

Breaking the Bonds

*A publication of Portland Intergroup #589 of
Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families*



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Note: This is the first known revision since this booklet was first produced by local Portland ACAs, in the late 1980s or early 1990s, before the publication of the ACA Big Red Book by ACA World Service Organization in 2006. It has been used as an introduction for newcomers since that time by ACA Portland Intergroup #589. Portland ACAs in service retyped and modified it slightly, redesigned it, and added new information, but the concept and contents remain basically the same.

Breaking the Bonds

ACA

*(Adult Children of Alcoholics
and Other Dysfunctional Families)*

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*This publication is available at:
Portland, Oregon-area ACA meetings*

Additional Resources:

ACA Portland Intergroup #589 : www.acaoregon.com
ACA World Service Organization: www.adultchildren.org

SERENITY PRAYER

**God, grant me the SERENITY
to accept the things
I cannot change**

**COURAGE
to change the things I can,**

**And the WISDOM
to know the difference.**

ACA Personal Bill Of Rights*

1. Life has choices beyond mere survival.
2. You have a right to say no to anything when you feel you are not ready or feel unsafe.
3. Life is not motivated by fear.
4. You have a right to all your feelings.
5. You are not always guilty.
6. You have a right to make mistakes.
7. There is no need to smile when you cry.
8. You have a right to end conversations with people who make you feel put down and humiliated.
9. You can be emotionally healthier than those around you.
10. It is okay to be relaxed, playful and frivolous.
11. You have a right to change and grow.
12. It is important to set limits and be selfish.
13. You can be angry at someone you love.
14. It is important to take care of yourself.

** Source unknown*

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the support group known as Adult Children of Alcoholics/ Dysfunctional Families (ACA). We are adults from many different backgrounds who came together to share our strength, hope and experience as we talk about growing up in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional family.

Our goal is to understand ourselves so that we can accept ourselves and others, just as we are, and learn to give and receive unconditional love. As we discover our long-suppressed emotions, we may feel confused or frightened. Now, when the emotions feel as though they are too much for us, we can ask for help and talk about them, which deprives them of their paralyzing power over us. Feeling and facing these issues is our way to recovery and self-understanding.

Much of our confusion about the issues we face as adults results from not knowing how to respond to and function in the world. Surviving as children meant developing a denial system so pervasive that we did not develop our ability to function independently while maintaining healthy, nurturing relationships. We have been operating from some stage of denial, and denial is what trapped us as children in the first place. We continued trying, as adults, to control the world in the same negative ways that did not work before. This is why we call ourselves adult children; that is, adults still suffering from our childhood experiences.

A safe, loving environment provides a place for releasing our denial. At first, many of us cannot remember our childhood. As memories surface, we feel the hurt of not having had a loving and supportive family. Sometimes this recognition is accompanied by a sensed loss of family and the deep pain of aloneness. ACA meetings provide a safe place for recognizing and expressing our long-denied grief. Experiencing the support of other adult children during our sense of loss helps us to grow closer to others as we learn a new way of releasing the pain of our past. As we gradually learn to love ourselves and to become our own loving parents, our deep-seated and false sense of aloneness and worthlessness is replaced with a realistic appraisal of our abilities and an authentic sense of our worth. We begin to see ourselves as loving and loved human beings.

ACA meetings make no requirements on our involvement or understanding, and we are free to accept or reject anything we read or hear. By attending meetings regularly, we find a pattern of growth emerging. This is done in a process that we control. We get out of the meetings what we put into them; risking is part of growing. We find what we truly want in life — acceptance, self-worth and love.

ACA World Service Organization has published literature that especially benefits adult children and are considered essential readings by most recovering adult children, for we discover ourselves in them. They are not a substitute for attending meetings, but will enhance our recovery and by working the steps, broaden our understanding of the effects of the family disease of alcoholism.

Other adult children sharing their experience, strength and hope can become our friends, fellow travelers, brothers and sisters in recovery as we take the risk of conversing and going for coffee after meetings. Phone lists are available for sharing between meetings. Remembering that we are an anonymous fellowship, we keep everything said, heard and seen at meetings confidential.

No matter what our past or present adult child problems, if we keep an open mind and keep coming back, we will find we can live happy, joyous and free.

THE 12 TRADITIONS OF ACA

Our experience has taught us that:

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on ACA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as expressed in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants, they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for membership in ACA is a desire to recover from the effects of growing up in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional family.
4. Each group is autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or ACA as a whole. We cooperate with all other 12-Step programs.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the adult child who still suffers.
6. An ACA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the ACA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every ACA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Adult Children of Alcoholics should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. ACA as such, ought never be organized, but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Adult Children of Alcoholics has no opinion on outside issues; hence, the ACA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we maintain anonymity at the level of press, radio, TV and other public media.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

THE 12 STEPS OF ACA

Here are the 12 steps as adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous. They are recommended as the foundation for our recovery.

