

Children of alcoholics, the forgotten victims



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“ Alcoholism is a [progressive] disease that not only affects alcoholics themselves, but also greatly affects their families and friends. The problems created by an alcoholic in the family can leave husbands and wives frustrated and angry. It can leave children confused, hurt, and lost” (Trapani 19). Today in the United States, there are approximately twenty-eight million children of alcoholics, meaning one out of every eight American is a child of an alcoholic (Trapani 21). Children of alcoholics are defined as individuals who grew up in a home where heavy alcohol was consumed by either one or both parents, and alcohol controlled the family. These children learn to hold back and find ways to deal with continuous change (Taibbi 21).

Children of alcoholics tend to experience intimacy and social problems that extend into their early adulthood; help and support are available to those individuals who want and need them. The alcoholic parents have an addiction where they are physically and emotionally dependent on alcohol. Their lives revolve around alcohol. There are various reasons as to why they became an alcoholic, but the most common is because of a downfall or unpleasant event that led them to depression. The alcoholic parents affect everyone around them, especially family.

Unfortunately, the children are the ones who seem to be hurt the most. Children of alcoholics face intimacy problems because they do not know what a healthy relationship is like. “ They have no frame of reference for a healthy intimate relationship, because they have never seen one” (Woititz, 1983 63). Children of alcoholics normally come from “ broken” families because these families tend to have a lot of abuse, lying, cheating, denial, secrets, and little emotional stability.

The alcoholic parent changes from loving and warm, and everything a child would want a father to be, to getting involved in big fights with the other parent, coming home late, breaking promises, and maybe even careless (Taibbi 21) (Woititz, 1983 63). These families are less close, and parents “are less likely to encourage their children to read or study” (Trapani 23). Because of this inconsistency and astonishing relationship, children of alcoholics tend to hold back their emotions. In addition, these children learn the bad habits exhibited in their families, such as lying, when all along, to these children, these habits were acceptable. Most often, children of alcoholics are afraid to get close to others because trust was never established in their alcoholic families. The alcoholic parent has caused a lot of emotional and physical pain that disappointed the child.

In the book, *Struggle for Intimacy*, Janet G. Woititz wrote: “ In a home that has been affected by alcoholism, the child’s needs are not totally unmet, but they are inconsistently met. This means that trusting people will mean being hurt, and therefore that trust is inappropriate. It means that a child must learn how to take care of himself.

In order to survive, the child learns how not to trust ... that he can depend on only himself. If someone is trustworthy, it is the exception rather than the rule.

When there is an expectation, it is most often met by frustration and disappointment. “ Don’t Trust” is something that the child learns very early and very well. However, contrary to the child’s nature, it is an adaptive response to a maladaptive situation. “ In addition, children of alcoholics were

given a lot of mixed messages, such as “ I love you, go away” and “ I need you, go away. ” Eventually, these children end up believing the negative part of the message (Woititz, 1985 13-15) and blame themselves for the family’s difficulties.

“ They suffer from feelings of inadequacy. They have a hard time believing they can ask for what they need or that they are good the way they are or that they have the ability to accomplish what they wish” (Taibbi 21). It is not unusual to know that children of alcoholics are afraid of letting other people know how they really feel. Eventually, bad habits exhibit in these children because they strive for good relationships. Some are “ 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, and depression or suicidal thoughts or behavior” (Torr).

Margi Trapani agrees by stating: “ They are twice as likely as other kids to have psychiatric treatment for behavior problems, anxiety, or depression. Some children of alcoholics have problems with lying, stealing, fighting, cutting school, and paying attention when they are in school. They are also more likely to be expelled from school or drop out because they marry early, get pregnant, are institutionalized, or join the military. ” Children of alcoholics perform poorly in school because they are “ having to worry about whether their parents will be drunk when they get home, or whether there will be another fight, makes it hard to concentrate on schoolwork or anything else” (Trapani 25). Studies have help proved that children of alcoholics face

intimacy problems. Anitra Gordon reviewed a video, “ Living a Life: The Alcoholic Family” and concluded that “ children of alcoholics often have problems .

.. dealing with intimacy ... ” In addition, in a periodical, Robert Taibbi wrote that, “ Researchers have found some common problems: [1.

] Difficulty with intimacy and trust. The cautious, untrusting child becomes a cautious, untrusting adult. Grown children of alcoholics are often afraid to get close to others. They continue their role of being good or bad or funny or lost and keep people from really knowing how they feel. .

