



NEWCOMERS

Welcome to ACA

*Adult Children of Alcoholics & Dysfunctional Families
Greater Toronto & Area Intergroup*

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

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MESSAGE TO THE NEWCOMER: YOU ARE SANE!

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Though in the past we may have adopted insanity, suicide attempts, self-abusive drinking, eating or drug use, compulsive working or obsessive relationships as our method of coping, we now have a chance to be sane, totally sane, in all ways and all our lives.

After surviving the traumas of childhood, we have screened ourselves, selected ourselves, and found each other, through twelve step programs, therapies, consciousness expansions, insane asylums, jails, and hospitals.

All that is needed now is a safe place where we can shed our defenses, our denial, and admit to ourselves and others how angry, hurt, maddened, and wounded we have always felt.

Finally, we are safe. We have ourselves. We have each other. We are sister, brother, father, mother,

sibling, and parent to one another. We can rely on each other until we are able to claim our adulthood, our responsibility for ourselves, our lives, and everything in them.

Anyone who can handle what comes up at six meetings without retreating once again into denial has begun an irreversible process of recovery: everything in that person’s life can become part of the recovery process, regardless of how chaotic it may look or feel.

Many of us act out our old dramas and defenses at least once again, as if to see whether they really are as unnecessary as we hope. Indeed, they are, and typically we do not slip back into denial, obsessions, and old survival strategies that no longer serve us. We keep our other programs going. We are still survivors.

If you seek explanations for this miracle (many have been offered, ranging from consciousness expansion through religion to psychiatry and science or combinations of all of these), any explanation includes one central statement in complete agreement with all the others—

“The ACA Program of Recovery Works”!



WELCOME TO ACA

This note introduces you to ACA — why it is here, how it works, and some resources that are available.

We are adult children of alcoholic or dysfunctional families. We meet to share our experience, strength and hope in living a program of recovery and growth.

The core of our program is the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions which guide us on a path of physical, emotional and spiritual healing. We also recognize that we have many characteristics in common. These are summarized in the ACA Problem and Solution and other literature.

ACA is independent of Al-Anon, AA, and other 12 Step Programs, although we acknowledge the wisdom and power of those programs which we have adapted for our particular needs.

GUIDELINES FOR MEMBERS

The group is self-supporting and relies on voluntary contributions from us to pay the rent and other expenses. We periodically appoint members to perform various tasks. These members are “trusted servants,” responsible to the group. We try, through service, to give back some of what we have received as part of our recovery, but not to give away all we have — thus repeating our old patterns.

We ask you as a newcomer to attend at least six meetings before you decide whether the group is right for you. It often takes at least that time to begin to understand and feel how the program works.

You have the right to say nothing. You also have the right to ask for,

or to not accept, feedback to what you have said. This is not a therapy group, although many ACAs have found therapy to be an important aspect of their recovery. You are responsible for taking care of yourself. Take what you like and leave the rest!

Most meetings do not allow “crosstalk”. Instead, each person is allowed to share freely and without editorial comments, one-liners, interruption, or any other type of response. This helps create a safe place to share. Crosstalk violates the safety of the meeting by recreating the family experience of not being heard or of being ridiculed, criticized, belittled, “fixed”, or judged.

We avoid giving advice. We prefer to share the story of our recovery and of our experience, strength and hope. We give support by respectfully listening. We make “I” statements, learning to focus on our own thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and we learn to ask permission before commenting on another’s share, or before giving feedback or advice to others.

Respect the needs of others for time. If you wish to talk at length about some issue, ask the other group members first. Stick to your issue and avoid going on tangents.

Above all, remember that everything said in the group should stay there.

Our progress depends on building trust between us. Gossip about each other is completely unacceptable. Anonymity is an essential part of our group.

What is said and who says it are not to be discussed with others.

We connect in-person with other

Resources

Meetings

Meetings are a safe place to begin our recovery/discovery.

Telephone Calls

The phone list is our lifeline between meetings

The 12 Steps

The Steps are at the core of our recovery

Literature

Materials from ACA, other 12-Step programs and our personally chosen materials promote our recovery

Anonymity

Anonymity allows us a new freedom to share our feelings and to experience an identity apart for a label. We need to be free in our meetings from the fear of gossip or retaliation.

Service

We serve by speaking, leading, doing group “chores”, giving rides, talking with newcomers, and doing what we can to ensure the safety of ACA being available to the next Adult Child who needs it.

The ACA Serenity Prayer

God / Higher Power, 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!

members we relate to between meetings. Some groups keep a contact list, and others simply encourage you to ask for the phone number of a member whose sharing reached you.

