



Core Competencies for Co-Dependents

by Stephanie Abbott

The stories of ACOA parents struggling to do a good job of raising their children provoke thoughts of what happened in their childhoods. What would have made a difference in that original family? A successful intervention with the alcoholic is an obvious choice, but in addition the sober parent can make an enormous difference in mitigating the damage to the children.

People are not born knowing how to deal effectively with someone else's addiction. A few instinctively avoid enabling and put an intervention in place early. The great majority bumble along repeating what doesn't work, managing the best they can, and adding to the damage to their children in the process. This is the normal response to addiction in the family, but the normal response is not good for children.

Family members believe they can control someone else's drinking. That is why we hear of children sent to find their parent in bars, left at home with orders to watch the alcoholic, told to be quiet and well behaved so they won't upset the drinker and make things worse, and other efforts that don't work. If Al-Anon and family counseling relieve them of these false beliefs, non-addicted parents are free to give their children the structure and attention they need.

The traumatic stress of living with an alcoholic leads to loss of self-control. This is why we hear of children who witness screaming fights between their parents, receive too much discipline one day and none the next, and live with disorder, confusion and lack of predictability. Parents may know this is not good for their children but the sense of helplessness in the situation can be overwhelming. If Al-Anon and a parental support group is there for them, giving them tools that actually work, they can change their reactions to the addiction.

There have been many books and pamphlets published in the last twenty years that give good direction to the puzzled spouse of an addict. In addition, there are books explaining alcoholism that can be read to young children, and others aimed at those who can read to themselves. COA support groups are out there. When loyalty to past behavior is overcome, a productive and healthy response to alcoholism is possible and helps healing for the children.

Research has made it clear that the majority of spouses of alcoholics are not mentally ill, control freaks, or people who enjoy suffering. They are simply overwhelmed by someone else's addiction.

When the parent is not given the education and tools, or what we might think of as "core competencies" for co-dependents, the next generation is left - at best - with a do-it-yourself approach to their own children.

Stephanie Abbott, MA, specialized in the family aspects of addiction, created the family program at Brighton Hospital in Michigan, taught at Marymount College in Arlington VA and is the editor of NACoA NETWORK.