1. We admitted we were powerless over the effects of alcoholism or other family dysfunction; that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand God.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and, when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand God, praying only for the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others who still suffer, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

In the Twelve Steps as adapted by the Portland ACA Intergroup, the word "alcohol" in Step One has been changed to read, "alcoholism or other family dysfunction", gender reference to God in Steps Three and Eleven has been changed from "as we understand Him" to "as we understand God" and the reference the reference "in Step Twelve to "alcoholics" has been changed to "others who still suffer."

**The Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions are reprinted for adaptation with permission of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.*

I don't recall family alcoholism, but I seem to fit these meetings, why?

The characteristics of adult children of alcoholics can fit members of any dysfunctional family, whether our parents were alcoholics or not. If the characteristics seem to fit, ACA can help. Why? Because the effects on children are similar, the tools learned here can be useful in dealing with the effects of any type of family dysfunction. For example, some families have problems because of divorce, workaholicism, chronic illness or disability of a family member, mental illness, frequent absence of a parent, frequent moving or other reasons.

In some families, active alcoholism skips generations. Even if our parents did not drink, they too could be adult children. They grew up with the disease, or their parents grew up with the disease, and carried the characteristics to the next generation, although they did not pick up the drink. These symptoms persist because the learned co-dependency is as powerful as the substance dependency.

It is also possible that we suffered the result without knowing the cause because our parents drank when and where we could not see them. Or they may have stopped drinking before we were old enough to recognize the effects of alcohol. Alcoholism is characterized by denial, unconscious lying to oneself. We may not recall alcoholism because denial kept us blinded as children and continues to obscure our vision as adults. Where there is addiction of any kind, there is also denial, and breaking denial is a beginning step.

Don't we dwell on the past too much?

The purpose of ACA meetings is to realize that because we unknowingly expect the future to be like the past, we have set ourselves up for repeating what we learned, in error, in our childhood. We are here to change that.

Our memory is warped by our own misunderstanding. When we look back today with awareness, we often find that reality was the opposite of what we perceived in our childhood. To survive as children, we learned to deny our feelings. Early in our recovery, the need for reliving our painful memories is not very clear. The process of breaking through denial, recognizing and understanding our feelings, and then forgiving ourselves and others, frees us from the control of the past. Our low self-esteem and feelings of guilt were based on error. We are building a new foundation for normal growth.

After grieving for that dark and painful past, guilt and anger are replaced with understanding, and often hate is replaced with love. Although alcoholism is a guiltless family disease that affects every family member, its effect on us can be changed and redirected. As we forgive our past and gently lay it aside, we are free to place our present and our future in the hands of our loving Higher Power.

Why the emphasis on feelings?

Our feelings exist and are part of the real world that we have been denying most of our lives. Denial of feelings was the beginning of our denial and the painful reality and inconsistency of our family life. Until we recognize and experience our own feelings, we continue to follow old patterns because we are locked into our old information system. Feelings are part of the information we need to make choices, especially choices that help us change old behaviors.

As physical, emotional and spiritual beings, we experience feelings as a normal part of growth and living. Feelings are neither good nor bad. They are only signals calling our attention to what is happening now. A signal is the first step to awareness, and normally leads to a point where we can choose what we want. It is the beginning of conscious choice, which means we either choose to change a situation or choose to allow it to continue.

Children in an alcoholic family soon learn that feelings have no bearing on what is happening. The reality of the situation, for which the feeling is a signal of awareness, is denied by those around them – first by adults and perhaps later by other siblings. Alcoholic families do not perceive the reality or validity of choice. Feelings (the signal) and choice (the action) are suppressed, denied and/or misdirected. Behavior becomes limited and constricted. When choice appears to be between the frying pan and the fire, we gradually lose our ability to see what all our options are.

The awful truth is that as children, we often felt we had to choose between accepting things as they were or feeling total abandonment. Abandonment, to a child, is the equivalent of death. As children we unconsciously gave up our identity to our parents in return for their not abandoning us. However, they often abandoned us anyway, emotionally if not physically. Even as very young children, some of us were told that if we didn't like our home situation, we could just leave. Think about this option. We could easily see it was impossible. How would we eat? Where would we stay? Who would love us? In our young minds we knew that in reality we could not survive on our own. We had to "choose" to stay.

As children of alcoholic households we were told "You're not really angry, you're just jealous (or upset, or crazy, or whatever)." Or we were told, "You don't really feel that way, do you?" Or just "Shut up!" Disappointment with broken promises was denied, or placated with excuses for the parent's behavior. Many of us believed "then it must be my fault," misdirecting the blame onto ourselves.

