

Section 3

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*I*nformation Every Loved One of  
A Chemically Dependent Individual  
Must Know



*The gem cannot be polished without friction,  
nor man perfected without trials.*

-Chinese proverb

*Section Topics*

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**Section 3: Information Every Loved One of A Chemically Dependent Individual Must Know**

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*The information in this book is provided for the sole purpose of informing the reader. The information provided in this book is not intended to be a substitute for a healthcare provider's consultation. Please consult your own physician or appropriate healthcare provider about the applicability of any opinions or recommendations with respect to your own symptoms or medical conditions.*

## 1) Why Chemical Dependency is a Family Disease that Affects Each Family Member

Dear Dr. Steve:

This is a terrible thing for a mother to say, but I don't know what else to do. I've agonized over this decision for three weeks but the time has come, either my son gets help or gets out. The details aren't important, but his drug use is tearing our family apart. My marriage has been irreparably damaged. When this started, my husband and I were there for each other. But in the last year, it's all we can do to find a kind word to say to each other. He's angry because he feels like what is going on is my fault.

As for me personally, my emotional and physical health has deteriorated after doing everything I can do to keep this family from falling apart. I'm on both anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications. I've been hospitalized 4 times in the last two years with a bleeding ulcer and resultant complications. When I'm not running around like a bat out of hell trying to do for everybody else I feel so depressed I can barely get out of bed. I've become so obsessed with my son, I've let the rest of my life fall apart. I stopped seeing my friends. I stopped taking classes. I don't know how it happened, but I wound up alone.

My husband and I have put so much time and energy into my son and all of his problems

that we have nothing left to give to our two daughters and other son. As they have sensed our lack of attention, one daughter has responded by acting out. She's hanging out with a new crowd of kids—a group that neither my husband nor I approve of. Her performance in school has fallen off sharply. Truancy, which was never a problem before, has gotten totally out of control. Though I suppose it was only a matter of time, a few months ago she actually ran away from home for two weeks.

My other daughter has responded by withdrawing from us. She spends more time than ever by herself in her room. She's become absolutely uncommunicative. A long conversation with her entails three grunts, a roll of her eyes, and a groan. As for her friends, she won't go out with them anymore—doesn't call them and won't return their calls.

On the other hand my other son has been a lifesaver. He works hard at school. His teachers can't say enough good things about him. He's never a problem around the house. The days I'm struggling most, he steps in and takes over. He helps me with the shopping, the cooking—he even does the laundry.

But back to my other son. I love him. I know I've made my share of mistakes. But the rest of my family is going down the toilet. We can't go on like this. What can I do?

*Your letter bears* testimony to the fact that chem-

ical dependency is a family disease. What this means in practical terms is that nobody is immune, nobody is unaffected by family alcoholism and drug addiction—NOBODY!

Just as abusing alcohol and other drugs erodes the physical, behavioral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of the user, alcohol and other drug abuse is also toxic to the physical, behavioral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of each family member. Why? Being raised in an environment dominated by the disease of chemical dependency places an enormous burden on each family member to adapt physically, behaviorally, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually to the stress, chaos, and insanity caused by the disease of alcoholism. The adaptations that each family member must make may enable each family member to survive emotionally and psychologically, yet, at the same time, these adaptations may lead to other forms of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dis-ease.

For instance, one way for a family member to cope with the stress and chaos created by family chemical dependency is to deny that chemical dependency exists in their family and, therefore, deny that they have been affected by another family member's use of alcohol and other drugs. There's a reason that this happens. Instead of being aware of and grounded in the reality of chemical dependency and the havoc that it wreaks, a family member may become vulnerable to having their reality misshaped and distorted by the denial system of the alcoholic and/or the enabler. The more a family member's perceptions are distorted by the denial system of the alcoholic and/or the enabler, the less able that family member is to:

- 1) Accurately judge what normal is
- 2) Accurately assess what is happening in a given situation
- 3) Trust with any strength of conviction their perception of a given situation
- 4) Assertively claim their viewpoint of a given situation

