



Coping With an Alcoholic Parent

Anthony is in bed when he hears the front door slam. He covers his head with his pillow so he doesn't have to listen to the sound of his parents arguing. Anthony knows that his mother has been drinking again. He starts worrying about getting to school on time and realizes he will probably have to help get his younger sister ready too.

Why Do People Drink Too Much?

Lots of people live with a parent or caregiver who is an [alcoholic](#) or who drinks too much. Alcoholism has been around for centuries, yet no one has discovered an easy way to prevent it.

Alcohol can affect people's health and also how they act. People who are drunk might be more aggressive or have mood swings. They may act in a way that is embarrassing to them or other people.

Alcoholism is a disease. Like any disease, it needs to be treated. Without professional help, a person with alcoholism will probably continue to drink and may even become worse over time.

Diseases like alcoholism are no one's fault. Some people are more susceptible to wanting to drink too much. Scientists think it has to do with genetics, as well as things like family history, and life events.

Sometimes what starts as a bad habit can become a very big problem. For example, people may drink to cope with problems like boredom, stress, or money troubles. Maybe there's an illness in the family, or parents are having marriage problems.

No matter what anyone says, people don't drink because of someone else's behavior. So if you live with someone who has a drinking problem, don't blame yourself.

How Does Alcoholism Affect Families?

If you live with a parent who drinks, you may feel embarrassed, angry, sad, hurt, or any number of emotions. You may feel helpless: When parents promise to stop drinking, for example, it can end in frustration when they don't keep their promises.

Problem drinking can change how families function. A parent may have trouble keeping a job and problems paying the bills. Older kids may have to take care of younger siblings.

Some parents with alcohol problems might mistreat or abuse their children emotionally or physically. Others may neglect their kids by not providing sufficient care and guidance. Parents with alcohol problems might also use other drugs.

Despite what happens, most children of alcoholics love their parents and worry about something bad happening to them. Kids who live with problem drinkers often try all kinds of ways to prevent them from drinking. But, just as family members don't cause the addiction, they can't stop it either.

The person with the drinking problem has to take charge. Someone who has a bad habit or an addiction to alcohol needs to get help from a treatment center.

Alcoholism affects family members just as much as it affects the person drinking. Because of this, there are lots of support groups to help children of alcoholics cope with the problem.



Problem Drinker or Social Drinker?

Many people like to have a glass of wine, beer, or other alcohol, but they're not alcoholics. They're in control. They can stop after one or two glasses, and they usually drink in social situations or at specific times, like dinner. But when someone drinks so much that it changes their behavior and makes them unpredictable, mean, or embarrassing, it's a problem.

What If a Parent Doesn't See a Problem?

Drinking too much can be a problem that nobody likes to talk about. In fact, lots of parents may become enraged at the slightest suggestion that they are drinking too much.

Sometimes, parents deny that they have a problem. A person in denial refuses to believe the truth about a situation. So problem drinkers may try to blame someone else because it is easier than taking responsibility for their own drinking.

Some parents make their families feel bad by saying stuff like, "You're driving me crazy!" or "I can't take this anymore." That can be harmful, especially to kids: Most young children don't know that the problem has nothing to do with their actions and that it's all in the drinker's mind.

Some parents do acknowledge their drinking, but deny that it's a problem. They may say stuff like, "I can stop anytime I want to," "Everyone drinks to unwind sometimes," or "My drinking is not a problem."

Lots of people fall into the trap of thinking that a parent's drinking is only temporary. They tell themselves that, when a particular problem is over, like having a rough time at work, the drinking will stop. But even if a parent who drinks too much has other problems, drinking is a separate problem. And that problem won't go away unless the drinker gets help.

Why Do I Feel So Bad?

If you're like most teens, your life is probably filled with emotional ups and downs, regardless of what's happening at home. Add a parent with a drinking problem to the mix, and it can all seem like too much.