If you decide to stop attending the group, please tell us the group. We hurt when someone we care about leaves without saying goodbye.



ACA BILL OF RIGHTS©

Many of us come into ACA not knowing that we could give ourselves permission to attend to our most basic needs.

The journey of recovery in ACA can include learning to identify our needs, feelings, and rights, and to take responsibility for getting them met in a healthy fashion.

At the same time, the rights we discover and determine for ourselves do not imply that others have the responsibility to fulfill those rights.

With the help of these rights, we are able to develop healthier relationships, and with a power greater than ourselves of our own understanding, we can begin to live life as our True Selves.

1. I have the right to say no.
2. I have the right to say "I don't know".
3. I have the right to be wrong.
4. I have the right to make mistakes and learn from them.
5. I have the right to detach from anyone in whose company I feel humiliated or manipulated.
6. I have the right to make my own choices and decisions in my life.
7. I have the right to grieve any actual or perceived loss.
8. I have the right to all my feelings.
9. I have the right to feel angry, including towards someone I love.
10. I have the right to change my mind at any time.

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To find the ACA Bill of Rights© and more WSO literature, please visit:

<https://adultchildren.org/free-literature-english-translated/>

11. I have the right to a spiritually, physically, and emotionally healthier existence, though it may differ entirely or in part from my parents' way of life.
12. I have the right to forgive myself and choose how and when I forgive others.
13. I have the right to take healthy risks and to experiment with new possibilities.
14. I have the right to be honest in my relationships and to seek the same from others.
15. I have the right to ask for what I want.
16. I have the right to determine and honour my own priorities and goals, and allow others to do the same.
17. I have the right to dream and to have hope.
18. I have the right to be my True Self.
19. I have the right to know and nurture my Inner Child.
20. I have the right to laugh, to play, to have fun, and the freedom to celebrate this life, right here, right now.

Remember, I am learning how to give to myself, and that is not bad.

I need to change old feelings of being victimized to new feelings of being able to meet challenges successfully.

I don't have to take care of everyone else. I have choices about how I respond to people.

Some situations can be resolved without my being involved.

Others can lend support to those who need it when I am not willing to be available.

It is okay to put my own wellbeing first. I am important, too.

I will read my Bill of Rights out loud to myself each day.

I may feel some of the old guilt for a while, but it may also be mixed with a new sensation: that of excitement along with a sense of aliveness.

I will discover that I am intuitively handling situations which used to baffle me.



BUT MY PARENTS WEREN'T ALCOHOLIC

Many newcomers in ACA report they identify with the characteristics listed in “The Problem” (or “The Laundry List” or “The Characteristics” which can be found online in ACA literature), but they can find no alcoholism in their family. There can be many explanations. Perhaps the family denial system prevents the newcomer from seeing the disease. Or, perhaps the family addiction has taken another form such as drugs, compulsive eating, work addiction or avoidance, violence, perfectionism, gambling, or etc. There may actually be no aspect of alcoholism in the home. The fact is, it doesn’t matter! Our program is not about our parents or whether or not you can identify an alcoholic in your past.

OUR PROGRAM IS ABOUT US

For the first time in our lives, we are dealing with ourselves. We identify the characteristics in each and every one of us. With this new focus on ourselves and away from the personality, disease or identity of our parents or caretakers, we come to see how our program addresses us as “Adult Children” in the here and now.

We begin to experience a reality that is our own life, independent of the family drama that resulted in acquiring the characteristics that brought us to meetings.

In a healthy home, a child is allowed to develop a healthy sense of self though the stability of parents, exploration and individuation. The early stage called the “terrible twos” is the time when a healthy family allows the child to learn to say “No” and to learn to establish appropriate boundaries.

The healthy child learns the quality of trust necessary to risk finding their own identity (“I want...”, “Give me...”, “I don’t like...”, etc.) and especially the meaning of the word “No.”

In our homes (for whatever reason) we were not able to experience the stability needed for this vital process. Healthy

exploration was distorted by unstable, unstructured lives. Individuation was not possible.

We enter ACA feeling more comfortable talking about other people— what they did, what they said, what they were, etc. We have had no experience in defining ourselves — what we feel, what we need, what we are.

When we grew up, we became extensions of those around us — learning their fears, behaviors, limitations, and prejudices. In ACA we find a need to discover ourselves as unique individuals instead of living as extensions of those around us.

For many of us, the early stages of discovering ourselves as individuals resulted in a feeling of guilt — as though we are “bad” for having a sense of ourselves as an individual or for betraying the role placed on us by the family system. Some of us began to name this guilt feeling as “after-burn” and to recognize it as a reminder that we are on a voyage of recovery.

