

COUNSELING CAPSULES

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Adult Children of Alcoholics

Has alcohol been an important influence in your family's life? A recent poll reported that one in every three American families is affected by alcohol abuse. You may be aware that there were alcohol problems in your family when you were growing up. However, you may not appreciate ways in which those problems continue to affect you, even as an adult.

Your emotional and psychological well-being, your academic work, and your present and future relationships may be affected by having grown up in a home where alcohol was or is a significant problem. It is important that you learn specific ways and patterns that alcohol problems in your family continue to influence your life.

Claudia Black, a leading author and theorist regarding ACoAs, has identified three such rules in alcoholic homes: Each member tends to find his or her own way to live with these three rules:

- **DON'T TRUST:** In alcoholic families, promises are often forgotten, celebrations canceled and parents' moods unpredictable. As a result, ACoAs learn not to count on others and often have a hard time believing that others can care enough to follow through on their commitments.
- **DON'T FEEL:** Due to the constant pain of disappointment, a child in an alcoholic family must "quit feeling" in order to survive. So the ACoA thinks, "Why feel anything when the feelings will only get out of control and won't change anything anyway?"
- **DON'T TALK:** ACoAs learn in their families not to talk about a huge part of their reality - drinking. This results from the family's need to deny that a problem exists and that drinking is tied to that problem. It is impossible to talk when a parent is drunk and when sober, everyone wants to forget.

"Roles" that emerge for children in their attempts to make sense of the chaos:

- **Hero:** These children try to ensure that the family looks "normal" to the rest of the world, they often project a personal image of achievement, competence, and responsibility. But the cost of such success is often denial of their own feelings and a belief that they are "imposters."
- **Adjuster:** In order to cope with the chaos of their families, they learn to adjust in inappropriate ways. They learn never to expect or to plan anything. They often strive to be invisible and to avoid taking a stand. As a result, they often come to feel that they are drifting through life and are out of control.
- **Placater:** These children learn early to smooth over potentially upsetting situation in the family. They seem to have an uncanny ability to sense what others are feeling at the expense of their own feelings. They tend to take total responsibility for the emotional care of the family.
- **Scapegoat:** These people are identified as the "family problem." They are likely to get into various kinds of trouble, including drug/alcohol abuse, as a way of expressing their anger at the family. They also function as a sort of pressure valve. When tension builds in the family, the scapegoat will mis-behave as a way of relieving pressure, allowing the family to avoid dealing with the drinking problem.

Some of these roles may look more effective than others, but each has its own drawbacks and its own pain. From the perspective of your role, it may be hard for you to understand the pain of a brother or sister in another role. Even though their pain may not be obvious all of these roles have potentially serious consequences.

HELP! WHERE TO FIND IT:

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