

Welcome to ACA



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Welcome to Adult Children of Alcoholics.

In meetings, you will hear us read the Problem or the Laundry List. You belong here even if your parents were not alcoholic if you identify with these common characteristics of Adult Children.

We meet here to share the experiences we had as children growing up in alcoholic or dysfunctional homes, how that infected us then, and how it affects us now. By practicing the 12 Steps, by focusing on the Solution, and by accepting a Higher Power of our own understanding, we find freedom from the effects of alcoholism and family dysfunctions. We identify with the "Problem" and learn to live in "The Solution," one day at a time.

This program is not easy, but if you keep coming back to these meetings, you will start to come out of denial. This will give you freedom from the past. You and your life will change.

Many of us could not recognize or accept that some of our current attitudes or behaviors result from our childhood experiences related to alcoholism or dysfunction. Having not

yet solved the mystery of our own selves, we often behave as adult children without realizing it.

By attending six meetings in a row at the beginning, and attending regularly thereafter, we come to know our real selves, and learn to behave responsibly. We do this by identifying with the listing of characteristics that we read in the Problem and the Laundry List.

- We learn to live in the Solution and choose to become our own loving parents.
- We come out of denial and share the pain of our childhood memories.
- We experience love and acceptance from members of our ACA group.
- We grow to awareness that feelings of the past and present form a pattern.
- We learn that the pattern can change.

So, please keep coming back. Listen, learn, and, most of all, share your feelings.

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 of 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

Am I An Adult Child? – 25 Questions

1. Do you recall anyone drinking or taking drugs or being involved in some other behavior that you now believe could be dysfunctional?
2. Did you avoid bringing friends to your home because of drinking or some other dysfunctional behavior in the home?
3. Did one of your parents make excuses for the other parent's drinking or other behavior?
4. Did your parents focus on each other so much that they seemed to ignore you?
5. Did your parents or relatives argue constantly?
6. Were you drawn into arguments or disagreements and asked to choose sides with one parent or relative against another?

7. Did you try to protect your brothers or sisters against drinking or other behavior in the family?
8. As an adult, do you feel immature? Do you feel like you are a child inside?
9. As an adult, do you believe you are treated like a child when you interact with your parents? Are you continuing to live out a childhood role with the parents?
10. Do you believe that it is your responsibility to take care of your parents' feelings or worries? Do other relatives look to you to solve their problems?
11. Do you fear authority figures and angry people?
12. Do you constantly seek approval or praise but have difficulty accepting a compliment when one comes your way?
13. Do you see most forms of criticism as a personal attack?
14. Do you over-commit yourself and then feel angry when others do not appreciate what you do?
15. Do you think you are responsible for the way another person feels or behaves?
16. Do you have difficulty identifying feelings?
17. Do you focus outside yourself for love or security?
18. Do you involve yourself in the problems of others? Do you feel more alive when there is a crisis?

19. Do you equate sex with intimacy?
20. Do you confuse love with pity?
21. Have you found yourself in a relationship with a compulsive or dangerous person and wonder how you got there?
22. Do you judge yourself without mercy and guess at what is normal?
23. Do you behave one way in public and another way at home?
24. Do you think your parents had a problem with drinking or taking drugs?
25. Do you think you were affected by the drinking or other dysfunctional behavior of your parents or family?

If you answered “yes” to three or more of these questions, you may be suffering from the effects of growing up in an alcoholic or other dysfunctional family.

Welcome, Newcomer!

Introduction

Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) is a 12-Step, 12-Tradition program of men and women who grew up in alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional homes. We meet with each other in a mutually safe environment and share our common experiences.

We discover that how we were parented affected our past and affects our present. We begin to recognize the unhealthy elements of our childhood. We begin to learn just who we are, apart from our families of origin. We learn to reparent ourselves with gentleness, humor, love, and respect.

By practicing the 12 Steps, focusing on the Solution, and accepting a Higher Power of our own understanding, we find freedom from the past and a way to improve our lives today.

