

# Alcoholism - The Family Illness

Alcoholism is a family illness. People suffering with alcoholism organise their lives around alcohol and family life becomes organised around the alcohol-dependent family member, in an attempt to keep their problems hidden from the outside world. This results in family adaptation, creating an environment in which codependency can develop (see Introduction to Codependency).

The unspoken family rules **don't talk, don't trust, don't feel** develop to protect the illusion of a 'normal' family. As the family progressively adapts to alcoholism, they follow a similar path to the alcohol-dependent person, shown in Figure 1 below (see also Symptoms of alcoholism figure in Alcoholism sheet).

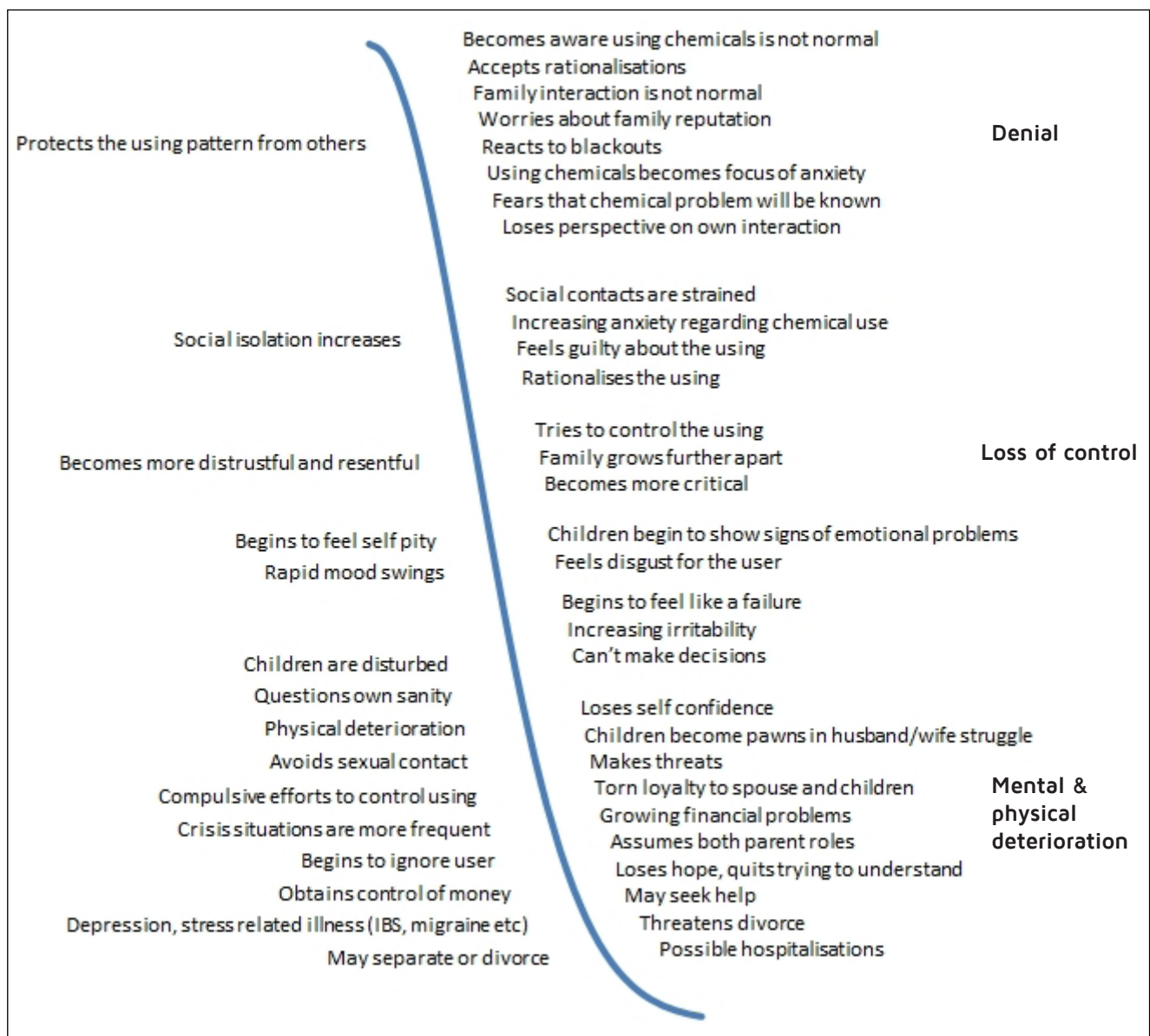


Figure 1. Family symptoms when adapting to alcoholism



## Family Characteristics:

Although all families are different and are made up of individuals who contribute their own thoughts, behaviours and feelings, the following has been created to provide a framework to illustrate the issues which differentiate a healthy functioning family and a family struggling with alcoholism or other drug problem.