The less confident and reliant a family member is on their perceptions, the more dependent that family member becomes on another person's explanation for what is happening. The more the family member's perceptions are shaped and distorted by denial, rationalization, blame, minimization, and deceit, the more that family member comes to doubt themselves—what they see, think, and/or feel. The more a family member surrenders their viewpoint of a given situation the less they come to trust their perceptions and emotions. Because of their ever increasing distrust of what they think, feel, and say, the family member becomes more dependent on other people's version of what they should think, do, say, and feel. As a result, the family member who uses denial as a survival mechanism is 1) vulnerable to being manipulated by others, 2) less able to assert themselves with other people, 3) unclear about who they are, 4) unsure of what they think and feel.

Another way for a family member to cope with the emotional turmoil caused by alcoholism and drug addiction is to emotionally shut down or numb out. Spared from experiencing feelings such as hopelessness, fear, shame, and despair, this family member may be emotionally insulated from their pain but at the same time cut-off from experiencing any of their other feelings. The more

emotionally constricted one is, the less they are able to access their whole range of feelings. This may spare the family member from being overwhelmed by emotional pain, but, at the same time, they're less able to feel joy, happiness, or love. Also, without having access to their emotions, the family member is less able to understand their choices as well as the impact that other people's behavior has on them. As a result, the family member who numbs out or shuts down as a way of protecting themselves from the emotional devastation that chemical dependency causes, denies themselves access to an important part of who they are as well as an important anchor to reality. And even more problematic is that without access to one's feelings, a family member is unable to discharge the inevitable build-up of internalized feelings. This leaves the family member vulnerable to developing physical problems such as gastrointestinal distress, emotional problems such as anxiety and depression, and interpersonal problems such as loneliness, isolation, and fear of conflict, intimacy, and trust.

Still another way for a family member to cope with the insanity perpetuated by chemical dependency is to behaviorally act out. This family member chooses acting out behaviorally because they need a way to release the internalized feelings that they are not permitted to express verbally. They are not permitted to express their feelings because talking about what is happening in the family of an alcoholic is strictly prohibited. As a result, the emotions that this family member is experiencing become internalized and bottled up. So this particular family member is faced with a dilemma. Since this family member chooses not to shut down or numb out emotionally

but at the same time chooses to be loyal to the *don't talk, don't feel* rules of the chemically dependent family by not talking about their feelings, how might this family member best release and express their pent up internalized feelings such as hurt, anger, confusion, betrayal, shame, hostility, and alienation? The family member solves this bind of not denying feelings on one hand but not talking about what they're feeling on the other hand by expressing behaviorally what they are not empowered to express verbally. Unfortunately for this family member, the way they most often choose to express their feelings behaviorally is by acting out. Although expressing feelings behaviorally may be essential to this family member's mental health, such a strategy for expressing emotions inevitably creates problems for the acting out family member. As their acting out behavior escalates, eventually they will be in trouble at school, home, work, and/or with the law.

Another way to cope with family alcoholism is to withdraw from the family. Hopelessness and helplessness make this family member feel impotent. They come to believe that there is nothing that they can do or say to improve the situation. Feeling duped, misled, and even betrayed by other's broken promises and failed attempts to make a deteriorating situation better, this family member retreats into their own world. Buoyed by the refrain, *what's the use*, this family member is convinced that there is nothing that can be done to improve their situation at home. Unwilling to any longer trust others, not willing to be set up for more hurt and disappointment, this family member feels safest by withdrawing from their immediate family and friends. Unwilling to open up to anybody

about what they're feeling, this family member may become more and more consumed by anger and even self-hate caused by their own sense of impotence. No matter how much this family member believes themselves to be better off by keeping to themselves, their emotional and spiritual deterioration will escalate as they remain silently enraged, hopelessly depressed, and forever angry at the fates that dropped this family member into this family and this situation.

