

The "Laundry List" (14 Characteristics of an Adult Child)

These are characteristics we seem to have in common due to being brought up in an alcoholic household.

1. We became isolated and afraid of people and authority figures.
2. We became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process.
3. We are frightened by angry people and any personal criticism.
4. We either become alcoholics, marry them, or both, or find another compulsive personality such as a workaholic to fulfill our sick abandonment needs.
5. We live life from the viewpoint of victims and are attracted by that weakness in our love and friendship relationships.
6. We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and it is easier for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves; this enables us not to look too closely at our own faults, etc.
7. We get guilt feelings when we stand up for ourselves instead of giving in to others.
8. We became addicted to excitement.
9. We confuse love and pity and tend to "love" people we can "pity" and "rescue."
10. We have "stuffed" our feelings from our traumatic childhoods and have lost the ability to feel or express our feelings because it hurts so much (denial).
11. We judge ourselves harshly and have a very low sense of self-esteem.
12. We are dependent personalities who are terrified of abandonment and will do anything to hold on to a relationship in order not to experience painful abandonment feelings which we received from living with sick people who were never there emotionally for us.
13. Alcoholism is a family disease and we became para-alcoholics and took on the characteristics of that disease even though we did not pick up the drink.
14. Para-alcoholics are reactors rather than actors.

- Tony A., 1978

What Does ACA Recovery Look Like?

By working the Twelve Steps of ACA and by attending meetings regularly, we begin to realize that ACA recovery involves emotional sobriety*. That is what ACA recovery looks like. But what is emotional sobriety?

To understand emotional sobriety, we must first understand emotional intoxication, which is also known as para-alcoholism. Para-alcoholism represents the mannerisms and behaviors we developed by living with an alcoholic or dysfunctional parent. As children, we took on the fear and denial of the alcoholic or nondrinking parent without taking a drink.

Emotional intoxication can be characterized by obsession and unhealthy dependence. There also can be compulsion. Even without drugs and alcohol, we can be "drunk" on fear, excitement or pain. We can also be drunk on arguing, gossip, or self-imposed isolation.

In essence the Laundry List, the 14 traits of an adult child, offers a textbook example of the behaviors and attitudes that characterize an emotionally intoxicated person. We fear authority figures and judge ourselves harshly while being terrified of abandonment. Without help, we seek out others to reenact our family dynamics. We can recreate our family dysfunction at home and on the job indefinitely until we find ACA. This means that our adult relationships resemble the template relationship we developed as children to survive an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional home. We find others to create chaos, conflict, or unsafe relationships.

Emotional sobriety involves a changed relationship with self and others. We measure emotional sobriety by the level of honesty, mutual respect, and the acceptability of feelings in our relationships. If our relationships are still manipulative and controlling, we are not emotionally sober no matter what we tell ourselves about our recovery program. Emotional sobriety means that we are involved in changed relationships that are safe and honest. We feel a nearness to our Higher Power. We cultivate emotional sobriety through the Twelve Steps and through association with other recovering adult children.

*Emotional sobriety was formally introduced to the ACA fellowship through the Identity Papers. The 1986 paper, "Finding Wholeness Through Separation: The Paradox of Independence," shows the genesis of emotional sobriety. The possibility of emotional sobriety is created through the broadening and deepening of the Steps and Traditions.

ACA Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over the effects of alcoholism or other family dysfunction, that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and, when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others who still suffer, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.