There are those among us who froze at this stage of our voyage, but most of us progress if we are simply willing to admit our feelings of “after-burn” to others.

The rigid and frightened child inside, who has come to view any change as a threat, can be loved, supported and nurtured through the changes necessary to become a healthy adult.

We can see now that our lives, while sharing history and learned reactions with our family, are separate from our parents or caretakers. We are not doomed to perpetuate the patterns we found necessary to our survival as children.

Any Adult Child, through guidance of our loving Higher Power, can heal, accept the past and grow through the clear and consistent direction provided by the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. Whether from the most violent alcoholic background or from the illusion of perfection and serenity in other dysfunctional homes, every Adult Child can begin progressing through the process of recovery and the discovery of their “True Self”.

Original version: Joe D., Kelly M., Christian C., and Charlie Ann P. 1987, Rev. by Tatiana L. 2024



FIRST STEPS

It is indeed confusing to walk into an Adult Children of Alcoholics & Dysfunctional Families meeting for the first time. Congratulations on your bravery! In these rooms you are welcome to share the confusion and pain that has haunted you.

Do you qualify for membership? If you identify with us, you are welcome to consider yourself one of us.

Many newcomers feel that they are not entitled to be in these rooms. Whether or not there was alcoholism in your family, if you identify with "The Problem" you probably belong. Adult children of compulsive gamblers, overeaters, debtors, sex addicts, work addicts, and other dysfunctional families have found help and acceptance in these rooms.

You may hear words that are new to you: "lost child", "hero", "scapegoat", "mascot", "codependent", "introject", "the child within". Read the literature or simply listen and you will understand. You may also hear about spiritual recovery and the 12 Steps.

ACA is not a religious program, but many of us have found that a belief in a power greater than ourselves has been helpful. It is not necessary to have religious beliefs, or even to believe in God to participate in this program.

More than one beginner has expressed, "But I don't know what I'm supposed to do! What are the rules? How does it work?" Strange as it sounds, ACA has no rules or explanations except to keep coming to meetings. Newcomers are frequently confused or unsure about what recovery is all about. While beginners occasionally focus on these issues, they as often do not. So for beginner, a few hints:

Attend six meetings before you decide if ACA is for you.

This is the traditional wisdom. What you hear may make you sad, uncomfortable, or angry. Try to

examine your feelings. You may also find yourself getting physical symptoms: fidgeting, dozing off, getting dizzy, feeling nauseated or experiencing headache. All are typical. Recovery is no day at the beach. We are learning a new way to live.

Try different meetings.

At the present time there are many different ACA meetings each week in this area. Although we try to make every meeting a safe place, you may feel more comfortable in some than others. Sample and select. Take what you want and leave the rest.

Speak up at meetings.

If you can, get your hand up, even if you can only say your name and that it is difficult for you to speak. It has been so for others of us. We embrace you. Share with us if you can. And once you do speak, others will identify and perhaps grow from what you share. More importantly, you will. This program works.

Reach out to other ACAs.

If there is someone you are drawn to or strongly identify with, you might tell them so after a meeting. It is not unusual for a group to go out for coffee afterward. Invite yourself or ask another ACA to join you. Isolation is part of this disease and you can break it.

Don't take rejection too personally.

It hurts when we don't get called on or if a friendly overture is rebuffed, especially as we all feel particularly vulnerable in these rooms. Try not to take it too personally. It has happened to all of us. Remember that each of us is in the room because of conflicts and problems, and some friction and disappointment is inevitable. If you don't get called on, ask to share with someone at the break or after the meeting.

Try to keep the focus on yourself and your feelings.

While it is painful and difficult to do so, we are in these rooms for ourselves and to feel our feelings. Lecturing, advice giving, criticism, feedback, commentary on others, and "fixing" are detrimental to others' recovery as well as your own. Focus on your past: your feelings, your problems, your patterns. This isn't selfish; it is healthy.

Don't follow leaders.

Be wary of anyone who acts as an authority figure. Such a person may be acting out their own dysfunction. We ACAs are each responsible for our own recovery, which comes through the development of our inner voice. Program is unique to each of us. We must learn to trust ourselves, not authority. We have no officials and our leaders are only "trusted servants", they do not govern.

Anyone can start a meeting. We have no spokesperson, representatives, or experts. Each one of us is expert in our pain, in our needs, in our recovery.

Get phone numbers.