Another way to cope with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual dis-ease caused by chemical dependency is to be overly responsible. Being overly responsible imbues the family member with a mythical sense of control over the chemically dependent individual, the circumstances created by chemical dependency, and the overall well-being of themselves and the other family members. Because chemical dependency is a disease about loss of control, behaving in an overly responsible manner enables the family member to avoid feeling powerless and out of control. Even if the overly responsible family member avoids feeling powerless and out of control, that does not mean that their life is not engulfed by those feelings. If a family member copes with family chemical dependency by being overly responsible, they do so based on the false belief that they can control the drinker and his drinking, the environment and its chaos, and themselves and their emotions. But in actuality, being overly responsible is a method of self-sabotage rather than an effective way to cope with the disease of chemical dependency.

Similar to being overly responsible, a family member may cope with the emotional and spiritual fall-out of fam-

ily chemical dependency by overachieving. Although this may seem on the surface to be a healthy adaptation to family alcoholism, it is not without its pitfalls. If a family member overachieves at school, at work, at home, or in sports as a way of masking core feelings of shame, inadequacy, powerlessness, and self-hate, and as a means of avoiding their essential humanness and all that means about having limits, then that family member has set themselves up to believe that they are only as good as their next achievement or accomplishment. This causes them to define themselves by what they accomplish rather than who they are. Once their identity and self-esteem is tethered to winning the next race, getting the next A in school, winning the next big account at work, writing the next best seller, and/or being the best of the best, they create an emotional roller coaster ride for themselves that leaves them imprisoned to an insatiable need for the approval and admiration of others. Afraid to slow down long enough to feel what their feeling, terrified of having to get to know themselves, unwilling to confront the limits of what it means to be ordinarily human, this family member creates for themselves a life of perpetual motion, always looking for the next mountain to climb so as to avoid having to confront their core feelings of shame, powerlessness, inadequacy, and self-hate. Vulnerable to the inevitable emotional lows that are experienced when the bubble of their grandiosity pops, they become a merciless perfectionist and an unyielding taskmaster of themselves and others in order to not have to descend into the emotional depths of shame and self-loathing.

As I said previously, on the surface, there's nothing harmful about any of these strategies. Simply put, they are

survival mechanisms and to the degree that they enable a person to not be harmed by a toxic environment, then they have served their purpose. However, as effective as these survival strategies may be to insure the survival of each family member, they can be very damaging to the overall physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of each family member. For oftentimes, these survival mechanisms become inflexible and maladaptive. Instead of being mechanisms to survive the insanity of family chemical dependency, family members may begin to (mis)apply these survival mechanisms to circumstances of their life that have nothing to do with family chemical dependency. When these survival mechanisms are rigidly used, inflexibly applied, and (mis)applied to circumstances that require a wider range of coping mechanisms, the family member will begin to sabotage their emotional and spiritual well-being. That is because once these survival mechanisms become rigid and habitualized, they usurp the family member's free will. This means that the family member has less and less choice about the use of coping mechanisms that are appropriate to the specific situation rather than their survival mechanisms. As a result of this, fear-based, habituated means of avoidance replaces thoughtful, flexible responses to life's circumstances. Sadly, when these survival mechanisms are applied by a family to developmental milestones, personal obstacles, the development of friendships and emotionally intimate relationships, spiritual development, and educational, recreational, and occupational challenges these survival mechanisms become a means of self-sabotage rather than tools for emotional and spiritual well-being.

That explains how chemical dependency is a family disease. When the disease of chemical dependency is active in a family, each family member must adapt to its presence. Most family members adapt to the presence of chemical dependency by developing survival mechanisms as a way of coping with the toxic fallout of chemical dependency. These survival mechanisms are wonderfully adaptive to the stressors created by the existence of chemical dependency, however the potential exists for these survival mechanisms to become maladaptive if they become rigid, constricted roles by which a family member chooses to live their life.

No matter how much pain your family is in, it takes a lot of courage to take the stand you are about to take with your son! You and your husband are to be congratulated for beginning to take some action that will protect the well-being of your whole family! Let me give you an idea of what to consider doing for you and your family.

