

On My Mind: Children of alcoholics and dysfunctional families

Children who grow up in dysfunctional families often become adults who fear conflict, or choose difficult relationships.



Tolstoy famously wrote that “all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” No doubt each troubled family is different, and has its own stories and pain, but approximately one in five American children lives with an alcoholic relative growing up, and far more families can be characterized as dysfunctional — i.e., they operate in ways that are distorted by other addictions and/or severe mental illness.

Some examples of dysfunctional families include those in which:

- a parent has dramatic and dangerous personality changes as they drink or use drugs. They might fall into stupors and be emotionally and/or physically unavailable, or fly into rages and become physically violent.
- a parent has such severe narcissism that they are incapable of consistent or deep love and caretaking.
- a parent or other family member has the intense mood swings and loss of awareness of reality that characterize severe mental illnesses. They

are unable to attend to the needs of others, and their behavior might be physically and/or emotionally abusive.

If you grew up in a world like that, as a large swath of our population has, relationships would feel fraught with danger. It is from early childhood through adolescence that the brain is learning at its best, when it is setting down the templates for what to expect from human connection, attachment, and interactions. Consequently, children who grow up in dangerously dysfunctional families often become adults who fear that any conflict might erupt into violence, abandonment, and cruelty. They might long for a partner who is consistently loving and honest, but have no idea what that would look like. They might instead choose relationships that are more like the familiar ones they knew as children, and they would likely accept behavior from a partner that is fundamentally unacceptable. To ward off danger, they might become people pleasers and caretakers, or protect themselves with shyness or avoidance. Conditioned by the negative behaviors of childhood authority figures, they might go through life wary and afraid of displeasing bosses, teachers, politicians, or other people in positions of authority.

Because of the prevalence of lies and cover-ups in dysfunctional families, people raised in such families may grow to question their own perceptions, or have trouble trusting that things are true. Because it is often difficult for children to question the rightness of their primary caretakers, they might blame themselves, and grow up to feel that there is something fundamentally wrong and shameful about who they are. Sometimes it feels safer to see oneself as the problem than to acknowledge that a parent is sick and damaged. Children who have been victimized by growing up in a dysfunctional world may come to see themselves as victims, and go through life hypervigilant to the risk of being mistreated again.

The genetically endowed temperament that creates much of the lens through which each of us experiences the world has a lot to do with how we process the traumas of growing up in these families. Different people respond differently to similar situations and events. That being said, however, people who grew up in severely dysfunctional families often share certain psychological characteristics with others who have had similar experiences. The Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization has publicized Tony A's "laundry list" of 14 common traits shared by adult children of alcoholics (ACoAs) that apply equally well to children from other types of dysfunctional families. See adultchildren.org/literature/laundry-list. Looking through this list may help you understand why you — or people you know — are conflict-avoidant, people-

pleasing, perfectionistic, excessively self-critical, or afraid of rejection and abandonment. That understanding, and knowing that you are not alone, can be enormously healing.

If you scroll down past the laundry list, you will come to the flip side of the laundry list. If the laundry list resonates with you, remember that those qualities that typify ACoAs all evolved for a reason. Those traits all came into being in order to protect you, and are well-intentioned defense mechanisms. The flip side of the laundry list is what happens when we mature and come to understand and appreciate these defenses, and learn how to turn them into strengths as an adult. Working through those lessons of childhood that no longer serve can turn those painful characteristics into adult strengths. Almost all of the psychotherapists, nurses, psychiatrists, and other kinds of doctors I know have been caretakers from an early age. In my experience, many, if not most of us, grew up in troubled homes. We were trained in the arts of avoiding conflict, caretaking others, and working intensely hard to make the world better from an early age. But problems arise when the need to please others comes at the cost of denigrating our own needs, allowing people to violate our boundaries, and feeling crushed by rejection or imperfection.

