

ACOA
A WAY OUT ?

By
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"I can't help the way I am!" Have you ever said this to anyone? We, as members of the human race, are all created as individuals with our own unique characteristics. These traits determine who we are and enable us to realize our own purpose of achieving our ultimate destinies. To evolve into the creatures we were designed to be, we are dependent on having the basic skills needed to compete our journey. These required tools, that are meant to guide us along our way, must be taught to us by other humans who themselves must already possess them. Our parents are the ones who take on the responsibility for this role. If they are not capable of supplying these necessary needs, the process of creating a healthy developing child will be broken. Instead of producing a functional productive citizen, they unknowingly create someone who will end up having serious difficulties in many areas of their lives.

These people are known as the adult children of alcoholics and otherwise dysfunctional families, hereafter referred to as ACOA'S. Through no fault of their own, they have inherited a disease, defined in the Oxford dictionary as an unhealthy condition of body or mind, and is often very hard to diagnose. Fortunately, though, there is a cure for this disease. After recognizing that you are infected, it is possible to have a very successful recovery, and by re-educating other people, they too can have a renewed hope for a happy, healthy life. Therefore, recognition of the problem, recovering from the disease and re-educating the public are the most important factors in dealing with Acoa's.

In order to have a successful recovery, one must first recognize what it is that is causing them problems in their lives. People who are affected by the consequences of alcoholism often sense that there is something about them that is not quite right. They perceive themselves as different from everyone else and they don't really feel like they belong. After persistently searching for clues that would lead to some kind of revelation about what might be wrong with them, most people will eventually find answers for their pains-taking efforts. Usually there are many indications that will point the finger to alcoholism and dysfunctional families. Because of the abnormally high levels of stress in dysfunctional families, members will experience mild to severe symptoms of physical, emotional, spiritual and behavioral disorders. (Marlin)

The most common physical symptoms are tense shoulders in the area where the shoulders and neck meet. This tension will usually cause migraine headaches, low back pain, sexual dysfunctions and gastro-intestinal disorders are among the other common physical ailments encountered by ACOA'S (Kritsberg 39 - 40).

At the same time, an ACOA will experience emotional problems as well. These will definitely include shame or guilt, anger, hurt, resentment and occasionally sadness. Above all, however, fear is at the top of the list. Trying to solve problems in the midst of unresolved fears will result in compulsive thinking, causing confusion, indecision and learning difficulties. (Kritsberg 42)

Because of all the physical and emotional problems, it is impossible for a person to experience any kind of spirituality. They are aware that their spirit exist, but it is basically dead form lack of growth. Just as the human body needs food to keep it alive, likewise the human spirit needs to be fed for it to grow. Until the other problems are corrected, spiritual growth will seldom occur.

The lack of spiritual growth directly affects the ACOA's behaviour as well. They experience what is known as "self-defeating learned behaviour" (Adult Children). One of the characteristics of a person caught in this kind of behaviour is that they have an "over-developed sense of responsibility and prefer to be concerned with others rather than themselves" (Adult Children). Also, they have dependent personalities which makes them willing to do anything in order not to be abandoned emotionally. This particular type of personality sub-consciously requires similar kinds of people in their relationships to suit their needs. In the ACOA pamphlet is states "...we keep choosing insecure relationships because they match our childhood relationships with our parents." An ACOA almost always needs an outside influence, such as another person, to make them happy. Because of this, ACOA's tend to make good followers instead of leaders. Once again, this characteristic is confirmed in the ACOA pamphlet. "... we become reactors rather than actors, letting others take the initiative." For this reason, people that have this disease have behavioral problems that make it impossible for the ACOA to have healthy relationships.

Having recognized the symptoms and diagnosed the problem to be related to family dysfunctions and/or alcohol, it will now be possible to begin the recovery process. To recover, one must have a willingness to seek to change things from the way they were. To do this it is important to focus on the things you want to change. This is why recovery cannot occur until recognition has taken place. The process of change takes place in three sequential steps: conversion, decision and action. Because change is an on-going process, it does not happen overnight.

