

# CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

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## Growing Up Amid Pain



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By Ron Gasbarro, RPh

## Alcohol — A Little Goes A Long Way

There is no doubt about it: Alcohol wrecks families. Of course, that's because it's a drug — a legal drug. Once you are a certain age, you can buy as much alcohol as you want, as often as you want, without restriction.

As with any drug, alcohol can be dangerous, even in small amounts. Alcohol can make us act stupidly, feel sad, or cause us to say or do things that embarrass ourselves and others. It even costs lives through accidents and illnesses. Still, many continue to use and abuse alcohol.

Have you ever thought that someone in your family drinks alcohol too frequently? That his or her drinking goes beyond what is responsible? Does that person's drinking end up making YOU feel bad? Do you try to cover up for a situation that seems to be out of your control? Is it the drinker's problem when he gets drunk? Perhaps it seems like it is your problem, too.



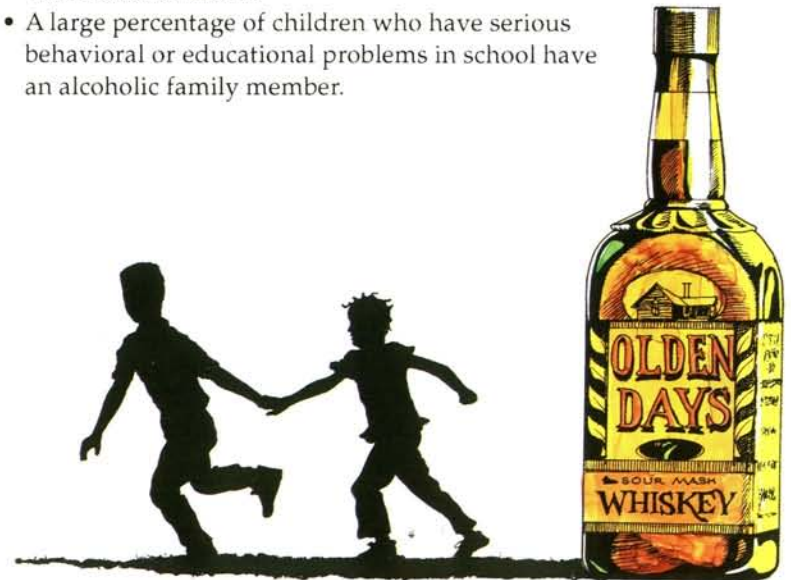
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## Alcoholism Casts a Long Shadow

Alcohol abuse is a major health problem. Alcohol is the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Approximately 15 million Americans are dependent on alcohol. That's about 1 in every 17 people. So the odds are good that someone you know is living with an alcoholic.

In a national Gallup poll, 1 out of 3 families reported that alcohol abuse was a serious problem for them. The following statistics are sobering:

- One in 8 school children lives in an alcoholic household.
- More than half the people who are recognizably alcoholic have or have had an alcoholic parent; 80% of all alcoholics have or have had an alcoholic grandparent.
- Children of alcoholics are four times more likely to become alcoholic or drug dependent than those of nonalcoholics.
- Of the millions of family members affected by alcohol abuse, fewer than 30% are receiving help.
- It takes an average of 13 years before family members of alcoholics begin to seek help for the problem in their own household.
- Alcohol abuse is involved in a majority of incest cases.
- Daughters of alcoholic fathers are more likely to marry an alcoholic or someone with a similarly obsessive nature than are daughters of nonalcoholic fathers.
- A large percentage of children who have serious behavioral or educational problems in school have an alcoholic family member.



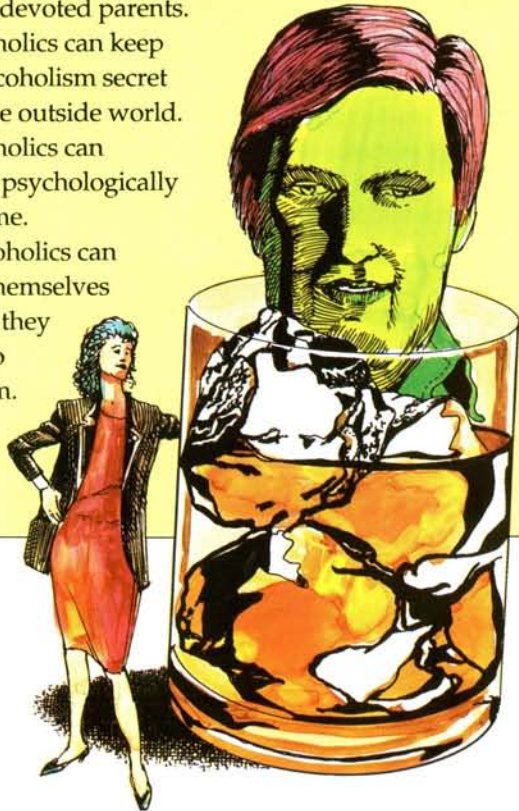


## Can You Spot the Alcoholic in Your Home?

Alcoholics try to explain away their drinking and often fool the whole family into thinking that everything is fine. However, if you look closely, nothing could be further from the truth.

