



## Pick Your Path to Health

### What Alcoholism Does to Your Family

Dee Dee Allen, 45, is a recovering alcoholic. She's been sober for the past eight years, but as she puts it, "before that, I had been trying to stop drinking for almost 15 years. It is the hardest thing I have ever done. I really didn't think it was possible."

Alcoholism runs in Dee Dee's family. "My favorite Aunt died when I was eight years old from liver cancer caused by too much drinking," Dee Dee recalls. "I remember seeing her for the last time in the hospital before she died. She didn't look like the Aunt Lillian I knew...she was so skinny, I was afraid to go to her. She was a big part of my life and I will always feel a sense of what might have been if she hadn't died." Dee Dee's aunt's alcoholism still has an effect on her 36 years after her passing away.

### Family Ties

Alcoholism is a family disease. It tends to run in families and has some genetic factors that you can pass onto your children, grandchildren and on down the family line. It is not only a family disease because of heredity, but also because of how it affects the entire family. "Any sickness will affect the whole system or family system. One member of the family behaving erratically or inconsistently will deeply affect the others, especially children," says Grace Tiva, LICSW, M. Div, a therapist in Washington, D.C. She believes the whole family needs to be involved in treatment, not just the alcoholic.

Whatever you do affects your family. And if you are an alcoholic, that too will affect your family. Alcoholism affects your mood, behavior, thoughts, and body. Your life is often unpredictable, chaotic and unstable, and so is your family's life. Your family is under a great deal of stress dealing with the effects of this disease. They may feel helpless, not knowing how to help you. They may feel anxious because they do not know how you will behave from one moment to the next. They may be embarrassed, ashamed and feel alone, not knowing what to do. They may fear for your safety or their own.

"When I was drinking and still living at home, if I would run out of beer, my mother would go out at night and get me more," says Dee Dee. "When I think about it now, I'm ashamed. We didn't live in a safe neighborhood and

having my mother go out at night to get me something to drink was not good. But I think she saw how drunk I was and knew I was determined to get more. And she would rather go buy it for me, then have me out in the streets drunk and worrying about what would happen to me."

### **Make Recovery a Family Affair**

If you or a family member is ready to get treatment for alcoholism, the entire family should get involved. The stresses in the family have to be looked at and treated as well. According to Ms. Tiva, "The whole family can continue to bear the results of chronic stress and continue with behaviors even after the alcoholic received treatment. If the family isn't treated as well, the person with the alcoholism is at risk to start drinking again."

"When I went into treatment, I told only those that I thought it was necessary to tell...my boss, my mama, of course, my close friends—so they would know why I wasn't drinking anymore or offer me any alcohol, and my doctors; and my fiancé at the time also went to some counseling sessions so that he could get information on alcoholism as a disease, and be able to better understand what I was going through," says Dee Dee.

### **Getting Help**

Although the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that African American women have a low incidence of alcoholism, African American women have a greater percentage of alcohol-related health problems. It's never easy admitting that you have a problem with alcohol, but remember, it is a disease and not a lack of willpower or character.

Take Dee Dee's words to heart. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done, but it is also the best thing I have ever done for myself—and my family. You need a lot of support. You need a lot of care, and it's out there for you. Show your strength by choosing to take these steps to a better path to health to get help with alcoholism.

- **First Steps:** join a family group or get family counseling, contact your local health department or hospital for support groups, talk to your family doctor.
- **Go to AA and/or Al-Anon meetings** (they're anonymous, free and everywhere). Call 1-888-4AL-ANON for information on meetings near you.
- **Check out different treatments, including medication.** Call 1-800-662-HELP.

- **Develop coping skills** to deal with stresses: meditate, pray, attend church regularly, exercise.
- **Throw alcohol-free parties**, barbecues, and cookouts.
- **Hold a family meeting**—talk about the problem as a family; decide how you're going to get treatment as a family, not every one will need the same kind of treatment or counseling; hold regular meetings to talk about family needs, express feelings.
- **Sooner is better:** Remember alcoholism is a disease, it gets worse and more severe over time. Earlier treatment is most successful.
- **Educate yourself** on alcoholism. Know the facts.

For additional information on alcoholism and information on treatment assistance:

- National Women's Health Information Center, Office of Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, [www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov), 1-800-994-WOMAN
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)
- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, [www.ncadd.org](http://www.ncadd.org), 800-622-2255
- Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, [www.al-anon.alateen.org](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org), 1-888-4AL-ANON
- The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service, 1-800-662-HELP

*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."*