

# Tony A's 12 STEP Workbook

“God, please set aside everything I think I know about myself, the twelve steps, this book, the meetings, my disease, and you, so I may have an open mind and a new experience with all these things, please let me see the truth.”

This workbook has been taken from:

1. Tony A's book “The Laundry List” The ACoA Experience,
2. Tony A's talk on “New Steps for ACoA”  
<http://acoasydney.com.au/tony-a-new-steps-for-aca/>
3. This **workbook** was created, tested and edited by group conscience.

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## The 12 Steps

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1. We admitted we were powerless over the effects of living with alcoholism and that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could bring us clarity.
3. We made a decision to practice self-love and to trust in a Higher Power of our understanding.
4. We made a searching and blameless inventory of our parents because, in essence, we had become them.
5. We admitted to our Higher Power, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our childhood abandonment.
6. We were entirely ready to begin the healing process with the aid of our Higher Power.
7. We humbly asked our Higher Power to help us with our healing process.
8. We became willing to open ourselves to receive the unconditional love of our Higher Power.
9. We became willing to accept our own unconditional love by understanding that our Higher Power loves us unconditionally.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and to love and approve of ourselves.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with our Higher Power, praying only for knowledge of it's will for us and the power to carry it out.
12. We have had a spiritual awakening as a result of taking these steps, and we continue to love ourselves and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

## Reading 1 - Introduction

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If you were brought up in a family crippled with alcoholism, this workbook is for you. Tony A., the co-founder of the ACoA movement and originator of the "Laundry List," gives you an insider's view of what it means to be an adult child of an alcoholic and what this worldwide recovery movement offers its members.

The Laundry List (potentially the Big Book of the movement) is filled with common sense solutions and powerful suggestions about how this recovery process can work miracles in your life. Learn how to deal with the rage over childhood losses and how to leave home emotionally. Discover how to become fully involved in the 12 Steps of Recovery, gaining valuable insights into the nature of the behaviour patterns that limit change and frustrate growth.

*The Laundry List* contains inspirational personal stories and tells of the early struggles of the movement, but the central focus of the workbook involves how to get started and, most importantly, how to avoid the obstacles and difficulties that short-circuit personal recovery.

(Editor's note: The writing of Tony A was done before ACA worldwide accepted the concept that everything Tony A wrote about alcoholism and growing up in an alcoholic home was also true for children who grew up in dysfunctional homes where addiction may not have been an issue. The ACA Big Red Book identifies 7 types of upbringing that qualify as dysfunctional as follows: "parents who were emotionally ill, hypochondriac, hypercritical, perfectionist, ultra-religious, or sexually abusive. Adults who have been adopted or who grew up in foster homes relate to The Laundry List as well and recover in ACA." ACA Big Red Book, page 4. When you see the words alcoholic below, feel free to also substitute the word dysfunctional for a better understanding).

**ACoA** - Adult Children of Alcoholics - is a worldwide recovery program. It is available to all who have suffered the pain and anguish of being raised in an alcoholic home. The ACoA recovery program is a fellowship that speaks directly to the problems experienced by men and women brought up in a family crippled by alcoholism. Our purpose in writing this book/workbook is to present this recovery program to you, to share with you what we have learned from thousands of members and to help you realize a happier, richer life, free of limiting defences and destructive behaviour. This book is a primer and guide that can help you understand the nature of the ACoA program, how it works, the many issues that confront recovering ACoA's and the practical steps involved in achieving a successful recovery.

The tools of recovery and discovery described in this workbook were developed over the first 12 years of the program's existence. They work, but only if the individual member is willing to do the work. Recovery is a complex process, we cannot return to our painful childhood and ask our parents to love us in the way that we needed to be loved. It just can't be done.

As ACoA's we need to learn how to nurture and fulfil ourselves. We need to look within, find the origins of our feelings and come to understand our difficulties and the role we play in causing them. This is all possible within the framework of the ACoA program. Those of us who have lived through the nightmare of family alcoholism need a safe and secure environment where we can unburden

ourselves, be brought closer to our painful childhood feelings and learn that we are not alone in our struggle. As ACoA's we have paid a tremendous price to reach this point of recovery.

The recovery process works. You don't have to accept your life the way that it is now. You can change. The ACoA recovery program has produced many miracles: I have seen many of them and I am one of them. In ACoA members learn about the critically important elements of the recovery process, including the resistance and denial and how they operate to limit growth. All of these subjects are comprehensively covered in this book/workbook. Over the years I have personally observed the recovery efforts of literally thousands of ACoA's. We have shared our pain and grief, successes and setbacks. Out of this continuing exchange I have come to see more clearly the patterns of behaviour that frustrate growth, the unrealistic expectations, the limited grasp of the recovery process. In this book/workbook I have tried to address these difficulties in a meaningful way.

A principal mission of the ACoA recovery program is to help members gain some clarity about their personal relationships, family ties, work, personal goals and other key issues. Throughout the book I have concentrated on the healing power of group support, the sharing of long-buried family secrets, the experiencing of painful childhood feelings and the willingness to consider a spiritual path. Much of the emphasis is on action and the need to turn inward and develop an understanding of who we became and how this can be changed. Most of all this book is about hope. The first ACoA group ever formed took as a name for itself "Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics." Today's ACoA program continues to offer that hope to each and every adult child of an alcoholic who is willing to take that first step toward recovery.

Tony A.

## Who is Tony A.?

I was born on November 4, 1927 and raised in New York City. My mother was a Christian and my father was a Jew, and I was brought up as an Episcopalian. Both of my parents were alcoholics.

My father was a successful stockbroker on Wall Street, so we were well provided for materially. Emotionally, however, our family was impoverished. From the beginning my life was touched by the insanity of an alcoholic household.

One evening, when I was one year old, my parents went out to dinner. It was the servants' night off and they left me in the care of my 19-year-old uncle, an alcoholic whom my father was trying to help out of a tight spot. When my parents returned from their night out, they discovered his body in my bedroom, a gun and a bottle of booze at his side. He had shot himself in the head, in an alcoholic stupor, and my crib was splattered with his blood and brains. From that time on loud noises always terrified me.

My mother's death had a devastating impact on my life. I was Barely two years old, yet I can still remember lying in my crib, crying, "I want my mummy. I want my mummy," and wondering what I had done that was so bad that she wouldn't come back to me. My stomach ached for days. To this day I get terrible pains in my stomach whenever I experience grief loss or abandonment.

My father remarried within a year and my stepmother soon became enmeshed in the dynamics of my father's alcoholism.

When my father was drinking, he would sometimes become cruel. I can recall vividly his brutal reaction to a typical childhood incident.

My father came home one evening and discovered that I had failed to lift the toilet seat when I had to urinate and had accidentally wet the toilet seat. He came storming into my bedroom, where my nurse was reading me a bedtime story. She screamed at him to stop as he snatched me up and dragged me into the bathroom. In a rage he rubbed my face around the rim of the toilet seat, the same way he trained our dog when he made a mistake. I was literally shaking after this punishment. The next morning when I went into his room to apologize, I found that he seemed to have no recollection of the incident.

I thought I must have done something too awful to be discussed. I was not old enough to know that in my home the punishment was always out of proportion to the crime.

Emotionally I felt that my father had abandoned me. I could no longer trust him to care for me. I felt hurt and guilty and very much alone. The experience left me fearful of him and all authority figures.

My father never punished me physically again after this incident, save for a few slaps in the face when he was annoyed with my behaviour. Fortunately, those times were few. To avoid his wrath, I became a model son, always obedient and alert.

My stepmother was a very complex woman with problems of her own. She struggled with dependency on alcohol, sleeping pills and diet pills for years.

She was generally supportive and concerned about me, but sometimes I got very mixed signals.

Like my father, she verbally abused me, attacking me bitterly. On occasion she was physically abusive. When enraged, she would stare at me angrily and force me to look into her eyes. I am still uncomfortable around angry abusive women and have trouble confronting them.

For years my father would take me to visit my grandmother in her suite at the Waldorf Astoria every Sunday, after which we would have a dinner I was too upset to eat. These visits were a torture and an embarrassment. She would spend the entire visit criticizing and berating my father, screaming that he was a rotten failure as a son and constantly recounting his faults. I felt guilt and shame over the whole thing whenever she turned her attention toward me. After all, I was my father's son. If he was no good, how then was I? When I was ten, my grandmother became depressed and committed suicide by swimming out to sea. I felt great relief when I heard she had died, principally because I was spared any more Sunday visits.

When I was ten, my grandmother became depressed and committed suicide by swimming out to sea. I felt great relief when I heard she had died, principally because I was spared any more Sunday visits.

Shortly after her death I began to feel guilty about my relief at not having to visit her anymore. What kind of dutiful grandson would have such sick selfish thoughts? I felt no sadness or loss, just relief followed by guilt. In 1939, when Hitler was killing Jews in Germany, I found a note in my school desk that was to change my life. The note said, "Tony is a dirty Jew." I felt shame and embarrassment and fear. All I could do was stare down at my desk. Stunned and shaken, I showed the note to my father, who responded by telling me that I was only half-Jewish. I felt shocked by his reply, which I took to mean that I was only "half-dirty. Soon thereafter my father became very troubled about anti-Semitism in this country and decided to change the family name. I suggested the name of my favourite chemistry teacher, and it became our new legal name.

The following year I was sent away to boarding school in Virginia, where no one would know about my name change. My best friend also attended this school with me. My father paid his tuition so I would not be lonely. By now, however, concealment and secrecy about my family origins was a way of life. Clearly, I was unacceptable as a half-Jew. I was being taught to deny my family heritage-or at least one-half of it. At boarding school, I escaped the oppressive atmosphere of my family's alcoholism but replaced it with worry that my closest friend would reveal my dark secret. It got so I couldn't sleep at night and the school nurse began giving me sleeping pills. This was marvellous! I had a substance that quickly helped me overcome my worry and concern. As a way to change feelings, I see it now as the beginning of my addictive behaviour. The anti-Semitism issue had a profound effect on me. I became overly sensitive to what other people thought of me. I tried to please everyone but couldn't trust anyone. Worst of all, I did not accept myself. I felt flawed and inferior and that there was something very wrong with me.

I had been sent away to boarding school to hide, and at first, I did miserably. But after two years I transferred to another school. There I was number one on the tennis team, ran the class newspaper and became editor of the yearbook - all in an effort to be accepted.

After graduation I moved on to the University of Virginia, where I joined a Christian fraternity. Mindful of my father's injunction - "If you ever reveal that you are half-Jewish, I will disown you" - I told everyone that I was 100 percent Christian, a condition for fraternity membership. I was in a terrible bind and it forced me to live a lie. Once again, my father had abandoned me. I felt lost and alone in my deception.

At the University I played tennis, shot pool and gambled. I didn't touch liquor, my father and I had made a pact that he would give me a sizable sum of money if I refrained from any alcohol until I was 21 years old. As a substitute I selected gambling-mostly poker and shooting craps. When I was at boarding school and college, my father began acting out in strange ways. He was heavily in the grips of alcoholism. His behaviours became more bizarre and my stepmother began taking him to mental health clinics. She soon became worn out with this and turned the task over to me. I remember leaving him at the different facilities, always feeling guilty that I was leaving him there alone and so forlorn. Even though he had asked me to bring him there, he would invariably say to me, "How can you leave me in a place like this?" I felt sad that my father was in such a desperate way and needed to go to such places. It was a depressing scene. I had ample material comforts but little in the way of stability or nurturing by my parents. It was all very confusing and frightening. All of these events made me feel different and apart.

I was always fearful that those I was with would discover my name change. Concealment and acceptance became primary themes in my relationships with others. Behind it all was a lot of self-loathing and very little self-acceptance.

When I graduated from college, I returned to New York and became a stockbroker, following in my father's footsteps. One major difference, however, was the way in which I chose to present myself. For so long I had hidden my Jewish heritage and hated my past. Now I became vocal regarding my Jewish/Christian roots. In fact, I jammed it down people's throats, testing their reactions. That way, if someone became my friend at least I knew he or she was aware that I was part Jewish and accepted me as I was. I was truly sensitized to this issue and it deeply distorted my thoughts and actions.

I put people through difficult tests to assure myself that they were real friends. With women I learned to be a consummate people-pleaser, manipulator and abandoner. My goal was to avoid the terror I felt if they displayed any anger, or the guilt I felt when I left them. "Keep them happy, distracted and satisfied and they won't abandon me."

As a result of my childhood experiences the early days in ACoA were very painful for me. When other members expressed anger, I wanted to run. Eventually, however, their stories of physical, sexual and verbal abuse put me in touch with my feelings of shame, fear and guilt. I discovered that because of what had happened to me as a child, I had been conditioned to become a fear-based personality called Tony A.

***At the beginning of step 1 you will be asked to describe which of these traits you most identify with and impact on you today. While you read these traits, highlight the parts that apply to you, then underline that are causing you pain at this time. Once you complete each trait, score them out of 10, 0=not affected, 10=severely troubled by.***

## The Laundry List

Clearly it was time to put in writing the general dimensions of our problem and some possible solutions. Until this point, we had kept our special program tentative and provisional. But now it seemed to be an appropriate time to go on record with what I thought we were all about. That night I spent hours thinking about the nature of our ACoA issues and how we might best resolve them. I knew I was in over my head, but I decided to try anyway.

The next morning when I arrived at my office, I promptly set about writing down what I perceived to be the major problems and behaviour patterns we had in common. To my amazement I listed some 14 items. I felt that I was receiving inner guidance and direction as I wrote the words. It was a strange feeling. After completing the list, I turned my efforts to outlining a solution. For this key element I drew heavily upon some of the AA and Alon-non slogans and general guiding principles. I suggested that frequent attendance at meetings, keeping the focus on ourselves, feeling our feelings (and expressing them) and working the AA steps were the major tools we could use to recover. I didn't set down anything particularly radical or progressive. Most of what I wrote seemed pretty basic. It didn't sound too therapeutic and it wasn't evangelism. It turned out to be a simple definition of who we were and what we might consider doing about it so that "we could get on with our lives in a more balanced and wholesome way." I then took this Problem/Solution to our group secretary, Chris F. She made some valuable changes in the Solution and typed it up.

I presented this document to the group at the very next meeting. As I finished reading the 14 elements that described our problem, one of the members, Barry, exclaimed, "Oh boy, that's my laundry list!" So, the group members promptly dubbed it the Laundry List.

This Laundry List and the Solution, also called the Problem/Solution, became the first formal document to explain who we were and what we hoped to accomplish. I read them aloud at every subsequent meeting. They seemed to help newcomers identify with their ACoA issues and the group effort, and the Laundry List also provided us with topics for discussion.

Our second group was visited by two members of the national staff of Allan-non. They reluctantly informed us that we could not qualify or be recognized as an Alon-non-meeting if we read the Laundry List or other literature not approved by their general conference. Since our second group was operating autonomously and had no burning desire to maintain affiliation, we elected to remain independent and not affiliate.

## **1. We Became Isolated and Afraid of People and Authority Figures.**

For many ACoA's isolation and fear were the most natural, almost spontaneous response to living with angry, abusive, hypercritical parents. Our parents were our first authority figures, and they loomed large over us in an almost God-like manner.

Alcoholism distorts human relationships, and the effects of alcoholism are particularly devastating to young children who naturally seek love, acceptance, respect and consistency. To be verbally or physically abused during the most vulnerable and innocent years can create either a fear of, or hostility toward authority, and a hypersensitivity toward angry, oppressive individuals. Many ACoA's continue to retreat into isolation, avoidance and distrust of people and relationships in order to ensure survival. As adults many ACoA's found that their reactions to authority figures either put them at the feet or at the throat of those they viewed in this way. As one member said, "I either wanted to kiss them or kill them."

Acquiring a more balanced approach toward those seen as authority figures is sometimes a difficult task. Until we learn to separate out and see that we are reacting in the present in much the same way as we did in our abusive family, we are bound to have troubled relationships. Just watching one's typical reactions, be it withdrawal, fright or hostility, and modifying this response takes real effort; but it's an essential step toward recovery.

Don't expect that knowledge alone will miraculously produce a new set of healthy responses. For many it takes painful trial over many months or even years.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## **2. We Are Frightened by Angry People and Personal Criticism.**

One of the most corrosive and damaging aspects of an alcoholic household is the use of rage and incessant criticism to control the family's behaviour. For many ACoA's, abuse often accompanied by anger. As a child, violent, angry movements and gestures absolutely terrified me. Our parents were

unpredictable and out of control. We, the helpless victims, had few defences. We were completely at their mercy and full of fear for our survival.

As very young children we were also painfully susceptible to the daily litany of verbal abuse. We were being “defined” by our parents and we had no choice but to believe what they were telling us about ourselves. This ugly pattern of verbal harassment caused many of us to feel great shame and an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Spontaneity, trust and confidence fled before these repeated verbal assaults. As adults we may sometimes be revisited by these feelings of helplessness when criticized or become very distressed by angry outbursts. Continuous badgering of a child over many years can, unfortunately, lead to resistance in recovery. As adults our reactions to critical or even mild suggestions can be alienating or inappropriate.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

### **3. We Became Approval-Seekers and Lost Our Identity in The Process.**

Very early in my childhood I began to watch the expressions on my father’s face very carefully. By doing so I could quickly determine what kind of mood he was in and adjust my behaviour accordingly. My responses to my father were always efforts to keep him “happy.” Whenever possible I used humour to keep him from escalating a sour mood.

Approval seeking became a powerful defence mechanism that I used whenever I was faced with people who were potentially threatening or violent, and my father was at the head of that list. I believed at a deep level that if I could get people’s approval, they wouldn’t hurt me.

Today I know that when I fall into an approval seeking stance and sometimes I find it difficult not to lose my identity. I abandon my natural self. The real me slides under the door because I’m concentrating on responses and behaviour that will please another, not me. So, I have said no to the authentic me and yes to someone else’s wants.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

### **4. We Either Become Alcoholics, Marry Them or Both-Or Find Another Compulsive Personality, Such as A Workaholic, To Fulfil Our Sick Abandonment Needs.**

If we make a careful survey of those close to us, family and non-family, it probably won’t take too much effort to notice that sometimes we are drawn to, befriend or become attracted to alcoholics or other addictive people. Emotionally healthy individuals with a solid sense of self-esteem do not usually link up with alcoholic, compulsive or emotionally ill individuals.

Sometimes the fixers and rescuers, who have very cleverly concealed their own personality problems, marry or couple with an alcoholic in a vain effort to gain control or self-esteem through the process of rescue.

Conversely many dependent and addictive people have been known to reach out for rescuing by turning to those who closely resemble their most abusive parent. While the rational world would expect a mistreated child to stay well clear of an abusive romantic partnership, experience says otherwise. Pain and abuse are familiar to most ACoA's and often they feel almost comfortable in an abusive environment or relationship that resembles what they experienced in childhood.

Alcoholics and workaholics are seldom capable of being supportive to another person because their compulsive/addictive behaviour acts to block their feelings. For many the addiction is the way of not feeling the feelings. Thus, a parent or partner who purposely gets drunk is making a statement: "I am now emotionally abandoning myself, my mate and/or my children."

When we become involved with an addictive person, we are at some level seeking the familiar abandonment we experienced as children.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## **5. We Live Life from The Viewpoint of Victims and Are Attracted by That Weakness in Our Love and Friendship Relationships.**

All ACoA's are truly victims. We view and approach life from that posture. We are readily attuned to and empathetic with kindred sufferers. Indeed, there is almost a sixth sense that guides our affiliation and socializing process.

It is quite natural for victims to be attracted to other victims.

Identification is almost instantaneous; and those of us who are fixers and rescuers leap at the opportunity to become involved in attempting to strengthen and nourish another unfortunate. We fail to understand that we often do so as a means of escaping our own pain and turmoil, in the belief that by putting the focus on another we will somehow solve the many ACoA issues that confront us. Often, we act out the role of victim over and over again. Being victimized has a bittersweet familiarity and provides a consistent identity. The challenge for ACoA's is to recognize the many ways in which we perpetuate the behaviour of victim, sell ourselves short or discount our personal value.

Once we are aware of our sabotage efforts, we can slowly begin the task of making healthy decisions that move us steadily away from the distress of low self-esteem. It's not an easy task but it does become less difficult with daily practice. Victims usually feel helpless about their lives. Healthy, esteem building actions bring a more positive outlook and usually a more sensible selection of partners and friends.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## 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.

When I take responsibility for others, I take the focus off myself. When I feel a compelling sense of responsibility for another, I'm no longer concentrating on feeling my own feelings. This behaviour enables me to feel needed, wanted, essential and important. I now have a special worth or value. And when I feel needed or wanted, I feel full. As someone once remarked at a meeting, "Somehow I managed to serve everyone well except myself." Since many ACoA's are driven by external approval, taking responsibility for another is an attractive way to gain approval and respect.