See pages 212-213 for Alateen and Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters contact information.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at

www.AliveAndWellNews.com.

- 3) Contact a qualified healthcare professional who can help you assess your situation and evaluate what treatment approaches are available for your whole family.
- 4) Encourage your children to talk to you and your husband about their feelings.
- 5) Attend Al-Anon and Alateen meetings.
- 6) Learn more about chemical dependency.
- 7) Develop the skills necessary to cope with your son's alcohol and drug use.
- 8) Work with a qualified therapist to help you and your family better understand the personal issues that have arisen as a result of living in an environment affected by chemical dependency.
- 9) Slowly but surely repair your marriage.

G.B.U.

*Steve*

## **2) How to Determine Whether or Not You Have Been Affected by Another Person's Alcohol and Other Drugs Use**

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

I'm a sophomore in college. My major is psychology. I recently took a class about alcoholism and drug addiction. We learned that alcoholism is a disease affecting not only the person who drinks but the whole family as well. There's no question that my mom and dad both were heavy drinkers. I can think

of many Saturday nights that were just plain scary. But I never thought about how their drinking may have affected me. The fact is I did the best I could not to think about their drinking at all. I spent more time trying to hide their drinking from everybody else. I never talked about it with my friends. I did the best I could to keep my friends away from the house so they wouldn't see mom or dad drunk. I think I just did everything I could to block out their drinking. So how can I tell whether I was impacted by their drinking?

*It's true that* chemical dependency is a family disease. And those who were raised in the presence of chemical dependency are vulnerable to being affected physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

But how best to determine how you've been affected? Let me suggest that you review the following questions from the official Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters website, titled, *Did you grow up in an alcoholic home?*

The wording of these questions offer an insight into some ways children are effected by growing up in an alcoholic home, even years after they reach adulthood.

- 1) Do you constantly seek approval and affirmation?  
It may be because you don't really know what normal is—you have to try to figure it out from the actions and reactions of others.
- 2) Do you fail to recognize your accomplishments?  
What seems routine to you might be considered overachieving by everybody around you.
- 3) Do you fear criticism? In childhood criticism often

was accompanied by some form of abuse, verbal or otherwise.

- 4) Do you overextend yourself? Just carrying a normal work load was never good enough. You had to do more to avoid the wrath of the alcoholic.
- 5) Have you had problems with your own compulsive behavior? Without knowing it, you probably developed a pattern in childhood of approaching everything alcoholically.
- 6) Do you have a need for perfection? One little slip up and the alcoholic might explode into anger. That deep-seeded fear can carry over into adulthood.
- 7) Are you uneasy when your life is going smoothly, continually anticipating problems? The alcoholic always sabotaged the good times like holidays, birthdays, vacations, etc. Things never turned out the way they were planned.
- 8) Do you feel more alive in the midst of a crisis? People can become addicted to excitement. They find normal people and situations boring.
- 9) Do you still feel responsible for others, as you did for the problem drinker in your life? There's always that nagging feeling that you were somehow responsible for the alcoholic's drinking. Maybe if you had done something differently...
- 10) Do you care for others easily, yet find it difficult to care for yourself? You are comfortable in the caretaker role, but extremely uncomfortable doing things for yourself, like spending money on something just for you.
- 11) Do you isolate yourself from other people? If they

get too close, they may find out your secrets.

- 12) Do you respond with fear to authority figures and angry people? The authority figures in your childhood were probably abusive. You expect the same from all authority figures. When the alcoholic became angry, it usually meant something extreme was about to happen.
- 13) Do you feel that individuals and society in general are taking advantage of you? You grew up with someone who was an expert at controlling and manipulating everyone around them. Trust is not something that comes naturally.
- 14) Do you have trouble with intimate relationships? Probably the only love that you saw demonstrated in childhood was the love the alcoholic had for the bottle.
- 15) Do you confuse pity with love, as you did with the problem drinker? You may be attracted to people who need you or people you know that you can fix.
- 16) Do you attract and/or seek people who tend to be compulsive and abusive? Again, normal people bore you and you don't understand them. You are more comfortable around people who you can relate to and won't judge you.
- 17) Do you cling to relationships because you are afraid of being alone? It may be from your deep-seeded fear of abandonment. One way or the other, your alcoholic parent emotionally or physically abandoned you for the bottle.
- 18) Do you mistrust your own feelings and the feelings expressed by others? How many times have you

heard, “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” But it did.

