

Adjuster: In order to cope with the chaos of their families, these children learn to adjust in inappropriate ways. They learn never to expect or to plan anything. They often strive to be invisible and to avoid taking a stand or rocking the boat. As a result, they often come to feel that they are drifting through life and are out of control.

Placater: These children learn early to smooth over potentially upsetting situations in the family. They seem to have an uncanny ability to sense what others are feeling at the expense of their own feelings. They tend to take total responsibility for the emotional care of the family. Because of their experience in this role, they often choose careers as helping professionals careers that can reinforce their tendencies to ignore their own needs.

Scapegoat: These people are identified as the "family problem." They are likely to get into various kinds of trouble, including drug and alcohol abuse, as a way of expressing their anger at the family. They also function as a sort of pressure valve. When tension builds in the family, the scapegoat will misbehave as a way of relieving pressure while allowing the family to avoid dealing with the drinking problem. Scapegoats tend to be unaware of feelings other than anger.

Some of these roles may look more effective than others, but each has its own drawbacks and its own pain. From the perspective of your role, it may be hard for you to understand the pain of a brother or sister in another role. Even though their pain may not be obvious, all of these roles have potentially serious consequences.

"The past is the past; shouldn't I just try to forget it and move on?"

Trying to forget the past without understanding how it affected you will usually not work and may lead to more problems. The best way to "move on" is to squarely face the past, its importance, and its meaning for you. Often this means understanding and forgiving your parents so that the healing process can begin. You can learn more about making peace with the past in several ways. You may choose to read some of the excellent books written for ACOAs or you may opt for individual therapy, group therapy, Al-Anon or support groups for ACOAs. Most communities now offer educational programs for ACOAs as an intermediate step between books and therapy.

Some excellent books on this topic are:

It Will Never Happen to Me. Claudia Black.
Denver, Colorado: Medical Administration Press, 1982.

Guide to Recovery, A Book for Adult Children of Alcoholics. H. Gravitz and J. Bowden. Pompano Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1985

The Struggle for Intimacy. Janet Woititz.
Pompano Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc. 1985.

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THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
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**ADULT CHILDREN
OF ALCOHOLICS**

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Has alcohol been an important influence in your family's life? You may be aware that there were alcohol problems in your family when you were growing up. However, you may not appreciate ways in which those problems continue to affect you, even as an adult.

Consider the following questions:

"How can I be sure if my parent is really an alcoholic?"

"But I'm gone from home now; why should my parents' problems bother me?"

"If my family is the root of all this, why do my brothers and sisters seem OK?"

"The past is the past; shouldn't I just try to forget it and move on?"

Your emotional and psychological well being, your academic work and your present and future relationships may be affected by having grown up in a home where alcohol was a significant problem.

It is important that you learn the specific ways that alcohol problems in your family continue to influence your life. Let's consider the questions one by one.

"How can I be sure if my parent is really an alcoholic?"

It is not necessary to diagnose your parent. Alcohol disrupts the consistency and predictability, which should be present in every family. It is this disruption and the resulting confusion and chaos that are important - not a medical diagnosis of your parent.

A recent poll reported that one in every three American families is affected by alcohol abuse. If alcohol was or is an important influence in your family, it is important that you learn about patterns related to being an Adult Child of an Alcoholic (ACOA). An "alcoholic" family is any family disrupted by alcohol abuse.

"But I'm gone from home now; why should my parents' problems bother me?"

If you grew up in an alcoholic family you may have longed for the day when you could go to college and leave the pain and chaos of your family behind. You may be surprised, therefore, to find at college that you experience feelings of dissatisfaction, apathy or distance from other people, similar to those you felt at home. Such feelings are easy to understand when you consider that families are places where you learn about yourself and about life. Although all families operate with "rules," alcoholic families have rules, which severely limit the development and growth of their members. Claudia Black, a leading author and theorist regarding ACOAs, has identified three such rules in alcoholic homes:

Don't trust. In alcoholic families, promises are often forgotten, celebrations canceled and parents' moods unpredictable. As a result, ACOAs learn not to count on others and often have a hard time believing that others can care enough to follow through on their commitments.

Don't feel. Due to the constant pain of disappointment, a child in an alcoholic family must "quit feeling" in order to survive. After all, what's the use of hurting all the time? In these families, when emotions are expressed, they are often abusive and prompted by drunkenness. These outbursts have no positive result and, along with the drinking, are usually denied the following day.

Thus, ACOAs have had few if any opportunities to see emotions expressed appropriately and used to foster constructive change. "So," the ACOA thinks, "why feel anything when the feelings will only get out of control and won't change anything anyway? I don't want to hurt more than I already do."

Don't talk. ACOAs learn in their families not to talk about a huge part of their reality - drinking. This results from the family's need to deny that a problem exists and that drinking is tied to that problem. That which is so evident must not be spoken aloud. There is often an unspoken hope that if no one mentions the drinking it won't happen again. Also, there is no good time to talk. It is impossible to talk when a parent is drunk. When that parent is sober, everyone wants to forget. From this early training, ACOAs often develop a tendency not to talk about anything unpleasant.

"If my family is the root of all this, why do my brothers and sisters seem OK?"

Each member of an alcoholic family tends to find his or her own way to live with these three rules. Claudia Black and others talk about different "roles" that emerge for children in their attempts to make sense of the chaos:

Hero: These children try to ensure that the family looks "normal" to the rest of the world. In addition, they often project a personal image of achievement, competence and responsibility to the outside world. They tend to be academically or professionally very successful. The cost of such success is often denial of their own feelings and a belief that they are "impostors."