

Collateral Damage: Children of Alcoholics

Alcoholism is a large problem in our society. It is estimated that one in five children are exposed to substance abuse within their home. Children who grow up with parents who are alcoholics are at greater risk for developing behavioral and emotional difficulties. These children are also more likely to experience abuse or neglect in the home. Children respond to dysfunction in the home in many different ways.

Difficulties can include anxiety, depression, anger, guilt, embarrassment, and failure to form friendships. The child will often try to keep problems at home a secret from other adults and peers. Some behaviors to watch for include, but are not limited to, truancy or failures at school, withdrawal from friends, risky or delinquent behavior, aggression, depression, and substance use.

Some children of alcoholics may show no difficulties while others become the "parent" in the home. They may look out for the well being of themselves and others in the home, including their parents, and be very successful at school to compensate for the difficulties at home.

These children often live in fear of their parents and of what may happen to them if others discover their parent's alcoholism. They may also feel guilty that they are unable to change their parent's behavior. Although these children may present well, they tend to have poor self image and are insecure in relationships.

It can be difficult to intervene effectively in this situation for many reasons. The problems associated with alcoholism are often kept "secret" from others. The child may feel that they are betraying their parent if they seek out assistance for themselves. The parent may be in denial of the problem or have no desire to change their behavior.

It is best when the whole family enters treatment and begins the recovery process; however when this is not possible, provide children with support and help them in building meaningful relationships with others.

It is important for these children to understand that they did not cause their parent's alcoholism and they are not responsible for curing it. In addition to help in these areas, professionals can also treat disorders that commonly occur in children of alcoholics such as anxiety and depression.

Older children may benefit from participation in groups such as Alateen which focuses on social connectedness and community involvement.

Often times the emotional impact that alcoholism had in the child's life will surface during adulthood. Adult children of alcoholics often have difficulty maintaining relationships, overreact to change, seek constant approval from others, have difficulty following through with tasks, are very hard on themselves, and have poor problem solving skills.

It is important for adult children of alcoholics who are having difficulties to seek the assistance of a professional when having difficulty achieving success, developing healthy social and romantic relationships, or having difficulty coping with life's stresses.