- 19) Do you find it difficult to identify and express your emotions? You were told that it was not okay to cry. You were never allowed to be angry and if you were you faced serious consequences or ridicule.
- 20) Do you think parental drinking may have affected you? Not everyone who drinks is an alcoholic. But it would be extremely difficult to grow up around excessive drinking and not be effected.

If you answered yes to some of these questions, chances are you have been impacted more than you may realize by the family disease of alcoholism. To find out more, consult a qualified healthcare provider. Because you put so much energy into hiding your parents drinking from yourself and the world, you have not allowed yourself to examine what impact their drinking had on you while you were growing up. It’s likely that there’s much for you to learn about yourself, your feelings, and what impact your parents drinking had on you. Talking to a qualified healthcare provider can help you sort out fact from fiction as you attempt to clarify the impact that mom and dad’s drinking had on you.

To learn more about how alcoholism and drug addiction affects family members contact such organizations as Al-Anon. See pages 212-213 for contact information.

## Pathfinder’s Checklist

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- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch’s, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Contact a qualified healthcare provider in order to explore in greater depth how your parents’ consumption of alcohol may have affected you.
- 4) Learn as much as you can about the family disease of alcoholism.
- 5) Attend either Al-Anon meetings or Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings.

G.B.U

*Steve*

## 3) How Alcoholism Impacts Children Raised in an Alcoholic Household—Part One

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

I need some help. My best friend is married to an alcoholic. She has a 12-year old daughter and a 14-year old son. Her husband was recently released from prison after serving nine months for his third DWI conviction. The first thing he did when he was released from prison was go straight to his old watering hole and get good and drunk. The longest he’s held a job since I’ve known him is about 14 months. In the past, he has shown a streak

of meanness that stops just short of beating my friend, but I think that's only a matter of time. From my perspective, I can only see things getting a lot worse before they would ever begin to get better. My friend is bright and ambitious but when it comes to doing anything about this situation, she's totally paralyzed. As much as I love her, she's made her own bed and I suppose has to lay in it until she gets tired of all his crap. But what about the kids, it's the kids that concern me. They're innocents in all of this. Can you tell me what it is that I can say to my friend to get help, if not for her and/or husband's sake, at least for the sake of these two innocent children?

*Sadly, alcoholism is* a family disease that negatively impacts every member of the family. Seldom is anyone spared. Your concern for everyone is both touching and well-founded. Oftentimes, a parent will do something for the sake of the well-being of their children long before they will do anything for themselves. I suggest that you encourage your friend to seek professional care and emotional support for her children and herself.

In terms of helpful information you can provide for her, maybe you can most effectively reach her by discussing what we know about how children may be affected by being raised in an alcoholic household.

- 1) *Alcoholism affects the entire family.* Living with an active alcoholic can negatively affect all members of your friend's family. It's not unusual for family

members to react differently to the stress caused by alcoholism. Children of alcoholics are vulnerable to not growing in normal emotional developmental growth. It's important that your friend understand that the level of either her resiliency or dysfunction can greatly influence how her children will be affected by her husband's alcoholism.

