



## INFORMATION

### **New Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics and Dysfunctional Families**

#### **Introduction**

Growing up as the child of an alcoholic parent is tough – and for many, the emotional consequences are severe. Adult children of alcoholics and dysfunctional families, however, can take comfort in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles. Thousands of these individuals across the country have been able to find encouragement and healing through Christ-centered support groups.

You may wish to copy and distribute these pages to your church as is, or you can modify them for the particular needs of your group. These are basic tools for your use.

#### **Group Guidelines**

The concordance of the New American Standard Bible defines “hope” as “comfort, expectation, confidence, trust.” Perhaps that is why many people raised in an alcoholic home have faced despair and depression at some time in their lives.

A young child first looks to his parents for comfort. Based upon the comfort he receives, he learns to expect that his parents will always be there for him and trusts that his needs will be met. In the alcoholic home, this comfort and trust is not always there. The alcoholic numbs his feelings with his drinking, and the spouse, too, will often deny feelings. The child then learns to suppress his normal emotions and denies that he really needs anyone to comfort him – thus beginning a life that is based on hopelessness and powerlessness. The unwritten rule of the alcoholic family often is: “Don’t talk; don’t trust; don’t feel.”

Many children of alcoholics, however, grow up to be overachievers and appear quite successful in the early years of their lives. They may even become Christians, but often still have difficulty in relationships and struggle with feelings of low self-worth. These adults often find it hard to believe that even God really loves them. They attempt to seek His approval by frantically serving Him, only to experience “burnout” because they give too much. Other children of alcoholics will not survive so well – they become alcoholics or drug abusers themselves, or develop some other form of compulsive or rebellious behavior.

The purpose of this group is to help adult children of alcoholics be aware of the burdens they carry and begin to move toward forgiveness and healing of the past. It provides a safe place in a Christian atmosphere to openly and honestly share with others who understand. Through group support and application of Scripture, these adults can begin to realize God’s love and acceptance of them and experience personal and spiritual growth.

Whatever your painful childhood memories have been, remember that you are not alone – over 25 million adults in the United States today are children of alcoholics. You are accepted here, whatever your frame of mind: whether you're depressed and have lost all hope, or are thinking you're OK and in need of no one. Be open and honest with us, and we will be honest with you. Together we will discover how God can work in our lives to relieve the burdens of our past and give us hope for the future.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you. (1 Peter 1:3-4, NASB)*

Much of the information on the following pages (not including Scripture references) was adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous materials.

### **Group's Objectives**

*So may God, the fountain of hope, fill you with all joy and peace in your believing, so that you may enjoy overflowing hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13, Berkeley Version)*

### **H – Healing** of painful childhood memories.

*. . . I am still not all I should be but I am bringing all my energies to bear on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God is calling us up to heaven because of what Christ Jesus did for us. (Philippians 3:13-14, TLB)*

*For I will restore you to health, and I will heal you of your wounds, declares the Lord, because they have called you an outcast . . . (Jeremiah 30:17, NASB)*

### **O – Open** sharing of feelings and emotions.

*Share the joy of those who are happy and the grief of those who grieve. (Romans 12:15, Berkeley Version)*

### **P – Prayer**

*Admit your faults to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous man has great power and wonderful results. (James 5:16, TLB)*

*The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth. (Psalm 145:18, NASB)*

### **E – Encouragement** toward growth and responsible living and a feeling of self-worth based on God's love.

*Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NASB)*

*So, take a new grip with your tired hands, stand firm on your shaky legs, and mark out a straight, smooth path for your feet so those who follow you, though weak and lame, will not fall and hurt themselves, but become strong. (Hebrews 12:12-13, TLB)*

*And I pray that Christ may be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in Him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high His love really is and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so at last you will be filled up with God Himself. (Ephesians 3:17-19, TLB)*

## **Five Short Chapters in the Book of Recovery**

### **Chapter 1**

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost ... I am hopeless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

### **Chapter 2**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

### **Chapter 3**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in ... it's a habit.  
My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

### **Chapter 4**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

### **Chapter 5**

I walk down another street.

### **The Problem**

Perhaps some of the following characteristics describe you as they do many adult children of alcoholics:

- We become isolated and afraid of people and authority figures. Angry people and personal criticism frighten us. We either become alcoholics ourselves or marry them, or both. Failing that, we find another compulsive personality, such as a workaholic, to fulfill our subconscious need for abandonment.
- We view life as victims, and we are attracted to weakness in our love, friendships and career relationships.
- We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, and it is easy for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves. This helps us to avoid looking too closely at our own faults, and to avoid responsibility for ourselves. Somehow we feel guilty if we stand up for ourselves instead of giving in to others.
- We become addicted to excitement in all our affairs. We confuse love with pity, and we tend to rescue others and try to “fix” them.
- We have denied feelings from our traumatic childhood and have lost the ability to express our feelings, because they hurt so much. We cannot express even comfortable feelings such as joy or happiness.
- We judge ourselves harshly and fear the judgment of others, yet we also criticize and judge others.
- We are terrified of abandonment, and will do almost anything to hold onto a relationship rather than experience the painful feeling of abandonment. We developed this from living in an alcoholic environment where no one was emotionally “there” for us.