The problem with this is one of energy depletion. Each of us has just so much energy to tackle life's problems and resolve them. When we use much of our energy to assist others, we are consistently robbing ourselves of opportunities to further our own well-being and self-esteem. Most likely no one will be particularly attentive and praise each of our little but important personal victories; helping another, however, can generate lots of attention, praise and gratitude.

This is not to say we shouldn't be of assistance and support on occasion. But we should keep clearly in mind that growth and change can only come from working on our own issues. This needs to become a primary task. To continually rush off to help others is to rob ourselves of a measured and perhaps accelerated recovery.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## 7. We Have Guilt Feelings When We Stand Up for Ourselves Instead of Giving In To Others.

When I say "yes" to another person and "no" to myself, I feel at ease. But when I say "no" to another and "yes" to me, I may become troubled by extreme feelings of guilt. This is not uncommon among ACoA's.

As a child I learned that my acceptance was conditional based upon my willingness to do what my parents desired. To refuse them would bring harsh disapproval. My efforts to assert myself were always met with great resistance; and I learned that my personal agenda, my needs, my desires, did not matter. My parents did not respect my individuality, only my compliance. Very early in my life I found that I could be overwhelmed by guilt when I tried to assert myself. To hold fast in my own best interests involved risking the anger, dissatisfaction and possible alienation of others. I was never taught that independence and sovereignty were healthy. In my alcoholic household the focus was always on the needs and desires of my alcoholic parents. In order to reduce the possibility of anger or some kind of confrontation, I chose to suppress my needs and always be available to them.

Even now, after many years of ACoA, I must sometimes content with old guilt feelings when I elect to do something, I consider important to me rather than doing something my wife or children want. The more central the person is to my life, the more apt I am to have some feelings of guilt.

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## 8. We Became Addicted to Excitement.

As a child growing up in an alcoholic household, I often found myself in the middle of a turbulent family soap opera. It was a household filled with tension, hostility, rebellion, guilt and shame. In some strange way it was both exciting and fearful, primarily because my parents' actions were so unpredictable when they were drunk. As a result, I have a tendency to link fear with excitement.

My usual reactions to the insanity in my household were vigilance followed by a rush of excitement and fear. The fear became part of my identity. I became addicted to the rush of adrenalin, the hyper-vigilance, the dread of a family scene going bad.

This combination of circumstances made me feel very alive and allowed me not to feel abandoned. I felt that I was in the middle of, or part of, something very tense and vital. Unfortunately, as a child I didn't understand that I was really engulfed in an alcohol induced emotional windstorm that was making me sick.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## 9. We Confuse Love and Pity and Tend To “Love” People We Can Pity and Rescue.

Over the years I've noticed that some ACoA members have a certain way of looking and carrying themselves that reminds me of my own “wounded and lost” look. For me it was a manifestation of my state of internal confusion. The sick, abandoned child in me was crying out through my countenance and my posture. As an adult I tend to be attracted to the same woundedness, the soul sadness, the deep confused sorrow in others that I felt about myself as a child. I wanted to rescue these people.

As a child pity was the closest thing to affection that I was able to experience, so now I have to watch that I don't confuse the two. In ACoA I forced myself to confront and work through some overwhelming feelings of self-pity. Eventually I had to wallow in them and re-experience much of my childhood sorrow. I had to surrender to the realization that if I felt great pity or sorrow for a person it didn't mean that I had to rescue them. My love couldn't make them whole, that was their task.

My effort to rescue people was an attempt to make them feel whole and complete. If I succeeded in “making” them feel good about themselves, then I could feel good about what I had done.

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## **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)**

Fairly early in my childhood my feelings became so raw, so painful, so intense that I began to discount them and stuff them. In ACoA, I discovered that my deepest reactions to abuse and abandonment, rejection and scorching ridicule, were carefully stuffed away in my subconscious. As events in my home became more and more unbearable, I just buried the feelings that went with the incidents. In doing so I managed to construct an almost impenetrable shell around my early torment. I was unable to let all the early pain surface and be processed. It took a number of years of ACoA recovery to break open that protective shell.

Most of my childhood feelings came to light through experiencing similar confrontations and incidents during my early recovery days. As unsettling and awful to feel as these events were, they were just what I needed to open myself up to long hidden feelings.

Even more damaging was my inability to recognize and know just what it was that I was feeling at any given moment. Long ago I had ceased being a sensitive, aware and spontaneous human being. I was sort of a mechanical individual with a very limited range of responses and reactions that might almost pass as feelings, not a very healthy portrait. From what I understand about human nature, a person who has lost the ability to identify and express his or her feelings is pretty much buried alive in rigid inflexible behaviour and incapable of experiencing life in a full and meaningful way.

ACoA meetings provide a safe and understanding environment where members can explore, identify and express their innermost feelings without the judgment of others. Meetings also provide a sense of belonging in which the vulnerable ACoA is accepted unconditionally.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## **11. We Judge Ourselves Harshly and Have A Very Low Sense of Self-Esteem.**

Children who are subjected to constant criticism and told repeatedly that they are “less than” are not able to develop healthy feelings about themselves. Our parents provide us with much of the framework and structure of our early identity. On a daily basis as they define us as good, bad, lovable, worthless, helpless or inadequate. Out of this daily litany children develop a sense of who they are and the stuff they are made of.

In an alcoholic household the daily input is generally harsh, punishing and critical. Alcoholic parents verbally abuse their children in a variety of ways; but the result is almost always a child with a painfully low sense of self-esteem. Even the over-achieving hero children of an alcoholic household harbour troublesome feelings of not being good enough. Indeed, their compliant achievements and

heroic efforts are usually an attempt to compensate for the harsh inner voice that constantly challenges their adequacy and capability.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

## **12. We Are Dependent Personalities Who Are Terrified of Abandonment and Will Do Anything to Hold onto A Relationship in Order Not to Experience Painful Abandonment Feelings We Received from Living with Sick People Who Were Never There Emotionally for Us.**

Parents who drink until they are intoxicated are emotionally abandoning not only themselves but also those close to them. Drunken parents are not rationally present for their own lives and cannot be emotionally present for their children.

Many ACoA's have shared that they would go to great lengths to avoid terrible feelings of emptiness, loss and rejection that they experienced as children. This gnawing dread and uncertainty usually got converted into self-doubt: "What's wrong with me?" They felt that there must have been something tragically wrong with them that caused their parents to abandon them. I think that a child sees abandonment in many forms. I was two years old when my mother died. I clearly felt that as abandonment. Every time that my father got into a drunken rage and berated me, I sensed that he was abandoning me. All were "little murders" of my spirit.

For many years I had trouble being alone. If I was by myself with no excitement around me and no people close by, I felt empty, abandoned and worthless. I needed constant attention and praise. I could not validate myself. I lived for the acceptance and attention of others because I felt that only they could reward me and fill the hollow, empty yearning. I did everything imaginable to shut out the feelings of emptiness. I constantly used people, places and things to distract me. My public behaviour was mostly a desperate effort to conceal my inner poverty.

I was terrified of being rejected in romance. At the slightest hint of rejections, I would run. I was blind to my dependency. I desperately tried to control people and situations so that I wouldn't feel abandoned. Even now, when someone close leaves me for a perfectly innocent reason that has nothing to do with me, I still feel tremors of the old terror.

Of all the issues that ACoA's must contend with in their recovery, the terror of abandonment and the awful feelings of emptiness are the greatest challenges. For some it's almost pure torture to have to endure, alone, the painful feelings of rejection, loss or isolation. Unfortunately, there is no simple remedy. Sometimes we have to accept the solitude, the apparent void, and slowly come to understand that we are not empty or unlovable. We will survive and can have a happy and joyous life without being overly dependent or clinging.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

### 13. Alcoholism Is A Family Disease. We Became Para-alcoholics And Took on The Characteristics of That Disease Even Though We Did Not Pick Up the Drink.

When any member of a family is suffering with alcohol addiction, all who live in the household are affected and become ill. In some families the desperation and emotional turmoil is ever present, while in other homes the entire family may go to incredible lengths to put on a show of normalcy.

Regardless of the family posture, however, the disease of alcoholism affects everyone. The children suffer stress in countless ways. Eventually the overwhelming pressures in the alcoholic family lead to emotional disturbances, many of which have been described in this chapter.

Appearances aside, all of the children in an alcoholic household become wounded and most of them carry those unhealed wounds into adulthood, where they tend to cause considerable distress in the work, home and social environment. No child escapes unscathed, though many are under the false impression that they have. It is most sad that so many ACoA's truly feel that they survived their childhood with only minor scratches and bruises.

Para-alcoholism is the transmission of emotional aspects of the disease from parents to children. Children who are exposed to the illness eventually take on many of the characteristics of the illness. It's a fact of life that many ACoA's resist before recovery.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

### 14. Para-alcoholics Are Reactors Rather Than Actors.

On the stage of life, the para-alcoholic waits for the signals and directions of others. The para-alcoholic is generally another-directed individual who tries to determine an acceptable course of action based upon his or her perception of what will please and satisfy others.

The ACoA is often described as an adaptive individual with a very vague central self. All through childhood the ACoA was forced to adapt, adjust and respond to the needs and demands of drunken and often abusive parents. This child learns to react almost automatically, usually out of fear or need. And it is this response pattern, often driven by dependency and low self-esteem, that ACoA's carry into their adult world.

In the recovery process ACoA's need to learn to process uncomfortable feelings and demands without reacting automatically. What helped me with this issue was the technique of not responding immediately-no quick reply, no jumping into action. I forced myself to stop and think, which also gave me time to process the disturbing feelings that were bouncing around inside me. Instead of reacting I learned to temporize, to tell people that I wanted to think about it first.

Initially I was amazed at how people respected my request for time or my inaction. I learned that as an ACoA I had been programmed to respond in an unhealthy way to both sick and healthy situations. Now I usually take charge of my responses, and they are almost always guided by a healthy respect

for what is appropriate and in “my” best interests. Most of the time I have stopped looking for validation and approval from others.

Please circle your score here: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

Additional Reading: Big Red Book – The Laundry List – Problem Chapter 1 page 3

## Step 1.

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### **We Admitted that we were Powerless Over the Effects of Living with Alcoholism and that our Lives had Become Unmanageable.**

When we lived with our sick family, we had no way of avoiding the destructive forces of the illness. We were deeply affected by their insanity and sick behaviour. Much of what we were taught as children now makes our lives unmanageable. We have taken on many of the destructive characteristics of the disease. We need to acknowledge that this is so and be willing to commit ourselves to a recovery program.

From the “laundry list traits” described above, the effects of living with this dysfunction, choose 3 trait’s that stand out in your life today and explain how these make your life unmanageable. Some of these effects can be Complex PTSD, PTSD, Frozen feelings, Anger, Guilt, Shame and Fear. (be as descriptive as you can, even down to the physical sensations you experience in the body)

1.

2.

3.

1. Is there any other part of your life that is currently unmanageable?

2. What might recovery from this unmanageability look like? Be specific....

3. Can you become willing to commit yourself to recovery from this unmanageable part of your life? Please explain

## Reading 2 - How It All Began

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In New York City, in 1977, a small group of young people in their late teens began to grow dissatisfied with their experiences in Alon-non and Ala-teen. 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. This was the first step toward what would one day become a worldwide organization called Adult Children of Alcoholics - or ACoA. All these young people were products of alcoholic households. In sharing their stories with one another, they discovered that they found it very difficult to relate to, or identify with, the adult members of Alon-non, most of whom were spouses of alcoholics. To these young people the older Al-Anon members represented one of their own family members with whom they struggled on a daily basis, the co-alcoholic (or co-dependent) parent who takes on many of the characteristics of the alcoholic in the family.

These young people recognized that they had many unhealthy survival techniques in common and reasoned that their recovery needs could best be served by forming a special group that was not dominated by parental figures. They all agreed that such a distancing process would be essential to their recovery efforts. For their first meeting they found a small conference room at the Brinkley Smithers Foundation headquarters, adjacent to Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. Though the group was developing a different stance concerning the nature of their alcoholic family problem and the recovery approach, they felt that some form of linkage with a national self-help organization would be beneficial. So, to attract additional members, they registered with Alon-non as the Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics group. Shortly after the group started, one of its members, Cindy, heard me share at an Al-Anon meeting. In my sharing I mentioned that I had grown up in a household with two alcoholic parents. Much of what I discussed focused on the destructive attitudes and behaviour that I had learned in my alcoholic family.

At the close of the meeting, and despite the fact that I was almost 30 years older than their oldest member, Cindy invited me to come and share with the new ACoA group. A few days later I attended their meeting and shared my story. I talked primarily about what it had been like for me to grow up in an insane household where alcoholism was king. I told them about how I thought I had developed many of my inappropriate and harmful behaviour patterns to protect myself as a child. In recent years I had pretty carefully explored some of the crazy behaviour of my alcoholic family, and I was quite vocal in my belief that most of my present-day problems could be traced back to the family

chaos of my childhood years. I was able to describe in detail some of the damaging personality traits that had run my life for so many years.

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. When I think back to those early beginnings, it strikes me that I was in a very vulnerable position. While these young people readily warmed to my ACoA personality, a few of them, who had alcoholic fathers, were somewhat apprehensive about me because of my own difficulties with alcohol. Since my pain and anguish were as genuine as theirs, however, most chose to accept me. Nonetheless I did feel their uncertainty and reluctantly saw that for some I represented an authoritarian parent.

## In the Beginning

In the early days of ACoA, we were grappling with the following issues:

1. We were not at all sure just what it was we wanted to accomplish or how to go about it.
2. We were very small; the first group formed had only five or six members.
3. Our primary aim was to gain some measure of relief from current emotional problems that we felt were largely attributable to being brought up in an alcoholic home.
4. Our primary aim was to gain some measure of relief from current emotional problems that we felt were largely attributable to being brought up in an alcoholic home.
5. The members of the group found it very difficult to trust and relate to authority figures or those we perceived to be professionals or experts in the field of human behaviour. At some deep level we knew we had to be responsible for our own growth and recovery.
6. All of us strongly believed that we needed a special and protected forum where we could safely share and experience our often-overwhelming feelings of rage, self-pity, fear and grief.
7. The format of our meeting borrowed heavily from the recovery process and approach taken by other self-help programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Many early ACoA members had prior involvement with these programs.
8. The format in those early meetings was pretty experimental. Usually a member would be asked to share his or her alcoholic upbringing story with the group. There was so much hurt and pain in those early stories that everyone would get upset, cry or feel terribly unsettled. We finally voted not to have the leader describe in detail the family saga but just to discuss what happened during the past week, within the context of the problems that seemed most troubling.

No matter how we tried to limit or guide the group input, however, the anguish and rage inevitably emerged. Without understanding the process very well, we had begun opening ourselves up. Unfortunately, we did not know what to do with all these raw feelings, and at the conclusion of each meeting most of us had to make a special effort to shut down our feelings. During the meeting we had experienced a safe, understanding environment. For one or two hours we had been able to talk openly about some common issues, unload feelings of rage and betrayal and receive loving, accepting support from fellow members. It was hard to return to a normal level of interaction.

Group attendance suffered mightily from this excess of strong feelings. Many found the sharing too intense and intrusive and some of the group members felt too threatened to continue attending. We began to flounder in our attempt to seek direction and purpose.

Within a few months the group had dwindled to just three members, and we were so discouraged, we wanted to give up. But I asked that we give it one more chance. I suggested we continue for at least one more week, during which I would make an effort to enlist people whom I knew had been brought up in alcoholic homes. Reluctantly they agreed to hold on for one more meeting.

I was definitely a man with a mission. I wasn't sure what I was trying to do. I guess my instincts told me that the ACoA meetings were helping me, though I would not have been able to describe just how at the time.

During the ensuing week I went to a number of AA meetings in various parts of the city. I talked about the formation of the ACoA group and invited recovering alcoholics who had been raised in alcoholic homes to attend our next session. On the following Monday evening at 7 P.M. some 17 AA members showed up, along with the two original members of the group and me. My last-gasp efforts had paid off: We had a functioning group.

Over the next month the group continued to expand and grow. Our new members networked and brought their other AA members to investigate this strange new group that focused primarily on feelings, and where people were encouraged to talk about the misery of their alcoholic household and how early behaviour and survival patterns were blocking growth today

## The Problem / Solution

As spring arrived in 1978 a second ACoA group formed at St. Jean Baptiste Catholic church on Lexington Avenue in New York City. I organized it and also chaired the meeting. Attendance quickly grew to 35 or 40 members, who were mainly drawn from the ranks of AA, Alon-non and Overeaters Anonymous (OA) recovery programs.

In spite all this growth we were still floundering. Our format and structure were pretty direct, but we suffered from a vague sense of purpose and a poorly articulated solution. Although we considered the 12 Steps of AA and Allan-non to be our basic Guide, we were still improvising. The content of our meetings was heavily focused on painful feelings, often explosive expressions of anger and recitations of the family soap opera that had disrupted our childhoods. We had no literature to guide or enlighten us except the general pamphlets and books of AA and Alon-non. We had no written information that spoke directly to our specific problems. Moreover, the therapeutic community had not yet identified and investigated the dimensions of what is now termed the ACoA syndrome.

Our uncertain direction and purpose led to our first crisis. One Wednesday evening in early spring some of the members cornered me and complained bitterly that the meetings did not have a sound rationale or direction. Their concerns were certainly valid. Instinctively I knew that specific direction and certainty are prized by people who have grown up in explosive and unpredictably abusive households. I also knew that, as a group, we did not wish to be merged with AA or Allan-non. In fact, our second group had elected not to affiliate with any organization. We were trying to get at

something very different, and now I was being asked to articulate just what it was we were all about and how this program could work for us.

## Change and Growth

During the next 18 months we continued to grow. Despite much turnover in membership we established a third and fourth group. Sometime during this period, we started what was to be a long-term dialogue with Allan-non to consider some form of affiliation. A number of our members also attended regular Alon-non meetings and expressed interest in some form of national representation. During this time our meetings were frequently visited by therapists and other mental health professionals who showed considerable interest in our new recovery program. Because our meetings were generally open to the public, we were also visited by members of the press, clergy and other 12 Step programs.

At no time did we see ourselves as pioneers of a new movement. We viewed ourselves as members of a 12-Step self-help program that focused on the special interests and needs of people who had been brought up in a family made dysfunctional alcohol. In 1978 and 1979 groups began to spring up in other areas of New York City and in New Jersey, Chicago and Florida. Out-of-town visitors would attend a few meetings, grab a handful of our Laundry Lists and head back to their distant hometown ready to replicate the simplified recovery format that we presented to members.

Soon the professional community began writing and publishing books and pamphlets about the ACoA syndrome. Our efforts seemed to dovetail in a timely manner with the expanding "family systems theory" movement. All this new information provided us with much needed insights that shed important light on the special nature of our illness.

Awareness of the ACoA self-help groups took a quantum leap forward because of the selfless efforts of one of our regular St. Jean Baptiste members, Jack E., a 20-year veteran of another 12-Step program. Jack moved to Los Angeles and, in true missionary style, he started the first West Coast ACoA groups. In less than a year there were many more ACoA groups all over Southern California. And with this effort ACoA became a nationwide self-help program.

On a personal level the program had helped me immensely. But I began to fear that my leadership role was creating in me a somewhat over inflated ego. I asked my Higher Power for guidance about what I should do. Shortly thereafter I stepped aside as meeting chairperson and took a much more comfortable seat in the back row of the meeting rooms.

Additional Reading: Big Red Book – How It Works – Chapter 6 page 81



4. How did you feel when you found this out?

5. How did you incorporate this healthy model?

6. How has a higher power evolved in your time in recovery?



growing up in an alcoholic environment leads directly to taking on many of the characteristics of the illness.

Until recently most people were unaware that everyone in an alcoholic household suffers some kind of emotional damage. (children of alcoholic parents are forced into an abnormal existence characterized by physical, verbal and emotional abuse, concealment, repression, stuffed feelings, chronic anxiety and continued betrayal. As these children mature - that is, manage to survive - they develop a whole series of defences that temporarily shield them from the brawling or muted insanity of their home life.

Such defences as hypervigilance, deep distrust, inability to express feelings, depression, fear of authority figures and a compelling need to control events and people are just a few of the lifestyle tactics that children of alcoholics carry with them into maturity. As adults they are confused and often deeply distressed when they see themselves continuing to act out in emotionally unhealthy ways that they learned from their parents.

Those of us who grew up in an alcoholic environment need to understand very clearly that our family was caught up in a conflict that took on many of the elements of open warfare. Whether the battles were loud and calamitous or silent and deadly, they all produced emotional stress in the smallest of victims - the children. The tragedy is that the stress and hurt and agony didn't get processed and discharged. Most of us tried to bury it deep, to ignore it, to pretend it didn't hurt or didn't matter. Over the years all the buried, concealed misery festered. Some of us tried to rebel early, some later; and many of us never had the opportunity to shed our lost, stuffed, frightened selves.