If you are an ACoA or a survivor of another kind of childhood family dysfunction, and you identify with some of the traits listed on the laundry list, you might wonder how to achieve the goals delineated by the laundry list's flip side. One thing that can be enormously helpful is psychotherapy. Therapy can help us come to a deep understanding of how our personalities have evolved, and how to move on from the lessons of our childhoods that are no longer working for us. It can be enormously liberating — and the antidote to shame — to tell the truth about ourselves and our lives; to remember not only the ways in which our childhood homes left us with scars, but also the love and strengths that we acquired there. Psychotherapy gives us techniques for changing the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves. (See [mvtimes.com/2020/04/13/mind-power-stories-tell.](https://www.mvtimes.com/2020/04/13/mind-power-stories-tell/))

Another powerful tool of recovery is talking with other ACoAs (and other family dysfunction survivors). For most alcoholics and drug users I have known, the most effective recovery comes through 12-step meetings like Alcoholics Anonymous, and the same is true for those whose lives have been affected by an alcoholic or other substance abuser. Al-Anon is a 12-step program for family members and friends of alcoholics, and there are several Al-Anon meetings on the

Vineyard every week. Just as the 12 steps can help “restore alcoholics to sanity,” they can help family members become mentally healthy too.

Brian Morris, a rehabilitation counselor and recovery coach supervisor at Island Health Care, sent me the following quote from the ACoA literature: ACoA is a 12-step/12-tradition program. As such, its pillars are anonymity, confidentiality, and kinship in a no-judgmental environment that allows us to “grieve our childhoods and conduct an honest inventory of ourselves and our family — so we may (i) identify and heal core trauma, (ii) experience freedom from shame and abandonment, and (iii) become our own loving parents.”

Brian and I both come from dysfunctional families (see bit.ly/2yDH31j.)

Brian wrote the following to me, and it is my experience too: “I always bristled at the notion of dysfunctional families, as if we were a band of Satanists, or all of us were somehow morally decrepit because of our relationship to each other. Addiction, truly, is a family disease. For which there is no known cure. But there is help.”

Brian also sent me this powerful quote from addiction specialist William White: “If we really believed that addiction was a family disease, we would not assess, treat, and provide continued support services to individuals in isolation from their families. We would instead deliver family-oriented models of engagement, assessment, treatment, and continuing care. Two groups must join to lead this revitalization movement: family members affected by addiction and [peer recovery] professionals.” The same is true for families dealing with a member with other types of mental illness.

Brian is interested in getting ACoA meetings started on the Vineyard. If you are interested, please contact him at bmorris@ihimv.org, or 508-964-0940.

The Laundry List – 14 Traits of an Adult Child of an Alcoholic

1. We became isolated and afraid of people and authority figures.
2. We became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process.
3. We are frightened by angry people and any personal criticism.
4. We either become alcoholics, marry them or both, or find another compulsive personality such as a workaholic to fulfill our sick abandonment needs.

5. We live life from the viewpoint of victims and we are attracted by that weakness in our love and friendship relationships.
6. We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and it is easier for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves; this enables us not to look too closely at our own faults, etc.
7. We get guilt feelings when we stand up for ourselves instead of giving in to others.
8. We became addicted to excitement.
9. We confuse love and pity and tend to “love” people we can “pity” and “rescue.”
10. We have “stuffed” our feelings from our traumatic childhoods and have lost the ability to feel or express our feelings because it hurts so much (Denial).
11. We judge ourselves harshly and have a very low sense of self-esteem.
12. We are dependent personalities who are terrified of abandonment and will do anything to hold on to a relationship in order not to experience painful abandonment feelings, which we received from living with sick people who were never there emotionally for us.
13. Alcoholism is a family disease; and we became para-alcoholics and took on the characteristics of that disease even though we did not pick up the drink.
14. Para-alcoholics are reactors rather than actors.

Tony A., 1978

Dr. Charles Silberstein is a psychiatrist at Martha's Vineyard Hospital and Island Counseling Center, where he is the medical director. He is board-certified in general, addiction, and geriatric psychiatry. He writes regularly about issues Islanders have with mental health.

Laura Roosevelt is a poet and journalist who writes regularly for Arts & Ideas magazine and Edible Vineyard. She currently curates the MV Times Poets Corner.