.. Children of alcoholics may handle their feelings through humor or distraction, getting attention for being bad, or simply become invisible. Altogether, they are feeling fear and uncertainty, and each attempt is to have some mastery in a family that often seems to have little control (Taibbi 21). Because children of alcoholics tend to hold back their feelings, they end up withdrawing themselves from social events and friends because “ life was a very serious, angry business” (Woititz, 1983 61). As a result, children of alcoholics end up growing up with undisturbed psychosocial functioning (Segrin 29).

Some studies were conducted that helped prove that children of alcoholics face social problems. A group of individuals, Andrea M. Hussong, Robert A. Zucker, Maria M.

Wong, Hiram E. Fitzgerald, and Leon I. Putter, worked on an experiment that tested social competences in children of alcoholic parents over time. In

summary of the experiment: “ In the current study, the authors tested the hypothesis that children of alcoholic parents (COAs) show deficits in social competence that begin in early childhood and escalate through middle adolescence. Teachers, parents, and children reported on the social competence of COAs and matched controls in a community sample assessed from ages 6 to 15.

Hierarchical linear growth models revealed different patterns of change in social competence across development as a function of the reporter of various indicators of competence. Moreover, female COAs showed deficits in social competence in early childhood that receded in adolescence and that varied across subtypes of parent alcoholism. Implications of these findings for understanding the development of social competence in children, and at-risk children in particular ... Another study done at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center also suggested that “ kids in families with widespread alcoholism may tend to find themselves on the other side of the temperamental coin-withdrawing and clamming up when confronted with unfamiliar people and situations” (Bower 230).

Shirley Y. Hill of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center also added, “ While the childhood risks associated with [poorly controlled behavior] are well known and more prominent among children from alcoholic families, the risks associated with extreme inhibition are less well studied” (Bower 230). Basically, Hill and her coworkers set up an experiment where they studied a group of young children, who had opportunities to play with other unfamiliar children, in a playroom. Results were “ children from the families with high

rates of alcoholism displayed far more inhibition during play sessions than their counterparts did ...

Inhibition appeared mainly as a pronounced tendency to stare at the other child while refusing to play with or to speak to him or her” (Bower 230).

Another study done by Alan Berkowitz and H. Wesley Perkins at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, not only helped prove that children of alcoholics face social problems, but also higher self-depreciation. The study also pointed out that the personality differences of the child are related to the gender of the alcoholic parent. In conclusion of the study, it states that: “ The study compared the personality characteristics of late adolescent and young adult children of alcoholics (COAs) with those of their peers and examined the extent to which personality differences are gender specific and are related to the gender of the alcoholic parent.

Specifically, data derived from an alcohol survey of young college students (N = 860) were used to examine familial alcoholism and personality characteristics, including impulsiveness, self-depreciation, lack of tension, independence/autonomy, need for social support, directiveness, sociability, and other-directedness. Although COA respondents were similar to their peers on most personality measure, they were more likely to report greater self-depreciation. This difference in self-depreciation between COAs and their peers was greater for women than men. Women with an alcoholic father were significantly more likely than women with an alcoholic mother to report greater self-depreciation. Male COAs rated themselves significantly higher on autonomy than did their male peers, but the gender of the alcoholic parent had little effect on this variable.

” “ Of course, in most situations children can’t do much about their parents’ drinking” (Friedham 10) but they can help themselves. “...

Children ... can benefit from educational programs and mutual-help groups such as programs for children of alcoholics, Al-Anon, and Alateen” (Torr). These groups are also known as self-help groups. It is important for children of alcoholics to attend one of these groups in order to interact with others who can understand the pain.

If left unresolved, these feelings can have a very negative lifelong impact, such as intimacy and social problems. Robert Taibbi also agrees that “ there is much that children of alcoholics can do to help themselves. ” Some ways to start are to “ Take care now ..

. Get support ...

Get counseling ... Seek out friends. Find positive role models ..

. [and] Let others know how you [children of alcoholics] feel” (Taibbi 21). No matter what the past was, the present offers a new beginning (Taibbi 21). Kids in these [alcoholic] situations should make an attempt to enjoy themselves and, as much as possible, get on with their lives” (Friedham 10).

In conclusion, not only do children of alcoholics face intimacy and social problems, but they may also face many other problems. While these children face these difficulties, they later strive for “ perfect” healthy relationships. At the same time, they are unable to trust others. These children have never experienced what a “ perfect” family was like because at home, there was a

lot of abuse, lying, cheating, denial, secrets, and little emotional stability. These children are not wrong for their parents' alcoholic addiction.

On a good note, these children are not alone because there is help. They can learn to maintain healthy relationship and trust others. Children of alcoholics can join self-help groups, such as Al-Anon and Alateen, where they can work with other children of alcoholics to understand and lessen the pain and feelings. But, one fact that everyone can agree on is “ alcohol is a poison and something society would be far better off without” (Friedham 10).