As alcoholism is a family disease, we took on symptoms early in childhood and carried them into adulthood. Even though we may never take a drink ourselves, we have acquired unhealthy behavior patterns that have given us difficulty, especially in our intimate relationships. This is a description, not an indictment. We have learned to survive by becoming reactors rather than actors. What we have learned we can unlearn, however, in “the Solution.”

### **The Solution**

Though our parents gave us our physical existence, we now look to God, our Heavenly Father, as the initiator of our new life. We look to Him for direction to a new level of experience, a life of wholeness and healing of the past. We learn that we do not have to remain prisoners of our past.

Recovery begins when we begin to learn about the disease of alcoholism. We learn that it is threefold: physical, spiritual and mental. We learn the three “C’s”: we didn’t Cause it; we can’t Control it; we can’t Cure it. By educating ourselves about the disease, we begin a process that

eventually leads us to forgiveness of our parents and the willingness to release them to God. We learn to focus on ourselves in the here and now and to detach from our obsession with the alcoholic. We learn to love ourselves and others, even though this may sometimes take the form of "tough love." We learn that real love cannot exist without the dimension of justice.

We learn to experience our feelings, and then to express them. This builds self-esteem, which is a missing ingredient in our personalities. We learn that, in Christ, we are OK – we are not "crazy." With God's help and "12 Steps" based on Scripture, we can recover from the disease of parental alcoholism and turn our lives in a new and beautiful direction.

As we learn to admit our powerlessness over alcoholism and people, places and things we cannot change, we let God begin to heal our thinking and our defects one day at a time. We learn to let God and the group nurture us, and we learn to nurture and accept ourselves and others.

As we begin to discover and love ourselves as God loves us, we will see beautiful changes in all our relationships — especially with our parents, ourselves and God. If we are married and if we have children, we will find healthier ways of interacting with these loved ones too. Finally, we become actors, rather than reactors.

### **The 12 Steps to Healing**

(Adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous' 12 Steps – all verses NASB)

1. We acknowledge and accept that we are powerless in controlling the lives of others and that trying to control others makes our lives unmanageable.

*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. (Romans 7:18)*

2. We have come to believe that only through God's power and the truth of His Word can order and hope be restored in our lives.

*For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)*

3. We make a decision to turn our lives over to God and honestly accept that taking responsibility for ourselves is the only way growth can take place in us.

*I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Romans 12:1)*

4. We take an inventory of ourselves, looking for our mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, volitional and social assets and liabilities. We look at what we have, how we use it and how we can acquire what we need.

*Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord. (Lamentations 3:40)*

5. Using this inventory as a guide, we admit to ourselves, to God and to other caring persons the exact nature of what is within that is causing us pain.

*Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. (James 5:16a)*

6. We give God all former pain, hurt and mistakes, resentment and bitterness, anger and guilt. We trust that we can let go of the hurt we cause and receive.

*Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (James 4:10)*

7. We can ask for help, support and guidance, and be willing to take responsibility for ourselves and to be responsible to others.

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)*

8. We begin a program of living responsibly for ourselves, acknowledging our feelings, mistakes and successes. We become responsible for our part in relationships with others.

*And just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way. (Luke 6:31)*

9. We make a list of persons to whom we want to make amends and commence to do so, except where doing so would cause further pain for others.

*If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5:23-24)*

10. We continue to work our program, each day checking out our progress and asking for feedback from others in our attempt to recover and grow. We do this through support groups.

*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12)*

11. We begin to see ourselves as God sees us. Through prayer and meditation on His Word, we seek deeper understanding of Him, a knowledge of His will for our lives and the power to carry out His will.

*Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you. (Colossians 3:16a)*

12. Having experienced the power of growing toward wholeness, we find our bodies, minds and spirits awakened to a new sense of physical and emotional relief. This awakening leaves us open to a new awareness of God's love for us and our own self-worth. We then are able to relate in a healthy way to others and share ourselves honestly with them. Becoming who we are is a lifetime task, and it must be accomplished one day at a time.

*Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)*

### **The Promises**

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are halfway through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past or wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word “serenity,” and we will know peace.

No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in others. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations that used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us – sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. They will always materialize if we work for them.