Why We First Came to ACA

Our lives had not worked; they had become unmanageable. We had tried everything we thought would make us happy, healthy, and successful. It didn't work.

In trying to reach our desired goals, many of us depleted our resources. We often lost our creativity, our flexibility, and our sense of humor. No matter what we did, the results no longer gave us the thrill, the joy, the sense of power, or the feeling of elation they once did. We were on a dead-end road. Continuing the same existence was no longer an option. Nevertheless, we couldn't quite abandon the notion that if we just knew one more thing about how the world worked, we'd be fine.

So we tried one more time. With little to win, nothing to lose, we came to our first ACA meeting.

Why We Keep Coming Back

We found people in the meetings who listened to us talk. They did not judge us. They did not try to fix us. They did not interrupt us when we spoke. They merely told us that if we came to meetings on a regular basis, we would gradually begin to feel better. We did.

What We Do in ACA Meetings

- We share what is happening in our lives, and how we are dealing with these issues in our recovery program (i.e., we share our experience, strength, and hope)
- We build a personal support network
- We practice defining and enforcing personal boundaries by giving service

What We Do Not Do at Meetings

- We do not engage in crosstalk
- We do not criticize
- We do not comment on what others share
- We do not offer advice

- We do not distract others from the person speaking by talking, whispering, gesturing, making noise, or moving about
- We do not violate the anonymity of others
- We do not repeat what is said in meetings (in any context)

How We Work a Program of Recovery (Tools of Recovery)

- We go to meetings and call program people to discuss recovery issues
- We read about the ACA experiences of others and write about our own
- We define and enforce our boundaries
- We do our recovery work using the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions to guide us
- We identify and evaluate the old parenting instructions in our minds
- We identify those that are helpful and useful to us in our lives today, and we discard those that do not
- We discover the impact and power of our Inner Child on our recovery
- We attend meetings that focus on issues that we need or want to work on
- We give service in ACA (in meetings we learn how to recover; in service we practice our recovery)
- We work with a sponsor to guide us in recovery and service work

Listening to others, and ourselves, share at meetings helps us in our recovery. Sharing at meetings helps us to focus, define, and clarify our problems. We express our

feelings. Talking out loud helps us to resolve some problems. We talk about our action plans to change our lives, or we share how well our current plan is working. At times we report our progress or victories. We often use meetings as a reality check on our overall program, comparing our lives today to our adult lives before we came to ACA.

In meetings we come to understand how our childhood experiences shaped our attitudes, behavior, and choices today. We hear others talk about their experiences, and we recognize ourselves. We learn how we can change. We sense that within ourselves are people who are not who we were taught to be. Some people call these our “Inner Children.” We discover ourselves.

We read literature about ACA issues, often using the literature as life rafts. We hang on to what we have read when the seas get temporarily rough. Many of us write daily and find that it helps us put things into perspective for us. Some of us write to get in touch with our Inner Children. We write about our childhood, daily thoughts, recurring struggles, and discoveries about life and ourselves. We write about new issues as they arise. We use ACA functions outside the meetings to learn spontaneity and how to have fun.

Gradually, we begin to recognize the negative parenting messages from our childhoods that drive our lives. We learn to replace them with healthy behaviors. This is a first step toward “reparenting.” As we gradually reparent ourselves, our outlook on life changes. We begin to look at it from an emotionally mature perspective.

Ultimately, we become happier, stronger, more capable people --- more able to handle life. We learn to respect others and ourselves. The quality of our lives improves as we learn to define and communicate our boundaries and insist that they are honored.

We have learned by experience that those ACA members who make the greatest gains in the shortest amount of time are those who use the “tools of recovery.” We have also found that all of us recover at our own pace and in our own time. We are individuals who come from varied experiences and backgrounds.

Membership

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.

Literature Policy

Many 12-Step programs require that *only* literature published within the program be available at meetings. The ACA program, from the outset, has held that valuable information exists outside the program.