As children most of us felt trapped and helpless, unable to establish a separate self. We weren't valued by our parents, and as adults we find it increasingly difficult to accept and nurture ourselves. But even more troubling are the frustrations and difficulties we have in our relationships with others and in our careers. Rarely do we have satisfying, healthy relationships with those near to us, and most of our friendships suffer from distorted thinking, dependency or domination. ACoA's seem to have considerable trouble establishing intimate, mutually nourishing relationships. This is not surprising, since we had no healthy intimacies to observe and learn from in our childhood. Physical beatings, scathing criticism, sexual abuse and raging tyranny certainly did not help us comprehend the qualities and characteristics that create healthy intimacy. In ACoA we learn that real intimacy and caring friendships can never flourish in the soil of self-loathing. Early in life, however, we were taught that we were unacceptable. We were told over and over again how terribly flawed we were. Our parents and other family members virtually created our negative sense of self-worth. Our real task as adults is to change how we think of ourselves. We begin this process when we join the ACoA recovery program. ACoA is available to all who are interested. The focus is on reconstruction, change, healing, nurturing - and a willingness to surrender old ineffective ways of dealing with life's problems. By learning about the dimensions of our illness and the ways in which it continues to have a powerful influence on our lives, we can begin the process of change. We gain insight into the ways in which we have contributed to the current unmanageability of our lives. We begin to see how powerless we have been over the destructive force of the illness.

## The ACoA program is about people, human contact and sharing.

Recovery involves attending meetings, listening, sharing, learning and taking action. Most of us have tried in vain to understand where we were going wrong by studying an endless

library of self-help books and attending lectures by professionals. Despite our efforts these activities never seemed to produce lasting, positive results. Why? Perhaps it's because an individual who is trapped in denial or resistance has very little possibility of producing substantive change.

Most effective change requires intensive exposure to the problems involved and a consistent effort to apply sound, sensible actions to the issues. Change and recovery seldom yield to solitary, infrequent, isolated effort. Self-help recovery programs bring success because they ask that the individual join with others who have common suffering. These programs invite the individual to suspend judgment, become teachable, open up to others, re-experience the early pain, take specific positive actions and develop faith in the process and a spiritual path.

The program demands nothing: The process is always voluntary. It requires a willingness to consider change, and a commitment to take healthy actions. The deeper your involvement, the greater the recovery. Fence-sitters derive very little of sustaining value. The primary law that operates in the realm of self-recovery is that the more you work the program, the more it will work for you.

## How Does ACoA Work?

ACoA is people helping people. It is a 12-Step self-help recovery program with a structure, a series of well-defined issues and some proven recovery principles and guidelines. Much of the early effort involves attending meetings and becoming familiar with the nature of the illness; learning to share with others on a consistent basis; and discovering some of the early action's newcomers take to initiate recovery. The pros can be seen as a series of recovery efforts:

1. Early awareness of the nature of the illness.
2. Identification with the destructive behaviour patterns that A C o A's have in common.
3. Developing a feeling of safety and security about the meetings and fellow members.
4. Developing a willingness to sit with and re-experience painful feelings that come from childhood.
5. Sharing with the group about family secrets, shame, harmful behaviour patterns and new unsettling feelings about childhood trauma.
6. Intensive study of some of the valuable information and self-help books that deal with the ACoA syndrome.
7. Developing friends among group members, active group participation and selection of a sponsor.
8. Study of the ACoA 12 Steps of recovery for guidance and direction.
9. Development of some form of belief or faith in a spiritual path.
10. Assessment (in writing) of the major issues and destructive behaviour patterns that are causing difficulty.
11. Discussing these issues and problems with a sponsor or ACoA friends and developing a practical, workable program of action to resolve them.
12. Applying the ACoA 12 Steps of recovery and the ACoA Solution to personal problems.

13. Sharing the results of these efforts with a sponsor, friends and a Higher Power.
14. Becoming willing to be held accountable by a sponsor and friends for following through on all major changes in behaviour and beliefs.
15. Adapting the ACoA program to all aspects of life particularly to relationships and work.
16. Developing a belief in the value of following a spiritual path in human endeavours.

Please keep in mind that the process of recovery varies considerably from person to person. The elements listed above are only rough guideposts that illustrate a general sequence of recovery events.

Early recovery is usually quite difficult for most ACoA's - even for those with other 12-Step recovery program experiences. One reason is that there are many different recovery issues involved. No two members are necessarily battling the same ghosts, since each member was brought up in a uniquely troubled family system. We all have much in common, but the specific ways we act out can vary. For one member an overwhelming dependency and fear of abandonment may be the major issue. For another member a controlling, abusive, suspicious manner may lead to a particularly troubling series of problems that destroys intimacy.

Some common threads run throughout all these different ways of approaching, controlling or reacting to life. These are described in detail in the Problem/Solution. This brief information piece was designed to answer the frequent and insistent inquiries: "Well, just how does ACoA work?" "How am I supposed to get better?" "What do I have to do?" "What is really wrong with me?" "Can I really recover from all this craziness?" Early on in ACoA we recognized the critical importance of a safe and supportive environment where we could all share openly.

Many of us found that opening up and expressing our real, authentic feelings was a frightening prospect. Most of us had been heavily censored as children. Our feelings were attacked, discounted or ignored. Now we were encouraging each other to be authentic and to reveal what we had so long edited or suppressed.

We knew that we had to create a new kind of open forum where each member could share the special pain and anguish that comes to us when we begin to re-experience the feelings of rage, grief, fear and abandonment that we stuffed during our dismal and distressing childhoods. When I constructed what I felt were the basic elements of a solution to our many and varied problems, I was guided by four principles:

1. Like our parents, we too were powerless victims of the disease of alcoholism.
2. By joining with others in a safe and loving environment, we could explore the ways in which the illness still affects us and gain a new clarity concerning it.
3. In ACoA the focus is inward and involves re-experiencing painful childhood feelings.
4. Most of us have to revisit emotionally the anguish and confusion that so affected us. A series of recovery steps is available to assist ACoA's on this journey.
5. ACoA is a spiritually based recovery program. Members are invited to look to a power greater than themselves as a helping force for recovery.

## Who we are?

If you are questioning the impact of the illness on your life, you may find the following section helpful. ACoA's are the innocent victims of an all-encompassing illness that strikes any family suffering from the effects of parental alcoholism. In an alcoholic household the emotional dynamics are generally destructive to all family members. Too often the atmosphere is one of violence, denial, fear, abandonment, brutal indifference, seething scorn, inconsistency and betrayal - or a combination of these elements.

Turbulence of this sort, if endured for many years, invariably leads to some form of psychic numbing. Spontaneity and vulnerability get pushed aside by rigid defences. Our feelings and emotions get stuffed and often covered over by denial and a powerful need to control. As trapped victims we adjust as best we can to the insane, unpredictable behaviour of the entire family.

As young children ACoA's learn a set of injunctions that are destined to keep us trapped in the illness for many years. **Claudia Black** has termed these:

1. Don't Talk
2. Don't Trust
3. Don't Feel

As emotionally abandoned children these three responses were at the core of our survival techniques, we used them over and over whenever the family drama became too intense and uncontrollable. Even more destructive was the way that this behaviour shaped our beliefs about life and people around us. We saw nothing was safe, certain or secure. We were always at risk. By following these harsh rules and directives we came close to being "buried alive" by our illness. When we finally left our alcoholic family, we seemed destined to feel the seemingly endless negative consequences of the sick lessons we were taught in an insane and unloving family environment.

As ACoA's we have many problems in common, but our problems can be dealt with. The most universal or frequently experienced of these problems are described in the ACoA Laundry List.

## The Nature of Our Problems

The typical adult child of an alcoholic has a number of troubling and distressing issues. This is understandable given the toxic nature of our early family life. The unique combination of problems that ACoA's must deal with presents a special challenge to the self-help recovery process. While most programs concentrate on a single problem such as alcohol, food or gambling, the ACoA program addresses a broad spectrum of difficulties ranging from deep fear of intimacy, to people pleasing, to extreme guilt when standing up for one's beliefs. In the ACoA program the focus is on understanding, accepting and eventually changing our self-defeating behaviour. In our recovery most of us have to contend with many kinds of entrenched behaviour:

1. Stuffing our feelings and/or being unable to express them.
2. Going to great lengths to avoid feelings of abandonment and rejection.
3. Isolating and being fearful of people, especially authority figures.

4. Acting as people-pleasers and losing our identity in the process.
5. Experiencing guilt feelings whenever we stand up for ourselves.
6. Reacting rather than acting.

Even more limiting is the fact that many ACoA's tend to live life from the viewpoint of victims and are drawn to people with similar lifestyles. In recovery ACoA's learn that in their childhood years they were indeed the most innocent of victims. They were deeply harmed, but the damage is not irreparable. ACoA meetings put us in touch with who we really are. When a newcomer to ACoA reads the Laundry List and recognizes how accurately it describes his or her life, a new awareness is born. It's like spirit calling to spirit. The newcomer hears a message of hope. Some have said that the Laundry List is like a child calling out to a child for support. Most newcomers quickly identify with both the elements of the Laundry List and also with the sharing of the ACoA group. On a fundamental level they come to realize that part of the process of recovery involves finding themselves through the sharing of others, and eventually through their own participation. Newcomers listen and begin to understand that for the first time in their lives they have a real chance to recover and be whole. They have an opportunity to experience supportive, non-punishing, non-judgmental family activity.

Like everyone else in the world, ACoA's need to be free to reveal what is happening to them and where they are in their life journey - without having to edit or conceal. For years or decades many ACoA's have, out of a sense of self-preservation, carefully guarded their thoughts and feelings. ACoA helps to dissolve the resistance and dispel the loneliness and isolation that blocked us.

Over the years people in self-help programs have suggested that a workable solution can only come out of an accurate definition of the problems. The Laundry List seems to be a reasonably precise depiction of the nature of our problems, and members feel that it is beneficial to the group to have this list of problems read at the beginning of each meeting. It sharpens everyone's focus, creates an invisible but palpable bond and encourages the process of opening up to the painful feelings within.

## Feelings

Most ACoA's are masters at avoidance of feelings. We will go to great lengths not to feel our feelings. It's really difficult for ACoA's to grasp the reality that feelings are neither good nor bad but experiencing them fully is essential to the process of recovery. This is especially hard because most recovery programs operate on the premise that the individual attends meetings to feel better. But in ACoA, when we go to meetings, we are more likely to feel worse because we are being opened up to strong feelings.

The members of an alcoholic family learn to feel shame for what they are and guilt for what they do, and this is an ever-present theme in ACoA sharing. Like other ACoA's, I had to learn that what I feel about myself and how I perceive myself isn't necessarily accurate. In my early days I had a terrible time with my estimate of myself. My angry self-loathing was engaged in a fierce struggle with the recovery process. My parents' definition of me needed to be neutralized. I was desperate to discover the real me, but the harsh, negative attitudes I clung to about myself formed an almost impenetrable barrier. I felt that there was something so wrong with me that I needed to be obliterated. This was only natural as I had been told again and again that I was terribly flawed and stupid. During my early years I learned to be hyper-vigilant, always outside myself, carefully scanning the external world for signs of danger to my brittle sense of self.

Part of my problem, like so many other ACoA's, was my ability to stuff and ignore the really strong feelings. Whenever I sensed any kind of abandonment or rejection, I would distract myself by calling someone or by racing out to give support to someone else. Whenever I felt swamped with feelings, I would grab for something external to draw away my attention away, a friend, a movie, a date, a party, television, a football game. It took me quite a while to understand that this seemingly innocent behaviour was really part of my problem. I did not want to sit quietly and experience the turbulent painful feelings. I was still trying to escape from or blunt my feelings. I resisted the process of healing because it was so foreign to everything I had been taught growing up.

Additional Reading: Big Red Book – ACA is a Spiritual Not Religious Program – Chapter 5 page 75

## Step 3.

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### Made a Decision to Practice Self-Love and to Trust in our Higher Power.

Instead of surrendering our lives to the sick parents that reside within us, we choose to put our faith in a spiritual power greater than ourselves, however we choose to define it. In my efforts to resolve the difficulties in my life, I recognized that I would have to accept myself and learn to nurture myself. I found that I could no longer give myself a way to the needs or demands of others.

I used meditation and prayer to help me nurture and be patient and considerate with the vulnerable human being hiding within me. As a starting point I visualized myself as a very young boy and began to nurture and care for that lost, frightened little boy who went into hiding to survive.

One of my approaches was to sit quietly for a few minutes each day, repeating the phrase, "I love you, Little Tony." At first, I felt foolish about what I was doing, but soon I began to feel a deeper appreciation for my inner child and what he had survived. Just as it is our Higher Power's responsibility to give us unconditional love, it is our responsibility to give our child-self unconditional love.

I also learned that this nurturing approach could help me heal the break with my parents. I could sit in silence and visualize my father as a frightened, confused, defensive little boy (and surely he was) and visualize myself hugging his little child. In my efforts to practice self-acceptance and self-appreciation, I began to discern healthy actions from unhealthy actions, toxic people from accepting and sensible people, positive situations from negative ones, and to take actions that moved me toward self-love.

*Tony talks about how we can't trust a higher power more than we can trust our own parents and that trust is an ongoing process. One of the basic problems as an ACoA is the trust issue. This has to do with the spiritual beginnings of children, spiritual meanings progress in self-consciousness when the child transfers its idea of omnipotence from its parent's to God. The entire spiritual experience of such a child depends largely on whether fear or love has dominated the parent / child relationship.*



3. Does your Higher Power love you unconditionally? Explain

4. What does your Higher Power want for you? (meditate on this for 5 mins and write down what comes up during this period of silence)

5. Has your Higher Power changed since entering ACoA recovery?

## The Process of Recovery

Recovery is complex. I'm sure no one in ACoA wants it to be that way, it just is. As M. Scott Peck so abruptly began his book *The Road Less Travelled*, "Life is difficult!" And I'm sure that if he were asked to describe life for ACoA's, he might suggest that life is doubly difficult. Our challenges as ACoA's are many. Not the least of them is to recover the self we abandoned amidst the tumult of an alcoholic family. Believe me, it can be accomplished. I know many who have done it.

Recovery is a process. It is often painful, time-consuming, confusing and most of all frustrating. Recovery is essentially a means of self-discovery and self-acceptance, and its ultimate goal is self-love. To this end the primary focus of the ACoA program of recovery is inward.

The program asks the troubled ACoA to open up and experience those awful feelings of fear, abandonment, rejection, rage, self-pity, sorrow—perhaps even wallow in them and literally mourn the emptiness of a miserable childhood. Most ACoA's resist this approach at first. We spent so many years stuffing our feelings that it's unlikely we will suddenly welcome them with open arms.

In recovery I discovered that I had to clear some kind of path through my self-destructive behaviour so that the spirituality of the program could reach me and lighten my burden. Somehow, I had to be emptied of all the sickness I had created. I desperately needed some clarity, and I intuitively knew that I could find some of it in a spiritual approach. I have never, however, been one who believed that there is only one path to recovery. There are many, and the ACoA recovery program is just one of those paths.

Newcomers to ACoA generally begin the journey by identifying with the common problems and relating closely to the experiences and behaviour shared by group members. They see that we all have much in common and begin to want to know more. One of the greatest tools available to both newcomers and regular members is the wealth of literature now available about the ACoA syndrome. A number of practical and insightful books have been published over the past decade by such forward-thinking professionals as Janet Woititz, Claudia Black and Bob Earll, to name just a few. Most professionals endorse attendance at ACoA meetings.

Awareness of our illness and how it defeats us over and over again is critical to personal recovery. The basic tools are the Problem/Solution, published literature and the inspired sharing of fellow ACoA's. Some meetings may be quite upsetting to newcomers. Strong emotions are frequently expressed, often explosively. These can be experienced as threatening and may stir up long-buried feelings. Newcomers may also be witness to an intimidating level of anger and pain.

Early recovery follows this general pattern:

1. Emerging awareness of the many ways in which the illness affected us.
2. The surfacing of long-buried feelings and recall of painful childhood memories.
3. A recognition of a powerful anger or sorrow at being robbed of a healthy childhood.
4. A willingness to experience in depth the rage and eventual grief that usually attends a fuller understanding of how, as innocent children, we were neglected or violated.

Unbridled rage and grief are usually difficult to observe and even more difficult to experience. Yet they are essential experiential steps in the recovery process. In my own recovery, and in the experiences related to me by hundreds of other ACoA's, the inward trip to recovery generally involves experiencing our feelings. It is critical that we open ourselves up to such frightening and threatening feelings as rage, depression and abandonment. It is essential that we sit with and experience whatever elements of pain and hurt surface.

Many times, I wished there were an easier way. But I don't believe that true recovery can occur without a profound and inspired understanding of who we are as individuals, and the knowledge that who we are is perfectly acceptable and worthy of love. Until I commenced recovery, I had been my own merciless judge, jury and executioner. I had never had a loving and nourishing model to follow, and I learned not to trust my feelings. In ACoA I realized that I had to make a beginning at listening to my emerging intuitive feelings.

## React or Act

I had been so conditioned to the role of reactor that I really did not know how to act in my own best behalf. Before ACoA I had always fashioned my behaviour to gain approval, validation, praise and acceptance. How I felt about myself and my needs was of little consequence. In short, I was a consummate people pleaser.

In recovery this posture had to be corrected. When I started acting to serve my own best interests, I felt terribly guilty. I was saying yes to a healthy me that was beginning to emerge, and it was all very uncomfortable. I had been desperately dependent on others and I didn't like to disappoint them. But I kept at the process-timidly at first, but with more conviction and strength as time passed.

None of these actions would have been possible without the loving support of other ACoA members. They supplied me with an awareness of the deceptiveness of my illness and they gave me unconditional love and acceptance as I made my troubled, journey into self-recovery. I truly believe that a spiritual force was working through all those who were supporting my painful recovery. They offered nourishment rather than criticism. Though I judged myself harshly, they accepted me and related to my humanity. Slowly I learned to change my old attitudes and destructive patterns. I struggled daily to keep the focus on myself and my issues, though the urge to give advice and "fix" someone else was almost always present.

My need to control people surfaced early as a major issue in my recovery, as it does for so many others in ACoA. I wanted to be the authority, and sometimes I resisted the sharing and suggestion from others. I was telling others and myself that a spiritual force was my ultimate authority, yet I was loathing to let go of my efforts to control the people and events in my life. Finally, through prayer, meditation, working the steps of recovery and consistent attendance at meetings, I slowly began to experience some recovery. My thinking and my behaviour began to shift. Fear and anxiety, the cornerstones of my disease, began to lessen. I began to relate to myself and others in a gentler and more vulnerable manner. I continued to share at meetings and became increasingly more willing to sit quietly with my turbulent and painful feelings. In this way I gained some valuable new insights. When I felt confident enough, I began to act on my new awareness.

Through it all I had setbacks, many of them. Sometimes I would slip back to old forceful, judgmental behaviour and make a disruptive personal assault on whatever or whomever was confronting me. And I always felt terrible after each episode, something akin to an emotional hangover. I was fortunate, though, for I had a new family to turn to for help, not my intensely dysfunctional family of origin. Now I had the consistent acceptance, support and concern of my ACoA groups. They provided positive encouragement even when I was responding to some of them as if they were my original father, mother and stepmother.

I'm convinced that my recovery is coming about because of three key factors:

1. My commitment to show up and do the work of recovery.
2. The love, acceptance and encouragement of my fellow ACoA members.
3. The grace of a spiritual power, who worked through other ACoA's to give me a new life.

## Reading 4 – The Recovery Process

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(Editor's note: The writing of Tony A was done before ACA worldwide accepted the concept that everything Tony A wrote about alcoholism and growing up in an alcoholic home was also true for children who grew up in dysfunctional homes where addiction may not have been an issue. The ACA Big Red Book identifies 7 types of upbringing that qualify as dysfunctional as follows: "parents who were emotionally ill, hypochondriac, hypercritical, perfectionist, ultra-religious, or sexually abusive. Adults who have been adopted or who grew up in foster homes relate to The Laundry List as well and recover in ACA." ACA Big Red Book, page 4. When you see the words alcoholic below, feel free to also substitute the word dysfunctional for a better understanding).

### Family Drama

It's very important for ACoA's to understand that alcoholism is a family disease that distorts all human relationships, those outside as well as those inside the family. As the alcoholic parent or parents become enmeshed in the disease, efforts to maintain normalcy and healthy interactions between family members disappear. Love, trust and acceptance are the prime casualties of alcoholism. Fuelled by neglect, abuse or denial, the family usually enters an unmanageable stage in which all members are in some way seriously affected. The desperate spouse and children all suffer grave emotional stress in their efforts to adjust to the impossible demands and destructive behaviour of the alcoholic.