As we grew older and physically left our alcoholic families, most of us took with us the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of our dysfunctional family. Physical separation, even of great distance, did not create emotional nor mental separation, or even freedom. We faced the larger world with our limited and rigid behavior patterns; for many of us feelings did not exist. When we admitted to them, we often did so in a way that did not grant us responsibility for our own feelings. We saw other people or

events as the cause and origination of our feelings. Or we put aside our own feelings, stepping into the feelings of those around us. Thus, we not only avoided our own feelings but also took on responsibility for the feelings of others. And so our current actions may not be based on our own feelings and wants but on a faulty perception of another person's feelings and wants.

This faulty perception was learned as children when our own feelings were mislabeled or denied. Because of growing up in an alcoholic home, many of us experienced symptoms of "delayed stress" as adults. One of the symptoms of delayed stress is "frozen feelings." We can't feel them, we can't find them and we don't even know how to get to them. We know we should be feeling something, but we don't. We don't laugh. We don't cry. We feel detached. We may feel we are just marking time. We sometimes wonder if we really exist. We find ourselves in the frightening position of being lost at sea, with no reference points for knowing ourselves, what we want or how to relate to other people. This sense of being lost or adrift can be aggravated when we seek professional help and cannot describe or explain ourselves. We can't identify the problem because we don't trust our own perceptions. As a result, we sometimes doubt our own sanity.

Questioning our sanity is often the direct result of denial, suppression and misdirection of our feelings. Our feelings are part of our understanding. If we don't accept our feelings as equal partners with our intellectual, physical and spiritual perceptions, our understanding will be distorted and diminished. Embracing our feelings shows us the way to the truth of our own experience. Feelings are not the whole but part of the process of experiencing a rich, full life. Awareness and acceptance of all our feelings validates us so we can form, with wholeness and openness, new feelings and perceptions. We begin with feelings, and then we can understand, forgive and be free to love.

What is alcoholism?

Alcoholism is a disease characterized by physiological dependence, a preoccupation with alcohol and an inability to control one's drinking. The disease is chronic, progressive and incurable.

Alcoholism is an addiction which cannot be cured or controlled by exercising willpower or self-knowledge or by making an intellectual or emotional decision. Prolonged abstinence cannot reverse the disease process. It is possible to become an alcoholic in a short period of time, even if only small amounts of alcohol are consumed.

Alcoholics cannot predict what will happen when they drink, cannot limit their drinking and cannot be just social drinkers. Alcoholics cannot be held responsible for being alcoholic but each is responsible for their own recovery. Two helpful sources of information on the disease are *Alcoholics Anonymous (the Big Book)* and *Under the Influence* by Miliam and Ketcham. Alcoholism is called the "family disease" both because it is considered hereditary and because of the impact on other family members. Its nature is such that it has a direct and profound impact on all people involved with the alcoholic. Children of alcoholics particularly suffer prolonged, extremely high levels of stress during their childhood in an alcoholic home. *Another Chance, It Will Never Happen to Me* and *Adult Children of Alcoholics* all deal with the effects of alcoholism on children.

An alternative starting point for family members is Al-Anon pamphlets, such as *The Merry-Go-Round Called Denial and Alcoholism, the Family Disease*. Recovery for adult children begins with Step One: we were powerless over the disease of alcoholism in our past. We did not cause it, we cannot control it and we cannot cure it. We are not responsible for the alcoholism in our family; like the alcoholic, each of us is responsible for our own recovery.

Is ACA only for alcoholics or drug addicts?

ACA is for adult children of alcoholics, whether or not they are

themselves substance dependent. It is also for anyone who grew up in a dysfunctional environment, whether or not alcohol or drugs were present. ACA is not a substitute for attending other Twelve Step programs or treatment for chemical dependency. Anyone who has suffered from any form of chemical dependency may want to establish clean and sober living before dealing with the painful issues ACA raises.

The specific behavior characteristics of adult children were clearly recognized in the 1980s and '90s. Members of other Twelve Step programs come to ACA to deal with their problems as adult children and to find solutions. While some other programs focus on detachment, adult children breathe through our handicapping denial system by experiencing and talking about our feelings, emotions, and self-conceptions. Here we focus on the effect our childhood had on our adult character. Through constructively reliving the past, the present is understood.

What if I belong to another Twelve Step Program?

If we have a problem with alcohol or any other dependency, our priority is our treatment program and our other Twelve Step groups. ACA is not a substitute for any other program. As recovering alcoholics, we may find that ACA aids our sobriety, helping us focus on issues that may not be apparent or appropriate in AA. For example, in our recovery we may have tried to do a "searching and fearless moral inventory." Using the moral values and beliefs learned from our parents' perception of us produces an inventory that is uncompromisingly harsh and judgmental. ACA helps us make the essential distinction between our values and those of our parents. As we clarify what our own values really are, our sense of self begins to emerge. We begin to establish boundaries between ourselves and others rather than accepting the thoughts, actions and belief systems of our parents or other authority figures as our own.