### **Recovering From Denial**

Adult children of alcoholics who have come far enough out of denial to recognize and admit the personal validity of “the Problem” are among the toughest, sanest and psychologically strongest people the world knows. We have shown a capacity for personal responsibility that is unusual, to say the least.

Though in the past we may have adopted insanity, suicide attempts, self-abuse, drinking, excessive eating, drug abuse, compulsive working or obsessive relationships as methods of coping, we now have a chance to be sane – totally sane – in every way.

After surviving the traumas of childhood, we have come together through 12-step programs, therapies, consciousness expansion programs, insane asylums, jails and hospitals. All that is needed now is a safe place where we can finally shed our defenses and our denial, and *admit to ourselves and others how angry, hurt, maddened and wounded we have ALWAYS felt*. Admit, experience and release.

And finally, we *are* safe. We have ourselves. We have one another. We are sister, brother, father and mother to one another. We can rely on one another until we are able to claim our adulthood and responsibility for ourselves, our lives and everything in them.

Anyone who can make it through six meetings of any ACA group without retreating once again into denial has begun an *irreversible* process of recovery. Many of us act out old dramas and defenses at least once again, as if to see whether this old behavior really is unnecessary. It is indeed unnecessary, and typically we don't slip back into denial and other obsessions. We become more than survivors – we change into *overcomers*! The 12 Steps work!

### **Characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics**

Adult children of alcoholics...

1. ... guess at what normal is.
2. ... have difficulty following through from beginning to end.
3. ... lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth.
4. ... judge themselves without mercy.
5. ... find it difficult to have fun.
6. ... take themselves very seriously.
7. ... overreact to changes over which they have no control.
8. ... constantly seek approval and affirmation.
9. ... have difficulty with intimate relationships.
10. ... usually feel different from other people.
11. ... are either very responsible or very irresponsible.
12. ... are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved.
13. ... tend to lock themselves into a course of action without seriously considering alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsiveness leads to confusion, self-loathing and loss of control.

—by Janet G. Woititz, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, Health Communications, Inc.

### **Suggested Introduction for Your ACA Group**

The following is a suggested approach for the opening of an ACA group meeting. Leaders may wish to use this procedure and wording exactly as shown here, or modify it as they see fit. We suggest that before beginning the meeting the leader select volunteers to read “the Problem,” “the Solution” and “the 12 Steps.”

1. “Hi, everyone, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. This is the regular meeting of ACA, a support group for adult children of alcoholics. We hope you will find here a safe place where, together, we can finally shed our denial and our defenses, and admit to ourselves and others how hurt and angry and wounded we have felt as a result of growing up in an alcoholic household. Admit it . . . experience it ... and release it to God through prayer, meditation on His Word and open and honest sharing with one another.”

2. Opening prayer by leader.

3. "And now, so that we can get to know you and you us, will you please hold up your hand if you are attending a meeting for the first time?" (Ask newcomers to introduce themselves by first name only.)

4. "We will now hear the Problem." (Reader will introduce himself by first name and then read "the Problem.") "Thank you."

"We will now hear the Solution." (Reader will introduce himself by first name and then read "the Solution.") "Thank you."

"We will now hear the 12 Steps." (Reader will introduce himself by first name and then read "the 12 Steps.") "Thank you."

5. "We hope you have identified with "the Problem" and have an open mind about working, one day at a time, toward "the Solution." It takes time. Please be very patient with yourself and with us. If you are a member of another 12-step program, you will find this to be a different way to focus on the same suggested steps.

"Some newcomers tell us that attending these meetings makes them aware of a hole inside themselves – a hole in the middle. This is, we believe, the empty space where the normal love of a child for a parent can be restored – by working through "the 12 Steps" and appropriating God's love to fill that empty space.

"In that empty space you can expect to get in touch with lots of feelings you may have denied yourself until now. It may be fear, or anger, or hurt, or unexpressed love. It may be these feelings and more. For today, we hope you will adopt us as your family and feel free to share those feelings. We will support you as brothers and sisters.

"This is a special occasion. You will probably see some tears today, and you will certainly hear laughter. Tears and laughter are serious expressions. We try not to be solemn or frivolous. We try to help each other set down that heavy load of negative emotion and let God lift us to a new level of expressing our joy or sorrow, realizing that these are legitimate emotions that He has given us."

### **Rules for Group Discussion**

1. While others are talking, please let them finish without interruption.

2. No "fixing." We are to listen, support and be supported by one another – not give advice.

3. It's OK to feel angry here and to express your anger in the group. We will hear you, but try to be considerate of others in the room.

4. Speak in the "I" mode about how something or someone made you feel. Example: "I felt sad when ..."

5. Keep sharing for no longer than five minutes, in order that others in the group will also be able to share.
6. Try to share from the heart as honestly as you can. It's OK to cry, laugh and be angry in the group without condemnation from others.
7. Remember that some people are here for the first time – others for the 60<sup>th</sup> time. Group members are in various stages of recovery. Give newcomers permission to be new, and old-timers permission to be further along in their recovery. We're here to welcome everyone into our family and to help them feel safe about sharing their lives.