Often the alcoholic family appears to be functioning normally. This is because it is drawing upon an elaborate denial system to conceal the true force of the disease. Robbed of healthy, nurturing role models, the children of an alcoholic household adopt the sick behaviour patterns that they witness daily. All too soon the innocent young boy who is beaten and viciously criticized by his raging, drunken father learns not to trust, to withdraw and to suppress feelings. He quickly recognizes that life is not safe, and he begins to construct a series of inappropriate defence measures to ensure his survival. Ironically these defences may include the same rage and criticism he got from his father.

Spontaneity, initiative and high self-esteem are rare qualities among children of alcoholics. Personality distortion can take many forms, and children of alcoholics are highly susceptible to those that involve rigidity, inflexible beliefs, isolation, flash rage and morbid guilt.

A typical example is the young daughter of an alcoholic mother who at an early age assumes the role of little mother and substitute wife. She buries her own healthy needs and exhibits an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, serving everyone else's needs except her own. She may compensate for her mother's outrageous neglect by feverishly cooking, cleaning, washing and shopping for the younger children in the family. She literally sacrifices her energy and personal development in response to the demands of the family disease.

Some ACoA's take years to discover that the family was caught in the grip of such a destructive disease while they were growing up. In many instances the family never acknowledges or confronts the disease. Instead they engage in a conspiracy to "act normal" while concealing or seemingly dismissing the insane drama motivated by alcoholism. Unfortunately, whether it is muted denial or open family warfare, there is bound to be some long-lasting emotional fallout that touches all members of the family.

## How Parents Define the Child

Scientists and medical specialists state confidently that much of our sense of who we are and our perceptions of how safe a place the world is are established in our early formative years, before age four or five. We develop many of our most fundamental personality traits and behaviour patterns during these critical early years.

Early in life we receive a constant flow of important communications from the people who control our survival: our parents. Through these daily broadcasts we begin to form some general impressions of who we are, how acceptable and enjoyable we are and how capable we are. At a deeper, more complex level, largely communicated through touch, we are told how lovable and valued we are as human beings.

In a healthy family environment, the children are shown consistent love and nurturing; respect for the feelings and actions of all individuals is common place; the right to voice one's opinions and voice one's needs directly (without fear) is assured; and healthy conflict and confrontation are encouraged as part of the family communication system. As the child of two alcoholics I find this almost impossible to imagine. I am able to describe these essential elements in great detail, but I can't really feel how they so richly empower those who are raised that way.

Over the years I have heard hundreds of ACoA stories that described the sick and distorted means that the parents and other family relatives used to give definition to the vulnerable children of an alcoholic household.

Physical abuse, beatings, incest, scathing criticism, public ridicule, abandonment, emotional remoteness, smothering control, scape-goating, silent scorn, tyrannical punishment and sexual intimidation are just a few of the pathetic crimes committed by the alcoholic family.

They really are crimes and make no mistake, the children are truly victims. These early wounds cause incredible injury to a child's fragile sense of self-worth and self-esteem. There is no safe passage to adulthood where a family is struggling with alcoholism or other addictive/compulsive diseases.

One of the real tragedies of ACoA's is how we discount and rationalize this alcoholic behaviour. I have heard some ACoA's dismiss the most horrendous neglect as reasonably minor. In our effort to survive we internalize much of the family brutality and give it a new identity-such as, "I only got hit when I really deserved it." "What's wrong with leaving me in a dark cellar for two days? It really wasn't that bad now that I think about it."

## Our Common Behaviour: Another Look at The Laundry List

When I wrote the original ACoA Problem/Solution, I prefaced the Problem section with a simple statement: "These are characteristics we seem to have in common due to being brought up in an alcoholic household."

For months I had sat at meetings with other ACoA's, listening to them sharing. Out of those early meetings I managed to gain some perspective concerning the nature of our problems. I wasn't conducting a professional or scientific inquiry; I was merely participating and noticing how all of us were linked by many common experiences and a series of behaviour patterns that was creating great turbulence in our emotional lives. I also saw that our current problems had their roots in the many ways we adapted and adjusted to the stress and pressures of our alcoholic family.

Although it is unlikely that one person possesses all of the common characteristics or behaviour patterns, it's a rare ACoA who can't identify with eight or nine of the 14 original characteristics I set down. In the years since I first wrote them down, individual groups have made some editorial alterations to the original characteristics, and quite a few professionals and writers have excerpted, cited, embellished and paraphrased my original list to fit their particular needs. Here, however, are the original 14 behaviour patterns, the Problem that I set down in 1977. I've added a few present-day observations to them, hindsight brings such wonderful clarity!

Additional Reading: Big Red Book – ACA Disease Model –page xxvi

### Step 4.

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## We Made A Searching and Blameless Inventory of our Parents Because, in Essence, we Had Become Them.

We examine, in a no-blame manner, the behaviour of our parents. The ACoA's emotional responses to life are largely a composite of the behaviour patterns of our parents. Growing up in an alcoholic household almost invariably means that we take on both the constructive and the destructive character traits of our parents. In order for us to forgive and accept ourselves, we need to see clearly who we have become and how much we still react to life as our parents did. No matter how far behind we may think we've left them, they've always been with us.



4. Make note of the main traits/behaviour's that reside in you from your father or second primary care giver. (positive and negative aspects)

5. Make a searching and blameless inventory of any person that may have been a parental figure in your life. (positive and negative aspects)

6. Make a note of the traits that you have taken on as a child from these people that impact your life in a negative way today. (take note that "**with stress, we regress**", notice who we become when we regress, Mum, Dad or other.)

7. How are you like each of your parents emotionally?



13. Can my inner child forgive my parents? (this is imperative to begin coming out of blame).

14. Tony talks about how we can become one parent and marry the other. Has this been your experience?

## Reading 5 - Waiting in The Wings

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Adult children of alcoholics are definitely “at risk” as human beings.

Recent governmental and private studies suggest that possibly 50 percent of all children raised in an alcoholic household become alcoholic’s and many marry alcoholics or other addictive personalities. The recent evidence also indicates that this generational pattern is also true for children of drug addicts and prescription drug abusers. In adult life many of us seem to be attracted to unstable partners and troubled relationships. The destructive forces lying in wait for the children of alcoholics are quite formidable, and adult children from these and other addictive environments need to be especially alert to these threats.

This leads me to some thoughts about the problem of alcohol and drug use by those attending ACoA meetings. I find it very difficult to believe that people who are using alcohol and drugs in any significant way can gain much value and nourishment from the ACoA program. Their escapist behaviour is much more likely to move them into a non-feeling, emotionally deadened space that is virtually unreachable. I would speculate that an active addict can gain little benefit from ACoA, and I also question the possible contribution of ACoA to those who are using drugs in a “recreational” manner. I don’t think that active drug use and attendance at ACoA meetings is a successful formula.

Once, during a secretary’s break at a meeting, I spotted two newcomers sitting in a remote corner quietly puffing away on their funny smelling cigarettes. I thought, “What better way to avoid experiencing the painful feelings that may be waiting for expression. What better way not to be here.”

While I certainly don’t condemn the moderate and appropriate use of alcohol or the careful use of medication, I do think it is important for ACoA’s, especially new members, to examine their current patterns of use of alcohol, prescription drugs, soft and hard drugs, and potentially destructive activity such as compulsive overeating, compulsive sex, gambling and debting. I’m convinced that most ACoA’s are extraordinarily susceptible to all kinds of addictive behaviour. All these destructive forces are literally waiting in the wings for most ACoA’s.

As children and adolescents most ACoA's learned any number of ways to escape from painful feelings and the difficult challenges of life. Many reached for addictive substances or found relief in compulsive behaviour.

Much of what the ACoA was attracted to and used resembled the substances used by their parents. Thus, the cycle of destructive behaviour moved into the next generation.

My experience has shown me that people who have already fallen victim to alcoholism, substance abuse or compulsive behaviour will make virtually no progress in the ACoA program as long as they continue their addictive behaviour. They are simultaneously trying to drown and revive their lost child, and that is both futile and counterproductive.

A newcomer who is in a struggle with alcohol, drugs, excessive use of tranquilizers, compulsive food binging, gambling or debting is engaged in a wearying battle with powerful runaway symptoms. Until he or she leaves this battlefield and arrests the runaway symptoms, the ACoA program is virtually useless. We can't effectively serve two masters: We can't be fully committed to recovery and self-destruction at the same time. It's almost impossible to hear any loving messages when you are in full flight from feelings. At a less obvious but potentially dangerous level, all ACoA members must become alert to the many partially concealed, seemingly innocent activities that may someday lead to an unmanageable life. I'm talking particularly about unacknowledged issues that have the potential to destroy ACoA progress and eventually cripple newly developed self-esteem. Often the behaviour is dismissed or discounted, a night of spirited drunken behaviour that "came out of nowhere"; intermittent food binging while isolating over a long weekend; a runaway sex drive that leads to high-risk encounters, perhaps aided by a few marijuana cigarettes.

Isolated events such as these may appear to have little or no impact on an individual's well-being. Some people view them as harmless diversions and distractions that take a little pressure off a stressful situation or just plain "feel good." But these actions also enable a person to avoid feelings, and actions such as these have a way of becoming more appealing and more frequently visited.

Addictive/compulsive behaviour normally escalates over time, but daily life does not improve along with it. ACoA's are very susceptible to this behaviour, and I have heard hundreds of ACoA's grudgingly admit that their behaviour patterns include a number of budding addictive/compulsive activities from cigarette smoking to overworking to overeating to drug use. In time these presently harmless, "only once in a while" issues can turn on them and make their daily lives unmanageable.

The message is that denial can operate at many different levels and at many different points in recovery. ACoA's learned all about denial and concealment in childhood. Now we need to be sensitive to the possibility that we are attempting to belittle, discount or just plain ignore some potentially destructive addictive/compulsive behaviour.

I make this plea for vigilance because even limited use of alcohol or minor compulsive behaviour can so easily trigger painful bouts of self-loathing, self-recrimination, depression and isolation. What may appear to be harmless behaviour can readily undermine a person's early efforts at recovery in ACoA. Denial is a strong counter-force in early recovery; and newcomers to ACoA are not very familiar with the ways in which they are able to sabotage their growth efforts. For some the early path to recovery may require one step forward and two steps back.

## Step 5.

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### We Admitted to Our Higher Power, To Ourselves And To Another Human Being The Exact Nature Of Our Childhood Abandonment.

Out of a searching and blameless inventory of our parents we come to see how we reacted, adapted, revolted and resisted, and ultimately abandoned ourselves. When we review the nature of our parents' illness, we come to see how many of their behaviour patterns replaced our youthful innocence and spontaneity; we see all the desperate adaptations, all the frightened defences we built, all of the repression, frustration and flight. Through these parent-taught mechanisms we truly abandoned ourselves.

All these harmful acquired behaviour patterns we adopted are truly our childhood losses. We need to acknowledge them to our Higher Power, to ourselves and to another individual so that we can move toward a healthy self. The intent of this step is to help us recognize how we were emotionally abandoned as children and how we abandoned ourselves and became our parents.

*Childhood abandonment is the core issue for people like us. This is what we live not to feel. That which we are frightened of feeling the most, is what we are addicted and attracted to creating and finding in our lives. In order to have healthy relationships I have to look at abandonment. Out of a searching and blameless inventory of our parents/care givers we come to see how we reacted, adapted, revolted, resisted and ultimately abandoned ourselves. When we review the nature of our parent's illness we come to see how many of their behaviour patterns replaced our youthful innocence, spontaneity and creativity. We see all the desperate adaptations, all the frightened defences we built, all the repression, frustration and flight. Through these parent taught mechanisms we truly abandoned ourselves.*

*All these harmful acquired behaviour patterns we adopted are truly our childhood losses, we need to acknowledge them to a higher power, to ourselves and to another individual so that we can move towards a healthy self. The intent of this step is to help us recognise how we were emotionally abandoned as children and how we abandoned ourselves and became our parents. Abandonment has touched us deeply. I came across a teaching in the states that those of us of the human race who have not suffered abandonment at a very deep level cannot make the next level of spiritual awareness. In other words, abandonment is the passport to the next spiritual level.*

*For those of us who have suffered abandonment I would like to offer the proposition that in actuality it's a huge spiritual plus. Because it's an emptying out feeling, and nature avoids a vacuum as I'm emptied out of humanness, my spirit can start moving into the God shaped hole. If I allow it to. That hole has always been filled up with people, places and things for me. But if I can allow myself to feel the feeling and to stay empty it allows this void to be filled up with spirit. And then the process comes.*

***"God empty me with me and fill me with thee"***

1. List the ways that you were emotionally or physically abandoned as a child.

2. Give examples of how you have done this to yourself as an adult.

3. Is this still true today?

4. List the exact nature of your childhood abandonment.

## Reading 6 - Getting Started with Recovery

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There are many roads to recovery for people who grew up in an alcoholic household. The ACoA program of recovery is one of those paths, but it is by no means the only way that an ACoA's can deal with the emotional disturbances that have their roots in a dysfunctional family system. I am convinced, however, that the ACoA program can be of great benefit to those still suffering the effects of a turbulent childhood.

My own recovery began when I first sat and shared with a small group of people who were also raised in an alcoholic environment. I felt almost instant empathy. I readily understood the nature of their pain because I had suffered in much the same way. The circumstances and nature of the experiences may have been quite different, but my feelings and reactions to all that sick alcoholic behaviour were very similar to theirs. This sharing and identifying was the beginning of my recovery process, and I think it is incredibly helpful for most of those who embrace the ACoA program.

My own personal recovery took a leap forward once the Laundry List was developed. Here were my major issues, listed on a single piece of paper, being read aloud at every meeting. Here too were some suggestions "The Solution" that I felt would move us all toward recovery. The Laundry List became my focal point. It showed me some real barriers to personal freedom that I needed to examine over and over again and begin to by consciously changing my attitudes and my actions.

What gave me great hope for the ACoA program was the realization that those issues that most troubled me were generally the ones considered most troublesome by the others in the groups. The Laundry List provides a reasonably definitive map of the troubled inner war zone, and the meetings provide a safe forum where people can commence the task of learning to trust, feel and share.

Additional Reading: Big Red Book – The Solution – Chapter 8 page 295

### Step 6.

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#### **We Were Entirely Ready To Begin The Healing Process With The Aid Of Our Higher Power.**

In this step we ready ourselves to turn to a power greater than ourselves. No matter how hesitant or uncertain we may be about the wisdom of such a move, we should keep in mind that healing can and does take place in this world and it is often propelled by acts of faith and belief. Here we are being asked to open ourselves to the healing help of a spiritual force. Part of the process of healing comes from gaining an awareness of how much we suffer when we hold onto our damaging ways of living. We need to think in terms of preparing ourselves to shed the habits and traits that have so restricted our enjoyment of daily life. At this stage in our recovery we can make a resolve to open up and become more teachable; to embrace the opportunities and to move toward the development of a partnership with our Higher Power, as we understand it. No longer do we need to run our life by ourselves or in secret. This step does not direct us to take actions, it merely asks us to be receptive and willing to adopt a new approach to life.

*In this step we ready ourselves to turn to a power greater than ourselves, no matter how hesitant or uncertain we may be about the wisdom of such a move. We should keep in mind that healing can and does take place in this world and is often propelled by acts of faith and belief. Here we are asked to open ourselves to the healing help of the spiritual force. This is a part of the process on the road to trust.*

From YouTube "New Steps for ACoA" by Tony A.

1. What current damaging ways of living are being made clear to you at this point in your life?

2. What behaviours are you willing to change?

3. Are you feeling any resistance to letting go of any of these behaviours?

4. With your non-dominant hand, write about write about the fears associated with this resistance.

5. Am I ready to now get out of the way to allow my higher power to aid in this healing process?

## Reading 7 - Successful Involvement

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What follows are some factors that I believe lead to successful involvement in the ACoA program. I know many members who have successfully used these approaches.

### Learning to Trust, Feel and Share

Newcomers are seldom prepared to trust the group members or the group process. At early ACoA meetings it's more likely that they are following the parental commands: "Don't trust anyone outside this house. Don't tell anyone, ever, what goes on in this house; Your feelings don't count. Keep your mouth shut about what you've just seen." Concealment, shame, avoidance, denial and silence are more apt to be some of the newcomers' approaches to their family secrets.

It takes time for many newcomers to see clearly that they are unconditionally accepted, that their secrets and shame are safe and that their sharing is respected and not judged. Group members encourage newcomers to share the long-stuffed hurt; to tell others about the misery that they witnessed in their childhood household; and to let others know how their early survival efforts have stayed with them in adult life.

Shedding light on all these hidden and shadowy corners is one way that ACoA members can begin to understand and accept the sickness of their childhoods. Little can be accomplished in the way of recovery until ACoA's come to see the nature of the disease and just how destructive it has been. Many ACoA members must also come to terms with the actuality that they are holding onto a great deal of anger at both parents. These intense feelings of anger need to surface and be acknowledged. Newcomers will be best served if they can sit with and re-experience as many of those unsettling early feelings as possible. It's not a pleasant task but it is an important part of the recovery process.

Most children who grew up in an alcoholic home wanted to be loved and valued in a simple, healthy, satisfying way. The ACoA program provides an opportunity to test a newly emerging willingness to trust, be open and be vulnerable.

### Changing Our Attitudes Toward Authority Figures

Our sick parents were our first authority figures. Often, they were punishing, indifferent, neglectful, deceitful or inconsistent. Years of this behaviour led many of us to be angry and distrustful in our attitudes toward and dealings with subsequent authority figures. Those who had early authority over us created a highly charged and untrustworthy environment.

We who were verbally and physically abused into fearful compliance must contend with the inappropriate re-enactment of that childhood anxiety or paralysis in our present-day dealings with those we have invested with the mantle of authority.

Whether it's a long-standing attitude of hostility and suspicion or one of fear and compliance, most ACoA's need to understand that it is quite likely that they will experience these feelings at the ACoA group meetings. It's also quite probable that they will have strong initial reactions to people they see

as being in authority. It may take a while to understand that group leaders are merely serving the group efforts to the best of their ability.

It is important to recognize that inappropriate reactions to authority figures are rooted in the distant past. Most day-to-day conflicts are generally just modified re-enactments of old clashes and incidents.

## Accepting the Group as Your New Family

Early in my recovery I made a conscious effort to be one of the group, a member of a family unit instead of a hero or group leader. I knew it was essential that I share and reveal who I was.

I began to notice that, in temperament and actions, some members resembled my father, my stepmother, my sister and even my wife and children. I had to monitor my reactions to these group members, constantly telling myself that they were not members of my family of origin and that it was inappropriate for me to judge, attack or be threatened by them. I pushed myself to act and share in as healthy a manner as I could.

As I learned to accept them and trust them, I also got in touch with all kinds of special new feelings. I began to feel really safe, appropriate and truly part of an accepting, loving group. All of us in the ACoA groups were taking what positive steps we were capable of in an effort to create and perpetuate an environment where we could all grow and change. I came to understand that I was a unique and cherished individual. For the first time in my life I began to value myself and see all the potential for an exciting, healthy, balanced life. I saw that fear consistently impoverished me, and I came to believe that love and acceptance can only flow through me when I'm not fearful.

Many of my discoveries came as a result of the concern and loving support of the group. As difficult as the concept may sound, it is vitally important for ACoA's to begin to accept the group as their new family.

## Making Friends

Reaching out with a willingness to share is seldom easy, and it is probably most difficult for those new to ACoA. To approach a person, engage in an opening conversation, risk rejection, explore common ground and accept differences can be very threatening and unnerving. It takes courage and persistence to start new friendships. It also takes some understanding of the ways in which ACoA's often try to control and direct a budding friendship.

I urge every newcomer to try to develop friendships within the group. Take time to discover those with whom you might feel a kinship. Move toward those who have a way of behaving or sharing that you admire. The more time you spend sharing with people, the better the opportunity to understand them and to develop some meaningful relationships. Take some risks. Try not to be a loner.

Here a word of caution is needed. The overwhelming weight of experience indicates that initial friendship efforts are best directed, at least for heterosexuals, at members of the same sex. Some developing friendships are started with the idea of a potential romance in mind. While ACoA

meetings have been, on occasion, a mating ground, I think that newcomers should focus on their major issues and not complicate their early recovery with ill-timed romantic ventures.

Granted, the urge to share can lead to a powerful closeness and empathy, which in turn can create a strong romantic attraction. My observations over the years lead me to a rather fundamental conclusion: Try to keep it simple and concentrate on personal change and growth. Romance and adventure probably won't become extinct while you are working on yourself.

Willingness, honesty and openness can make the development of friendships easier. Just being willing to put out your hand and meet someone you don't know, giving a nod of recognition or making a signal of any kind that you are willing to be friendly, any such actions can help the newcomer feel like part of the group and someone the group members might wish to know better. Being open and honest about what is happening and how you feel are very special ways of developing trust and eventually friendship.

Developing a friendship requires some vulnerability. My own early experiences have shown me that becoming friends with other group members is a vital recovery tool. They become the core of an invaluable support system. Newcomers who hang back, leave the meeting early and resist giving themselves a chance to develop friendships are depriving themselves of an invaluable recovery element.