Beginning the recovery process will not only be personally rewarding, but it is the greatest gift you can give your family. Taking that first step is always the most difficult but the result will be worth it in the end. Conversion does not happen until we have some kind of

awakening to the fact that we are going to lose something we are not prepared to live without if we do not change (Larsen 47). A common deception that follows conversion is that all the problems will automatically go away. This is not true and every effort must be made to have a constant awareness that the conversion is a spiritual process and is not at all connected with human reasoning. This is why the initial conversion must be followed by a decision to keep the process of change going.

As I have stated, and I can't stress the importance of this enough, a decision to change must be executed with a constant awareness of the habits that need changing. Habits can be changed. Because they are learned behaviours, the idea is to un-learn the destructive, self-defeating habits and start practicing a completely different way of doing things. The bad habits that we have are rooted on our subconscious where they function without our awareness or permission (Larsen 45). Whenever a situation arises, it is natural for us to want to stay in our comfort zones. Doing this prevents us from having to face our unhealthy behaviours, "and so they stay - inhibiting the growth of our ability to function in truly satisfying relationships" (Larsen 20). Therefore, every effort must be made to do what it takes to make it happen: not just doing what you feel comfortable with. Earnie Larsen has a thought in his book that I think everyone should remember; not just the ACOA, "There is only one way to break old habits, which is at the core of change: do what you are afraid to do (54).

The final necessity for completing the process of change is action. It is fine to recognize, have the conversion experience and even make the decision to change but the whole thing will be in vain unless there is DOING. Having faith that things will change without doing the things that need to be done to make it actually happen, will not produce any results at all. In Larsen's book, he recommends developing an activity program specifically tailored to meet your needs. Doing this ensures that the process of change continues and the structure of a program will provide a kind of insurance policy that will help avoid instances of slipping back to the old ways. The program should include daily reading or input of information about self-help techniques. Other components of the program that would be useful are a sponsor or mentor, group therapy, evaluation of your progress, prayer, health care and celebration of each new accomplishment. As time goes on, there will be noticeable improvement such that others will begin commenting on the changes taking place in your life. You might even have the desire to share your knowledge with others, especially those who are still at the point where they don't know what's wrong with them.

Just like habits need to be relearned, family systems and the general public need to be re-educated about the way our society deals with social issues. I sincerely believe that many

of today's social problems are somehow connected to dysfunctional families. Public awareness has been almost non-existent until the last twenty years or so. Finally there are people who are realizing that there is a better way of life, and as a result they are out of their shells and fighting back against the disease. They are realizing that alcoholism is far more serious than people think. Everyone who has an alcoholic relative in one or more generations of the family is at risk of developing dysfunctional symptoms. The trouble with the way the problem of alcoholism has been dealt with is that society seems to take the "quick fix" approach as a solution. The "quick fix" method doesn't seem to produce any lasting results, otherwise wouldn't it seem logical that we would have seen some improvement by now? It is possible for our country to change what our society is becoming by increasing our efforts to educate the public perhaps in a similar way we did with the AIDS epidemic. The correct way to eliminate any problem is to trace it to the root cause and make changes that would prevent the problem from happening again.

Taking these facts and my own thought into consideration, one can conclude that alcoholism or dysfunctional behaviour is definitely a family disease whether they drink or not. It must be a terrible feeling to experience the fear of not knowing who you are and what your purpose of being is. It is obviously a devastating way to deal with life. As an individual, however, you can make a difference. By working on yourself and seeking out the ways to improve, you will be amazed at the effects in your relationships with other people. Your whole life can be completely turned around, but first you must recognize the areas in your personality that need to be changed. Recovering from these negative traits can best be accomplished by conversion, decision and action. You may also decide that you would like to help your friends and loved ones by re-educating them with your newly discovered knowledge. What can you do to help provide spiritual nourishment to an endangered species known as the human race?