



Life Balance

February 2014

Alcoholism: The family inheritance that no one wants

Upon their passing, some parents bequeath money and property to their children. Others leave behind the gift of love, respect and admiration. Millions of others also leave a legacy of chaos and confusion, remnants of their addiction to alcohol.

The effects of living with an alcoholic parent are traumatic, psychologically pervasive and life altering, resulting in lasting wounds and painful coping mechanisms and behaviors.

It is believed that one in four children in the U.S. is exposed to alcohol abuse and/or dependence in the family before reaching the age of 18. These children may be neglected or abused and

frequently face economic hardship and social isolation. They also are vulnerable to physical and mental problems, including an increased risk of becoming alcoholics themselves.¹

Pleasing the culprit

Children who grow up with alcoholic parents don't know what normal is. Their lives are plagued with constant disruptions. And they are often the targets of irrational parental behavior. These children cannot rely on their parents for the stability and support they need, and they can't trust them to make the right decisions.

So from an early age, they learn to hide their true identity and their true feelings in order to please their parents, ironically relying on the most troubled family members for their own happiness.²

Growing up as enablers

Growing up in an alcoholic family environment, the children tend to become

enablers. As adults, it is likely they will wear this badge and exhibit deeply ingrained traits that can interfere significantly with their work and relationships.

They may:

- Feel obligated to take care of other people. They feel guilty when they ask for something for themselves. They give up their own wants and wishes to make other people happy. On the other hand, they try to control other people in order to get what they want without having to come right out and ask for it.³

Additionally, they may:

- Be easily influenced by what others say or do and by what others might be thinking or feeling.
- Take on too much responsibility.
- Let others tell them how to feel, dress and behave. They give in to others as opposed to standing up for their own needs.

Break the alcohol cycle once and for all

For alcoholics, quitting may not be easy, but it is certainly possible. There are several programs and support groups available to help guide them along the way, such as:

Alcoholics Anonymous

www.aa.org

Al-Anon and Alateen

<http://al-anon.alateen.org>

Call SEAP for a referral to a therapist. A professional specializing in addiction can provide the support and tools you need to change your life.

Call toll-free (800) 692-7459 (800) 824-4306 (TDD)

SEAP

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or log on to

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- Work hard to keep other people from being upset with them or disappointed in them. They may lie or distort the truth to avoid making others angry.
- Judge themselves too harshly.
- Confuse love with pity. They tend to love people they “pity” or can “rescue.”⁴
- Take themselves very seriously and have difficulty having fun.
- Constantly seek approval and affirmation.
- Be extremely loyal, even when their loyalty is undeserved.
- Be impulsive. They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsivity leads to confusion, self-loathing and loss.⁵

The same dynamics apply to children who grow up with parents addicted to drugs, both legal and illegal.

Helping the children

Some children of alcoholics manage to grow up and lead healthy and productive lives. However, they are not the norm. In most cases, children will either repeat the pattern set by their parents and other family members or go through life feeling a combination of guilt, shame and anger.⁶ If you or your children are the product of an alcoholic lineage, get help. Al-Anon and Alateen are educational programs and support groups for children of alcoholics. Al-Anon works

with adults, and Alateen with adolescents 13–18, although some groups may accept younger children.⁷

Early professional help is also important in preventing more serious problems for the child, including reducing the risk of alcoholism. Child and adolescent psychologists and psychiatrists can diagnose and treat problems in children of alcoholics. They can also help children understand they are not responsible for the drinking problems of their parents. The treatment programs may include group therapy with other youngsters, which will reduce the feeling of isolation felt by children of alcoholics. It's important to note that children can be helped even if their parents are not yet ready to make changes in their use of alcohol.⁸

How do you want to be remembered?

If alcoholism runs in your family, you know firsthand what toll it can take on your loved ones. If you drink, seriously consider quitting and break the cycle once and for all. Think about the positive changes it can have on your relationship with your children by exposing them to your efforts in achieving a healthier and more rewarding lifestyle. Who knows? Perhaps the experience itself will be the catalyst they need to begin their own journey toward healing and self-realization. This is a legacy your children will thank you for, and one that can have positive effects for generations to come.

Telltale behaviors that give away the secret

Typically, the children of alcoholics will try to keep their parents' disease a secret. However, their actions may provide clues that something is not right. The following behaviors may signal a drinking problem at home:

- Failure in school; truancy
- Lack of friends; withdrawal from classmates
- Delinquent behavior, such as stealing or violence
- Frequent physical complaints, such as headaches or stomachaches
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol
- Aggression toward other children
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Depression or suicidal thoughts or behavior

Some children may cope by taking the role of responsible “parents” within the family and among friends. They may become “overachievers” in school, while simultaneously isolating themselves emotionally from other children and teachers. Their psychological scars may show up only when they become adults.⁹



Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com
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Click on BeWell and select “Alcoholism” for access to articles, links to resources, videos, forums and webinars, and a guide titled “Understanding Substance Abuse and Treatment.”

1. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/one-four-children-exposed-family-alcohol-abuse-or-alcoholism>
2. <http://family.jrank.org/pages/244/Children-Alcoholics-Family-Dynamics-Developmental-Influences.html>
3. <https://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/library/printArticle.asp?articleID=14409>
4. Ibid.
5. <http://family.jrank.org/pages/244/Children-Alcoholics-Family-Dynamics-Developmental-Influences>
6. Alcohol Health & Research World, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1997, pg. 249
7. <http://al-anon.alateen.org/foralateen/how-can-i-help-my-children>
8. http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/children_of_alcoholics
9. http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/children_of_alcoholics