

**ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS SUPPORT GROUPS:
A VALUABLE ADJUNCT IN TREATING CLIENTS
WITH DISSOCIATIVE DISORDERS**

Martin R. Smith, M.Ed.*

Gladys T. Patterson

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*Biofeedback Institute of Los Angeles
3710 South Robertson Boulevard, Suite 216
Culver City, California 90232

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ABSTRACT

Clients with trauma-induced dissociative disorders who are being treated on an outpatient basis often have great difficulty in managing their lives between therapy sessions. A number of therapists and clients are finding that Adult Children of Alcoholics 12-Step meetings are a valuable source of support and guidance for dissociated clients who are working their way through the difficult process of recovery.

The list of characteristics that describe people raised in alcoholic homes include isolation, fear of authority figures, fear of abandonment, uneasiness with other people, clinging to dysfunctional relationships, and an addiction to excitement in which there is a preference for continual upset rather than workable relationships.

Many people with dissociative disorders resulting from childhood trauma have found that these characteristics describe their life experiences even though they were not necessarily raised in alcoholic homes. They are all welcome in ACA.

Many concepts in ACA coincide with concepts being used in the treatment of dissociative disorders. The 1984 ACA identity report addressed the ideas of denial, self-hate, contacting the inner child, mourning and grief, post-traumatic stress, and the problems of reparenting. In 1986 the identity committee looked at damage to children caused by distorted mirroring and multidimensional dissociation, the problem of separation from a dysfunctional system, and the need for guidance from a higher power. Additional concepts used in the ACA program are reuniting the divided parts of the self and the need for group support in disobeying irrational authority.

"In New York City, in 1977, a small group of young people in their late teens began to grow dissatisfied with their experiences in Al-Anon and Alateen. These groups just weren't meeting their needs as children of alcoholics. Out of frustration they decided to form their own special-purpose self-help recovery group." (Tony A. & Dan F., 1991, p.7)

Shortly after this event, Tony A., a long time member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Al-Anon, was invited to speak at the new group's meeting. He relates the following: "When the other members of this fledgling group began to share their painful experiences and family secrets, I felt very much at home. A whole new dimension of recovery was opening up to me, and I promptly joined the group." (Tony A. & Dan F., 1991, p.8)

Tony A. soon wrote a list of characteristics describing people raised in alcoholic homes, dubbed "The Laundry List," a list that anyone from a traumatizing home can relate to.

Some time later, another longtime member of AA and Al-Anon, known as Jack, brought the program to Los Angeles. In 1986, an Interim World Service Organization was formed in southern California. The program now has meetings around the United States and in numerous foreign countries.

Although Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) is firmly grounded in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA, there is a fundamental difference -- ACA openly acknowledges the traumatic etiology that creates the characteristics which make up "The Laundry List."

The emergence of ACA was presaged by the co-founder of AA, Bill W. He wrote in the Big Book of AA (1976): "Now and then the family will be plagued by spectres from the past,....The family may be possessed by the idea that future happiness can be based only upon forgetfulness of the past. We think that such a view is self-centered and in direct conflict with the new way of living." (pp.123-124) In an address to the Medical Society of New York, he laid out AA's version of the factors of personality change: analysis, catharsis and adjustment. Finally, in the January, 1958 issue of AA's newsletter, The Grapevine, he wrote an article entitled: "The Next Frontier -- Emotional Sobriety." He probably did not know about addiction to adrenaline or stress-induced analgesia but he certainly recognized emotional intoxication and realized that emotional sobriety, not physical sobriety alone, would lead to happiness, peace and joy.

We would like to focus on several concepts besides emotional sobriety that seem to be of immense value in ACA -- powerlessness, insanity, unity and a spiritual awakening.

The First Step in all 12-Step Programs state that attempting to be powerful over something you are not makes your life unmanageable. Denying the reality of early abuse does not stop the destructive effects of that abuse. The Second Step says you can be restored to sanity which implies that perseverating in dissociation (as alluded to in the First Step) will make you insane. The First Tradition states that personal recovery depends upon unity. Dissociated clients and their therapists need to be united by the certainty that recovery is possible. In ACA, a spiritual awakening may be quite simple. It can mean just awakening the spirit of the inner-child or children which possess the capacity for spontaneity, aliveness and joy.

PRECAUTIONS

There are several precautions for people with trauma-induced dissociation who attend an ACA meeting -- premature or compulsive disclosure could lead to a retaliatory "kickback." They may be overstimulated by other people's sharing and not everyone is fully recovered -- hence the slogan, "Take what you like and leave the rest."

SUMMARY

Despite these potential drawbacks, ACA welcomes anyone who identifies with "The Laundry List." It is a place to be as hurt as you are and to express the feelings and grief you have hidden inside.

The 1984 Report of the Identity, Purpose and Relationship Committee states that the purpose of ACA is to shelter and support newcomers in confronting denial; to comfort those mourning their early loss of security, trust and love; and to teach the skills for re-parenting yourself with gentleness, humor, love and respect.

In short, ACA, in conjunction with therapy, can accelerate the process of healing the wounds suffered during an abusive childhood.

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