Answer the following questions to find out whether you are well-informed about alcoholism.

- T F 1. Alcoholics are unemployed.  
T F 2. Alcoholics only drink cheap booze.  
T F 3. Alcoholics are not intelligent.  
T F 4. Alcoholics cannot take care of their bodies.  
T F 5. Alcoholics are always drunk.  
T F 6. Alcoholism can happen to the poor, to the rich, and to the middle class.  
  
T F 7. Alcoholics can be loving, devoted parents.  
T F 8. Alcoholics can keep their alcoholism secret from the outside world.  
T F 9. Alcoholics can change psychologically over time.  
T F 10. Alcoholics can make themselves believe they have no problem.



Now read on to find out whether you were correct or not.

## Knowing What to Look For:

Questions 1 — 5 are False. Questions 6 — 10 are True.

1. Alcoholics can hold respectable positions for decades, and can be doctors, firemen, pilots, even elected officials.
2. Some alcoholics drink only the very best wine or Scotch. You will rarely see the alcoholic in your home swilling cheap booze or scrounging through the medicine cabinet for cough syrup. But you should know not to be surprised at anything the alcoholic does.
3. There is no relationship between intelligence level and alcoholism. Both geniuses and those who are not so bright can become alcoholic.
4. Many drinkers take good care of themselves as a way of overcompensating for their condition — just to prove that alcohol is not affecting their lives.
5. Many alcoholics only drink after 6 p.m. Through other times of the day, they can be completely sober.
6. Most alcoholics are respectable, ordinary people from all walks of life. Only one in three is a skid-row bum.
7. Many alcoholics can have a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” personality — loving and caring when sober, but abusive and violent when drunk.
8. Families learn to cover up for their drunken father, husband, son or wife. Co-workers, church members and neighbors may never discover the secret.
9. The longer a person drinks, the more it affects the organs in his body — including the brain. Psychologically, the person can deteriorate to a point where alcohol is the most important thing in his life.
10. Denial is a process by which the alcoholic makes himself believe that he can stop drinking at any time. He also trains other family members to think the same way. This is where you must draw the line!

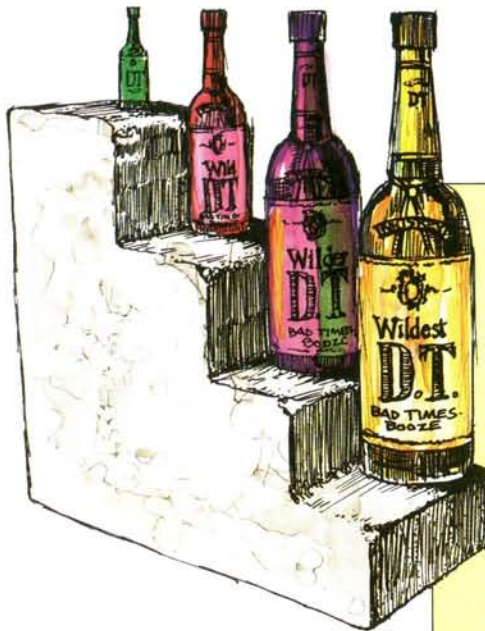


## Down the Staircase of Alcoholism

Before you can learn how to help the alcoholic in your family, you must know how alcoholism affects an alcoholic. Alcoholism develops slowly, but is very destructive as it progresses. There are generally four stages of drinking:

1. *Recreational drinking* — when alcohol is used to take the stress out of life. After a while, drinking starts to become the event of the evening, rather than just an occasional activity.
2. *Medicinal drinking* — when alcohol tolerance increases, and the alcoholic needs more alcohol to attain the same effect.
3. *Daily drinking* — when drinking alcohol becomes an everyday activity, and more and more drinking is done alone. The person tries to control his drinking and may even be successful in remaining sober for short periods — but alcohol has him under its control.
4. *Deadly drinking* — when the old saying, “The man takes the drink, then the drink takes the man” applies. Now, after a single drink, nothing else matters to the alcoholic. It is as if the alcohol has come alive

and tells the person how to behave. In this stage, the alcoholic drinks to prevent “the shakes” and other symptoms of withdrawal.