ACA provides us, as does any other Twelve Step Program, with skills and tools for dealing with our lives more realistically than we

may have done in the past. Each program serves a purpose and will best serve us as we become more clear as to what our needs are and how we can best meet them.

I feel anger toward my parents and feel guilty as a result. Is this common?

Yes, it is common for adult children to feel deep-seated anger and hatred toward either parents, siblings, or both. The family disease caused the alcoholic or addict to focus on drinking or drugs and the co-dependent, or enabler, to focus on the alcoholic or drug addict. Our parents' misplaced attention left most of us children depending on ourselves or becoming the parents to these adult people acting like children.

Our natural feelings of love and the values of society tell us to love our parents and family. We may have accepted these ideas so completely that we do not allow ourselves to entertain any bad feelings or thoughts regarding our parents. When we do, we feel guilty.

When feelings such as guilt, anger and hatred are denied rather than acknowledged and resolved, they are perpetuated. Suppressing these feelings leads to depression, inappropriate rage, undefined fears, compulsive behaviors and a free-floating guilt, which we experience again and again. In ACA, we learn to recognize and accept our feelings and to distinguish between feelings relevant to our current experience and feelings that are rooted in our past. By becoming clear about this distinction, we are able to see the context and legitimacy of our old feelings. This acknowledgment of our past allows us to break the cycle in which past feelings governed our actions and emotions in present situations.

Attending meetings, reading and sharing with a friend, co-sponsor or counselor are all steps leading away from guilt, anger and fear. It helps when we see our parents are also victims of the disease of alcoholism. As adult children begin to recover, we

recognize that the fears of our childhood are not permanent disabilities. Skills and strengths learned for surviving childhood in an alcoholic home are assets in the adult world. ACA helps us use those assets in a more balanced way and, more importantly, helps us through the process of forgiveness. Forgiving our parents and ourselves opens our lives to love. As we become more available to our Higher Power, we begin to see that we can have all the love we need.

What is the process for improving poor self-image?

One of the main characteristics shared by adult children, no matter what our background, is a poor self-image or even no sense of self. The experience of unconditional love is a psychological cornerstone of a positive self-image. We have difficulty giving and receiving unconditional love because we seldom experienced it when we were growing up. Trusting other people was something we learned not to do and in many cases we especially learned not to trust ourselves.

In an alcoholic family, thoughts, actions and behaviors center around the alcoholic. Communication becomes twisted and indirect. As children we became very performance-oriented, because often the good messages seemed conditional and based upon how we fulfilled our parents' expectations. Our learned lack of trust undermined any good messages about ourselves. Sometimes we reacted to contradict any praise given us, as proof that others could not manipulate us and we became trapped.

As adults we stifle our feelings because as children we could not have survived if we allowed ourselves to feel what was happening to us. Many of us were abused physically, sexually and emotionally. Even those of us who were only ignored, suffered, because that was a subtle, but painful, message that we were not worth noticing or being cared about. Sometimes we delay our recovery because our suffering is not as obvious as that of other adult children. It is difficult to understand why we are so confused until we realize

that invisible emotional abuse is just as damaging, and often harder to recognize. Our childhood information-gathering and analytic functions tried to make logical that which was arbitrary, inconsistent and unfair. As adults we continue to function in a way that feeds misinformation. We don't think we have the right to ask questions which we're afraid to ask, and we don't know what questions to ask. Without such clarification, our misconceptions continue.

As we learn what it means to be an adult child of an alcoholic, we take the first step towards our new life. No matter how much our journey along the path to recovery is delayed by our own doubts and fears, we need never go back to where we were because now we know that we are not crazy. We are not alone.

Reading the Big Red Book and other books describing adult children gives us a new base for our information-gathering and analysis. As we learn about our characteristics and the manner in which we display them in our own lives, we gradually become aware that now, we have a choice. We may continue to react in the old patterns, but we also become more and more aware that we do have alternatives. This heady sense of unknown freedom can be very frightening.

As we realize that we can choose, we become aware that we can choose what we want, rather than what we should. Wanting—even having the right to want—is something we did not learn as children. We learned instead to deny our wants. Often, before we accept that we have a right to want, we experience a tremendous void and feel that we may fall off the edge. As in all change, we start with small steps and keep practicing.

Coming to meetings, we listen to others whose lives have been damaged just like ours. This is painful, and we can now allow ourselves all the time necessary to uncover the wounds as we feel able to bear the pain. We are adults, and no longer need to listen to the parental message that we do things right now, or else. We are

now free to set our own pace.

Crying and feeling our loss opens a place within us for new love, growth and living today. Because other adult children know what the pain is like, meetings can be a safe place to feel our pain. Grieving our loss begins our healing process, and our early misconceptions begin to surface, opening us to the opportunity to change them.

