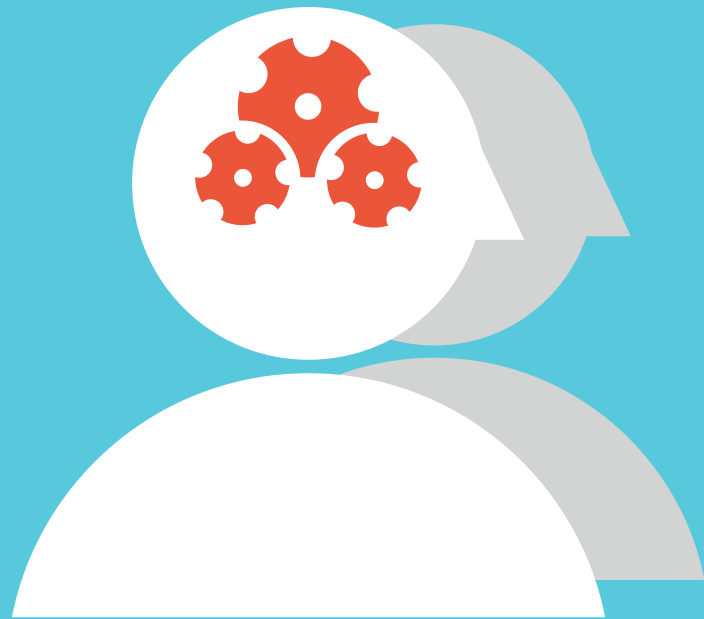




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Adult Children of Alcoholics

# Mental Health



†SEIRBHÍS TACAÍOCHTA AGUS FORBARTHA  
STUDENT SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

## Adult Children of Alcoholics

### Has alcohol affected your life?

Alcoholism runs in families. Children of alcoholics run a higher risk of developing alcoholism than other children. Adult children of alcoholics also tend to marry alcoholics. Although they may not be aware of it at the time, a pattern is being created.

Adult children of alcoholics tend to adopt roles within their families in an effort to cope with the everyday dysfunction. Such roles may include the following:

**Responsible:** Over serious and self-reliant, difficulty in trusting others, unable to relax, need to be in control

**Adjuster:** Pride themselves on being flexible. Avoids taking charge

**Placater:** Takes care of others, while ignoring their own needs.

These have been characterised as:

**The Care Taker:** Self-esteem based on how many people they take care of, the “fixer”,

**The People Pleaser:** Someone who is unable to say no, who never wants to make anyone angry,

**The Martyr:** Self-esteem is based on suffering more than anyone else who always puts others first

**The Workaholic:** Self-image based on activity. S/he has learned from the family that you are only as good as what you produce,

**The Perfectionist:** No matter how well they perform or how much they do, it is never good enough,

**The Stump:** Self-image is based on survival. Survival and safety is achieved by fading into the woodwork to such an extent that no one knows they are there.

These roles and characteristics have also been described as the Family Hero/, Super Kid, Scapegoat, Problem Kid, the Lost Child, Mascot or Family Clown.

A family in which there is an alcohol problem becomes a dysfunctional family where members avoid, rationalise or cover up problems and carefully guard or deny secrets. There is a tendency among family members to indulge and distrust feelings and conceal them in order to avoid dealing with their own issues. They do this by judging, criticising, blaming or attempting to control others. In addition, family members may violate one another's personal boundaries or remain aloof and unavailable behind well-fortified emotional and psychological defences.



There are a number of core issues which affect the adult children of alcoholics. They can hate and fear being out of control in any situation. They may distrust both themselves and others. This is frequently the result of being told lies within the family. Adult children of alcoholics learn to minimise and ignore their feelings as emotions and feelings are perceived as being wrong and bad. They often see things in black and white terms and engage in “all or nothing” thinking. They may suffer from dissociation which provides them with an emotional anaesthetic. They can learn to separate themselves from the reality of what is going on in the family. Such adult children may be adrenaline “junkies”, creating crisis after crisis to survive. They may also take on responsibility for everything that is going on.

These core issues are often triggered by:

- Intimate relationships requiring warmth, trust and sharing
- Major life transitions or stressors which encourage that these adult children of alcoholics return automatically to old patterns of behaviour
- Performance and the imperative that “I must get it right”.



### **Can an adult child of an alcoholic move on from here?**

Therapy / counselling involves looking at the painful family experience that the person comes from and which promoted low self-esteem, secrets, jealousy, suspicion, rigid attitudes, entangled relationships, manipulation and control. The goal is to move towards a healthier family system that builds self-worth, where communication is open, where there is trust, love independence and growth. The person is encouraged to break the pattern of secrecy and create new traditions and open mindedness. Assertiveness techniques may be acquired. Role playing may also be used to challenge the inner critic in order to identify the critic and the message it sends.

### **Some more help?**

The following reading may also be helpful:

Gravitz, H.L. and Bowden, J.D. (1985) *Recovery: A guide for adult children of alcoholics* New York : Simon & Schuster

Wegschieder, S. (1981) *Another chance: Hope and health for the alcoholic family* Palo Alto , CA : Science and Behaviour Books

Woititz, J.G. (1983) *Adult children of alcoholics* Fla , Health Communications

Please remember, The DCU Counselling and Personal Development Service is here to help. Should any questions arise from the above topic or if you would like more information, please feel free to contact us.

Also, if you wish to inquire about making an appointment with the DCU Counselling and Personal Development Service, please do not hesitate to connect with us, we would be more than happy to be of further support to you.



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