*Eventually, alcoholism kills its victim... and others. The liver, brain and other vital organs are destroyed, or the person causes an accident and is fatally injured himself, or kills someone else. Cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and other diseases are also common when alcoholism has taken hold.*

## Alcohol and the Family

While the alcoholic is slowly but surely destroying his body, he is also eroding the family unit by introducing destructive elements.

**Insecurity** — Barbara fears the bank will repossess the family’s house because her drinking husband cannot keep a job. They are falling behind on their house payments. Barbara wants to help, but with three small children, how can she go to work?

**Guilt** — Tom believes that if his wife, Julie, had been able to have children, she would not have turned to drinking. But Tom is sterile and cannot be a father. Somehow, he feels responsible for his wife’s alcoholism.

**Fear** — Jimmy, 13, is afraid of the violence that occurs when his parents get drunk. Yet he is afraid to run away, and besides, where would he go? The life he knows is one lived at the mercy of drunken, angry parents.

**Isolation** — Everyone at the Wilson’s knows Grandpa drinks too much — but no one ever discusses it. Whenever he goes off on one of his drunken tirades, family members retreat to their rooms.

**Embarrassment** — Molly recently married Eddie. Soon after, Eddie’s drinking began to get worse. She would like to invite friends over, but she is too ashamed to invite even her family for a visit, because Eddie is often lying, passed out, on the couch.

**Resentment** — Christine had a promising career before she married George. Soon, however, his drinking became noticeable at company functions. She was passed over for promotions, and eventually the resentfulness she manifested caused her to lose her job. Now they are barely making ends meet. Christine regrets the day she met George, and yet she stays with him, feeling somehow obligated to help him.





## How Family Members Are Affected by Another's Drinking

Call it love, loyalty or fear. Whatever it is, it causes family members to use "smoke screens" to cover for the alcoholic. In doing this, they are also trying to lessen their own hurt. Family members use several methods to cope with a bad situation. They even assume specific roles within the family, usually subconsciously. The roles include the following:

**The Excuse-Maker** — When Pete is drunk and his boss calls, his wife Marie grabs the phone and explains that Pete is not at home. If Pete is too hung over to work, Marie calls in for him.

**The Load-Lightener** — Bobby, 17, works hard around the house, keeping the grass mowed, the car cleaned and the garden growing. He isn't aware of it, but Bobby wants to make the world think that all is fine at 123 Maple Street — in spite of the fact that his parents are alcoholics and don't care about the house.

**The Discipline Problem** — Amy used to be an honor student. But her parents' behavior when drunk made it impossible for her to study. Amy began shoplifting jewelry and clothing accessories from the local department store. Frequently picked up by the police, Amy feels sure, deep down, that she can somehow make her parents wake up and notice her.

**The Perfect Person** — Betty does everything right. Each time her mother goes to the supermarket intoxicated, Betty bakes a cake for a neighbor, or offers to baby-sit for another. She tries to divert attention away from her family's problem by becoming too perfect to be believed.

**The Fault-Finder** — Alice blames Roy for everything, even if it has nothing to do with his drinking. When she hit a telephone pole with her car, she blamed Roy, saying she was nervous about his being at home alone. This behavior just makes Roy drink more.

**The Door-Closer** — When Jenny's father starts yelling at her mother, Jenny shuts herself off mentally from what is happening. Her parents' drinking hurts her, but she's not willing to get help or to confront her parents with their behavior.

Each of these coping styles causes problems because they actually make it easier for the alcoholic to keep drinking.