We do suggest that any outside literature brought into meetings is in keeping with the ACA 12 Steps and 12 Traditions. Our program also suggests that such literature is kept separate from the ACA “Conference Approved” literature.

For more information on the ACA literature policy, refer to the trifold entitled, “The ACA Literature Policy.”

Contributions are Voluntary

No dues or fees are required for membership; we are, however, fully self-supporting through our own contribution. We give our 7th Tradition donations at the meetings as we can afford to, in acknowledgment of the benefits our program gives us.

At the meeting level, our contributions are used to keep the doors open (pay the rent, buy the refreshments, make literature available, or pay for the virtual platform). Excess funds are sent on by the meetings to our Intergroup, our Region, and World Service. Each of us has a responsibility to ensure that ACA fulfills its mission to be available to others seeking recovery by supporting the efforts of our Intergroup, Region, and World Service both in supplying them with the financial resources and manpower to do their jobs.

Affiliation

ACA is an independent 12-Step, 12-Tradition program. We are not affiliated with any other 12-Step organization. We do, however, cooperate with other 12-Step, 12-Tradition programs.

We are not allied with any sect, denomination, organization, institution, political, or law enforcement groups. We do not engage in any controversy, and we neither endorse nor oppose any causes.

A Personal Invitation

This is your personal invitation to come to ACA and to *keep coming back*. Your presence in meetings helps us in our recovery. We know that this program works for us. We have yet to see anyone fail who honestly works the program. This is our path to sanity, our program to serenity.

We invite you to participate. ACA works!

The ACA Program and How it Works

We find that a difference in identity and purpose distinguishes Adult Child of Alcoholics from other 12-Step programs and underscores the need for our special focus.

Characteristics

The central problem for ACAs is a mistaken belief, formed in childhood, which affects every part of our lives. As children, we fought to survive the destructive effects of alcoholism, and began an endless struggle to change a troubled, dysfunctional family into a loving, supportive one. We reach adulthood believing we failed, unable to see no one can stop the traumatic effects of family alcoholism.

Following naturally from this pervasive sense of failure are self-blame, shame, and guilt. These self-accusations ultimately lead to self-hate. Accepting our basic powerlessness to control alcoholic behavior and its effect on the family is the key that unlocks the Inner Child and lets reparenting begin. When the First Step is applied to family alcoholism, a fundamental basis for self-hate no longer exists.

The ACA Program

Two characteristics identify the ACA Program. The program is for adults raised in alcoholic homes, and although substance abuse may exist, the focus is on the *self*, specifically on reaching and freeing the Inner Child, hidden behind a protective shield of denial.

The purpose of ACA is three-fold: to shelter and support newcomers I confronting denial; to comfort those mourning their early loss of security, trust, and love; and to teach the skills for reparenting ourselves with gentleness, humor, love, and respect.

Recovery in ACA

Moving from isolation is the first step an Adult Child makes in recovering the self. Isolation is both a prison and a sanctuary. Adult Children, suspended between need and fear, unable to choose between fight or flight, agonize in the middle and resolve the tension by explosive bursts of rebellion, or by silently enduring the despair. Isolation is our retreat from the paralyzing pain of indecision.

This retreat into denial blunts our awareness of the destructive reality of family alcoholism and the first stage of mourning and grief. It allows us to cope with the loss of love and to survive in the face of neglect and abuse.

The return of feelings is the second stage of mourning and indicates healing has begun. Initial feelings of anger, guilt, rage, and despair resolve into a final acceptance of loss. Genuine grieving for our childhood ends our morbid fascination with the past and lets us return to the present, free to live as adults.

Confronting years of pain and loss at first seems overwhelming. Jim Goodwin, in describing the Post Traumatic Stress of Vietnam veterans, writes that some veterans, "...actually believe that if they once again allow themselves to feel, they may never stop crying or may completely lose control..."^{1, 2}

Sharing the burden of grief others feel gives us the courage and strength to face our own bereavement. The pain of mourning and grief is balanced by being able, once again, to fully love and care for someone and to freely experience joy in life.

