

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Adult Children of Alcoholics

How does having an alcoholic parent affect the lives of their adult children? From what we know today, having an alcoholic parent does seem to make an individual more likely to develop an alcohol problem, but certainly not all do. The difference seems to be in the way a parent’s alcoholism affected family life.

Alcoholism has different effects on different people. In families where alcohol plays a central role in the functioning of the family, children will often feel isolated and ashamed. As a way of protecting themselves and their families, they quickly learn not to talk about the situation, suppressing their feelings about the situation, and putting their own needs aside.

For children of families in which alcoholism has played a less central role, or where the family has maintained some stability, the impact seems to be much less negative.

Children in families where one or both parents have an alcohol problem may experience situations such as:

- Covering up or lying for a parent who is intoxicated.
- Taking on extra household chores because a parent is unable to perform them.
- Periods of intense emotional volatility, with a parent who swings between dependent and needy, explosively angry, and fun-loving and exuberant.

These situations can create conflict, may lead to confusion about a child's role in the family, and may thrust responsibilities on them that they are too young to take on.

Different children react differently to the experience of living in a family disrupted by alcohol abuse. The emotional instability in the family may cause children to be constantly "on guard" and distrustful of the parent's feelings. Some become high achievers others disengage and become isolated from the family. Still others act out in socially inappropriate ways, as a method to attract attention to themselves and make up for the neglect they feel.

In their adult lives, these children may continue to focus on others' needs more than their own. They may have problems recognizing and expressing feelings, and they may feel unable to assert themselves or ask that their own needs be met. These difficulties may mean that they have a greater tendency to develop emotional problems, and alcohol or other substance abuse problems of their own. In addition, even if they do not develop a drinking problem themselves, adult children of alcoholics have a greater likelihood of marrying a problem drinker.

If you feel that your family life has made you vulnerable, there is still a lot that you can do:

1. If you are concerned about your drinking, talk to a professional about it.
2. Develop life skills (e.g., communication, coping skills, and assertiveness) that will help you face life's challenges.
3. Work on developing a balance between family life, work, and recreation.

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4. Research the effects that growing up with an alcoholic parent can have, identify the issues that are of greatest concern to you—then seek support to deal with them in a positive and healthy way.

Many adult children of alcoholics find it beneficial to discuss their issues with people who have had similar experiences. Many communities have "Adult Children of Alcoholics" groups. Professional support can help shift the negative impact you feel your family history may have had on your adult life.