Family with parental alcoholism/addiction	Healthy family
Rigid thinking - black and white	Open to change and new ideas
Low self-worth / shame	High self-worth
Compulsive behaviour covers pain	Individuals choose their behaviour
Rules are arbitrary - rigid or non-existent and chaotic	Rules are designed to guide and protect, are age appropriate and consistent
Feelings are avoided and repressed - no risks taken because there is no safe place within the family	Feelings are expressed openly and validated. Touch is appropriate and nurturing
Denial of stress, challenging issues and problems. Although crisis can be used as a welcome distraction from emotional pain	Expect stress and work together for mutual support
Disturbed hierarchy - one person or no one in charge, children provide parenting for siblings. Hidden coalitions, inconsistency and chaos	Parents are in charge - strong coalition, they protect and assume responsibility for the children
Terminal seriousness - anger (often suppressed), depression, hostility or phony happiness	Fun, humour, joy and laughter exist in adults and children

Families do not choose to become dysfunctional but adapt in order to cope with alcohol and other problems. Codependent patterns of behaviour allow the family unit to balance the effects of the drinking parent's behaviour. This often leads to the adoption of roles for family members to play.

These roles become essential to the survival of the individual family members and the family itself. The roles are often played out with the same compulsion, delusion and denial as the dependent plays his or her role as drinker.

Role-playing and the adoption of particular roles are not calculated behaviour, but happen subconsciously; family members are unlikely to be aware that the masquerade exists. Role-playing can be destructive as it creates a false reality where there is no place for honesty/self-honesty within or outside of the family unit. Communication becomes distorted by double messages, an overt message from the role self and a covert one from the real self.



Family roles can occur in all troubled families and occasionally in healthy families in times of stress. However, in families dealing with alcoholism, the roles are more likely to be rigidly fixed and are played with greater intensity, compulsion and delusion.

Role	Motivating Feeling	Identifying Symptoms	Pay Off For Individual	Pay Off For Family	Possible Price
Dependent	Shame	Chemical use	Relief of pain	None	Addiction
Enabler	Anger	Powerlessness or Martyr	Importance Righteousness	Responsibility	Illness Exhaustion
Hero	Inadequacy Guilt	Over-achievement	Attention (positive)	Self-worth	Compulsive drive
Scapegoat	Hurt	Delinquency	Attention (negative)	Focus away from dependent	Self-destruction Addiction
Lost Child	Loneliness	Solitary Shyness	Escape	Relief	Social isolation
Mascot	Fear	Clowning Hyperactivity	Attention (amused)	Fun	Immaturity Emotional illness Addiction

The above table has been adapted, with permission, from the work of Sharon Wegscheider Cruse, who worked with Virginia Satyr on family dysfunction, and illustrates an extremely complex adaptation process, presented for guidance only. Individuals bring their own personalities and genetic traits into the equation. Birth order and sex also play their part. In a family where there are only two children, the roles often overlap, with one child playing two or more roles. Only children often try to play all roles, sometimes concurrently or changing to meet the needs of the family.

Roles also change when there is a change in the family group, for instance when the eldest child, often the Hero, leaves home. The family adapts in order to find homeostasis or stability. Role-playing is a way for the family to keep its secrets hidden and to continue to survive without perceived threat from the outside world.

Changes will also take place when the alcohol-dependent person finds help for his/her drinking. It is often difficult for children to give up their roles of responsibility when a parent stops drinking and wishes to resume parenting.

Recovery for the alcohol-dependent person should also include help for the family as they adapt to a new situation. The first and most important step is to face the problem with help.



## Sources of Support

There are many sources of support including those listed below. Speak to a Nacoa volunteer helpline counsellor who will listen and research other avenues of support if you wish.

- **Nacoa**

Helpline: 0800 358 3456 Email: [helpline@nacoa.org.uk](mailto:helpline@nacoa.org.uk) Website: [www.nacoa.org.uk](http://www.nacoa.org.uk)  
Information, advice and support for everyone affected by a parent's drinking.

- **ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics)**

Tel: 07071 781 899 Website: [www.adultchildrenofalcoholics.co.uk](http://www.adultchildrenofalcoholics.co.uk)  
Support for people who have grown up in alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional families.

- **Al-Anon Family Groups**

Helpline: 0207 403 0888 Website: [www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)  
Support for anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking.

- **Alcoholics Anonymous**

Helpline: 0845 769 7555 Website: [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)  
Information, support and local meetings for alcoholics.

- **BACP**

Tel: 01455 883300 Website: [www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk](http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk)  
Information about counselling and how to find a counsellor

- **COAP (Children of Addicted Parents & People)**

Website: [www.coap.org.uk](http://www.coap.org.uk)  
Online forum for young people affected by a parent's addiction.

- **CoDA (Co-Dependents Anonymous)**

Website: [www.coda-uk.org](http://www.coda-uk.org)  
Self-help group interested in working through the problems codependency has caused in their lives.