While going through this exciting, painful process, it is enormously helpful to have other ACAs to call in times of stress and need. Ask for people's numbers (some may say no, but that is okay). Call someone. It's hard to lift up that phone and admit your pain, but we have all been there.

Remember that this is a program of spiritual recovery.

We practice anonymity, and try to have no gossip or criticism among us.

If any of this is helpful, terrific. If it is not, leave it.

You will recover in your own way at your own pace. Just keep coming back. It works.



SOME HISTORY AND DEFINITIONS

AA – Alcoholics Anonymous. The first of the modern 12 Step Programs, founded in 1935.

ACA – Adult Children of Alcoholics. Originally used by west coast groups, and now used by the ACA World Service Organization (ACA WSO).

ACOA – Adult Children of Alcoholics. Used by meetings and Intergroups in areas previously associated with Al-Anon and now registered with ACA WSO

ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS & DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES (ACA) – an independent 12 Step Recovery group officially formed in 1984, founded on the Steps and Traditions of AA, established for anyone who identifies with the “Problem”. In April 1993 the Traditions were changed to “a desire to recover from the effects of growing up in an alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional family.”

AL-ANON FAMILY GROUPS – a 12 Step organization formed in 1953 and founded on the Steps and Traditions of AA, for the purpose of offering recovery to “anyone affected by someone else’s drinking”.

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS (COA) – a generic term used to identify offspring of alcoholics, including dependent children still living at home. COA has also been used as the name for independent ACA groups in metropolitan New York City. The first ACA meetings used this acronym.

PROGRAM – Usually referred to by 12 Step group members, the Program is usually the personal mix of 12 Step meetings, phone calls, writing, and continual exercise of the 12 Step principles. In ACA, recovery with the Twelve Steps our program includes a process of reparenting.

Some ACA groups are generally quite open about the use of outside materials in the development of their individual Program. AA, Al-Anon, and other 12 Step programs publish books and materials that specifically address their unique program wisdom, experience, strength and hope that may be invaluable to ACA recovery.

RECOVERY – A word referring to the personal process of discovery, release and change in the lives of the individual whether recovering from addiction to substances, sick relationships, overwork, compulsion, or other dysfunction. Generally, recovery refers to the results of the 12 Step Program.

REPARMENTING – ACA recovery includes a process of reparenting to develop as individuals and a sense of a sense of “True Self.” Through reparenting, we learn to take responsibility for ourselves and our own lives, to regulate our emotions, to develop healthy life skills, healthy relationships, and a loving connection with a Higher Power. Such lessons were usually not available in our families of origin. Reparenting leads to our release the pain of our family systems and our growing sense of well-being, comfort and appropriate response to “life on life’s terms”.

THE TWELVE STEPS – A system of recovery evolving through the Oxford Groups of the 19th Century, broadened and deepened by the founders of AA in 1935. Adopted by Al-Anon in 1953 and by ACA in 1984. Different Adult Children groups use different versions of the first step, for example, we were “powerless over our childhoods”, “powerless over the effects of alcoholism”, “powerless over family dysfunction”, or etc. These steps are also used by over 100 other groups dedicated to Recovery from various addictions and compulsions. ACA WSO ratified an official version of the ACA 12 Steps in April 1993.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS – 12 Step groups usually follow the “Twelve Traditions”, also originated by AA to guide the service structure for autonomous meetings. For example, the Twelve Traditions clarify who may attend or be a member, establishes that each group has no leaders, no dues or fees for members, that each group is self-supporting through its own contributions, declining outside contributions, and that 12 Step recovery work remains non-professional, that is handled by the fellowship and not by therapists, doctors or other professionals. ACA WSO ratified an official version of the 12 Traditions in April 1993.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INNER PEACE

Be on the lookout for symptoms of inner peace. The hearts of a great many have already been exposed to inner peace, and people everywhere possibly could come down with it in epidemic proportions. This could pose a serious threat to what has been, up to now, a fairly stable condition of disorder in the world.

Some signs and symptoms of inner peace:

- A tendency to think and act wisely, sometimes spontaneously, rather than on fears based on the past
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment
- A loss of interest in judging other people or interpreting the actions of others
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others
- New resilience and ability to resolve conflicts and repair relationships (in a healthy way)
- A loss of the ability to worry (this is a very serious symptom)
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation
- Contented feelings of connection with others and nature
- Frequent attacks of smiling
- An increasing tendency to let things happen rather than make them happen
- An increased susceptibility to love extended by others as well as the uncontrollable urge to extend it

KEEP COMING BACK! IT WORKS IF YOU WORK IT AND YOU'RE WORTH IT