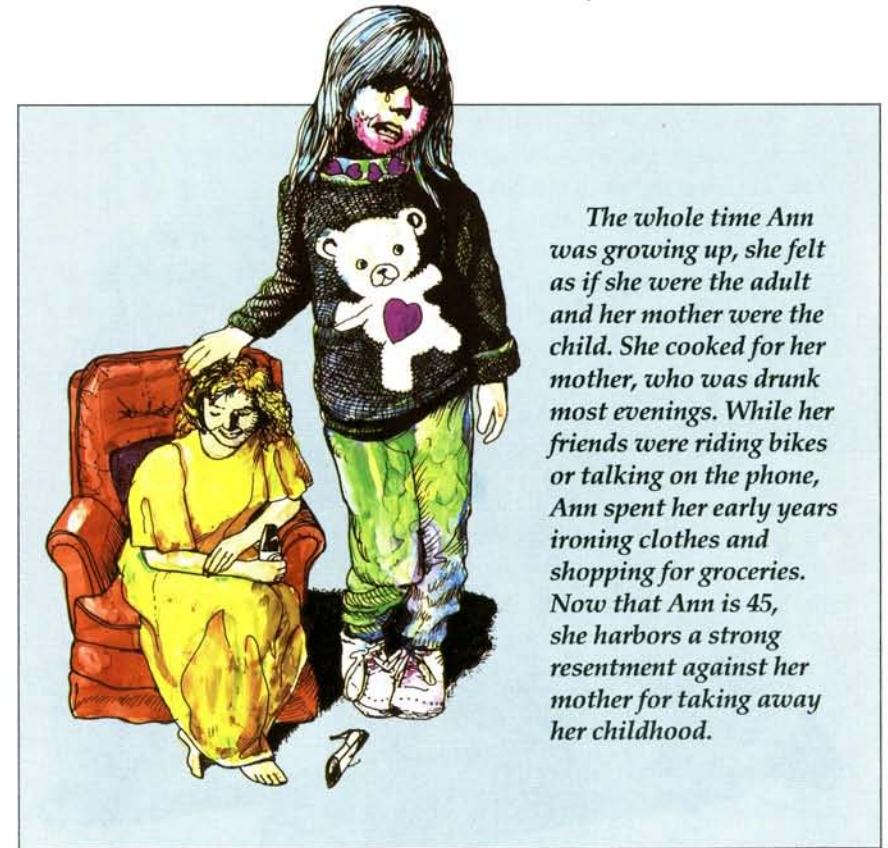


## How Children Are Affected by Alcoholism

Young children often do not understand the complexities of alcoholism in their parents. But they do notice the erratic, destructive and violent behavior of the alcoholic adult living in their home. Living with an alcoholic can leave lifelong scars.

For every parent's **action**, there is a child's **reaction**. When the alcoholic parent is inconsistent in his behavior, the child is forced to react in ways that are inconsistent with either her role as a child or with her basic personality.

Many children of alcoholics view themselves as extremely mature for their age. And why not? They may have to pretend that everything is "just fine" in their home. They may have to clean up the mess made by the alcoholic parent. They may have to act as their own parent, fixing meals, washing clothes, and tucking themselves in bed at night, alone. But this takes a tremendous toll and leaves them with many emotional scars.



*The whole time Ann was growing up, she felt as if she were the adult and her mother were the child. She cooked for her mother, who was drunk most evenings. While her friends were riding bikes or talking on the phone, Ann spent her early years ironing clothes and shopping for groceries. Now that Ann is 45, she harbors a strong resentment against her mother for taking away her childhood.*



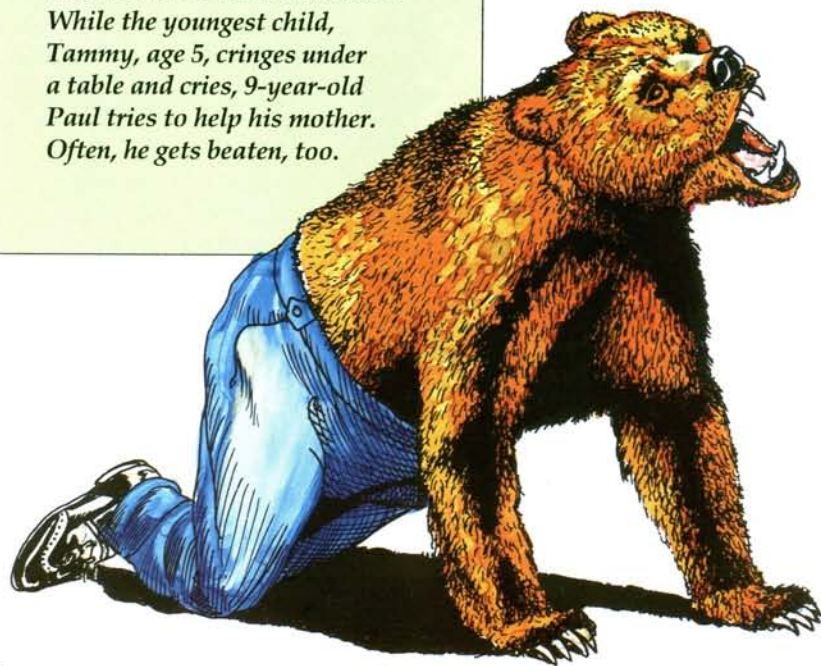
## Self-Esteem

Children see the behavior of their parents as a reflection of their own worth. So it is not surprising that the children of alcoholics feel that because something is wrong with their family, something is wrong with them, and they are somehow at fault. They know their family is different from those of their friends, and they long for a stable, happy family.

