

Coping with College Series

Having an Alcoholic Parent Can Make Life Difficult

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Growing up with an alcoholic parent can be difficult. "Adult children of alcoholics" can have struggles and relationship concerns stemming from the alcoholism, even after leaving home.

Often it is not the drinking, per se, that affects the ACOA, but the situation that is created by the drinking. A parent who is drinking excessively may be unavailable or unpredictable. There may be increased tension or family conflict due to drinking. All of these things can affect how children view themselves and how skilled they are in forming relationships.

Children in alcoholic homes often try to accommodate family needs by learning roles that help the family function despite the alcoholism. For example, in a home filled with unpredictability, a child might adopt the role of being "the responsible one," then take over tasks that should have fallen on the parent. This role helps create constancy and structure in a home that was becoming increasingly chaotic.

Sometimes ACOAs have difficulty going beyond the role they had as a child. They may find themselves taking care of others, feeling out of control or upset when they cannot control things or experiencing an exaggerated sense of responsibility for things that are not in their power to control.

Other common roles ACOAs take on include being a "placater" who tries to please others, or the "humorous one" who relieves tension with humor and distraction. These roles represent creative coping strategies used by children to help reduce family stress.

Unfortunately, if these roles become entrenched, it can be costly for the ACOA in terms of developing emotionally, socially and psychologically. It can be difficult to develop healthy intimate relationships if you have grown accustomed to a specific role. For example, the ACOA who used humor to defuse tension at home may find they now use humor to keep people at a safe distance. They may struggle to feel comfortable when someone wants to talk seriously.

Any of the ACOA roles can have negative consequences if they limit your ability to relate to others. If you struggle with issues related to growing up with an alcoholic parent, it may help to talk with someone about how your experience affected you.

Student Counseling Services offer different counseling options to help students deal with issues relating to relationships and problematic feelings like guilt, anger or self-esteem that may relate to being an ACOA.

If you want to learn more about ACOA issues on your own, I recommend Claudia Black's book, ***It will never happen to me***. Whether you choose to deal with your feelings privately, with a trusted friend, or by seeking services at Student Counseling Services, it is important to know it is never too late to learn new coping skills or grow beyond old, but familiar roles.