There are many reasons why a parent's drinking can contribute to feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness, embarrassment, worry, loneliness, and helplessness. For example:

- **You might be subjected to a parent's changing moods.** People who drink can behave unpredictably. Kids who grow up around them may spend a lot of energy trying to figure out a parent's mood or guess what that parent wants. One day you might walk on eggshells to avoid an outburst because the dishes aren't done or the lawn isn't mowed. The next day, you may find yourself comforting a parent who promises that things will be better.
- **It may be hard to do things with friends or other people.** For some people, it feels like too much trouble to have a friend over or do the things that everyone else does. You just never know how your parent will act. Will your mom or dad show up drunk for school events or drive you (and your friends) home drunk?
- **You might be stressed or worried.** It can be scary to listen to adults in the house yell, fight, or break things by accident. Worrying about a parent just adds to all the other emotions you may be feeling. Are you lying awake waiting for mom or dad to get home safely? Do you feel it's not fair that you have to be the grown up and take care of things around the house? These are all normal reactions.

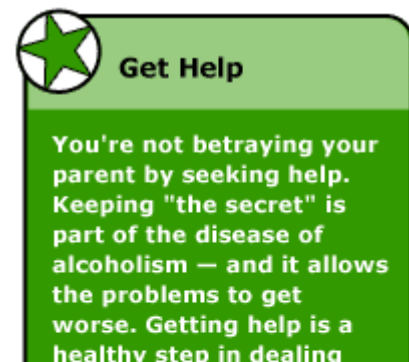
Although each family is different, people who grow up with alcoholic parents often feel alone, unloved, depressed, or burdened by the secret life they lead at home.

You know it's not possible to cause or stop the behavior of an alcoholic. So what can you do to feel better (or help a friend feel better)?

What Can I Do?

Acknowledge the problem. Many kids of parents who drink too much try to protect their parents or hide the problem. Admitting that your parent has a problem — even if he or she won't — is the first step in taking control. Start by talking to a friend, teacher, counselor, or coach. If you can't face telling someone you know, call an organization like Al-Anon/Alateen (they have a 24-hour hotline at 1-800-344-2666) or go online for help.

Be informed. Being aware of how your parent's drinking affects you can help put things in perspective. For example, some teens who live with alcoholic adults become afraid to speak out or show any normal



anger or emotion because they worry it may trigger a parent's drinking. Remind yourself that you are not responsible for your parent drinking too much, and that you cannot cause it or stop it.

Be aware of your emotions. When you feel things like anger or resentment, try to identify those feelings. Talk to a close friend or write down how you are feeling. Recognizing how a parent's problem drinking makes you feel can help you from burying your feelings and pretending that everything's OK.

healthy step in dealing with the problems a parent's drinking create. In fact, taking care of yourself is what your parents would want you to do, especially if they have trouble doing it every day because of their drinking.

Learn healthy coping strategies. When we grow up around people who turn to alcohol or other unhealthy ways of dealing with problems, they become our example. Watching new role models can help people learn healthy coping mechanisms and ways of making good decisions.

Coaches, aunts, uncles, parents of friends, or teachers all have to deal with things like frustration or disappointment. Watch how they do it. School counselors can be a great resource here. Next time you have a problem, ask someone you trust for help.

Find support. It's good to share your feelings with a friend, but it's equally important to talk to an adult you trust. A school counselor, favorite teacher, or coach may be able to help. Some teens turn to their school D.A.R.E. (Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education) officer. Others prefer to talk to a family member or parents of a close friend.

Because alcoholism is such a widespread problem, several organizations offer confidential support groups and meetings for people living with alcoholics. Alateen is a group specifically geared to young people living with adults who have drinking problems. Alateen can also help teens whose parents may already be in treatment or recovery. The group Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) also offers resources for people living with alcoholics.

Find a safe environment. Do you find yourself avoiding your house as much as possible? Are you thinking about running away? If you feel that the situation at home is becoming dangerous, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at (800) 799-SAFE. And don't hesitate to dial 911 if you think you or another family member is in immediate danger.

Stop the cycle. Teenage children of alcoholics are at higher risk of becoming alcoholics themselves. Scientists think this is because of genetics and the environment that kids grow up in. For example, people might learn to drink as a way to avoid fear, boredom, anxiety, sadness, or other unpleasant feelings. Understanding that there could be a problem and finding adults and peers to help you can be the most important thing you do to reduce the risk of problem drinking.

Alcoholism is a disease. You can show your love and support, but you won't be able to stop someone from drinking. Talking about the problem, finding support, and choosing healthy ways to cope are choices you can make to feel more in control of the situation. Above all, don't give up!

Reviewed by: Michelle J. New, PhD
Date reviewed: February 2010



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