### **Additional Resources Available from Focus on the Family**

8605 Explorer Drive  
Colorado Springs, CO 80920 • 719/531-5181

*Item availability is subject to change. In such cases, our staff members would be pleased to help you find appropriate alternatives as they are able. Inclusion on this list does not necessarily constitute endorsement of material content or organizational viewpoint by Focus on the Family.*

### **Books**

**BOUNDARIES: WHEN TO SAY NO, WHEN TO SAY YES** by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan) • 247454 •

The authors' purpose is to help readers set mental, physical, emotional and spiritual boundaries for their lives so that they can distinguish what is their responsibility and what is not.

**CHANGES THAT HEAL** by Dr. Henry Cloud (Zondervan) • 0214637 •

Dr. Henry Cloud explains why people develop emotional and relational problems and describes how these issues can be solved. His purpose is to help people become mature image bearers of God by setting boundaries, accepting good and bad in the world, and becoming an adult by separating from parents and developing peer relationships with other adults.

**THE HEALING JOURNEY FOR ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS** by Daryl E. Quick (InterVarsity) • 0813284 •

The purpose of this book is to assist the adult children of alcoholics (ACAs) who are often plagued with emotional and behavioral problems. The author offers hope and encouragement for the ACA by outlining a recovery plan which includes awareness, acceptance, and action.

**WHEN GOD DOESN'T MAKE SENSE** by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale) • 82372 •

Encountering difficulties in life can challenge one's faith in God. When questions are left unanswered, one may feel a profound sense of abandonment by God. Dr. James Dobson addresses those who have been left confused and disillusioned by life's problems.

## CDs

### **“Adult Children of Alcoholics” I-III (Panel) • 5008991 •**

Three adult children of alcoholics reveal the pain of growing up in alcoholic homes and discuss some of the common traits that many ACAs possess, including a fear of intimacy. They also provide practical healing steps through Christ.

### **“A Counselor’s Search for Wholeness” (Dr. Jim Conway) • 5009025 •**

Many adults suffer from insecurity, anger and pain due to a troubled upbringing. Pastor and counselor Jim Conway is one of them. He describes the typical patterns of family dysfunction, examples of the pain he endured, and how his traumatic childhood hurt his wife and children.

### **“Family Stress: When Relationships Break Down” (Rev. Dewey Bertolini) • 5008921 •**

A youth pastor relates his hateful relationship with his father. Though his father had rejected him, God brought about healing and reconciliation.

### **“Healing the Past and Moving On” (Carolyn Koons) • 5008958 •**

Carolyn Koons shares the heartbreaking trauma of her severely abusive childhood and her pilgrimage of recovery. She explains how faith in Christ brought emotional healing, and how God used that adversity to prepare her for future work.

### **“Help for the Alcoholic” I, II (Panel) • 534910 •**

An alcoholic, his wife, and Dr. Keith Simpson discuss the symptoms of alcoholism and the need for treatment. The intervention process is described, and referrals of local support groups are mentioned.

## Booklets

### **“Coming Home: An Invitation to Join God’s Family” (reprinted from Tyndale) • 5107000 •**

The imagery of a warm, loving home is used to draw an analogy for the reader to understand what becoming a Christian means. A prayer on page 10 helps the reader ask Jesus into his heart.

### **“Depression: Help for Those Who Hurt” by Dr. Archibald Hart • 5007449 •**

In this booklet, Dr. Archibald Hart discusses why it is important to understand depression. He also describes the nature and symptoms of depression.

### **“Divorce: Coping with the Pain” by Andre Bustanoby • 5007452 •**

The emotions of rejection are noted as abandonment, grief and denial, self-pity, anger, feelings of failure, guilt and loneliness. Ways to deal with and understand these feelings are given along with several solutions for coping with loneliness. The booklet ends with a reminder to rely on God’s grace in times of emotional turmoil.

**“Examining Addictive Behaviors” I, II** (Dr. Archibald Hart) • 5008289 •

Dr. Hart asserts that there are socially sanctioned behaviors which stimulate or tranquilize and which may actually stem from underlying hidden addictions or compulsions. He explains how people can recognize these addictive behaviors in their lives.

**“You’re Not Perfect: Escaping the Tyranny of Perfectionism”** by Dr. David Stoop • 373457 •

Dr. David Stoop suggests four steps to help dig out the roots of perfectionism and change old patterns.

**Resource Lists**

**“Substance Abuse”** • [RL049](#) • \$Complimentary

Resources and referrals address the topic of drug and alcohol abuse.