Reparenting Ourselves

The need to reparent ourselves comes from our efforts to feel safe as children. The violent nature of alcoholism darkened our emotional world and left us wounded, hurt, and unable to feel. This extreme alienation from our own internal direction kept us helplessly dependent on those we mistrusted and feared.

In an unstable, hostile, and often dangerous environment, we attempted to meet the impossible demands of living with family alcoholism, and our lives were soon out of control.

To make sense of the confusion, and to end our feelings of fear, we denied inconsistencies in what we were taught. We held rigidly to a few certain beliefs, or we rebelled and distrusted all outside interference.

Freedom begins with being open to love. The dilemma of abandonment is a choice between painful intimacy or hopeless isolation, but the consequence is the same – we protect

ourselves by rejecting the vulnerable Inner Child and are forced to live without warmth or love. Without love, intimacy and isolation are equally painful, empty, and incomplete.

Love dissolves hate. We give ourselves the love we need by releasing our self-hatred and embracing the Child inside. With a child's sensitivity, we reach out to explore the world again and become aware of the need to trust and love others.

The warm affection we have for each other heals our inner hurt. ACA's loving acceptance and gentle support lessen our feelings of fear. We share our beliefs and mistrust without judgment or criticism. We realize the insanity of alcoholism and become willing to replace the confusing beliefs of childhood with the clear, consistent direction of the 12 Steps and Traditions, and to accept the authority of the loving God they reflect.

ACA is a 12-Step Program of Recovery

ACA's relationship to other anonymous programs is a shared dependence on the 12 Steps for a spiritual awakening. Each program's focus is different, but the solution remains the same.

In childhood our identity is formed by the reflection we see in the eyes of the people around us. We fear losing the reflection – thinking the mirror makes us real and that we disappear or have no self without it.

The distorted image of family alcoholism is not who we are. And we are not the unreal person trying to mask that distortion. In ACA we do not stop abusing a substance or losing ourselves in another. We stop believing we have no worth and start to see

our true identity reflecting in the eyes of other Adult Children, as the strong survivors and valuable people we actually are.

¹ *“The Etiology of Combat-Related Post Traumatic Stress Disorders,” Goodwin, Jim, PsyD., Disabled American Veterans, Pub., Cincinnati, p. 16.*

² *Post Traumatic Stress is the tension of unresolved grief following the loss of fundamental security.*

Note: Since this was written, ACA literature has been updated to include those who grew up in dysfunctional as well as in alcoholic homes.

The Problem

Many of us found that we had several characteristics in common as a result of being brought up in an alcoholic or other dysfunctional household. We had come to feel isolated, and uneasy with other people, especially authority figures. To protect ourselves, we became people-pleasers, even though we lost our own identities in the process. All the same we would mistake any personal criticism as a threat. We either became alcoholics (or practiced other addictive behavior) ourselves, or married them, or both. Failing that, we found other compulsive personalities, such as a workaholic, to fulfill our sick need for abandonment.

We lived life from the standpoint of victims. Having an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, we preferred to be concerned with others rather than ourselves. We got guilt feelings when we stood up for ourselves rather than giving in to others. Thus, we became reactors rather than actors, letting others take the initiative. We were dependent personalities,

terrified of abandonment, willing to do almost anything to hold on to a relationship in order not to be abandoned emotionally. Yet, we kept choosing insecure relationships because they matched our childhood relationship with alcoholic or dysfunctional parents.

These symptoms of the family disease of alcoholism or other dysfunction made us ‘co-victims’, those who take on the characteristics of the disease without necessarily ever taking a drink. We learned to keep our feelings down as children and kept them buried as adults. As a result of this conditioning, we confused love with pity, tending to love those we could rescue. Even more self-defeating, we became addicted to excitement in all our affairs, preferring constant upset to workable relationships.

This is a description, not an indictment.

The Solution

The solution is to become your own loving parent.