Knowledge of the conditions that created our self-image leads to recognition that those conditions no longer exist. We also begin to understand that what was done to us was often also done to our parents. They could not give us what they themselves did not have. While this does not change our childhood, we become free to break the pattern.

Working the ACA 12 Steps in a workbook is the foundation for our recovery. As we experience awareness and knowledge of the choices we are free to make, we come to realize that we are not dependent on other people or things for the sense of who we are and what we want. We begin to sense that some part of us has always been as we are now; it is now safe and we are free to show our spirit to the world.

As we grow in the freedom of showing our spirit to the world, we learn that love is a process not a product; a state of being, not of having. As we learn to cherish our own spirit and share ourselves with others, we see it is possible to view others and ourselves as equals, though different. Learning to like ourselves, we become open to love. A secure sense of self and an unrestricted flow of love both to us and from us is a truly possible outcome of our work on ACA issues. Learning to receive unconditional love opens us to giving it as well. We find that what we give, we also receive.

Why the no cross-talk rule in ACA meetings? Aren't we here to help each other?

We are here to help ourselves by sharing our own feelings. When we get into the problems of other people we are avoiding our own. Focusing on others, giving advice, rambling and talking theory are all ways of avoiding our own feelings. Likewise, seeking advice keeps us in our victim perspective, again putting the focus outside ourselves. To be effective, our answers must be discovered from within.

We each need our feelings accepted and respected just as they are. The biggest service we can render each other in our recovery is to listen without comment, judgment or interpretation.

What is co-sponsorship?

ACA members are available to each other as co-sponsors (also known as Fellow Travelers). Co-sponsorship means learning together to create a new, healthy, nurturing family of "sisters and brothers in recovery." Our new family provides opportunities for mutual sharing of experience, strength and hope in dealing with what happened then and what is happening now. Working the Twelve Steps provides a focus for forming supportive, non-dependent relationships.

Here are the guidelines of co-sponsorship that we follow. We choose a person with whom we feel comfortable, generally of the same sex, and if they are willing, exchange phone numbers. Some of us have more than one co-sponsor. We try to be available to our co-sponsor in times of crisis but also contact each other to share the good times. Co-sponsors act as a sounding board, encouraging each other in our recovery. Our new family provides a shoulder to cry on, acceptance of feelings, non-judgmental support, comfort and nurturing. Co-sponsorship, having a Fellow Traveler, allows us to accompany each other on our spiritual journey of recovery.

Do I need counseling?

ACA is not a psychotherapy group. Many intense, previously buried emotions surface during meetings. Counseling can provide an objective process for resolving and integrating these feelings. If we have problems we cannot handle we do not substitute ACA for other help we may need.

ACA does not recommend specific professionals or treatment programs. Many adult children seeing counselors are glad to share their experience with others after meetings. Adult children can often recommend counselors trained to deal with our issues.

Remember, we do have options. If our needs are not being met after several sessions with one counselor, we can shop around for another. We now know we can ask questions and interview a counselor as we would an employee. Word-of-mouth advertising from people getting good counseling is the best source.

Do I have to believe in a Higher Power to belong to ACA?

ACA is a spiritual program, not a religion. Belief in a Higher Power is not necessary for attending meetings, but as we listen to others share in their recovery, we become more aware of the role of a Higher Power in other people's lives. Many of us found that being willing to entertain this concept provided our own Higher Power the opportunity to be heard. ACA allows us to choose our own concept of a Higher Power, whatever that might be. We may also find that our idea of a Higher Power changes in the process of recovery.

Adult children often believe we must be in complete control. To survive as children, we tried to bring order out of chaos by controlling as much as possible the outcome of each situation. The contradiction in our adult lives is between our outward attempts to control everything and our inner feelings of not having any control. By the time we get to an ACA meeting, most of us are ready to

admit to some degree of powerlessness.

As we accept our powerlessness over things we cannot change, we begin directing our lives towards changing the things we can. When we admit powerlessness, we can no longer play God or stand alone; we do need others. Part of our ACA recovery is relinquishing our responsibility for other people, places and things. Removing ourselves from the role of judge and caretaker for the world helps us break the cycle of guilt, anger and fear. This broken cycle opens up room and time for ourselves. Our thoughts can then focus on personal changes today.

We can only ask a God of our own understanding to take away our own problems and defects of character, most of which were learned in ignorance of the disease of alcoholism. Most recovering ACA's find that change comes into our lives as we turn over our problems to our Higher Power and the Twelve-Step process of forgiveness.

Can I recover from being an adult child? Will my life get better?

Yes! It sometimes feels that to be an adult child is to be filled with negative characteristics that will be impossible to overcome. The process of identifying ourselves as adult children is almost overwhelming, because now we have identified, or put a name to, the vague sense of uneasiness that has flowed through our lives, sometimes vague, often overpowering.