If I could make just one plea to the hesitant newcomer I would say, "Let go, and let others in." If you don't know how to let go, say so. It also helps to get telephone numbers and use them, even if it's only for a short, hesitant, "Hi, how are you?"

From group effort ACoA's learn new actions and new ways to respond to an adopted extended family. Those newcomers who maintain a distance or stay remote from the interaction of the group are avoiding a major opportunity to grow. Growth and change seldom come in isolation. They come through interaction. Difficult as it probably is for many newcomers, I urge them to get involved, to make friends, to share their feelings with the group, to be available for after-meeting discussions and to arrive early and chat with the members as they arrive. Such behaviour can be the beginning of the end of isolation.

## Step 7.

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### **We Humbly Asked Our Higher Power To Help Us With Our Healing Process.**

This is a powerful step. It requires both humility and participation. Humility involves becoming aware that we really are not masters of the universe, and that in all probability there is a divine order that we can tap into. There are, however, three states of being that may get in our way. First, we may believe that we were quite mature and sane, capable of adequately directing our own lives. Second, we may suffer from an overinflated ego that keeps us from seeing what exactly we are doing to perpetuate our problems. We are blind to any form of self-revelation or counsel by others. Third, we have no real knowledge or understanding of the specific steps and actions we would have to take in order to begin the healing process. We may be able to describe some of our problems and issues, but

we don't know how to plug into the process of recovery. All of these can keep us from having humility.

This step also rests on a fundamental belief that we too can receive the gift of emotional well-being as so many others have through working the 12-Step recovery program. It is doubtful that all of these people could have recovered without some active request for assistance from a spiritual force of their understanding. Faith and willingness to seek out some kind of spiritual assistance has served many. Belief in a Higher Power is a form of humility. In seeking assistance, we move out of the driver's seat. This approach opens the way.

Prayer, meditation and a willingness to see and change our responses to people and situations are key recovery ingredients. Eventually we come to see that part of the healing process requires us to be absolutely ready to change our behaviour patterns. We need not be alone in our effort, we can always call upon our Higher Power and the members of our group to provide support and guidance. The healing path can be made easier; but we need to understand that while we need not tread the path alone, we do need to make a strong personal effort. Like farmers, we never will be in complete control of the growing process. We are asked only to do the planting and hoeing. The harvest will come from our Higher Power with the aid of our neighbours and friends.

*This is a powerful step which requires both humility and participation. Humility involved in becoming aware that we really are not masters of the universe and that all probability is that there is a Devine order that we can tap into. Humility comes from the word humus which is really of this earth. I was told years ago that what I needed to do was to become average in order to become humble. I also feel that I needed to go back through the traumatic feelings in order to find some kind of an authentic self.*

***“God, empty me of me and fill me with thee”***

*I would like to be emptied of these feelings of shame, guilt, fear, terror, uncertainty and the desperate need to be loved in the external world. Because I'm unable to love myself. These steps were written with the point of view that the goal would be self-love. Learning how to nourish, love and care for me, my little child and then to be open enough to receive the love of my higher power.*

From YouTube “New Steps for ACoA” by Tony A.

1. Create your own prayer based on what you specifically want to be emptied of.



## The Group as Your Family

I've always liked attending meetings, and over time the groups became my family. I was committed to them. Just how I began to see them as my family I'm not sure, but there it was. I could look around and see members who strongly reminded me of members of my family of origin. Sometimes during the sharing, I could re-experience many of my early feelings of anger and depression, intolerance and fear. I could see what was happening. I was beginning to open up. Often only negative feelings came tumbling out. But in ACoA I was in a safe place and I knew that, despite what I was feeling, I was actively engaged in a healing process.

I was talking and trusting and risking in a new family environment where there was no judgment and criticism. We all shared our pain, risked confrontation and tested our new boundaries. With the Laundry List as our guide we all worked on our issues as best we could. Some of my early efforts were pretty limited. But I kept trying even when I was hit with miserable feelings of frustration, inadequacy and loneliness. I simply kept going, even when I felt I didn't belong and would always have trouble with the give and take of friendships. I was experimenting with new ways of responding, trying to develop healthier behaviour. Most important, I began to open up to the affection and concern of the members. They really cared. I lowered some of my defences as best I could, considering my fears, and let their care and faith in me carry me through some pretty dark and uncertain days. The interplay at the meeting put me in touch with how fearful of people I had become and how I concealed it. But now I felt that I was being heard, and that what I said and felt were considered valuable. All the group members wanted to learn how to love and accept people in a healthy way and be appreciated and valued in return.

In my recovery I discovered that I was a lovable person who just wanted to be open and tolerant. I came to understand that, at a higher level, love can only flow through me when I am not fearful. In my relationships I had to see that fear and anger blocked my spontaneity as it did when I was a child. Now it was up to me to change my response in my new supportive environment.

During my first few years in ACoA I really had to struggle with spontaneity at meetings. My sensitivity, my need to control and my defences were always working overtime to protect me and to keep me from being vulnerable and open to others. Once I had developed a give-and-take relationship with members of the group, however, I felt more protected and secure. On occasion this sense of safety would be threatened when someone I had grown close to would abruptly pull away and cease to interact with the group. This was very disturbing, because it could mean that the individual's pain was so intense that he felt he must literally abandon the healthy support and nurture that the group could offer. Even though I felt rejected and angry when this would occur, I vowed that I would never just "amputate" my group, regardless of the pain or frustration I felt. I became willing to stay put in my group, work it out and let the pain dissolve.

## Working the ACoA 12 Steps of Recovery

Many years ago, a series of 12 recovery steps were created to assist members of Alcoholics Anonymous on their path to recovery. These steps have proven to be powerful action guides. As other self-help programs were established, they usually adapted these steps to their own needs. Allanon, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Debtors Anonymous all use the steps.

The 12-Step recovery groups represent a new way of living for many troubled individuals. The ACoA 12-Steps of recovery are uniquely for ACoA's. The AA steps are for the alcoholics, our parents. The ACoA 12 Steps are for us.

ACoA's should strive to make these steps an integral part of daily living. I'm absolutely convinced that I would have had a very limited and narrow recovery had I chosen not to learn how to love myself, take an inventory of my parents, keep the focus on myself and find a Higher Power to act as a loving parent.

For literally millions, 12-Step concepts have played a key role in the recovery from many addictive / compulsive illnesses and behaviours. They help clear away the damage of the past, and they are a resource that can lead to self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-love and serenity in a troubled and anxious world. Self-knowledge and change come slowly and often at great cost. Self-understanding can be greatly advanced by learning how our destructive behaviour hurt us and the sources and causes of that behaviour.

This is where the ACoA 12 Steps can make a positive contribution to sustained recovery. Following the steps can lead to a deep discovery of self and then to authentic loving. The following suggested steps of recovery give ACoA's a powerful guide to the recovery process.

## Step 8.

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### We Became Willing To Open Ourselves To Receive The Unconditional Love Of Our Higher Power.

In our alcoholic homes we were the victims and our parents were the aggressors. As we internalized our parents we became our own aggressors, unable to give ourselves anything but self-hate and self-criticism. Now we are willing to let go of the idea of ourselves as either victim or aggressor and open ourselves to the unconditional love of our Higher Power. As we open up, we are flooded with the warmth and love and acceptance we were denied as children. This infinite source of love is always available to us, waiting only for us to open the gates and let it in.

*In our alcoholic / dysfunctional homes we were the victim's and our parents or care givers were the aggressors. As we internalise our parents, we became our own aggressors unable to give ourselves anything but self-hate and self-criticism.*

*Now we are willing to let go of the idea of ourselves as either the victim or aggressor and open ourselves to the unconditional love of our higher power. As we open up, we are flooded with the love we have been denied as children.*

*The infinite source of love is always available to us, waiting only for us to open the gates and let it in. In 1980 I read a book on the Kahunas, the medicine men or the wise men of Hawaii and one of their spiritual practices they believed that on this level of experience there are three of us... in other words there's Tony that you see now talking to you all on this level and there's you on your level and we are all on the same level together. About an inch above our heads there was a higher power and each one of us has their own individual higher power and that higher power is one with God. So, my invisible higher power is one with God and*



3. How can you become more willing to open yourself to that unconditional love?

4. What can I do as a daily practise that connects me to my inner child, the source of unconditional love?

## Reading 9 - What to do About Parents

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### The Family Soap Opera

Early in childhood our parents assigned us a role in the family soap opera. We had no choice about the part we were directed to play, and we were never allowed the right to reject the role if it didn't seem to fit or was downright destructive. We were in a helpless position: We had no say about our immediate destiny.

As the illness in the household grew it expanded and disabled everyone. As helpless children we took on the characteristics of the disease. Out of necessity and a desire to survive we made adjustments to the family drama. We began to experience guilt and shame about the family illness. We were victimized on a daily basis with physical or verbal abuse, unwarranted and inconsistent punishment and a litany of hundreds of critical observations such as "Shame on you," "How can we love anyone who does that," "You'll just drive your father to drink if you do that," "God won't love you if . . .," "You shouldn't feel that way."

As children we were absolutely unable to see what was really going on. We couldn't see that we were in no way responsible for our parents' drinking or other destructive behaviour. The responsibility rested squarely with them. We didn't cause their alcoholism, we couldn't control it (God knows, we tried!), and we certainly couldn't cure it. In all probability their sick and distorted reactions to life came directly out of their own painful, distressing upbringing. They too were victims. They were merely passing along their sick heritage. In the family dynamic the whole family enables and covers for the alcoholic in hopes that they will change. Eventually many ACoA's shut down, detach and accept at the core of their being that they were the cause or contributing cause of the family illness. In ACoA I had to get very clear that I didn't cause my father's rage just because I had an

accident in the bathroom. And I didn't cause my mother to die by being a "bad boy." I was innocent on all counts, but back then I believed at the core of my soul that I was the cause. Today I have to be ever alert lest I inappropriately accept blame or guilt.

As an adult in ACoA I can change my early script. First, I need awareness, to understand that the role I played as a child for my parents' benefit was a sick one. And, if I continue to play that role and repeat those actions as an adult, it will only make me sicker. I must fully accept without reservation that I did not cause my parents to drink. As a little child I didn't have that kind of power, though many times I wished I had the power to stop their insane behaviour.

## Our Personal Rage and Sorrow

Two very powerful emotions buffet the ACoA about: an emerging rage at one's parents and a deep, aching sorrow over a lost childhood. Alcohol and the family environment that went with it robs all ACoA's of a healthy, spontaneous and nurturing childhood. Our youthful joys were always being trampled by the family sickness. For most of us one of the truly damaging aspects of being raised in an alcoholic household was our treatment as a nonperson. Part of this process of being robbed of any individuality as a human being was the need to stuff feelings of anger and resistance. In my family there was only one person who could directly express anger and rage: my father. The rest of us had to suppress our anger at how we were treated. We were not valued, and this was never more evident than in the way our feelings and needs were so conveniently ignored. Year after year I was forced to stuff my feelings until somewhere deep inside me, I developed this molten ball of rage at all the times I had been abused and invalidated.

I think that this core of rage is within all ACoA's and all abused children. Many ACoA's have shared how their rage became strangled by their loyalty to their parents. How could parents be wrong? Parents were to be respected -not because of what they did and how they treated us but just because they were our parents. Therefore, we must be mistaken in our perceptions of them. Always, it seems we were the ones who were wrong, inappropriate, stupid and foolish. Just how the ball of rage was created varies from person to person. But for just about every one of us it is there, and we need to deal with it in recovery.

## Suggestions for Healing

Where our parents are concerned, popular opinion might easily take us down a path that has only two recovery steps: awareness and forgiveness. Time and again, however, ACoA's have shared how this particular approach didn't work for them. The cumulative rage had stayed stuffed. The grieving over the lost childhood had been dismissed as self-indulgent or theatrical. Theory has it that once you are aware of the real nature of a situation (our parents' alcoholism), you are then able to move on to forgiving them their disease, as they too were victims. But ACoA suggests that there is a central issue that absolutely needs to be addressed before a person can reach the forgiveness stage. We cannot rationalize or intellectualize our way through this stage, we have to experience it in all its intensity. That immense well of rage and self-pity needs to be brought to the surface and openly experienced. Until this is done, dealing with parents is largely an exercise in futility. We absolutely need to feel all those mind-numbing feelings of helplessness and the rage it triggered then and will trigger now as we relive those distant days. It can't remain blocked. It's a poison in our system and it needs to be brought up if we are to recover. Most ACoA's need to feel the rage and sorrow over and

over again until it is spent. This generally can't be achieved in a single week. Believe me when I say that all ACoA's have a huge reservoir of pain to contend with, not a neat, tidy thimbleful. Finding a safe outlet for all this pent-up, suppressed bile is essential. Many of us have spent our adult years venting this rage at inappropriate times, directing it at those who resembled or represented our parents.

Most likely the sorrow has made us distant, unavailable and depressed. We were experiencing minor volcanic eruptions, and some of the lava was getting to the surface where it singed friends, spouse and children but seldom, if ever, our alcoholic parents. ACoA meetings offer a safe, secure, supportive environment where we can begin to experience these powerful feelings and express them. ACoA members understand what is happening and do not invalidate the member who has just gotten in touch with a core of pure rage. Sometimes when members erupt, it can be frightening and uncomfortable. Some new members become very disturbed by the process and retreat. It's amazing how at a funeral, relatives are encouraged to wail and get in touch with their grief and sorrow; experience it fully right at the grave site; exhaust themselves over many hours and days of active mourning. This process is seen as restorative and wholesome. In ACoA expressing rage and sorrow at one's parents and what happened in our childhood is equally restorative. It's a rite of passage to a new life. Don't be afraid of the process. Encourage it in yourself and in others. Try to be considerate of others when you express your rage but, more importantly, don't suppress or cut off the rage and sorrow.

Some of us work with our rage in the following ways:

1. Share with one or two close friends in a safe location and shout out what you feel.
2. At home, hit pillows, cushions or a punching bag to absorb the energy that goes with your fury, accompanied by all the words you never expressed.
3. Go into the woods and scream at the universe, your Higher Power or whatever representation fits. If you live near a beach, you can yell at the top of your voice at the surf.
4. Write a letter to parents without editing or toning down your passion and rage. Then read it over a few times and share it with a supportive and understanding friend. But don't mail it!

If you're confronting sorrow, write about the broken promises and the hurt of the lost child within you. Describe all those moments that failed. Most ACoA's will confirm that holding onto these powerful emotions eventually will cause some kind of illness, either physical or emotional. The human body often produces a stress-related illness that reflects the pain and rage being stuffed.

## Confronting Our Parents

Some ACoA's feel that it is essential that they communicate their feelings to their parents. If your parents are alive you can write them, telephone them or visit them. If your parent(s) are deceased, you always can ask a supportive friend to play their silent role while you unburden yourself.

In any direct sharing with your parents there are some risks:

1. Parents' denial that there was alcoholism or sick behaviour
2. Debate about the severity of the problems.

3. Outright attack, criticism and invalidation of what you say and who you are.
4. Indifference and remoteness.
5. Belief that the children or outside circumstances caused all of the problems. When you approach your parents directly, it's best to keep in mind that they ...
6. Probably won't agree with your interpretations and views of what happened.
7. Probably won't react as you would like -that is, admitting to it all, apologizing and begging for forgiveness.
8. Probably won't change their way of treating you to any extent. Your role and their way of treating you was established many years ago.
9. May decide to punish you in some way for bringing up old pain. They may even cease contact with you.

Many confrontations lead to a sort of touchy and suspicious armistice. Clear-cut victory is rare. It goes against human nature. Often what the ACoA really desires are that the parents suddenly transform themselves into the loving, nurturing, sensitive parents they just couldn't be because of their illness. This set of events will require understanding and acceptance on the part of the ACoA. The only element of the family soap opera we can change is who we are and how we choose to behave. A forthright and direct approach to our parents can, however, lead a new and more meaningful relationship. We can establish a more honest, fearless level of communication. A new sense of respect and understanding can emerge out of confrontation. Such actions can be freeing as long as we don't have unreasonable expectations concerning the outcome. In short, we can decide to accept our parents even if they make no changes or adjustments.

## Leaving Home Emotionally

We start to leave home emotionally when we stop reacting negatively to some of the situations and people our parents and family always reacted to. When we can act spontaneously and responsibly in familiar stressful situations that created chaos in our family, then we have successfully begun our emotional journey away from our parents. Unconsciously many of us stay tied to toxic parents much longer than we know. I'm reminded of one group member who spent months lamenting the fact that she was, for economic reasons, still living with her abusive mother. Finally, she informed us that she had moved out and taken her own apartment. Six months later we discovered that her new apartment was located directly below her mother's in the same building. The ties that bind can be truly powerful. There are many ways to stay unhealthily linked to your parents in a dependent and leaning manner:

1. Living with parent(s) in their home.
2. Being fully or partially supported (financially) by one or both parents.
3. Spending most or all of your spare time with your parents rather than developing friendships with contemporaries and peers.
4. Always vacationing with parents.
5. Fully or partially supporting parents out of feelings of guilt or obligation.
6. Daily visits, daily phone calls, working for parents' company are all ways to keep the old dynamics fresh.

Keep in mind that in the above scenarios the important factor is that our parent(s) continue to treat us in destructive, punishing or indifferent ways that are similar in manner to our childhood treatment

and evoke the same kinds of negative responses. We are still buried alive. In our dealings with our parents we continue to lose our spontaneity, our aliveness -our independent selves. Some of us need to stay clear of toxic parents during early recovery. Once an individual has embraced ACoA and come to understand the nature of the illness, stress and conflict with parents (especially those who are still alcoholically active) is quite natural. The family secrets are no longer sacred. We stop making excuses for our parents' sick behaviour. We also may learn how we enable parents to continue their toxic journey. We resist and eventually repudiate the guilty, over responsible victim role. As we detach emotionally, our parents and their injunctions no longer control us. It is at this point that conflict becomes most intense. As we declare ourselves to be worthwhile, valued human beings who deserve respect, our sickness abates but not necessarily that of our parents. This leaves a void that needs special attention. At this juncture we can begin to address the issue of forgiveness.

## Forgiving Our Parents

Of all the tasks we are asked to consider in ACoA, none is more challenging than a willingness to forgive. Forgiveness and letting go of judgments about our parents are a major point of recovery. We need to be responsible for the way in which we hold or cherish our parents. Before we can move into this critical arena, before we can do healing work with our parents, there is one prerequisite: forgiveness of self. In order to forgive my parents, I had to start by forgiving myself. I had to travel well down the action road to personal recovery. Forgiving myself meant that I had developed a new and positive understanding of myself. I accepted that I was a valuable and lovable human being and I took actions, daily, to reinforce that belief. My faith in myself had to be matched by actions. Once I reached this stage in forgiving myself, I could begin the task of forgiving my parents. The logic is as follows:

1. I unwittingly took on most of the characteristics of both my parents.
2. These behaviour patterns and beliefs are all inside me.
3. The traits I most disliked in them, I carry.
4. I must accept, embrace and work at changing these negative traits in me.
5. Once I have neutralized them in me, I can move on to forgiving my parents for these traits and how they harmed me.
6. It's difficult to forgive my parents' behaviour if I loathe or deny that same behaviour in myself.

I may have travelled an entirely different road in my life and made every effort not to be like my parents, but I am. And as I work the fourth step of ACoA recovery and undertake a blameless review of my parents' behaviour patterns, I will come face to face with my own defects and shortcomings. I must see that in stressful situations I typically recreated the dysfunctional behaviour of my parents. As a child I had no choice. Their sickness was my model, my teaching system. As I work on myself to change these destructive patterns, I am laying the groundwork for forgiving my parents.

Now comes the most difficult part of the effort to forgive your parents -and for many it is a monumental effort. Here spirituality and compassion combine to produce a willingness to honestly contemplate and work along a forgiveness path.

This path might consist of the following guidelines:

1. Pray for a continued willingness to let go of your judgments about them and to gain a recognition that if there is a culprit, it is the disease of alcoholism and the ways in which it ravaged your parents.
2. This process helps us to move toward an acceptance of our parents' humanity just as we have opened up to our own humanity and that of our fellow ACoA members. Every ACoA needs to understand that forgiveness of one's parents is a way to increase one's valuation of oneself. It's a critical element in your healing process. By working on this element, we are choosing to move away from hatred, retaliation, blame, judgment and scorn -a group of traits that can only diminish our efforts to achieve self-love.
3. Develop an understanding of the handicapped or desperate family environment your parents came from. Their sick survival mechanisms were the best they could do with what they inherited from their family environment.
4. Visualize, if you can, your parents as frightened, abused children, trying to escape and survive the insanity of their early households.
5. Use prayer and meditation to help you understand that your parents did the best they could. Try to see that they could barely be there for themselves because they too were childhood victims.
6. Accept the fact that your parents had or still have an illness that distorts and destroys life's joys. They are alcoholics, co-alcoholics or para-alcoholics.
7. Acknowledge that at the present time their way of dealing with their actions and attitudes toward you may consist of denial, resistance or indifference.

