



## Pick Your Path to Health

### When Children of Alcoholics Become Adults

Our childhood environment stays with us years after we leave our family home. In relatively happy and stable homes, this can be a source of strength. But if we are left with confusion or unhappy childhood memories they can stay with us forever, unless we take active steps to re-examine it and change the way we feel inside. Re-examination can be a difficult process, but when your childhood environment included a parent with an alcohol problem, re-examination can be downright terrifying. The good news, though, is that through the re-examination process, the pain of your childhood and adulthood can subside, and you can live your life in a more energetic and positive way.

The rates of alcoholism are relatively low among African American women, and many women do not realize that they are at risk. In addition, familial and cultural expectations often lead African American females to take on the role of protecting the alcoholic in their family from ridicule and consequences. The repercussions of this dynamic are frightful, and African American women must be vigilant of how a family member's alcoholism in their childhood may affect them today.

#### Children in alcoholic homes

There were nearly 30 million children of alcoholics in the United States in 1991, nearly 11 million of whom were under the age of 18. Children raised in alcoholic homes suffer greatly. These youngsters often have higher levels of anxiety and depression. They may do poorly in school or have difficulty with basic coping skills. Children of alcoholics often exhibit low self-esteem, have nightmares, and complain of having few friends. As teenagers, these youths may become perfectionistic and excessively self-conscious. Because their experiences at home are filled with uncertainty and chaos, children of alcoholics may strive to find ways to maintain absolute control whenever such control is possible.

And when children of alcoholics grow up, they become *adult* children of alcoholics. Still "children" inside without first-hand knowledge of what a functional family system is like, adult children of alcoholics are not sure how to build their own healthy life as they get older. Adult children often repeat the roles they knew as children—many of them become alcoholic themselves, and almost half marry an alcoholic spouse. Some create

another addiction in their lives, such as an addiction to shopping, eating, or working. The cycle of addiction often continues, striking new generations with equal fervor.

### **How do I know if I am affected by my family's alcoholism?**

Anyone who grows up in a family with alcoholism is affected by the disease. (And yes, alcoholism, like heart disease or cancer, is a disease with a biological basis.) With the help of a support group or mental health professional, adult children can learn to understand the disease of alcoholism and begin to find a healthier way of life.

Al-Anon, a national support group for family members affected by a loved-one's drinking, asks individuals to take this quiz to determine if they need help.

1. Do you constantly seek approval and affirmation?
2. Do you fail to recognize your accomplishments?
3. Do you fear criticism?
4. Do you overextend yourself?
5. Have you had problems with your own compulsive behavior?
6. Do you have a need for perfection?
7. Are you uneasy when your life is going smoothly, continually anticipating problems?
8. Do you feel more alive in the midst of a crisis?
9. Do you still feel responsible for others, as you did for the problem drinker in your life?
10. Do you care for others easily, yet find it difficult to care for yourself?
11. Do you isolate yourself from other people?
12. Do you respond with fear to authority figures and angry people?
13. Do you feel that individuals and society in general are taking advantage of you?
14. Do you have trouble with intimate relationships?
15. Do you confuse pity with love, as you did with the problem drinker?
16. Do you attract and/or seek people who tend to be compulsive and abusive?
17. Do you cling to relationships because you are afraid of being alone?
18. Do you mistrust your own feelings and the feelings expressed by others?

19. Do you find it difficult to identify and express your emotions?
20. Do you think parental drinking may have affected you?

If you answer yes to some of these questions, Al-Anon recommends you seek help.

### **Where to go for help**

Support groups have helped millions of people deal with alcohol problems in their family. These groups are generally free and are found in most every community in the country. Look in your local telephone book under "alcoholism" or contact these national numbers to find help near you.

Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization  
310-534-1815  
[www.adultchildren.org](http://www.adultchildren.org)

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc.  
1-888-4AL-ANON  
[www.al-anon.org](http://www.al-anon.org)

National Black Alcoholism and Addictions Council  
202-296-2696  
<http://www.borg.com/~nbac/>

It is only when we make peace with our past that we are able to enjoy our present and future. If family alcoholism was a part of your childhood, take this first, very brave step. Get help, and see where the path to better health takes you.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*