To have survived the past and to have the courage to attend these meetings indicates that we do have the spirit to recover. Our survival skills, strengths and tenacity can now be used for our own growth. By reversing our commitment to compulsive behavior, we affirm our worth and learn to accept choice and freedom. We learn to accept ourselves, which is far more than we ever thought possible.

Growing up and as adults, we tried to understand the alcoholic. When understanding was impossible because of the nature of the disease, we often moved into guilt and then into hate. Although this was necessary for our survival, it did not provide us with choices, and it certainly stunted our growth. Now, we have a chance to stop focusing on the alcoholic and to concentrate on our own lives. This freedom begins our recovery process.

At times it feels as though our lives and stability are disintegrating rather than healing. The first, and most important, stage in recovery is grieving. This involves feeling feelings that have been repressed and identifying them. We start remembering, and often wish we had not begun this painful journey. As adult children, we have an opportunity to re-experience our pain and hurt from a new perspective, one that allows us to learn and grow from our experience instead of being overwhelmed by it. Resolution of our feelings, rather than denial of even having them, is a milestone on this journey towards freedom.

As we remember our experience, understanding develops as to what controls our reactions in our present life. We are given opportunities to see and break the old patterns. We transform the survival skills of our childhood into tools for present and future growth. We experience moments of happiness and this becomes part of the new life we are capable of creating for ourselves.

Going through the process one day at a time allows us to practice our new perceptions and actions, integrating them into a solid foundation for free choice that carries us through the rest of our lives. It is important to remember that we have all the time we need to heal. Often, we want to be there now, rather than going through the process. This is when we gently remind ourselves that becoming who we are is a lifetime task.

How did ACA get started?

In 1978, Tony A. helped found the first ACA group in New York, with a group of former Alateens who were over 18 years of age.

Most meetings were initially sponsored by Al-Anon. Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics then became known as ACAP (Adult Children of Alcoholic Parents), then ACOA, then ACA, and included “and other Dysfunctional Families”. They adapted the Twelve Steps, were protected by anonymity, and each meeting is autonomous, existing to meet the needs of its members.”

Locally in Portland, Oregon—by 1984—there were several Al-Anon ACAP meetings and the demand was growing. As more people discovered the meetings, more paths to recovery were explored. These paths included books that members had found very helpful but which were not approved by the AA or Al-Anon World Conferences. That fall, several meetings decided by group conscience to separate from Al-Anon in order to have such non-conference approved literature available at meetings. The name Adult Children of Alcoholics () was chosen by these meetings and a service-oriented Intergroup was formed. Since then, the name was changed to Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families (ACA), with our own World Service Organization (WSO).

What are Step-Study Groups?

The Twelve Steps are our guide to recovery. Periodically a new Step-Study Group will form. ACA members who wish to work the steps together will gather at a regular place and time, usually weekly, to meet to do step work, using one of the ACA step workbooks. Each group is autonomous and sets their own group conscience on how many weeks they will spend working each step, and how long they will stay open to new members. Studying the Steps in depth can create an opportunity to suddenly hear or see what has been available to us all along, and to integrate it into our lives on a more personal level than before.

How can service work aid my recovery?

Serving our ACA groups as a Secretary or a Intergroup

Representative provides an excellent opportunity for the Twelfth Step work of carrying the ACA message and practicing the ACA principles. Keeping the program available to both new members and old provides a strong sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

Serving as an Intergroup officer or on an Intergroup committee offers a chance to interact with other adult children. Service work can also help improve our self-esteem and offers us a place to practice our new behaviors as we identify and let go of our old attitudes.

Through our service work at local, regional and World Services levels, we are more exposed to ACA information. Our deeper awareness helps peel away the many layers of denial operating in all aspects of our lives. As we do this we often come to a better understanding of who our parents are, who we are and why we hurt.

Working together on a common goal offers us opportunities to know other adult children on a more personal level than is possible in regular ACA meetings. As new relationships with other adult children grow, we slowly discover that there are people with whom we can talk and share our feelings.

There is a basic human need to be needed. Volunteering as an ACA service worker can fill that need through helping others and helping the program.

What is Intergroup? Can anyone attend?

We make a difference in the lives of others by first serving ourselves, then serving others. ACA Intergroup is composed of people like us acting as representatives from groups in the Portland metropolitan area. All ACA members are encouraged and invited to attend Intergroup meetings, which serve as our collective group conscience. Intergroup acts as our "Service board or committee directly responsible to those they serve."

At Intergroup business meetings, information is exchanged

about new meetings, activities and conventions. Intergroup Representatives and others in attendance discuss ways to improve methods of carrying the ACA message, of maintaining current services and planning for future growth.

Literature supplies and books sold at ACA meetings are available for purchase by anyone attending Intergroup meetings. Intergroup also serves as a resource for local public information and as a liaison for regional and national information.

Is there anything positive about being an adult child?