## Step 9.

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### **We Became Willing To Accept Our Own Unconditional Love By Understanding That Our Higher Power Loves Us Unconditionally.**

We became willing to give to our self the unconditional love and acceptance we receive from our Higher Power. By actively working these steps we have begun the process of building self-appreciation and self-love and affirming ourselves as full of worth and value. We are taking the important actions that will lead to well-being. We choose to put into play new behaviour, new responses, new attitudes that will lead directly to a richer, more serene way of living. It is essential that we study these 12 paths to self-love. As we learn to give love to ourselves, we also learn to give love to others, and to receive their love openly and easily.

*I believe that It's my higher powers job to love me unconditionally, I also believe that this higher power cannot love me unconditionally until I love little Tony unconditionally. And as I love little Tony unconditionally and I love him to the extent that he starts to become calm and accepting, then my higher powers unconditional love starts flowing through me, to him, and then we become a trinity. My Higher Power, me and little Tony become merged in love and as such then we can be presented basically to home or to the source or to God. This is my*



## Your Own Laundry List

At some point during the early months of ACoA attendance newcomers should take pen in hand and make a list of the bothersome issues and behaviour patterns that are most troubling to them in their day-to-day affairs -their own "laundry list." An excellent starting point is the ACoA Laundry List. For those who may be too confused to know where to begin and for those who might mistakenly see all current behaviour as troublesome, the Laundry List is a practical and reasonable reference. The newcomer might consider circling those that apply and then listing them on a separate sheet in two distinct groups: (1) those that seem to be causing frequent or persistent difficulties in their personal and work relationships; and (2) those that are causing only occasional but significant disruption in their enjoyment of life.

In addition to the problems described in the Laundry List, members of ACoA may also identify other issues such as compulsive overeating, overspending, inappropriate drinking behaviour, shoplifting, abrupt amputation of friendships, compulsive lying to friends and relatives, and high-risk sexual activity. They should add such difficulties to the list.

The purpose of this activity is to get clear about the nature of the gravity and troublesome behaviour that may be seriously diminishing the joys of living. This is an effort to gain clarity. Such activity works well in conjunction with steps two, three, four and five of ACoA recovery. Step two, for example, involves the belief that we can gain clarity and understanding about our destructive patterns. Not all destructive behaviour is overt. People-pleasers go to great lengths to satisfy others and maintain harmony. While this might be considered as an appropriate and friendly way of responding to the world, at a personal level, people-pleasing robs the ACoA of a centred and healthy self. In listing the issues and actions that cause us difficulty, we might use this distinction as a guide.

Over time the newcomer may add to the list as self-knowledge grows. Usually a searching and blameless inventory of parents' behaviour patterns will turn up additional issues and traits that cause the ACoA complications. The effort at this stage is to build a portrait of unhealthy responses to what life presents us. The goal is understanding and clarity. Without a clear understanding of what is holding the ACoA back there can be no purposeful movement forward. Most people cannot really confront or begin to deal with what they can't recognize or understand.

At some quiet time at the end of each day, ACoA members should sit with their personal laundry list and try the following:

1. Read each issue slowly and thoughtfully.
2. Reflect on each item and determine whether the issue caused problems during the current day.
3. Review the circumstances of any disruption or event that occurred, and review what or how the ACoA's attitudes and actions contributed to the problem.
4. Consider what would have been a more wholesome response or action.

## Awareness

The intent of the foregoing effort is to help the ACoA become thoroughly familiar with the nature of his or her issues and the extent to which they cause problems and upset. This review should not be seen as a time to engage in intensive self-criticism. A negative approach can only bring frustration and despair. The ACoA is being asked to review, in a noncritical and blameless way, how the troublesome issues got triggered, their responses and the results that occurred.

With effort the ACoA will begin to see that awareness alone is not recovery. True clarity involves awareness of the self-defeating patterns, some understanding of how the individual activates the problems and a recognition that certain efforts will be needed to bring about meaningful change. Fortunately, no one is asked to do this alone. Other members of the group are available for support, and a Higher Power of our understanding is always accessible to us if we choose to seek spiritual guidance and nourishment.

## Journals

Some ACoA members have found that keeping a journal is also very helpful. The journal might be divided into three sections.

1. A list of the most troublesome issues to be worked on.
2. A daily diary where the ACoA can record both successful and unsuccessful efforts to correct major personal issues.
3. A list of personal recovery goals that can be referred to on a daily basis. (Recovery goals are discussed in detail in the next section.)

I have found that keeping a journal or diary can be very helpful. In my own life I am easily distracted and tend to drift away from my recovery goals. Having these goals written down and reviewing them daily keeps my issues fresh and also keeps me focused on the positive aspects of my recovery.

## Establishing Recovery Goals

This section deals with one approach to recovery that ACoA's often resist. Some ACoA's find that any discussion of recovery goals strikes them as too impersonal and mechanical. As living, breathing, vital human beings they feel the recovery process should not be reduced to some kind of exercise.

After considerable struggle I have come to believe that establishing some personal recovery goals and putting them on paper along with some thoughts about how to achieve these goals, can accelerate recovery. I find that it's very easy to lose sight of where I'm going and how I plan to get there, and others have told me this is also true for them.

My first efforts at goal-setting were pretty limited. Fortunately, I had enough sense not to bite off more than I could chew. I decided to tackle some of my smaller personal issues, because I knew that with effort, they might clear up quickly. For instance, I "inherited" my parents' tendency to be rude and demanding of store personnel. So, I set myself a goal of reversing this habit. When I went into stores, I made a conscious effort to be pleasant and friendly. I succeeded on some occasions and

failed on others. But as I made the effort, it got easier, and this soon ceased to be an issue with me. Starting with simple problems allowed me to see progress right away, which helped build my sense of self-esteem and confidence.

I found that it was important to draw myself a map of how I intended to tackle my issues. I really wasn't anxious to go into such detail. But I knew that if I didn't draw up some course of action, I would leave too much to chance. If I wanted to be healthy, I had to be willing to take appropriate steps. By then I was able to turn to my Higher Power for energy and resolve.

Someone once told the following story at a meeting, and it gave me a great image to remember: A traveller wanted to cross a dangerous river. The traveller was told he could row the boat and look to his Higher Power (whom he called God) to steer. He was also informed that, if he absolutely wanted to, he could take the helm and steer instead, but that God had a policy of not rowing! I always remember this when I am tempted to wait for miracles. My recovery is teaching me one very invaluable lesson: I cannot expect growth and recovery if I don't make a really sustained effort. Sometimes what I really want is a magical recovery, preferably one where my Higher Power wipes my slate clean in just a few months and I am promptly given the gift of emotional well-being. In this fantasy I see my role as being limited to some in-depth sharing. The rest would be miraculously done for me! Unfortunately, it doesn't quite happen that way. I have to do the rowing. I cannot overstate the value of listing your issues on a piece of paper along with the ways in which you plan to work on them. Recovery takes on more importance and meaning when you write down your goals and review them frequently. Troublesome issues don't get away from us so easily when we keep them in focus.

## Other Common Difficulties

In addition to the problems described in the Laundry List, some additional ways of behaving often cause continuous irritation and disharmony. Chief among them are control issues, Critical judgment, an overinflated sense of self, intolerance and giving advice.

## Control Issues

The effort to control the actions of others, the environment and all manner of situations are often a problem for ACoA's. Taking charge, being in control, manipulating others, being bossy, bulldozing through-whatever the description, it is for many a constant source of concern. Control issues generally involve the critical (and impossible) need to arrange life's events so that things are safe, secure and predictable. Often "rescuers" turn to heavy control. In rescuing they see that the rescued one is dependent; thus, the rescuer has control and is not vulnerable. The rescuer can feel safe, secure and wanted. Control issues began early for me. I learned as a young boy that by manipulating my parents with humour I could put them in a good mood and get them to respond favourably to me. It was my primitive effort to arrange things so that anger and abuse would not erupt. When my parents were angry, anything could happen, and I was very fearful. So, I relied on humour to protect me. I became hyper-vigilant, always watching for signals from the external world that could lead to criticism, hurt or embarrassment. As a child I became fear-based, and I found I could reduce this fear by controlling people, places and things as a people-pleaser.

## Criticism

Critical and negative appraisal of others also can be very destructive. It serves no beneficial purpose and it can easily lead to isolation. Criticism not only pushes people away, it also draws attention away from personal issues.

A frequent quip in ACoA used to be, "I haven't got time to work on my own issues because I'm too busy taking everyone else's inventory." Growth and progress require both energy and concentration. Try not to waste time on the useless and counterproductive habit of finding fault with others, it can easily occupy all of your waking hours.

A leading marriage counsellor cautions that the most destructive force in any relationship is continual criticism, and he instructs his clients that they absolutely must drop all criticism of one another from their daily communication. This is a powerful instruction that ACoA's might find helpful. Criticism can keep us all away from looking at our own shortcomings. For many it feeds the distorted need to be seen as superior to others. But what it really does is clearly separate us from others. How can I be open to another person and really hear who they are over the roar of my criticism of them? If one objective is to live in harmony with those around us, and work on our own issues, then criticism can only be viewed as counterproductive. As the preamble of one recovery program admonishes, "Let there be no criticism of one another."

## Overinflated Sense of Self

An overinflated sense of self can cause havoc with any and all kinds of relationships. Like most people I developed an image of who I was and how I wanted people to see me based upon how I was treated as a child and how I was defined by my parents. Consequently, I acquired some pretty distorted views of myself.

Early in my teens I developed a kind of defensive arrogance, a posture of false superiority. These I used when I found myself in threatening social situations or in those instances where my demands for special attention weren't being met. I used intimidation to get me through many situations where I felt out of control and vulnerable. I flashed a certain kind of pride that kept me aloof from others. In ACoA these approaches often robbed me of a chance to be one with fellow members, for even in ACoA meetings it took me a while to get rid of much of the inflated self that had worked to keep me invulnerable.

Getting to see the nature of my unworkable self-images was very difficult. Like others, I had trouble acknowledging my defensive arrogance and pride. Before I was willing to give them up, I wanted something new that would keep me invulnerable and would continue to protect me from others and their reactions to me.

## Intolerance

Intolerance -being closed to other ideas, approaches or suggestions has slowed down more than a few recovery efforts. When a person's discomfort level is high, being open to new and different ways of living is often very difficult. Long-cultivated negative response patterns don't take kindly to the

introduction of constructive suggestions. Many prefer to rely on time-tested reactions, such as pulling back, ignoring the issue and suppressing feelings.

Whatever the threat, we usually want to be well protected. Being open and tolerant of change involves letting go and surrendering. Awareness and knowledge of who we are cannot be forced on us, but ACoA's can advance recovery by cultivating an environment of open-minded willingness to try sensible suggestions and approaches. Flash rage and hostility can turn much of recovery (and life in general) into a shamble. Somewhere in our youth some of us may have used rage and anger as a defence or as a way of getting some of our needs met, but now it serves us poorly in most of the adult world.

Flash rage and hostility are not viable methods of interacting and responding. We need not stuff our anger; we can let it course through us. But we don't improve anything by exploding at our friends and family or fellow members. Some, I imagine, see anger as a power tool to frighten and intimidate. Explosive rage tends to be threatening to some ACoA members and is generally unsettling to everyone. Attacks of righteous indignation seldom further anyone's growth, nor do hostile putdowns concealed as helpful sharing.

I have learned that when I am filled with rage, I can employ a few strategies to help me cool down. If I am alone, I write out my anger and rage in a journal. If I am with another person, I say, "I need to take some time out" and walk away. Another technique I use is to take slow, deep breaths and slowly count backwards until I feel calmer. Restraint of tongue needs to become a way of life for those afflicted with a compelling need to explode and attack in rage. Venting the rage and dissipating the hostility need to be done in a safe supportive environment, in a therapist's office, with a sponsor or close friend, or yelling at the ocean when no one is around.

## Giving Advice

Giving advice can be a wonderful and mutually beneficial activity. Unfortunately, in ACoA it can sometimes prove to be troublesome. We all know people who spend many of their waking hours dispensing advice, guidance and direction to others. Giving advice is often a means of avoiding the pain of one's own problems. If an ACoA adopts this advice and rescue role, you can be pretty sure that somewhere there is a good bit of deflecting or avoidance of personal problems. One of the things I learned in Al-Anon is that the worst vice is advice. Suggestions work much better. It's still a struggle for me to let go of this need. I'm learning to get my ego out of the way, face my own issues and work on them rather than on the sketchy and convoluted issues others may present to me. With the aid of my Higher Power I've learned some things about what troubles people and why, but I'm reasonably hesitant about advising others how to conduct their romantic, family or work affairs. However, since you are reading this book, you've seen that I don't hesitate to talk about recovery and some of the lessons I'm learning.

## Enlisting the Support of Others

Just about everyone in ACoA knows how difficult it is to reach out to others. A major fear is that those to whom you turn for assistance will reject your request, treat your request with indifference or (even worse) criticize your efforts. Fortunately, I have rarely seen this happen. Most members are

keenly aware that ACoA is a fellowship that involves sharing and caring. Love, nurture and support are freely given to the extent that the individual member is capable.

It's probably not too wise to approach a newcomer with complex problems or issues. If you happen to be working on the eleventh step of recovery, your sharing about prayer and meditation might produce only a limited response if you have turned to a newcomer for guidance.

Let's say you are having trouble at work. Perhaps your boss is on your case for tardiness. Rather than jeopardize your job or career, you could ask a group member who rises early to call you and support you in your commitment to be on time. Perhaps you are planning a holiday visit to your parents' home in a distant city. You haven't seen them in two years, you now have five months in ACoA, and you are very concerned about how you will behave during the visit. By all means ask one or two group members if you can phone them for support during your visit, in the event that things get too strained or you lose perspective. Maybe you're feeling pretty secure, but you just want some added insurance or a safety net. Nothing triggers reactive behaviour and high-level stress like a visit with parents during the holidays!

I think that willingness is the key to getting the greatest amount of benefit from your group. Avail yourself of every positive attribute the group can offer. Not a few newcomers think that they must accomplish their growth alone. After all, that's how it was growing up in an alcoholic household: Don't trust others, do it yourself. Part of growth is in learning to trust others. And part of trusting others involves reaching out for support-especially when you feel you are on thin ice. I do it over and over again and it works for me. I had to rid myself of the awful tendency to go it alone. My fear of people, dread of criticism and feelings of inadequacy were always conspiring to keep me on a painful and potentially damaging solitary path. In ACoA we all have a chance to abandon the solitary journey.

Many ACoA's seek support from others in monitoring their related goals. I know that left to my own devices I might never have completed the ACoA 12 Steps of recovery and I would not have taken such bold measures. Fortunately, I had enough sense of understanding that by myself I would accomplish little, but that I could accomplish miracles with the support of others and the divine grace of my Higher Power. And that's how I view myself now, as a miracle. But I had to reach out, to ask others to hold me accountable and responsible for whatever it was that I set out to do. I needed concerned and caring people who had a vital interest in my recovery and expected me to have an interest in them. In a larger sense, when one of us recovers, we all benefit.

In my early days I formulated my personal program for recovery. The ACoA 12 Steps and my own issues were sitting there waiting to be confronted. I allowed my Higher Power to steer, but I had to row. To keep me focused on my efforts I informed others about what I planned to do and asked them to be available for reporting and review. In doing this I ensured that I was no longer alone. I had made my recovery a collaborative effort. I could mess up on my goals, fall short, adjust my goals -do just about anything - yet they would continue to be there in a concerned, non-judgmental, no-blame capacity. They listened, they made suggestions, they encouraged me -and above all they showed me that they truly wanted me to recover. So, I grew and changed and am continuing the process of recovery.

## Sponsorship

Many 12-Step programs endorse the concept of formally selecting a sponsor. A sponsor is an individual you can turn to regularly for guidance, direction and assistance in your recovery process. His or her principal role is to provide perspective, support and encouragement to the newcomer or sponsee. Typically, the sponsor has considerable time in the 12-Step program, demonstrates sound recovery behaviour and is someone you respect.

The sponsorship concept works remarkably well, particularly in Alcoholics Anonymous, the largest and oldest 12-Step program. It has been a time-tested and proven aid to millions. One reason might be that a sponsor demonstrates concern, is willing to be supportive and above all holds the newcomer or sponsee accountable. A newcomer who is willing to surrender some personal sovereignty can benefit immeasurably. Sponsorship can start the process of trusting and sharing with another individual. Newcomers can profit from impartial, concerned and caring feedback.

Counterbalancing all these advantages of sponsorship are the few instances where the sponsor selected was sadly unqualified or perhaps too emotionally distressed to provide a sponsee with sound direction. In most instances I have heard about, the damage was not irreparable; a Higher Power seems to intervene and repair such ill-fated selections.

Sponsorship and selection of a sponsor are voluntary acts. No one is wedded to a sponsor or sponsee. Sponsors have a responsibility to be supportive, caring and enlightening. They have no mandate to be overbearing, hypercritical or abusive to those who seek their help. In those rare instances where unhealthy behaviour occurs, the sponsee should dissolve the sponsorship. This approach also should be taken where there is too much friction or dissension.

Ideally sponsorship provides an opportunity for the newcomer to begin trusting and talking at a deep personal level. In sponsorship the newcomers need to be able to drop their defences and begin to be teachable. For heterosexuals, the sponsor relationship is more effective if those involved are of the same sex. In any case sexuality should not be a part of the relationship.

The role of sponsorship in ACoA is somewhat clouded. Some groups endorse it, while others shy away from it. Since many ACoA's have great difficulty with authority figures, mentors or, advisers due to years of parental abuse and inconsistency, I can readily understand the reluctance to embrace sponsorship. On balance, however, I favour sponsorship. It has proven such, a valuable aid to recovery in so many other programs that it deserves careful consideration in ACoA.

## Seeking Professional Assistance

Some members of ACoA need more help than they can get in an ACoA recovery group. It's not unusual for some ACoA's to have a suitcase full of problems when they join ACoA. Some of the problems may yield to the application of the ACoA recovery principles, but others may prove infinitely more resistant to the ACoA healing process.

For these people ACoA group therapy or one-to-one therapy with a qualified ACoA -trained professional may be a wise solution. In the past few years, numerous treatment centres throughout

the United States have developed intensive, onsite recovery programs that involve one- to four-week concentrated group and individual therapy specifically for ACoA's.

I don't believe that ACoA can or should stand alone as the only treatment for ACoA's. ACoA's need to understand that a full commitment to recovery will always benefit from consistent and frequent attendance at ACoA meetings. The development of numerous ACoA friendships, working the recovery steps and, where desired, some therapy, all can help.

Those who elect to undertake ACoA therapy will benefit most if they find a professional who is thoroughly trained in ACoA issues and the ACoA program. With denial and resistance so strong in our emotional make-up, professional help can aid ACoA's to see where and how different aspects of the illness impact on them. It strikes me, however, that one hour of therapy or 90 minutes of group therapy each week needs to be supplemented by two or three ACoA meetings weekly, especially during the early phase of recovery. For some ACoA's an hour of therapy barely scratches the surface of their issues.

ACoA's also need to be willing to form relationships with fellow ACoA's and to be in contact with them often. I firmly believe this. My fellow group members were my guides, showing me where and how I was in difficulty. I needed to open up to them many hours a week. I needed their companionship because I wanted to recover fully, something I could never accomplish alone.

Additional Reading: Big Red Book – Beyond Survival: Practicing Self-Love – Chapter 15 page429

## Step 10.

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### Continue To Take Personal Inventory And To Love And Approve Of Ourselves.

In this daily action step, we monitor our actions and seek out those opportunities and situations where we can increase our self-esteem and self-love. We can use this step to correct our course in the event that we stray from healthy actions and begin re-enacting destructive patterns of behaviour. If we see ourselves flirting with or contemplating harmful behaviour, it's important to recognize that change must come from within. We can ask our Higher Power for assistance and we can turn to our group for support as we struggle with those actions that bring with them self-loathing, resentments and guilt. We need to establish a new vigilance, one that centres on our behaviour. This we can do by working this step on a daily basis: examining who we are and what we are doing this day to grow and change.

*In this daily action step, we monitor our actions and seek out those opportunities and situations that we can increase our self-esteem and self-love. We can use this step to correct the course, so we don't stray from healthy actions and re-enact the destructive patterns of behaviour. If we see ourselves flirting with contemplating bad behaviour. It is important to recognise that change must come from within. We can ask our higher power for assistance, we can turn to our groups for support as we struggle with those actions that bring with them self-loathing, resentments and guilt. We need to establish a new vigilance, one*



3. How can I continue to use my personal laundry list and my recovery goals to seek out opportunities and situations to increase my self-love and further build my self-esteem?