- 2) *Many people report being exposed to alcoholism in their families.* It's important that you stress to your friend that she is not alone in what she is going through. Roughly one in eight American adult drinkers either abuses alcohol or is alcohol dependent. There are an estimated 26.8 million children of alcoholics in the United States. Research suggests that over 11 million are under the age of 18. Seventy-six million Americans have been exposed to alcoholism in the family. Almost one in five adult Americans (18%) lived with an alcoholic while growing up.
- 3) *There is strong, scientific evidence that alcoholism tends to run in families.* Children of alcoholics are more at risk for alcoholism and other drug abuse than children of non-alcoholics. Does your friend know that children of alcoholics are four times more likely than non-children of alcoholics to develop alcoholism? Almost one-third of any sample of alcoholics has at least one parent who also was or is an alcoholic. Children of alcoholics are more likely than non-children of alcoholics to marry into families in which alcoholism is prevalent. She can make a difference in her children's lives if she takes action today!

- 4) *Alcoholism usually has strong negative effects on marital relationships.* How your friend copes with her husband's alcoholism will serve as a model for how her children cope with interpersonal difficulties. Compared with non-alcoholic families, alcoholic families demonstrate poorer problem-solving abilities, both among the parents and within the family as a whole. These poor communication and problem-solving skills may be mechanisms through which lack of cohesion and increased conflict develop and escalate in alcoholic families. This leaves your friend's children vulnerable to recreate in their marriages much of the communication and behavior patterns that they are witness to now.
- 5) *Alcohol is associated with a substantial proportion of human violence.* Perpetrators are often under the influence of alcohol. It's important that your friend know that studies of family violence frequently document high rates of alcohol and other drug involvement. Your friend and her children may potentially be at risk for being the target of your friend's husband potential for violence.
- 6) *Children of alcoholics exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety more than children of non-alcoholics.* There is considerable anecdotal clinical evidence that demonstrates that children of alcoholics are vulnerable to experiencing emotional distress. Children of alcoholics display elevated rates of psychopathology. Anxiety and depression are common among children of alcoholics. Younger children who are raised in alcoholic families often exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety such

as crying, bed wetting, not having friends, being afraid to go to school, or having nightmares. Older children may isolate themselves by staying in their rooms for long periods of time and/or cut themselves off from their friends.

- 7) *Children of alcoholics experience greater physical and mental health problems and higher healthcare costs than children from non-alcoholic families.* Your friend should know how family alcoholism affects the emotional and physical well-being of her children. Inpatient admission rates for substance abuse are triple that of children not raised in an alcoholic family. Inpatient admission rates for mental disorders are almost double that of children raised in non-alcoholic families. Injuries are more than one and one-half times greater than those of children who are not raised in alcoholic households.

So what good is this information? What can your friend do with this information? It drives home the point that her children are in the line of fire—their emotional and physical well-being are at risk. Emphasize that she's the last line of defense between her husband's alcoholism and the impact that his alcoholism has on her kids. If she remains paralyzed, then her kids will remain exposed to the toxic impact of alcoholism. If she mobilizes herself, if she begins to make choices such as getting professional help for herself and her kids, if she takes her kids to Al-Anon and/or Alateen, her kids don't have to wind up being another statistic in a column of mine. Emphasize to your friend that with help, she can make choices that will:

- 1) Help her children develop autonomy and independence.

- 2) Help her children develop a strong social orientation and social skills.
- 3) Have her children engage in acts of helpfulness.
- 4) Help her children develop a close bond with a care-giver.
- 5) Help her children cope with emotionally toxic experiences.
- 6) Help her children perceive their experiences constructively.
- 7) Help her children develop day-to-day coping strategies.

We know that the stronger your friend can make her family, the more resilient her children will become. If your friend maintains healthy family rituals or traditions, such as vacations, mealtimes, or holidays, she can strengthen the core of her family. If your friend can model how to safely and respectfully confront her husband about his drinking and the impact of his drinking, her children will feel more empowered to assert their feelings and concerns as well. If your friend maintains friendships with concerned people like you, she will partially fill the void created by her husband's drinking. Lastly, if your friend encourages her children to maintain an observance of a spiritual practice or religious observance, her children will be much more insulated from many of the toxic influences of their father's drinking.

Perhaps your friend can take her kids to a support group for friends and family members of an individual who drinks and drugs such as Al-Anon and Alateen.