In a home disrupted by alcohol, the mood of the house is dictated by the condition of the alcoholic. When the father gets drunk, a child will anticipate violent or erratic behavior. Instead of sharing her problems with her friends, the child is likely to deny or cover up her pain. Why?

There are many reasons. The child may have been told by the non-alcoholic parent to “keep quiet” about the other, alcoholic parent. Or, the child may fear ridicule from or rejection by peers. Further, the child may adopt the alcoholic parent’s coping technique of denying problems and isolating herself from others.

*When Tom drinks, he often hits his wife. Unfortunately, the children witness this abuse. While the youngest child, Tammy, age 5, cringes under a table and cries, 9-year-old Paul tries to help his mother. Often, he gets beaten, too.*

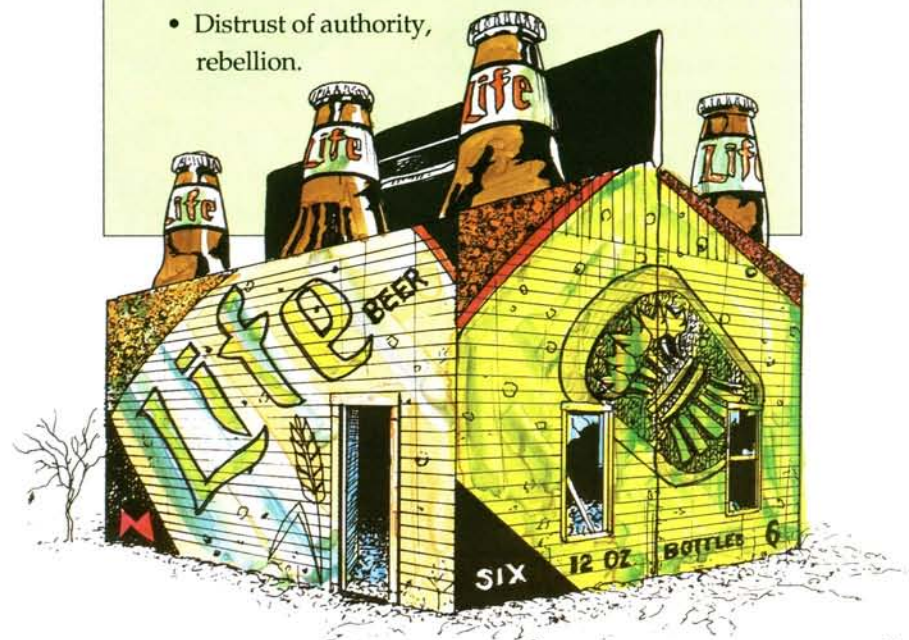


## Score Card for the Child of an Alcoholic

The child who grows up in an alcoholic household suffers the effects his entire life. Problems revealed in therapy as an adult usually point back to damage left by alcoholic parents.

Parental dependence on alcohol creates an unhealthy family environment. This is characterized by:

- Psychological and physical abuse
- Forcing the child to deny the reality of the situation
- Loss of childhood happiness
- Reversed or distorted child-parent relationships
- Extreme childhood frustration and anxiety
- Profound disappointment in one’s childhood
- Lack of positive, healthy role models
- Fear of the outside world
- Distrust of authority, rebellion.





## What the Concerned Parent (or Adult) Can Do

You may not want your child to know what is going on. But rest assured, she **does** know that something is deeply wrong. For the child's sake, if not your own, get started *immediately* on a plan of action. Here's how to begin:

### Stop Being a Part of the Problem

Do not make excuses for the alcoholic. Let him talk to his boss on the phone. Let her call in sick. Break the support system that enables the drinker to continue drinking. Alcoholics cannot drink for very long without the help of others. As their resources dry up, they may wake up.

### Take Stock of Your Life

Do not react to every one of the alcoholic's actions. What are your priorities for your children? Are they happy? Will they become healthy adults? Is your career on track? How do you want your own future to be? Don't sacrifice your health or your children's future to someone else's sickness.

### Get Professional Help

Most times, you cannot beat alcoholism alone, whether it is your problem or that of someone you love. And the problem will not evaporate like your spouse's bottle of Scotch. Groups, psychologists and trained clergy can get you and your family on the road to recovery.

