



## **SYMPTOMS AND RESOLUTIONS FOR ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLIC PARENTS**

**By Yvonne Thomas, Ph.D.**

Many individuals have come from homes in which one or both parents had drinking problems. These people are called “adult children of alcoholics” or ACAs, and often, as adults, struggle with residual symptoms they may not even be aware of or realize link directly back to having an alcoholic parent. Unfortunately, the act of moving away from an alcoholic parent/s does NOT correct or erase the kinds of effects and LIMITATIONS such a home life can cause its recipient. Instead, unhappiness in different areas of one’s life can occur, unless he or she can become aware of and resolve this damage.

Firstly, in becoming conscious of some ACA symptoms, note that having one’s own alcohol problem is often NOT a symptom, since many ACAs don’t over-drink (or drink much at all). However, some ACA symptoms MAY include the following: there may be trust and fear-of-closeness issues; they may be repelled by, yet still drawn to, similar unpredictable, erratic, inconsistent situations and/or people; they may use perfectionistic behaviors to control the parts of their life they can; they may suffer from low self-esteem and/or shame from taking on their parent’s own unresolved feelings and issues that have caused the parent to over-drink; they may have grown up too quickly and not truly had a childhood; and they may be a workaholic to the exclusion of having a personal life.

After one becomes cognizant of how he or she has been affected by having an alcoholic parent, it is time to start resolving the damage. It is very common for an ACA to have trouble trusting people, given that alcoholic parents usually CAN’T be trusted in many important ways: they can’t be consistent and dependable, they often cannot keep (or remember) promises made to his or her child, they frequently can be extreme in opposite directions (“I love you – I hate you” moods), and may be emotionally, physically, and/or sexually abusive and/or neglectful of the child’s basic needs. So, it is no wonder that an ACA is not comfortable trusting or being close to many people; ironically, however, when the ACA DOES trust someone, it is often the WRONG people! This is because the ACA has been subconsciously conditioned to feel familiar and even somewhat COMFORTABLE with someone who, on some deep level, reminds him or her of the alcoholic parent’s inconsistency. To attack this problem, take a close look at the PATTERNS in which you engage – and be aware that they are NOT always so obvious. For example, you may keep being attracted to erratic people – they may not drink too much, but they may be a workaholic, a gambler, bipolar, etc. Once you have identified your pattern, recognize what you are getting from it that keeps you repeating it and know that these reasons typically are NOT healthy (i.e., do you need to be the rescuer, the martyr, the “needed” one, etc.). Try to be honest with yourself, and counteract these unhealthy justifications with TRUE logical reasoning. Additionally, gradually start exposing yourself to more consistent people and settings to make these experiences more comfortable and familiar.

If you use perfectionistic behaviors to control the parts of your life you can and/or you never really got to have a childhood and/or if you are living a workaholic lifestyle, start injecting some LIGHTNESS and FUN into your world. Too many ACAs have had to grow up before their time and are extremely serious, not playful, and live within a “no-risk” zone in which they often resist broadening their lives much.

Also, it is important for ACAs to separate out their OWN issues from their over-drinking parents’ ones to prevent taking on their parents’ shame or low self-esteem which their drinking has covered up. ACAs can feel much RELIEF when they stop being the receptacle for their parents’ negative thoughts, feelings, and self-perceptions. For more help in successfully dealing with ACA issues, seek assistance from a Psychologist trained in this area.

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