Yes there is! Full awareness of the impact of alcoholism or other dysfunction on our lives seems at first to reveal only a legacy of negative characteristics. However, the rigidity of this perspective keeps us from seeing the many positive strengths found within us. Children in an ongoing relationship with an alcoholic develop certain personality traits. One study showed that the majority of co-alcoholics rate high in tenacity, assertiveness, curiosity, ambition, playfulness, responsibility, originality, competitiveness and self-confidence, all of which are positive traits when balanced with trust, love and faith.

The characteristics and personality traits that formerly controlled us because we did not see nor understand them can be exercised now as we want or need them. We start bringing our lives into a more wholesome, centered balance rather than the extremes of reaction to outside forces. Opportunities for continually transforming these characteristics from negative, controlling forces into self-caring tools lead us into a richer, fuller life.

To build our new life, we need an honest and accurate assessment of where we are right now. This cannot be done alone. We need assistance. When doing our Fourth Step, often we see only our shortcomings. This one-sided assessment is false, exaggerates our negative self-image and stifles our growth. Acknowledging and valuing exactly where we are in the present is a new way of being here, providing a place to stand from which to move forward. By

exploring our past and experimenting with new behavior, our old dysfunctional patterns can be turned inside out, becoming useful perspectives which offer us new ways of seeing and dealing with our world. Our hypervigilance and adaptability take new meaning as we use them to become aware of what we were, why we became that way and how we now wish to grow. Acknowledgment of our many skills is a foundation for committing our lives to a fuller, more creative process of making choices. We are worth the commitment.

We can all be congratulated on our ability to survive. As we move beyond survival into living, we let go of our helpless, hopeless attitude about ourselves. We acknowledge that we have valuable skills as a direct result of having grown up in a dysfunctional household. Looking at our jobs, we see we are valuable employees, often extremely loyal. Hypervigilance helps us avert problems that others do not see coming. We can discover and correct already existing errors, because we have been trained to look for all the ways in which a situation affects us. Our need for control can lead to organizational and supervisory skills. We like to work without supervision and can handle large workloads. We can deal with high-stress situations in our jobs. As we recover, we retain the skills and attributes, but we are able to temper them and assert our rights in a calm, reasonable manner. We no longer feel compelled to take on an unreasonable workload. Nor do we feel compelled to have a temper tantrum to make clear our position, opinion or feeling about a situation. With these skills and our new attitudes, we interact better and are able to move and work with greater ease among more people.

On a personal level, our capacity for enjoying life and sharing love, until now, lay dormant or had been abused by others or ourselves. We are able to empathize with others because of the many unhappy experiences we have survived. Acting on this concern for others may have helped us develop social skills as adults that we may not have developed as children. In awkward or uncomfortable situations, we sometimes risked sharing our feelings

with the person next to us, and learned that we were not alone in those feelings. We learned that we could start conversations to relieve our own anxiety; as we made ourselves more at ease we found that others were also feeling more at ease. Now we can use this skill as it is appropriate rather than feeling compelled to use it all the time.

Our childhood isolation, which worked against us, also encouraged self-reliance, self-protection and a tolerance for solitude which we employed as adults to keep ourselves safe. Now we are better able to distinguish between situations in which solitude is unhealthy isolation and in which it is appropriate for self-nurturing relationships. And now the relationships that we form in all areas and on all levels enhance our own lives and the lives of those with whom we interact.

Not only have we survived, but also we are alive in the here and now—breathing, feeling, moving, acting, growing human beings. Awareness of what we would like to change in ourselves allows us to shift our attitudes and change our future. We aren't where we were, nor where we will be. We are finding our lessons and accepting our rewards. We are essentially good people who are also potentially joyful people. A full appreciation of ourselves allows us to actualize our joyful potential. Knowing where we came from gives us an extra sense of joy as we feel and acknowledge the new, small victories in our daily lives that build into the triumph of breaking the bonds imposed on us solely through experiencing childhood in a dysfunctional home.

Why the confusion?

Feeling uncertain, disoriented, agitated, unprotected and just plain stumped can be very good for your recovery. Children of alcoholics often feel this way, especially when we are making progress with our greatest difficulties.

In the process of spiritual recovery, the most painful experiences

are often those that entail the shock of recognition, as the protective masks we once wore are stripped from us. We experience afresh the panic, the suppressed rage and the sense of helplessness which compelled us, as children, to adapt our character to the disturbed nature of our home environment. These feelings themselves can inspire fear, threaten our sometimes-precarious equilibrium and the childhood taboos that we often still carry. Most frightening of all, they can make us feel stuck in our past.

