

13 Characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics

You'll likely identify with these traits if you grew up around alcoholism

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If you grew up in an alcoholic home, you're probably familiar with the feeling of never knowing what to expect from one day to the next. When one or both parents struggle with addiction, the home environment is predictably unpredictable. Argument, inconsistency, unreliability, and chaos tend to run rampant. Children of alcoholics don't get many of their emotional needs met due to these challenges, often leading to skewed behaviors and difficulties in properly caring for themselves and their feelings later in life.¹

If you were never given the attention and emotional support you needed during a key developmental time in your youth and instead were preoccupied with the dysfunctional

behavior of a parent, it may certainly be hard (or perhaps impossible) to know how to get your needs met as an adult. Furthermore, if you lacked positive foundational relationships, it may be difficult to develop healthy, trusting interpersonal relationships later on.¹

Children of alcoholics often have to deny their feelings of sadness, fear, and anger in order to survive. And since unresolved feelings will always surface eventually, they often manifest during adulthood. The advantage to recognizing this is that you're an adult now and no longer a helpless child. You can face these issues and find resolution in a way you couldn't back then.¹

Illustration by JR Bee, Verywell

Lasting Effects

Many children of alcoholics develop similar characteristics and personality traits. In her 1983 landmark book, "Adult Children of Alcoholics," the late Janet G. Woititz, Ed.D, outlined 13 of them.²

Dr. Jan, as she is known, was a best-selling author, lecturer, and counselor who was also married to an alcoholic. Based on her personal experience with alcoholism and its effect on her children, as well as her work with clients who were raised in dysfunctional families, she discovered that these common characteristics are prevalent not only in alcoholic families but also in those who grew up in families where there were other compulsive behaviors, such as gambling, drug abuse, or overeating, or where other dysfunctions occurred, such as the parents were chronically ill or held strict religious attitudes.³

She cited that adult children of alcoholics (ACoAs) often:⁴

- Guess at what normal behavior is
- Have difficulty following a project through from beginning to end
- Lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth
- Judge themselves without mercy
- Have difficulty having fun
- Take themselves very seriously
- Have difficulty with intimate relationships

- Overreact to changes over which they have no control
- Constantly seek approval and affirmation
- Feel that they're different from other people
- Are super responsible or super irresponsible
- Are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved
- Are impulsive—They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsively leads to confusion, self-loathing, and loss of control over their environment. In addition, they spend an excessive amount of energy cleaning up the mess.

Of course, if you're a child of an alcoholic, that doesn't mean that everything on this list will apply to you. But it's likely that at least some of it will.

The Laundry List

Before Dr. Jan's book was published, an adult child of an alcoholic, Tony A., published in 1978 what he called "The Laundry List," another list of characteristics that can seem very familiar to those who grew up in dysfunctional homes.⁵

Tony's list has been adopted as part of the Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization's official literature and is a basis for the article, "[The Problem](#)," published on the group's website.

According to Tony's list, many adult children of alcoholics can:⁵

- Become isolated
- Fear people and authority figures
- Become approval seekers
- Be frightened of angry people
- Be terrified of personal criticism
- Become alcoholics, marry them, or both
- View life as a victim
- Have an overwhelming sense of responsibility
- Be concerned more with others than themselves
- Feel guilty when they stand up for themselves

- Become addicted to excitement
- Confuse love and pity
- "Love" people who need rescuing
- Stuff their feelings
- Lose the ability to feel
- Have low self-esteem
- Judge themselves harshly
- Become terrified of abandonment
- Do anything to hold on to a relationship
- Become "para-alcoholics," people who take on the characteristics of the disease without drinking
- Become reactors instead of actors

ACoAs and Relationships

Many adult children of alcoholics lose themselves in their relationship with others, sometimes finding themselves attracted to alcoholics or other compulsive personalities, such as workaholics, who are emotionally unavailable.¹

Adult children may also form relationships with others who need their help or need to be rescued, to the extent of neglecting their own needs. If they place the focus on the overwhelming needs of someone else, they don't have to look at their own difficulties and shortcomings.¹

Often, adult children of alcoholics will take on the characteristics of alcoholics, even though they've never picked up a drink: exhibiting denial, poor coping skills, poor problem solving, and forming dysfunctional relationships.

Support

If you identify with the characteristics outlined in either Dr. Woititz's or Tony A.'s book, you might want to take our [Adult Children Screening Quiz](#) to get an idea of how much you may have been affected by growing up as you did.

Many adult children find that seeking [professional treatment or counseling](#) for insight into their feelings, behaviors, and struggles helps them achieve greater awareness of how their childhood

shaped who they are today. This is often overwhelming in the beginning, but it can help you learn how to express your needs and cope with conflict in new and constructive ways.¹

If you or a loved one are struggling with substance use or addiction, contact the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\) National Helpline](#) at **1-800-662-4357** for information on support and treatment facilities in your area.

For more mental health resources, see our [National Helpline Database](#).

Others have found help through mutual support groups such as Al-Anon Family Groups or [Adult Children of Alcoholics](#). You can find a support group meeting in your area or [online meetings](#) for both Al-Anon and ACOA.