Remember: Alcoholism is not just the alcoholic's problem. If there's an alcoholic in your family, your whole family is sick. Your goal should be to make it well.



Much of what you as a non-alcoholic parent can do to help your children overcome the consequences of living with an alcoholic parent depends on how your household is run from day to day. As the sober parent, you should:

### *Be flexible in your dealings with your children.*

In many instances, the alcoholic home is characterized by a rigid family system, because of each member's attempts to control the situation. If you try to demand too much control over your children, they may think you are blaming them for the situation, and rebel.

### *Do not isolate your family from the rest of the world.*

Your children — and you — need outside friends that you can trust and confide in.

### *Do not blame your children for wanting to get help.*

Encourage them to talk with counselors or trained clergy.

### *Avoid pressuring your children to take sides in conflicts with your spouse.*

This will destroy any trust your children may have in you; instead of the truth, they will tell you what you want to hear.

### *Help your child develop effective coping skills.*

When the child withdraws from a disruptive or abusive situation, comfort him. He is doing what he needs to do to stay sane. Help him develop effective coping skills. Provide for his safety, even if it means moving the family out of the house, or sending the child to live with a relative.

### *Avoid making your oldest child into your substitute parent or confidant.*

Find your own friends and talk about your frustrations with them.

### *Encourage your children to become active in school or church activities.*

It's essential that your children interact with children from healthy families.

### *Never make the child promise he will not drink when he becomes an adult.*

This creates guilt and implies to the child that he will never be able to behave responsibly. Encourage the child to avoid alcohol, and help him develop effective decision-making behaviors.





## What the Alcoholic Parent Can Do

Whether or not you label yourself as an alcoholic, if your drinking is causing problems within your family, you need help. If you think your drinking is your own business, then why is this booklet in your hands right now? Obviously, someone you know and love cares about what is happening to you.

Your children notice your behavior. They may appear to accept your drinking, but their behavior more likely indicates a potentially unhealthy withdrawal from the situation. Children can suffer the consequences of your behavior for the rest of their lives.

Be honest with your family. Do not try to hide from them; they know you have a serious problem, and knew it long before you admitted it to yourself. They may be able to understand your drinking, but not your unwillingness to communicate your feelings with them. Confess your problem to them and ask them to help you.

Your children want to be loved. Love them without making them fearful of you. Most often, your children can tell the difference between you and your behavior. They still love you. They simply hate your drinking. Being an alcoholic does not excuse you from parenting. Do not increase the distance between you and your children by underestimating what they can plainly see.



**GET SOBER. GET HELP.  
STOP HURTING THOSE  
YOU LOVE MOST.**

## Where Can You Get Help?

### *For Non-alcoholics:*

- **Al-Anon and Alateen** — These groups are for family members and friends of alcoholics. Alateen is for teenagers; Al-Anon is for adults. Both offer friendship, understanding and encouragement for coping with alcoholism. Call (800) 356-9996 for the chapter nearest you.
- **Adult Children of Alcoholics** — This organization helps the adult children of alcoholic parents deal with the negative feelings they have incorporated into their personalities. (310) 534-1815.
- **Co-Dependents Anonymous (C.o.D.A.)** — This self-help group helps those who have a difficult time maintaining healthy relationships. (602) 277-7991.
- **Professional Help** — For private assistance with your family's problem, seek out a psychologist or social worker specifically trained in alcohol and drug dependencies. Ask friends, your family physician, or professional organizations for advice on whom to see.

### *For Alcoholics:*

- **Alcoholics Anonymous**—A worldwide recovery program, AA helps the alcoholic get and stay sober. Typically, the AA member uses the AA principles and group support to maintain sobriety. Check your phone book for the chapter nearest you.
- **Rational Recovery**—This is a relatively new method of alcohol recovery for those who may think AA is too religious for their preference. Call (800) 303-CURE, (916) 621-4374, or 621-2667.
- **Veterans Administration** — Alcohol treatment is offered to vets at many VA hospitals. Check your phone book for the nearest center.
- **Women for Sobriety** — This is a group that deals with the special problems alcohol abuse causes women. (800) 333-1606.



## Drinking and the Family

When someone in your home is an alcoholic, you and your children can suffer emotional scars that can last for the rest of their lives. Find out how to make things better for everyone.

If you are the adult child of an alcoholic, you probably developed certain coping skills and some repressed emotions as a child. These may now be standing in the way of good relationships.

