drinking.
- *have difficulty having fun and take themselves very seriously.* Children in alcoholic families don't have much fun. They often are punished for having fun and fun not related to drinking was not modeled at home.
- *have difficulty with intimate relationships.* ACOAs have no frame of reference for what a healthy relationship is. And if they don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel, the odds are against having healthy intimacy.
- *over-react to changes over which they have no control.* Control is a huge issue for ACOAs. Children in these homes have tried to get control over their environment most of their lives. Even having little success at this doesn't diminish the ACOA's efforts at being in constant control.
- *constantly seek approval and affirmation.* COAs are given mixed messages, but usually not unconditional love. ACOAs try to get this approval but at the same time have difficulty accepting it when they do get it.
- *feel they are different from everyone else.* They often believe that no one else feels as they and do not feel "normal".
- *are either super responsible or super irresponsible.* Children in alcoholic homes try and try to please their parents. As adults they often continue to try to please others by being overly responsible. Or else they learned that they could not please their parents so gave up trying at all.
- *are extremely loyal, even in the face of that loyalty being undeserved.* This loyalty is more often driven by fear and insecurity, as it was in their childhoods.
- *are impulsive.* It is common for ACOAs to act before they think. Thinking things through and weighing the potential consequences of behavior was not modeled or taught to ACOAs.

Treatment

There is help for the Adult Child of Alcoholics. As the patterns of dysfunctional behavior that they carry with them was largely learned in their alcoholic homes, they can learn healthier forms of thinking and behavior with proper guidance. There are support groups specifically for ACOAs in many areas. There are Al-anon meetings in almost all cities and towns in the USA. Therapists can help ACOAs to learn to overcome these dysfunctional behavior and belief patterns. ACOAs can help themselves by learning all they can about alcoholism, by trying to identify the unhealthy patterns in their lives, and by being honest with themselves and others.

References and further information:

Claudia Black, *It Will Never Happen To Me*

Janet Woititz, *Adult Children Of Alcoholics*

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies

found at www.oas.samhsa.gov/ACOA.htm

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Reference:

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