By entering this program, we have begun to step into uncharted inner territory. Together we are moving towards self-awareness, respect, honesty, love and responsibility for ourselves. The general experience in recovery is that, after a while, we do become more comfortable in our emergence as emotional, and occasionally somewhat difficult individuals. As we begin to orient ourselves to this new state, we can find considerable satisfaction in our increasing integrity. Still we may frequently find our emotional landscape in glorious disarray. This is quite normal (for us). Contact with others who are experiencing recovery can offer crucial help at these times. Certainly this takes courage; sometimes we are apt to feel that we have nothing to share but our hurt and shame, and it is tempting to slide back to the closet or the bottle or whatever dark place we came from. But please DO pick up the telephone or come to a meeting and spread the fertilizer around. It often seems as if the deeper our immediate difficulty is, the more ACA's we can connect with.

We each bear a past which we have neither been able to assimilate nor to escape. The roots of our anger, fear and heartache run deep into the earliest layers of our soul's experience. As we begin to make the mental, spiritual and emotional connections that enable us to survive today and as our perceptions open us more to reality, we find ourselves changing in ways that were almost unthinkable before. The distorted self-image which we formed in the alcoholic environment – perhaps the greatest “authority figure” we will ever have to face – begins to be challenged daily. It is painful to admit how far the situation of our life has been outside

our control, outside of what seems fair or right. Owning up to this past and these distortions, to the damage we have undergone, seems fundamentally to be a process of grieving and letting go.

As a residue of our upbringing, we sometimes get “moralistic” with ourselves and experience our powerlessness, pain and uncertainty as a punishment. Perhaps this attitude is one last attempt to preserve the old hope that if we can just be obedient enough, we will be taken care of. We may also feel that our every move ought now to be an obvious step forward, with no steps back required. These are self-blaming attitudes which we can let go of. Our true self will always do us the invaluable service of stubbornly refusing conformity with any ingrained notions of what we “should” need or “should” feel. Deeply effective recovery is rarely experienced as a smooth, gracefully assured process. It involves the recognition of some very sickening circumstances; contending with their side effects on us cannot always be both truthful and outwardly pleasing. The feelings and attitudes most rigidly prohibited to us as children are the most disorienting ones to learn to know today, but this is exactly what liberates us.

Confusion, isolation and self-doubt are the natural result when we are so continually forced to withhold our strongest feelings that we begin to disown them. Now, in the process of coming back to life, we must come face-to-face with the horrors we are leaving behind us. It is a necessary step towards regaining our own identities. But this reunion with a “long-lost self” is more momentous than meeting a long-lost relative (especially given the kind of relatives most of us seem to have!). Your recovery in this program may not be measureable or controllable, but surely it is already underway. And you are not alone.

What is co-dependency?

Co-dependency is part of the behavior we learned growing up in a dysfunctional home. This behavior causes problems for us, and identifying co-dependency is the first step towards changing our old unworkable patterns:

My good feelings about who I am stem from being liked by you.

My good feelings about who I am stem from receiving approval from you.

Your struggles affect my serenity.

My mental attention is focused on solving your problems or relieving your pain.

My mental attention is focused on pleasing you.

My mental attention is focused on protecting you.

My mental attention is focused on manipulating you to “do it my way.”

My self-esteem is bolstered by relieving your pain.

My own hobbies and interests are put aside. My time is spent sharing your interests and hobbies.

Your clothing and personal appearance are dictated by my desires as I feel you are a reflection of me.

Your behavior is dictated by my desires, as I feel you are a reflection of me.

I am not aware of how I feel; I am aware how you feel. I am not aware of what I want; I ask what you want. If I am not aware, I assume.

TO LET GO*

For adult children, learning to “let go” is a large part of our recovery.

To let go does not mean to stop caring, it means I can't do it for someone else.

To let go is not to cut myself off; it's the realization that I can't control another.

To let go is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences.

To let go is to admit to being powerless, which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To let go is not to try to change or blame another, it's to make the most of myself.

To let go is not to care for, but to care about.

To let go is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To let go is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.

To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes, but to allow others to affect their own destinies.

To let go is not to be protective, it's to permit another to face reality.

To let go is not to criticize or regulate anyone, but to try to become what I dream I can be.

To let go is to fear less, and to love more.

** Source unknown*

AFFIRMATIONS

Affirmations are a tool for correcting our old misconceptions about ourselves. We replace the old, erroneous messages in our lives with positive, truthful ones. These new messages call our attention to the choices we make in our lives minute-by-minute, day-by-day as we feel our own feelings, and allow our own experiences. We can resize them to fit our own unique solutions. The following are examples. Use what you like of them and create others that are your own.

I am loving and lovable.

I set limits and make them clear.

I am a worthwhile person.

I allow myself to be relaxed and to enjoy life.

I am caring and competent.

I feel serene and peaceful.

I feel calm and clear-headed.

Confrontation is affirming my caring for others in a positive way.

I can be forgiving and forgiven.

I am intelligent.

I can ask questions without guilt or fear.

I am responsible for making my own decisions.

I am strong.

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