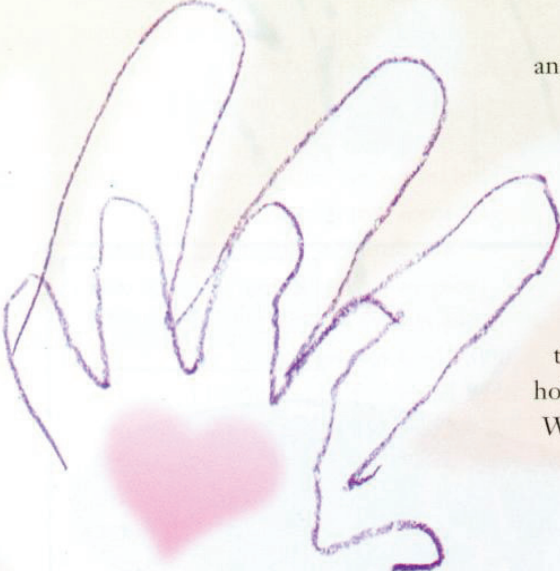


Reaching Out to Parents

Understanding how you can become part of the solution

Addiction is puzzling to outsiders. How can people destroy their lives like that, and how can anyone bear to live with an addicted person and watch the deterioration that inevitably occurs? Why would parents subject their children to such a sad and chaotic environment?



While there aren't any simple answers to these questions, we do know some important facts about alcoholism. We know that alcoholism has a genetic component and that it runs in families. Research has shown that children of alcoholic parents have an approximately three to four times greater risk of becoming alcoholic than children of non-alcoholics. We also know that it is a lifestyle disease caused by excessive use of alcohol.

Experience has also shown us that friends and family members often unwittingly befriend the disease by making it easier for the alcoholic or addict to go on drinking or using drugs. Friends and family members who care about and want to help the addict often do things that actually support the person's addictive behavior — things like making excuses for the person, paying the person's bills, bailing the addict out of jail, and even lecturing or blaming the addict.

The wrong approach

Why is hostile or belligerent lecturing and blaming an enabling behavior? Because verbal abuse (or worse) gives the alcoholic an "excuse" to drink. If the family member or friend who is confronting the alcoholic is angry or out of control, the alcoholic is likely to see this as another reason or excuse to get drunk. And in terms of family dynamics, it becomes the person who is confronting the addict who now appears to have the problem, not the addict. After all, it is that person who has lost his or her temper and possibly made threats.

As anyone who's ever given an alcoholic an ultimatum will tell you, intimidation and blame don't work. Until alcoholics experience and genuinely understand the harmful effects of their drinking and/or drug abuse, they won't do anything about their addiction.

So how can you help a parent who is trying to cope with an addiction? First you need to understand that family education and support can lead to intervention and ultimately to recovery. Yes, you can be optimistic: alcoholics can recover. In fact, there is a better recovery rate for treated alcoholism than for many other serious diseases.

Alcoholism tends to sneak up on people after a few years of drinking that perhaps hadn't worried the family because it had seemed to be normal social drinking. Most people don't realize

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that the disease is worsening over time until things have gotten out of control. By the time family members and friends are alarmed by — or even aware of — the problem, they usually have no idea what to do about it. That's why blaming the non-addicted spouse or the addict is inappropriate and actually can undermine any efforts to help the person.

Moving toward a solution

We live in a society that encourages drinking and using, yet we tend to be judgmental about people who get addicted to alcohol as well as their families. As a result, families are ashamed of the addiction, and, not surprisingly, they try to hide it from others. Shame is a natural and common component of this family disease. It leads parents with substance abuse problems to lie to their children and family members about what is going on, to deceive themselves by denying they are addicted, and to avoid seeking help. These efforts to minimize shame lead to deep-seated feelings of isolation and loneliness for the entire family.

These reactions are not healthy, nor are they productive in terms of getting the person into treatment and recovery, but they are normal. The enabling, blaming, shame, fear, and denial are things that almost all families go through in their efforts to contain and remedy the problem. When we understand that, our attitudes toward these families change. When we let go of the resentment and disapproval we might feel for substance-abusing parents, we can begin to help them and their children work toward recovery. And only when families don't feel as though they are being judged and have to defend themselves are they going to be able and willing to accept help and support.

You can help parents caught in this painful situation by being prepared through education to understand the aspects of this disease and by having a caring and nonjudgmental attitude. Have information about Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon, two free support groups, and a referral list of intervention specialists and community resources on hand, so that when an opportunity to talk about the problem arises, you'll be prepared to help. Pamphlets about the nature of addiction, the possibilities of recovery, how to talk to the children about what is going on, and other important topics can be displayed on bulletin boards at the center or added to resource tables, giving all parents who come to your center access to them. You can often readily find these materials in Spanish as well as English. Include helpful and supportive information about beating addiction in your program's newsletter. Contact your state substance abuse agency, and invite a substance abuse counselor, family counselor, and/or a recovering alcoholic to speak during a staff training workshop so that all staff members can increase their understanding of the disease and its effects on parents and children, learn to identify warning signs, and have a better idea of how they can help.

Remember: Alcoholism is treatable, and you are in a wonderful position to be part of the solution to the unnecessary suffering of family alcoholism. **CSF**

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For information on alcoholism, contact...

- Al-Anon: visit www.al-anon.alateen.org or call (888) 425-2666.
- Alcoholics Anonymous: visit www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.
- National Association for Children of Alcoholics: visit www.nacoa.org or call (888) 554-2627.
- National Drug and Treatment Referral Routing Service: call (800) 662-4357.
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: visit www.niaaa.nih.gov.
- National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: visit www.nofas.org or call (202) 785-4585.
- SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information: visit www.health.org.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: visit www.samhsa.gov.

Additional reading on families' reaction to alcoholism

- *Perfect Daughters: Adult Daughters of Alcoholics*, by Robert J. Ackerman.
- *Talk, Trust, and Feel: Keeping Codependency Out of Your Life*, by Melody Beattie.
- *Codependant No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*, by Melody Beattie.
- *It Will Never Happen to Me*, by Claudia Black.
- *Getting Them Sober: You Can Help!* by Toby Rice Drews.
- *I'll Quit Tomorrow: A Practical Guide to Alcoholism Treatment*, by Vernon E. Johnson.
- *Another Chance: Hope and Health for the Alcoholic Family*, by Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse.

To find your state's substance abuse agency contact information, go to <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/ufds/abusedirectors>.