As ACA becomes a safe place for you, you will find freedom to express all the hurts and fears that you have kept inside and to free yourself from the shame and blame that are carry-overs from the past. You will become an adult who is imprisoned no longer by childhood reactions. You will recover the child within you, learning to love and accept yourself.

The healing begins when we risk moving out of isolation. Feelings and buried memories will return. By gradually releasing the burden of unexpressed grief, we slowly move out of the past. We learn to re-parent ourselves with gentleness, humor, love and respect.

This process allows us to see our biological parents as the instruments of our existence. Our actual parent is a Higher Power whom some of us choose to call God. Although we had alcoholic or dysfunctional parents, our Higher Power gave us the Twelve Steps of Recovery.

This is the action and work that heals us: we use the Steps; we use the meetings; we use the telephone. We share our experience, strength, and hope with each other. We learn to restructure our sick thinking one day at a time. When we release our parents from responsibility for our actions today, we become free to make healthful decisions as actors, not reactors. We progress from hurting, to healing, to helping. We awaken to a sense of wholeness we never knew was possible.

By attending these meetings on a regular basis, you will come to see parental alcoholism or family dysfunction for what it is: a disease that infected you as a child and continues to affect you as an adult. You will learn to keep the focus on yourself in the here and now. You will take responsibility for your own life and supply your own parenting.

You will not do this alone. Look around you and you will see others who know how you feel. We love and encourage you no matter what. We ask you to accept us just as we accept you.

This is a spiritual program based on action coming from love. We are sure that as the love grows inside you, you will see beautiful changes in all your relationships, especially with your Higher Power, yourself, and your parents.

The ACA Twelve Steps

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 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.

The ACA Twelve Traditions

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 personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, T.V. and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

The Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

The ACA Promises

1. We will discover our real identities by loving and accepting ourselves.
2. Our self-esteem will increase as we give ourselves approval on a daily basis.
3. Fear of authority figures and the need to "people-please" will leave us.
4. Our ability to share intimacy will grow inside us.
5. As we face our abandonment issues, we will be attracted by strengths and become more tolerant of weaknesses.
6. We will enjoy feeling stable, peaceful, and financially secure.
7. We will learn how to play and have fun in our lives.
8. We will choose to love people who can love and be responsible for themselves.
9. Healthy boundaries and limits will become easier for us to set.
10. Fears of failures and success will leave us, as we intuitively make healthier choices.
11. With help from our ACA support group, we will slowly release our dysfunctional behaviors.
12. Gradually, with our Higher Power's help, we learn to expect the best and get it.

Sharing in ACA

In ACA, if we do not share, we cannot heal.

It is important for newcomers to share no matter how haltingly, incoherently, or disorganized the words may be. Telling our

stories out loud allows us to hear our problem, recognize it, and validate that truth.

What we share about depends on where we are in our recovery process. As time goes along, our sharing evolves. The first topic is generally what brought us to an ACA meeting. Following that our sharing takes on various functions.

1. In the beginning, we often wail, complain, cry, rant, rave, blame, and whine; this is a necessary stage that brings us out of denial. When we speak our thoughts aloud, we recognize that we have a problem and what it is. Until we make our discomfort real by voicing it, we cannot recognize our problem so we cannot solve it.
2. When we start sharing our problems, feelings start to rise within us, and we begin to learn how to express them appropriately.
3. We describe how we overreacted to a situation and our feelings about it.
4. We describe our current problem and our feelings about it.
5. We trace our feelings about a current situation back to a similar problem we experienced as children, recognizing that neither have been resolved.
6. We grieve our losses.
7. We talk about possible solutions to resolve the childhood problem and the current problem.
8. We commit ourselves to a plan of action to solve the past and present problems.
9. We share our healing as we progress.
10. Finally, we share on topics introduced by others; we describe our own problem, how it was rooted in the past, and how we resolved the past and present problems. In this way we affirm our own recovery and display for our fellows that recovery happens in ACA.

