

Helpful Web Sites

<http://www.recovery.org/acoa/acoa.html>

Adult Children of Alcoholics **ACOA**



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Adult children of alcoholics are survivors of an unhealthy/dysfunctional family atmosphere in which one or both parents had a drinking problem.

The dysfunctional nature of the family may have preceded the alcoholic behavior or have been evoked and exacerbated by the strain of dealing with a problem drinker. The effects of being raised in an alcoholic home can range from debilitating to devastating. Each alcoholic family is different and has different dynamics, so each adult survivor has a unique experience.

Often, but not always, characteristic roles that children adopt in alcoholic homes are based on birth order or gender. Some of these roles are:

Hero/Caretaker - The super responsible child who is the achiever and often takes over many or all parental deficits for the siblings.

Acting-Out Child - The child who is often in trouble and rebelling.

Lost Child - The child who is quiet and seemingly removed from the family situation.

Pet/Mascot/Comedian - The child who is often the favorite; sometimes the baby; and, often works to bring a light side to the family situation.

Each adult survivor has a unique experience, but here are some common characteristics of adult children of alcoholics:

- self-critical and judge themselves without mercy

- have difficulty having fun and being playful and take themselves too seriously
- are in relationships with people who are very dependent on them or vice versa
- have difficulty initiating and being successful in intimate relationships; choose significant others who are not good for them; and often repeat bad patterns over a number of relationships
- constantly seek approval and affirmation and are very tuned in to what others want from them
- have strong needs for control so they often overreact to even minor change and fear being out of control
- are overly responsible or overly irresponsible and in general react to things in an extreme either/or fashion
- are extremely loyal - often past the point where such loyalty is deserved
- usually feel that they are different from other people and are not sure what constitutes “normal” reactions and behaviors in relationships
- exhibit their own “alcoholic” behaviors - over drinking, over drugging, overeating, over sexing, overworking, or overspending

Destructive behavior patterns often associated with the parents of an alcoholic home are:

- neglect and withdrawal
- harsh discipline
- shaming/degrading messages
- physical abuse

- verbal abuse
- inconsistent responses
- double messages
- much anger and threats
- criticism and perfectionist demands
- control through use of guilt induction
- sexual abuse
- mental and emotional cruelty
- unpredictable flare-ups
- flagrant irresponsibility

Obviously the more destructive behavior patterns that are found in the alcoholic home, the more devastating the effects for the children. Sometimes these patterns continue even after the drinking has stopped, continuing the damage to the children. There are adult survivors from unhealthy families where destructive behavior patterns are evident but there is no drinking. These adult survivors often have many of the same characteristics listed above.

Adult survivors of alcoholic homes usually feel inadequate, unworthy, unlovable, without rights and hopes that they will amount to anything even if they are successful. These underlying feelings can lead to behaviors such as chronic procrastination or underachievement, lack of perseverance or completion of projects, and repeated failure just short of success.

The key is to seek professional help now.