4. Are you willing to continue to take personal inventory and to love and approve of yourself on a daily basis?

## Reading 11 - A Matter of faith

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### The Concept of a Higher Power

As a spiritually based recovery program, ACoA asks its members to consider developing faith in a Higher Power, a spiritual force or truth of their understanding. No organized religion is involved in ACoA and no member is ever required to adopt any formal or even informal spiritual belief. The members of ACoA are merely asked to give consideration to a spiritual path, selecting whatever power or deity or cosmic force they feel comfortable with. For my own recovery I found a belief in a Spiritual Being to be healing and nurturing. I became willing to allow forces outside my control to aid in my recovery.

The concept of a Higher Power can be very disturbing for 'some people with an ACoA background. As children our authority figures were alcoholic or co-alcoholic parents who were emotionally distressed, and we received much abuse and betrayal from them. Consequently, ACoA's find it very difficult to rely upon or have faith in any kind of power or central authority even one of our own choosing. Our authority figures were threatening, dysfunctional parents who gave and withheld nurturing in an arbitrary and often cruel manner. Resistance is the most natural reaction in the world, to such experiences.

Many of us had tried to have faith in our parents with disastrous results. My own parents were extremely unpredictable. One day I would receive praise for something I did and the next day I would be rebuked for the same act. There was no consistency. I was alternately terrified and enraged at the authority figures in my childhood.

Coming to a receptive stance concerning the concept of a Higher Power in ACoA need not be painful, but it may involve considerable time. Fortunately, most ACoA's I knew who were initially uncomfortable with or resisted a belief in a Higher Power eventually came to believe. Over time they embraced the concept of a power greater than themselves that could help them find a new understanding and self-acceptance. In the beginning I needed to suspend critical judgment about a Power greater than myself, to put my beliefs and considerations on the shelf. Then I began to listen to others and observe how they perceived their Higher Power. I never felt any pressure to believe in anything, only a suggestion that I set aside my long-standing perceptions and open myself up to the possibilities. And, like so many before me in other 12-Step programs, I did develop a belief in something beyond what I could directly see. I accepted that something was trying, lovingly, to guide both me and others. Slowly I gained conviction that some Higher Power was moving me toward wholeness and love. I could see this in my daily living. As I watched myself go through painful changes and achieve a kind of serenity I had never experienced, I began to see that I could not have done any of it alone.

Faith and spirituality are personal matters. It is difficult for people to articulate their personal beliefs in this area and it's even more difficult to describe in a book.

History is filled with events that have been attributed to faith in a Higher Power. The co-founders of the original 12-Step recovery program, Alcoholics Anonymous, stated very clearly that their strength and direction came from their faith in a Higher Power.

Agnostics and atheists as well as believers of all faiths are welcome in ACoA. We urge all who have grave reservations about faith in a Higher Power to momentarily set aside these considerations and just visit and experience the healing power of the ACoA meetings.

Those in ACoA who do have an abiding faith in a Higher Power do have an additional source to draw upon. I know of no more helpful path to healing and recovery than through a partnership effort with a Higher Power as you understand it. I have, on many occasions, witnessed what I would describe as miracles of faith. I have seen healing and growth where it appeared to be all but impossible. I have seen joy and serenity replace anguish and emotional disturbance. I have watched ACoA's struggle with all manner of earthly problems and triumph through faith. I firmly believe this faith and grace is available to us all.

## Prayer

Listening to other people proclaim how prayer has worked in their lives doesn't bring me anywhere near the joy that comes from actually experiencing responses to my own prayers. When I pray, I feel as though I am having a conversation with my Higher Power. In my conversations I generally ask for guidance and direction. When I'm uncertain of which path to take, I ask my Higher Power for love and understanding. Often, I can readily see when I'm getting help. My mind will become quiet and my thinking will gain clarity. Whenever fear or depression descend on me with any intensity, I turn to the power of prayer to carry me through. When I can, I try to put myself in a quiet, contemplative mood before I pray. I know that prayer doesn't require any special environment, but I find that I become more focused and centred when I get still.

Prayer doesn't work for me when I ask for things of this world - money, a bigger car, fame, a new home or winning the lottery. I suppose that if prayers in this realm were answered, I might easily become distracted and use my energy for selfish pursuits. And I've found that the longer I practice prayer (and meditation) on a daily basis, the more I see it as a means of developing a deeper spiritual bond with my Higher Power and a greater trust and love for my fellow ACoA members. Prayer also puts me on a journey to self-discovery. In my prayer I frequently ask to be shown my motives, the nature of my pain and the true essence of my fear or anger. This allows me to look behind the defences and screens I use to conceal myself from me.

I also find that prayer is extremely beneficial when I can't be of direct help to someone in trouble or in need of support. I've often implored my Higher Power, "Please help this person to do that which is healing and loving."

In all my activities I view prayer as a powerful tool for good. Suppose some members of ACoA might challenge my belief in prayer with an argument such as, "Prayers get answered only if you do the footwork." That may be part of the formula, or perhaps my Higher Power supplies both the motivation and the direction. I prefer to believe that my Higher Power also provides the energy I need to row the boat. I'm certainly no miracle worker, but I have come to see some minor wonders accomplished. A prayer I use on a daily basis whenever I am in a fear-provoking situation is "Please, God, help me!" It helps to calm me. Prayer helps me achieve a connection with my Higher Power, and out of this I gain a renewed acceptance of myself. For many years I have struggled with the deprived lost child within me who resisted recovery. Prayer has been the principal tool I used to quiet him. My prayers for greater self-acceptance and self-knowledge carry me through some of my

most difficult moments. And I know from talking with many hundreds of ACoA members that prayer has been equally helpful to them.

A curious thing about prayer is how seldom people discuss it. Whenever it is discussed, it's generally done with a degree of embarrassment or reticence. True, prayer is a very personal act; but I often wonder why grown men and women shy away from comment or discussion about such a powerful tool for recovery. These days I am only too willing to tell people about the role that prayer has played in my life and recovery.

## Meditation

Years ago, I was told that prayer was a way of talking to God and that meditation was an effective way of listening to God, and that the most effective form of prayer was deep listening. Since many people would rather do the talking than the listening, it's not surprising that meditation seems less popular than the prayer of petition. Some people are much more comfortable or secure when they are active. They have difficulty trying to sit quietly in a contemplative state. I think that the still, quiet voice of a Higher Power is more audible when the seeker is in a quiet meditative state.

Unfortunately, this world offers hundreds of distractions to keep us from this aspect of spiritual renewal. For those who are not inclined to have faith in a Higher Power, meditation can be a wonderful way to reflect upon life, relationships and issues being confronted. Out of a still silence, understanding and answers can flow. Whatever their motives or beliefs, I suggest that all ACoA's make a consistent effort to engage in some form of meditation. My first experiences with it enabled me to quiet down my racing thoughts.

Meditation is the vehicle that enables me to have a richer spiritual life. I've tried to develop a special listening attitude. In meditation I open myself to instruction. I become truly willing and receptive, putting my wants and needs aside and adopting a posture of focused awareness and listening. I relax my body, concentrate on my breathing and do my best to become receptive. On occasion I will inhale "God; exhale "loves me." I do this to get calm and centred. It is when I'm calm and listening that I'm available for enlightenment and guidance. I have also engaged in "light" meditation. In this effort I try to visualize light moving up my body in a healing manner.

I've described some of my approaches, but there are many forms of meditation available to the individual. The form you use is not nearly as important as your willingness to use meditation as a recovery tool. In my meditation efforts I try to make myself available to a Power greater than myself. I temporarily step out of the driver's seat to become teachable. By putting myself in a quiet listening mood I become open to direction however I may perceive it. I believe that deep listening is the highest form of love I can give to my Higher Power. Then I go about my life trying to be of service to myself and others.

In all of my meditative activities it's up to me to listen as intently as I can. When I let my mind wander to a wide range of topics, it's because I have lost my central focus. Concentration is sometimes difficult and my surroundings less than ideal, but with practice I have learned to tune out many distractions. It takes discipline to incorporate meditation into daily living, but you can engage in it anywhere, anytime. It's helpful if you can set aside a modest block of time - preferably at the same time each day - and adhere to this schedule as best you can until it becomes a familiar experience.

## Step 11.

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### We Sought Through Prayer And Meditation To Improve Our Conscious Contact With A Higher Power Of Our Understanding, Praying Only For Knowledge Of Its Will For Us And The Power To Carry It Out.

The primary goal of our spiritual efforts is to become open and receptive to our Higher Power. Our emotional well-being can be greatly enhanced through prayer and meditation. Becoming a channel for the will of a Higher Power can bring us to a new understanding of who we are and how we can lead a full and happy life. Spirituality and faith are very personal matters. The ways in which individuals make contact with a Higher Power are limitless. There are many different prayers, many approaches to prayer and numerous forms of meditation. Many people do not approach meditation and prayer eagerly. Some find it very difficult to sit quietly in a contemplative mood; they are much more comfortable with momentum and action. Others have long-standing resistance to the idea of prayer, which they confuse with supplication and pleading. A few people have difficulty with the idea of spiritual intelligence. People with these kinds of resistances are asked only to be willing to consider some actions that may bring them closer to a spiritual path or truth. When I become open to my Higher Power, I strengthen my sense of well-being and feel in tune with my spiritual self. In such a posture I go beyond my self-centred demands and actually experience life on a more giving and sensitive plane. A small note of caution: When I first began to actively pray, my conversation and appeals were focused on what I wanted and needed in my life. I was unable to get beyond the "I want" for some time. Slowly, however, I began to sit quietly and listen as well as pray. As I developed this "deep listening;" which I consider to be the heart of true prayer and meditation, a new, richer peace and contentment entered me. I had begun to accept the simple concept, "Thy will, not mine, be done." And in so doing I freed myself from blinding self-concern and self-indulgence.

*The 11<sup>th</sup> step of ACoA is very similar to the 11<sup>th</sup> step of AA. Instead of saying "we sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with a higher power of our understanding, praying only for knowledge of god's will for us and the power to carry it out", instead of him I made it "it". And instead of using the word God I used higher power. I must say I did that because I don't believe that God is a He or she, I believe it's it.*

*I'd like to say that prayer and meditation have probably been the major step which has saved my life. As I said my first 11 months in AA my hands were sweating so bad from fear and terror, I really couldn't shake anybody's hand. My sponsor took me over to Transcendental Meditation where I was initiated into the TM discipline and the first day that I was taught to meditate was walking through central park in New York and my left hand stopped sweating and I must say at that particular time I wondered if it was the Jewish half of me or the Christian half which had stopped sweating.*

*I saw from this experience that meditation basically could change me physiologically, that it could change my chemical make-up. I went back for the refresher course two or three days later and after that meditation my right hand had stopped sweating and I realised that basically meditation was a way of changing me physiologically. I began to study all kinds of spiritual readings and I*

*got into western mysticism, eastern mysticism, I found / discovered that western mysticism basically seems to concentrate on the head in other words I see you as the Christ, I love you. I do a lot of mental work in order to try to become one with my higher power.*

*Eastern mysticism on the other hand concentrates mostly on the body, their belief system states that there has to be a physiological transformation / change in the body in order to effect a permanent spiritual transformation. In other words, the Big Book of AA talks about God consciousness and it talks about the overwhelming God Consciousness which our early founders received. Bill Wilson had an overwhelming spiritual experience, as did Marty Mann have an overwhelming spiritual experience. Most of us who have come after those two people have had what is called basically an educational variety of spiritual awakening.*

*My spiritual awakening has been going on and on and on and on and I have not had that overwhelming spiritual experience that the founders of AA had. On the other hand, after Bill Wilson had this spiritual awakening as did Marty Mann, they tried to re-capture it over the next 25-30-35 years and never could. In fact, I was at the meeting where Marty Mann spoke and she had just gotten over a 20-year depression, she had just gotten initiated in Transcendental Meditation.*

*What I'm saying is that I learned that in order to get myself aligned with my higher power I had to give up caffeine, I had to get rid of smoking 3 - 3 ½ packs of cigarettes a day. I had to get off the sugar, which I am now 5 days off of again. That's been the toughest one for me sugar, I find it to be the primary addiction, but God is calmness in action, human being are excitement in action and I find that the drugs that I put into my body basically to create some kind of stress or excitement in me are kind of obstacles to spiritual success I've learned that prayer is talking to God and meditating is listening to god and that the highest form of prayer is listening. When my mind stops, Gods mind starts.*

From YouTube "New Steps for ACoA" by Tony A.

1. How often do you pray?

2. How often do you meditate?

3. What do you pray for?

4. Do you have a daily program for prayer and meditation?

## Reading 12 - Does the ACoA Recovery Program Work?

### Can I Really Change?

Recovery is not an easy process. For the newcomer full of hope, recovery and change may appear to be the automatic dividends of regular attendance, devotion to the program and spiritual development. Nice as this would be, it's just not true. I view recovery as lying along a spectrum. At one end is "virtually no change" and at the other end is "deep substantive change." The entire spectrum is available through the ACoA program. Some members won't stay active and committed long enough to make more than limited progress on the journey. I have known others who persevered and did achieve remarkable emotional well-being. These winners understood at a deep level that they were sick and tired of living a tolerable half-life. They came to a point where they were willing to go to any length to bring about true substantive change in their behaviour and their relationships with others. That any ACoA can change is a given. As soon as someone walks through the doors of an ACoA meeting, hears and identifies with the Laundry List and the personal sharing of the members, the process of change has begun. When the individual begins to understand the nature of the problems and how childhood disturbances created chronic and continuing problems, the journey truly begins.

The extent of change depends on the ACoA's willingness to continue the journey. So, the answer to the question is, "Yes, anyone can change, and for some this change can be deep and formidable." The extensive changes that I have seen and experienced cover a wide range of issues. Whether it was a problem with abandonment, fear of authority figures, guilt, control or inability to express stuffed feelings, healing change took place after a concerted effort in recovery. Change is probably most evident in the meetings.

Over time I have watched suspicious, angry and rigid members become open, accepting and trusting. This to me was transformation of the most fundamental kind. I have also observed desperately shy and frightened, dependent individuals emerge from their constricted world and become confident, independent and whole. Over the years I've had a real opportunity in ACoA to witness many miracles. What saddens me most are those who start the journey only to fade and retreat once again into denial after just three or four meetings. I have to keep remembering that they are not at fault. It is their disease that diverts them from a chance to bring about true, wholesome change in their lives.

For those who persevere, the rewards are many. When I am asked how long it will take for substantive change to occur, I can only share that each person's recovery is different. No two people will grow and change at the same rate. I do know, however, that the more effort, the more attention paid to issues, the more risk-taking in new areas, the better the chances are for an early recovery from some difficult problems. I can't stress enough how much hard work is required in order to achieve long-lasting change. Surface or cosmetic change is relatively easy; ACoA's do it all the time. A little knowledge and sharing can sometimes mislead newcomers into believing they have made great strides -until they collide with some of their more enduring and resistant patterns of behaviour. For all ACoA's it's very discouraging and humbling to discover that an issue you thought you had overcome was right back causing great difficulty. I counsel newcomers not to expect immediate recovery in such areas as control, fear and rage. Little issues and problems yield more readily. Some issues and behaviour patterns will require long term alertness. For everyone, ACoA or not, old habit patterns die hard. It's up to us to outlast their influence upon us.

In ACoA change comes from being willing to alter our reactions as well as our actions. I had to learn not to react to sickness in others. I taught myself not to overreact to strong or rude criticism. I had to slow down and examine my reactions outside stimuli. At parties, in money matters, with my children, I had to get past old automatic responses (most of which were fear-based) and give myself time to think. I also had to stop all of my violent critical attacks on myself. This latter problem changed by using positive affirmations and visualizations to replace my scathing denunciations when I acted inappropriately or blundered in some way. Over and over I would say to myself, "I love you, Tony. You did the best you could." The whole ACoA process is one of change. People come through the doors with some incredibly destructive beliefs and behaviour patterns. The task of ACoA is to enable and guide people through some much-needed change. The fact that there are meetings and people sitting together sharing about their problems, drawing strength from each other, trusting, feeling and revealing who they really are is a clear indication to me that ACoA can bring real change to its members.

## What Is Recovery?

Every ACoA's perception of recovery is different. No two individuals will have the same impressions and expectations. One may be looking forward to a new spontaneity and truly satisfying

relationships, while another may be seeking a peaceful serenity with an end to anxiety and fear. In truth, recovery can be all of these and much more. Any effort to portray recovery needs to focus on the most common patterns at the core of our being. Like all other ACoA's, my recovery efforts have been aimed at surrendering and letting go of a whole series of inappropriate defences. At the same time, I am actively developing a blameless understanding of myself and taking positive actions that I know can lead to self-acceptance and self-love. For years I lived a life of shame, secrecy and desperation and I yearned for an existence where I could be with myself and others a state that's not easy to attain in today's stress-filled world.

Regardless of our denial or our successes in life, I think that most un-recovering ACoA's are painfully aware that they are not functioning well. They sense that something is terribly amiss. Unfortunately, they join most of their neighbours in the great conspiracy called, "Let's keep our pain and our humanity concealed." Everyone gets to play this game of "act as if." Some do it well; others have little capacity for it and seek help; still others get addicted and go crazy. It takes real courage to enter a self-help recovery program such as ACoA. And it takes even greater valour to start revealing the long-hidden family secrets and our continued sick responses to them. Recovery is a wondrous, inspired, ongoing process.

Newcomers walk through the doors of ACoA barely able to articulate the nature and substance of the pain that brought them to the meeting. They can only say, "I don't want to be this way any longer." They actually are willing to surrender the very defences and behaviour patterns that helped them survive in their alcoholic household. They begin the awesome process of changing their lifelong responses and actions. With the help of others and a Higher Power, their sick, distorted thinking begins to heal and they start to feel the gift of emotional well-being. This gift is something they will have to nurture and tend to for the rest of their lives, but it is a task that becomes easier as self-love blossoms.

Recovery is . . .

1. An expanding process of self-understanding
2. Creating and sustaining supportive, mutually enjoyable personal relationships
3. Having the ability to feel and experience a full range of emotions in wholesome and appropriate ways
4. Being clear about one's needs and being able to ask to have them met in a positive manner
5. Taking healthy actions and risks that will lead to increased self-acceptance
6. Confronting problems and difficulties with confidence in an ability to resolve them effectively
7. A willingness to grow along spiritual lines
8. Emotional balance and a state of well-being

## Being a Healthy Parent to our Wounded Child Within

In our first few years upon this earth we had an opportunity to be vital, spontaneous human beings, full of hope and confidence. But something happened -and the sick family environment put an end to our infant chances for a wholesome upbringing. Instead our infant was neglected or abused for many years, without hope, without healthy nurture and above all without understanding. In adult life many former infants try to heal their abandoned child by "doing," by compensating for the sense of shame

and worthlessness that they carry with them. The greater the outer display, the greater the inner poverty. Finally, with the help of ACoA, we began to understand that healing could only be realized by going within and rescuing the abandoned child. In order to heal the pain, we were asked to embrace it, feel it, sit quietly and re-experience all the hurt, torment, abuse and helplessness. We were told that such actions could bring our child into the light. For many it took an incredible act of faith to bridge a lifetime of emotional defences and begin rescue efforts. Once the abandoned child has been brought into the light, nurturing is essential to keep it from slipping back into the darkness once again.

Each of us needs to learn how to give nourishment to that part of ourselves that has been locked away for so long. The child is the core spirit that we carry. That spirit needs to be acknowledged, accepted and loved. In my journey I turned to affirmations each day. The first day I began saying, "I love you little Tony." I was embarrassed and wanted to run. Slowly, however, I began to get a new sense of myself. I also used visualizations. I would create a mind picture of the adult me hugging and protecting the abandoned infant me. I formed a relationship with this other me. I made it a sacred and cherished one. I knew that I had to develop a loving acceptance of this other me and that my loathing and self-hatred were all inside this lost child. Over time I fully adopted this child and became a responsible, caring parent.

I analyse that the foregoing passages might leave you wondering about my sanity! Let me say that just as I believe that I have a Higher Power to call on for help, I also believe that there is a lost little child in me at the core of my being. I think that life became so painful for that child that it licked its wounds and went off to a dark corner. This child needed to be acknowledged. I needed to re-experience all of this lost child's hurt and shame, own it and free the child. Deep inside I knew that until I liberated this child and nurtured it, I couldn't be fully integrated.

## Reading 13 - Avoiding the ACoA 12 Steps of Recovery

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Sometimes members can get so carried away with the dynamics of the sharing process and the recitation of their problems that they ignore the important framework that holds the ACoA structure together: the ACoA 12 Steps. These steps are meant to be incorporated into daily life. The central themes of the steps focus on love and understanding. We are asked to undertake the task of reversing our behaviour and start loving ourselves. To do this requires a certain amount of surrender, some examination of our parents and ourselves and a willingness to correct wrongs and grow along spiritual lines.

