

Adult Children of Alcoholics - Alcoholism runs in families and children of alcoholics run a higher risk of developing alcoholism than children in the mainstream of the population. Adult children of alcoholics also tend to marry alcoholics, and although they may not be aware of it at the time, they are continuing a pattern.

Families in which there is an alcohol problem become dysfunctional families who create behavioural structures in which its members avoid, rationalise or cover up problems and carefully guard or deny secrets.

Within this system, there is a tendency to indulge, exasperate and distrust feelings and conceal them to evade one's own issues by judging, criticizing, blaming or attempting to control others.

In addition, family members regularly violate one another's personal boundaries or remain aloof and unavailable behind well fortified emotional and psychological defences.

Adult children of alcoholics adopt roles within their families in an effort to cope with the everyday dysfunction of the family.

Roles of family members :

- Responsible. Extremely serious, self reliant, unable to trust others, unable to relax, need to be in control.
- Adjuster. Pride themselves on being flexible. Avoid taking charge.
- Placater. Takes care of others while ignoring their own needs.

Characteristics of A.C.O.A.'s:

- The Care Taker. Self esteem based on how many people they take care of. Classic 'Fixers'
- The People Pleaser. Someone who cannot say no. Never wants to make anyone angry.
- The Martyr. Self esteem based on suffering more than anyone else. Always puts other people first.
- The Workaholic. Learned from family - only as good as what you produce. Self image based on activity.
- The Perfectionist. No matter how well they perform, or how much they do, it's never good enough.
- The Stump. Self image based on survival. Survival and safety exist in fading into the woodwork to such an extent that no one knows they are there.

Roles within Family:

Family Hero / Super Kid
Scapegoat / Problem kid
The Lost Child
Mascot / Family Clown

Core Issues of A.C.O.A.'s:

- Control. Adult Children of Alcoholics hate and fear being out of control in any situation.
- Distrust. They distrust others and themselves. This is frequently the result of being told lies within the family.
- Avoidance of feelings. Emotions and feelings are perceived as being wrong and bad so children learn to minimize and ignore their feelings.
- All or nothing. Adult children frequently have all or nothing thinking, black and white extremes.
- Dissociation. Used by adult children as an emotional anaesthetic. They can learn to separate themselves from the reality of what is going on in the family.
- Adrenaline "Junkies." Create crisis after crisis to survive.
- Over Responsible. Take responsibility for everything that is going on.

How these core issues are triggered:

1. Intimate relationships (requires warmth, trust, sharing).
2. Major Life Transitions. (Rigidity and resistance to change.)
3. Unexpected Events or Stressors. (Return automatically into old patterns of behaviour.)
4. Performance. ("I must get it right.")

Usually, it is one of these areas that will bring an adult child of an alcoholic into therapy or prompt them to seek help.

Growth and recovery for an A.C.O.A. requires letting go of denial, while in a safe place peeling away the many layers of protection that have shielded them from the reality of their history, emotions and behaviour. They may gradually release the protective layers of denial about themselves, their family and their past.

Therapy / counselling involves looking at the painful family system that they come from that promoted low self-esteem, secrets, jealousy, suspicion, rigid attitudes, entangled relationships and manipulation and control. The goal is to help A.C.O.A. to move towards a healthier family system that builds self worth, where communication is open, where there is trust, love, independence and growth. Furthermore, encourage the A.C.O.A. to break the pattern of secrecy and create new traditions and open mindedness.

Assertiveness techniques may be used with A.C.O.A. and role playing that challenges the inner critic identifying the critic and what the messages that it sends are.

The A.C.O.A. association run a 12 step programme in the Hanley Centre, Hope Street, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin.

Further Readings :

Gravitz,H.L. & Bowden,J.D.(1985). *Recovery: A guide for adult children of alcoholics*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Wegschieder,S.(1981). *Another chance: Hope and health for the alcoholic family*. Palo Alto,CA: Science and Behavior Books.

Woititz,J.G.(1983). *Adult children of alcoholics*. Fla, Health Communications.

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