

ACOA

Are you familiar with the term "Adult Child" or "Adult Child of an Alcoholic" (ACOA)? The following is excerpted from a booklet published by Onion House, "Resources for Adult Children."

"Adult Child" carries a double meaning: the Adult Child of an Alcoholic is trapped in the fears and reactions of a child; and the child who was forced to be an Adult (prematurely) without going through the natural stages that would result in a healthy Adult.

A Canadian therapist, Margaret Cork, provided the first modern study of the children of alcoholic families in her book, "The Forgotten Children", 1969. In 1977, in New York City, a small group of Al-Anon members (12 Step organization formed in 1953, with AA principles, for the purpose of offering recovery to "anyone affected by someone else's drinking."), discovering they were all the offspring of alcoholics, began the first "Children of Alcoholics" meetings.

In 1982, Dr. Janet Woititz authored her ground-breaking book "Adult Children of Alcoholics." Her insights and observations were modified and formulated by Adult Children Anonymous (ACA) in 1984, as "The Problem."

Although there is a genetic vulnerability to alcoholism, the focus among ACOA's is related primarily to the social and psychological dysfunction that may result from growing up in an alcoholic home. Lasting relationships tend to be a challenge for most ACOA's and some never achieve them. Very often, ACOA's gravitate to other ACOA's who provide familiar characteristics similar to the family's dysfunction. Part of the ACOA's difficulty is that they have been trained (co-opted) by the family to NOT SEE "the Problem." Another term for this phenomenon is DENIAL.

There is a cluster of characteristics that tend to typically show up in ACOA's:

- tendency toward isolation
- fear of authority
- fear of criticism and angry people
- attracted to victims and confuse pity with love
- overdeveloped sense of responsibility

- guilt feelings, especially with self-assertion
- low self-esteem
- fear of abandonment
- dependent personalities
- reactors rather than initiators

ACOA's often remain in abusive relationships and situations:

- frequently yelled at and blamed
- humiliated in public
- called "selfish" for not doing what the other person wants
- people pleasing or "running away"
- called "childish" when expressing needs, wants and feelings
- fearful of expressing opinions
- frequently grilled "Perry Mason" style
- consistent feelings of guilt, fear and/or anger

A few other "Problems" from the "Laundry List:"

- difficulty having fun
- keep guessing at what "normal" is
- constantly seeking approval
- feel different from other people
- super-responsible or the opposite
- super-sensitivity
- problems with sexuality
- difficulty completing the project
- lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth
- overly loyal despite negative information
- over-react to change

What are the psychological underpinnings of the ACOA state of mind? The answer lies in the fallout from the major ACOA defense, e.g. DENIAL: These defensive or "body-armor" states come about via efforts to avoid feelings and result in a few or most of the following:

agreeing, analyzing, attacking, arrogance, arguing, accusing, blaming, complying, debating, defying, denying, dodging, explaining, glaring, intellectualizing, interrogating, intimidating, joking, justifying, minimizing, preaching, projecting, quibbling, rationalizing, sarcasm, shouting, silence, sparring, staring, switching, talking (ad nauseum), theorizing, threatening, withdrawing.

Finally, the biggest problem and challenge for most ACOA's occurs in the realm of Intimacy. And, like a ticking time-bomb, the problem typically tends to

emerge in an ACOA couple after the first child is born. (This insight stems from the editor's clinical experience.)

When all is said and done, however, there is another side to the coin, an optimistic side. Most ACOA's do not suffer the fate described above. In fact, the dysfunctional family cauldron tends to produce super-resilient, productive, effective people. "What doesn't destroy you, only makes you tougher!"

ACOA's tend to make our best, compassionate, empathic fellow citizens: our caregivers -- doctors, nurses, therapists and counselors; our leaders and top executives in business, law, government, etc. Who else would want to take on the challenges, the unrelenting pressure, the formidable hours? Who else can handle these intense stresses with the skill and aplomb of Olympian athletes?

Understanding and familiarity with the downside of the ACOA experience provides some leverage, at times of stress and dysfunction, to have a handle on what's happening and to point the way to reconstitution and appropriate healing.