Working most steps is a solitary affair. Some members prefer the excitement and challenges of the meetings and social fellowship to the singular process of step work. Yet it is essential that we keep the focus on ourselves. The steps help make this possible. The ACoA 12 Steps offer nourishment, not punishment. ACoA's have had enough punishment in their lives. The steps accelerate self-awareness, and for many they will be the first real opportunity to develop a relationship with a Higher Power.

Despite all these benefits some members may not actively work the steps. Others may jump in only to fade when they arrive at steps four and five. Some may resist undertaking an inventory of their parents. Perhaps they will feel that such actions are betrayal of the family secrets or maybe they prefer to bury the past. Many members are disturbed when they see that they have many of the same behaviour patterns as their dysfunctional parents. This is simply a fact. Our early training

system was our parents, and we invariably learned to respond to life in much the same way as our parents. Blame is not an issue; we are merely trying to examine the dimensions of the problem behaviour and be aware of its influence and the impact of it on our lives.

## Perfectionism

The desire to be perfect in performance, knowledge or behaviour is a perplexing character trait that definitely works against recovery. I believe that perfectionism is created by fear. This was certainly true for me. I became a perfectionist because I was afraid of punishment. If I didn't do something perfectly, I might be rejected, ridiculed, fired, abandoned or ignored. Many people become perfectionists to please the world. My ACoA issue involving perfectionism also stems from an effort to control the outside world so that I won't be hurt but will be accepted and loved. So, my efforts at perfection were aimed at favourably influencing what I perceived to be a hostile, unfriendly world.

In ACoA we ask people to turn inward, to respect the inner self and not stay stuck in pleasing the external world. Perfectionism involves greater effort and energy, much of which could be re-channelled to a sensible application of program principles.

Such suggestions as "Easy does it, but do it," "Lower your standards and your performance will rise" and "Think" can help the perfectionist to loosen the grip of fear. Overly responsible individuals are particularly troubled by perfectionism in all sorts of matters. Fortunately, there is no possibility of working the ACoA program perfectly! How well we work the program will be reflected in how we feel about ourselves and in the nature of our relationship with our Higher Power. Only we can judge the results.

## Instant Relationships

Developing friendships with members of your ACoA groups is a healthy activity. It demonstrates a willingness to reach out, open up and share. There is, however, one social approach that can be troublesome, especially for those in the first year of recovery.

Too often newcomers become prematurely involved with ACoA members of the opposite sex. They form instant physical relationships with each other. This is natural, common issues and a sense of family tend to draw people together. Sometimes it is a lost child calling to a rescuer. Instant romance however, takes a great deal of time, attention and energy. The new romantic has shifted his or her centre away from recovery to the demands of the new relationship. And sadly, I know of no self-help recovery program that can compete with a new romance. Thus, it generally leads to a setback or slowdown in the recovery process.

The "me" that first shows up at an ACoA meeting is usually quite desperate and emotionally troubled in the area of relationships. The newcomer is often very needy and confused. Many members of ACoA endorse the concept of focusing solely on yourself if you arrived at ACoA unattached. The operating principle for this suggestion is that there has got to be a solid me before there can be an us. Common sense points to waiting until you are more secure in the knowledge of who you are. It's best to view group activity as an opportunity for awareness and growth rather than romance. And,

since the group can take on the characteristics of the family of origin, ill-conceived romantic endeavours with other group members can tear apart the new healthy family concept.

In a new romantic involvement, it is most common for ACoA's to act out the old dramas of earlier attachments. ACoA newcomers need time to see the nature and complexity of their relationship issues. Involvement in a romance with another ACoA, especially another newcomer can only serve to short-circuit recovery and possibly drive the newcomer away from the program. The focus needs to be on personal recovery not on a romantic conquest. Unfortunately, many ACoA's are just awakening to incest issues and trying to resolve them. In their efforts to grow and recreate their early family, physical attachments and involvements can be very damaging. The best suggestion I can give is to take it easy and remember that recovery needs to come first.

## Fixing Others

I'm never sure where the boundary between sharing and rescuing is located. For some members of ACoA, giving advice and fixing others is as natural as breathing. As young children in an alcoholic household, their assigned role was one of rescuer, fixer and hero. The actions of a fixer generally go far beyond general support and sharing. Fixers attach themselves to other members and often attempt to run their lives, professing to have most of the answers to whatever problems the "victim" is facing.

Fixing others gives stature, importance and control to an individual -three good reasons to engage in it. A somewhat less intrusive form of fixing is chronic advice giving. Most meetings have one or two "senior advisers" who feel it is their mission to dispense advice -not share experiences in a give-and-take manner - to the more confused, suffering members of the group. I think we can draw a distinction between fixing, advising and sharing. The first two are intrusive and involve giving up one's centre.

Sharing is a different mechanism. Ideally, sharing involves relating one's experiences, perhaps how a person handled a particularly troubling issue. It is done in a passive, non-directive manner: "If you can benefit from my experiences, please do. If not, that's okay."

Fixing and advising can seriously interfere with recovery of both the fixer and the person being fixed. The fixer is often acting out of a need to stay away from his or her problems, helping others is a sure way to avoid personal issues. Fixing also has a component of control to it, an issue many ACoA's are trying to resolve. It's commendable to want to steer others through tough times that you have experienced and resolved. But if it interferes with your own growth (and it usually does) or that of the newcomer, it's best to step aside.

We are in ACoA to fix ourselves, not others. In those situations where a formal sponsor-sponsee relationship is in place, both parties agree that mutual sharing and exploration of problems will characterize the relationship. In this arrangement guidance is best given when it is open to change or reversal. The demanding, overbearing, controlling sponsor can do the sponsee a real disservice. Unfortunately, some newcomers are drawn to strong, directive personalities because that's the kind of individual who ran their childhood home. Early ACoA linkages are often based upon old family dynamics. This recreation of early family roles in ACoA is inevitable but sometimes troubling.

In my alcoholic household I was always preoccupied with the feelings of my parents. When they felt gloomy, I felt gloomy. I wanted people close to me to feel good so I could feel good. In ACoA I had to learn to let others feel troubled, depressed, miserable, lost or fearful without rushing over and trying to fix them. I learned to detach and not pick up and carry another's burden. Trying to fix others is a selfish, time-consuming way of continuing to feed my illness.

## Denial and Blame

It's still very easy for me to be blind to the essence of some of my actions. There are issues in my life that don't yield easily to clarity. I literally can't see the forest for the trees. Sometimes I finally reach discovery and understanding on my own. More often, however, the insight and inspiration come from someone sharing at a meeting, or my observation of another member's blindness. This is why meetings and friendships in ACoA can be so meaningful. Where I have been absolutely blind to a destructive trait for many years -let's say arrogance, a controlling nature or vicious gossiping - it's not very likely that I will quickly single it out and resolve it in ACoA. I may have to see it in others or feel the resistance of others to my negative actions. Even more helpful is a loving sponsor who gently points to some of my blind spots and eases me into a recognition of how I have been hurting myself. Denial is the mind's way of defending itself from fear, feelings of inadequacy and a whole legion of hurts. Left alone, denial can make a real mess of recovery. A willingness to examine one's actions, to be open to feedback from others and to seek the aid of a sponsor or close friend in ACoA can shorten the distance between blindness and discovery.

Blaming others is a natural way to shift attention away from the responsibility to recover. For example, if I spend all my emotional energy blaming my parents for the issues that are repeatedly troubling me, I stay blind to the need to engage in my own recovery. Blame is corrosive; it blinds and enables one to remain free from responsible actions. Yes, it's true our parents taught us miserably, if they taught us at all. But recovery will come when we admit to ourselves and others how enraged, hurt and helpless we have always felt about them. Then we can experience it all and move on to positive change.

[Additional Reading: Big Red Book –The Importance of Service in ACA – Chapter 10 page 353](#)

## Step 12.

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### **We Have A Spiritual Awakening as A Result Of Taking These Steps, And We Continue To Love Ourselves And To Practice These Principles In All Our Affairs.**

Self-love and self-acceptance inevitably lead us to feel connected with a larger universe. When we were victims in an alcoholic household, we lost our authentic self to the demands of the disease. Throughout our adult lives, and especially in ACoA, we have been attempting to recover and cherish our authentic, spontaneous self. Through working these steps to the best of our ability and developing a relationship with our Higher Power, we can gain a wonderful new awareness and an opportunity to truly change. We can find a happiness and contentment beyond anything we could imagine. This does not mean that our life will always be trouble-free, only that we can readily and confidently deal with life's problems. There is a solution beyond us. By working the program daily and

admitting we are powerless over the effects of living with alcoholism, we can learn to love ourselves. And when we do, we are free to love others in a new, healthy way. By sharing with each other we act as a mirror, reflecting our new growth and love. By using this program in all our affairs, we can dispel the old destructive personality that so crippled our enjoyment of life. No longer do we imitate a normal life. Now we embrace it.

*Self-love and self-acceptance inevitably lead us to feel connected with the larger universe. When we were victims in an alcoholic/dysfunctional household we lost our authentic self to the demands of the disease. Throughout our adult lives especially in ACoA we have been attempting to recover and cherish our authentic, spontaneous self. Through working these steps to the best of our ability and developing a relationship with our higher power, we can gain a wonderful new awareness and an opportunity to truly change, we can find a happiness and contentment beyond anything we could imagine, this does not mean that our lives will always be trouble free only that we can readily and constantly deal with lives problems.*

*There is a solution beyond ourselves, by working the ACoA program daily and admitting we are powerless over the effects of living with alcoholism or dysfunction we could learn to love ourselves, and when we do we are free to love others in a new and healthy way by sharing with each other we act as a mirror reflecting our new growth and love, by using this program in all our affairs we can dispel the old destructive personality that so crippled our enjoyment of life through a long debilitating life we can now embrace it. It is my personal belief that I'm here basically by the grace of my higher power this morning to present twelve steps for victims, rather than perpetrators.*

*It does not mean that if I'm new to ACoA that after having done these steps and worked this program that it might not be a very positive act on my part to look at the 12 steps of AA, CODA or Al-Anon and make amends to people I have harmed, but as children, that's what we are working on as children, what I need to do is to put the focus on learning how to love me and not to blame and shame myself.*

*Fear is what I am, I'm a fear-based person, ACoA is what I am, and co-dependency is what I do, and I feel my job basically is to help people learn about their personality profile.*

*A very wise man I think in 400BC said "the way to do, was to be" and what I believe the ACoA Program and these steps will do is to help us learn how to be, along with the laundry list. In AA I was told that I had to do before I could be, I had to change my behaviour in order to become something different.*

*The ACoA movement is teaching me that I have to learn what I am, in others words I have to be before I can do. I hope this this has been of some help to you all.*

From YouTube "New Steps for ACoA" by Tony A.

5. How have you awoken spiritually?

6. Do you believe the spiritual awakening(s) have been a result of working the steps?

7. Give an example of how you love yourself?

8. Give an example of how you practise these principles in your daily life?

The principles from the Big Red Book:

- Step # 1. Powerlessness and Surrender
- Step # 2. Open-mindedness and Clarity
- Step # 3. Willingness and Accepting Help
- Step # 4. Self-honesty and Courage
- Step # 5. Honesty and Trust
- Step # 6. Willingness
- Step # 7. Humility
- Step # 8. Willingness and Self-forgiveness
- Step # 9. Forgiveness and Courage
- Step # 10. Honesty and Discernment
- Step # 11. Seeking and Listening
- Step # 12. Love and Self-love

## Reading 14 - Resistance and Setbacks to Recovery

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Recovery is a lifelong process. It cannot be accomplished overnight or by attendance at just a few meetings. I know, because as long and hard as I've been working on it, I am not "recovered." I experience recovery as an ongoing, upward spiral that provides greater depth of realization. So, if you expect to accomplish recovery in a set amount of time, you may be sorely disappointed. It requires a sustained effort to improve the quality of living and to build meaningful friendships with other group members. How members function in the ACoA group environment is a pretty clear representation of how they function in other areas of their life. It's difficult to be one kind of personality in ACoA and a distinctly different individual in other settings. When an ACoA member is experiencing a great deal of resistance to recovery, it will probably show up in one or more of the following behaviour patterns, most of which lead to a decrease in spontaneity and increased difficulty in trusting, sharing and feeling. All are pronounced signals of resistance and withdrawal.

### Trying to do It Alone

Often a newcomer will attend a few meetings, gather some information, make a rough assessment of the potential contribution of ACoA and then decide to work on his or her problems. It pains me when members of ACoA describe how their first approach to recovery was side-tracked by a decision to go one alone. An individual comes through the doors of ACoA; readily identifies with eight or nine issues in the Laundry List; completely relates to much of the sharing by members and then decides to try the "home-study" method of recovery. Such activity is self-defeating.

It's a tragic mistake for newcomers to turn their back on any recovery program that speaks directly to so many personal problems. And yet this happens every day all over the world. The "I can do it myself" approach, which was probably an early survival mode, shuts off so many people from a healthy new way of living. Like most ACoA's, I need human beings in my life to help me recover. I had to surrender my isolated pose of self-reliance. I needed to share, to trust others, to identify and to feel. I learned about my disease through others and in partnership with them. I cannot recover alone, and I don't know many people who can.

Trying to change in isolation is far too limiting. Life is all about relationships. And if I'm having problems with relationships -and I think most ACoA's do- then I have to work them through by learning about my actions, my contributions to the problems. I can only do this with the feedback and insight provided by other people, and readily available to me in the ACoA recovery program.

### A Sometime Thing

Those in AA often quote the wonderful phrase "Half-measures availed us nothing." It aptly refers to the degree of willingness and commitment of the individual seeking recovery. Too often the newcomer makes the judgment that he or she can "audit" the course-just sit in for a quick refresher. Believe me when I say that I wish ACoA could be used in such a progressive manner. In reality, however, members grow and change and recover because they are ready and willing to show up regularly and do the hard work. Sitting on the fence doesn't work. Such troublesome issues as people-pleasing, fear of abandonment, over-responsibility and stuffing of feelings seldom respond favourably to half measures. Once an individual has accepted the fact that they do, indeed, have

some real behaviour problems that can be attributed to an alcoholic upbringing, only a committed and sustained effort can bring solid relief. Anything less is just a form of evasion. Recovery takes time, effort and a willingness to learn about feelings, a desire to experience good and bad feelings and a readiness to risk telling others. In ACoA we concentrate on feelings-depressing ones, uncomfortable ones, frightening ones. We try to experience and re-experience painful moments in a safe, supportive environment. A person who is just passing through probably will not sit still or pay attention long enough to reap any substantial benefits from these efforts.

Haphazard attendance is one way to stay isolated and apart from the group. In all probability the members of the group will adopt a casual, distant attitude toward the individual just as the individual has with them. This is very self-defeating.

## Wanting A Quick Fix

As children we saw our parents do many patch-up jobs to the family problems. And we were probably served many quick-fix TV dinners and remedies for minor colds-overnight relief from pain and suffering. It seemed to work well for a while, but eventually things broke down worse than before.

The quick solution is seldom an enduring one. Nonetheless many ACoA's still try to get by with a series of magical fixes. I'm pretty much like everyone else, and I definitely hoped for a quick magical cure -a high-intensity resolution to all my problems. When I first began in ACoA I was willing to put out some effort, but I wanted fast response, quick recovery. In short, I had high expectations. I was almost childlike in my expectations that our fledgling ACoA program would provide fast, fast relief for my symptoms!

I gambled a lot as a young man. With gambling there's a short time between the bet and the results, and I grew accustomed to fast results. As a stockbroker I bought and sold stocks for myself and my clients. If I didn't see immediately favourable results, I moved the investments elsewhere. I brought this same mentality with me to early ACoA. I was hoping for the ultimate quick fix, a short trip from turmoil to emotional well-being.

Well, it didn't work for me and I seriously doubt that it can work for anyone else. Recovery turned out to be a lot of hard work. My really deep-rooted issues did not readily yield to my new insights. It took new behaviour and new attitudes to begin to heal them -neither of which I was able to acquire in a few months. If my experience is at all representative, then I would suggest that newcomers gently let go of any dreams of a quick fix and settle in for the real miracles.

## Unwillingness to Share and Open Up

Just listening to others and reading the literature-trying to get well just through gathering information-probably won't produce many positive results. An important element in ACoA recovery is self-disclosure - a willingness to tell the group as a whole, and selected individuals, what is really going on in one's life. I need to share my feelings about my problems. The reality is, I have all these problems. It's a "feeling illness" that I'm grappling with and it can't be resolved with knowledge alone.

One of the most threatening aspects of the ACoA recovery program is the intense, revelatory level of sharing. Long-buried shame, confusion and rage surface and all the pain and anguish that go with them are shared. Twelve-Step recovery programs succeed because the members are willing to open up to fellow members, become human and vulnerable. All of this is doubly necessary in ACoA because it is such a devastating and all-encompassing feeling disease. Newcomers in ACoA soon see the value and merit of sharing. It is a release; a relief and it signifies a willingness to let go and feel the feelings. Unfortunately, some members are so rigid and intimidated by the meetings and the recovery process that they remain silent and withdrawn. True, some meetings can be intense and on occasion full of anger. But there is no way that a member can benefit from a sphinx-like demeanour. There may be great silent heroes in the movies; but in ACoA those who cloak themselves in silence, seriously limit their recovery prospects. Self-acceptance and self-love come out of sharing and owning who you are. We generally loathe our hidden self and self-loathing; shame and evasion form a pattern that ACoA recovery hopes to reverse.

Opening up to people can be frightening. It involves risk, rejection and criticism. In ACoA, however, judgment and criticism are almost non-existent. There may be some low-level gossip and a few personality clashes, but the overall environment is supportive, non-critical and non-invasive. This is the only way that ACoA can adequately function as a recovery program. We are brought together to share as brothers and sisters, to heal each other. This is something we cannot do alone or in silence. We can trust the process, surrender to it and try not to retreat into silence. I never could think my way out of my problems. I had to feel, act and talk my way out of them. Quite often the ACoA program asks people to do that which they fear and hate as part of the recovery and it works.

## Drifting and Not Focusing on Personal Problems

Newcomers to ACoA are shown a list of behaviour patterns that have brought problems and troubles to all of us. As newcomers listen to members share, they discover other characteristics and issues.

Most members readily identify with some of the major issues and add to their "to be worked on" list as they make progress in their recovery. Some members, however, seem to have difficulty identifying just what it is they should be working on. They are vague and unfocused. They may be able to share at great length about how much they were abused as children, but often they don't see clearly that it's all connected to their current behaviour. They need to sit quietly and draw up their very own list of problems. They can either focus on the most troublesome ones or attack the least difficult ones if they have trouble confronting and working on some of the larger issues. Another way to limit recovery is to just drift along without understanding that recovery requires work.

It's sad to watch members drift like leaves on a windy pond, moved around by forces outside themselves. To ignore one's issues is to ignore the program. The program can always provide some nourishment to the drifters, but real change and progress will probably elude them until they define and take responsibility for their problems with a concerted effort.

My own self-deception was a major hindrance to my recovery. Since I had written the Laundry List and thrown myself into service, helping to put the groups on solid footing, I felt that I was doing wonders with my own ACoA illness. But after a few years I realized that I had blithely skipped over some of my issues - I hadn't done the core work that was required. Because I was the originator of

the Laundry List, I had deceived myself into thinking I had cleaned up some problems when all I had done was define them and give them lip service.

In ACoA there is an essential process that cannot be avoided. Members have to prepare their own precise list of issues. Then they need to develop some recovery goals, specifying what they want to accomplish and how they will proceed. Remember, your Higher Power will steer you, but you need to do the rowing.

## Reading 16 – A Reminder about Anonymity

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AA, the original 12-Step recovery program, considers anonymity to be the foundation of its program. This concept is equally important to the ACoA recovery program. Some of the key aspects of our anonymity stance are as follows:

1. Whatever we may hear shared at a meeting must be kept confidential. What we hear in the meeting rooms should stay in the meeting rooms. We must always respect the confidentiality of the members.
2. A member should especially guard against ever revealing the names of ACoA members to non-members or the public at large. Each individual's affiliation with ACoA is a private and personal matter and we, as fellow members, must respect this right to privacy. Our sense of security and support require it.
3. At the individual level a member may elect to reveal his or her own association with ACoA to another individual or group of non-members. Such action should be undertaken with caution as such disclosure may cause harm to an innocent relative or family member.
4. At the public media level, I urge discretion concerning revealing one's association with ACoA.

Broad publicity, though well meant, may reflect negatively on parents and relatives. When it comes to public disclosure to the media it is best to look carefully at the content of the situation and the motives involved. Some have found it freeing to reveal the family secrets, while others have found that it increased family disharmony. On this issue each member would do best to seek the guidance of his or her Higher Power.

**God, grant me the serenity  
To accept the people I cannot change,  
The courage to change the one I can  
And the wisdom to know that one is me.**