See pages 212-213 for Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters contact information.

## Pathfinder's Checklist

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- 3) Alcoholism and drug addiction are family diseases.
- 4) All family members are affected by the disease of alcoholism.
- 5) One can continue to be affected by family alcoholism even after they've left their home and are well established in their adult life.
- 6) There are identifiable characteristics that can be attributed to being raised in an alcoholic family.
- 7) These identifiable characteristics can erode one's emotional and spiritual well-being no matter what the circumstances of one's life may be.
- 8) Your friend and her children are not alone in what they're going through. There's a community of people who come together to break down the denial and heal the wounds that have been fermenting for years.

G.B.U.

*Steve*

#### 4) How Alcoholism Impacts Children Raised in an Alcoholic Household—Part Two

Dear Dr. Steve:

I divorced my wife four years ago. Cocaine, alcohol, and marriage just don't mix in my book. I have three children. During the custody battle I was unable to convince the judge that my children would be better off with me. My kids are 9, 10, and 13. I get calls all the time from old friends telling me how out of control my wife has become in the last 18 months. The longer my kids live with her, the more concerned I become for their emotional and physical safety. They love their mother and I don't want to do anything that would jeopardize their relationship with her, but I can't help but think that more harm than good is occurring as a result of living with her. Am I overreacting or am I justified to be so worried about my kids?

*You're not overreacting.* You're more than justified to be concerned about your children's emotional and physical well-being. The professional healthcare community long has recognized that children raised in an alcoholic household are at risk for developing emotional problems as a result of being raised in the shadows of alcoholism. Not only are children raised in alcoholic homes at risk for developing emotional disorders, they are also four times more likely than children raised in non-alcoholic households to become alcoholics themselves.

The following is a list of emotional difficulties that somebody who was raised in an alcoholic household is vulnerable to experiencing.

- 1) Overresponsibility: The child may develop the belief that they and they alone are responsible for the alcoholic's drinking, their mother and father's conflict, and ultimately the well-being of all family members concerned. This sense of overresponsibility can create a chronic feeling of guilt and self-blame within the child.
- 2) Anxiety: The child in an alcoholic home can be exposed to chaos, drama, and acting out by all of the family members. This atmosphere can breed chronic concern and fear about the situation at home. This atmosphere can also breed a generalized world view that the world is unsafe and danger perpetually lurks around the corner.
- 3) Shame: Alcoholism exists in an environment of denial, deception, and secrecy. When the child experiences the oppression of denial and secrecy they get the message that there is something to be ashamed of about the family, the drinker, and/or themselves. This internalized message can lead to the child developing a shame-based sense of self.
- 4) Fear of Emotional Intimacy: Alcoholism can undermine fundamental trust and compromise the psychological, physical, and emotional safety of the child. These developmental bonding qualities if compromised in childhood can prove problematic for the child when they attempt to develop appropriate adult emotional intimacy.
- 5) Confusion: Alcoholism is a destabilizing influence

in the family. The child seldom experiences predictable and consistent behavior from the alcoholic. Structure and orderliness are disrupted. Mood swings, emotional outbursts, and inconsistent behavior renders the child confused and fearful, never knowing what to expect next.

- 6) Anger: The child can become consumed with chronic anger at the alcoholic's drinking and behavior and anger at the non-drinking parent for their lack of support and protection.
- 7) Depression: Alcoholism breeds helplessness, hopelessness, and impotence. Chronically experiencing these emotions can make the child vulnerable to depression.

Because some children of alcoholics may act like a responsible parent within the family, they may cope with alcoholism by becoming overcontrolled, successful over-achievers throughout school, and at the same time be emotionally isolated from other children and teachers. Because of this, their emotional problems may present themselves only when they become adults.

Be mindful of the fact that whether or not an alcoholic is receiving treatment for alcoholism, children and adolescents can benefit from educational programs and self-help groups such as programs for children of alcoholics, Al-Anon, and Alateen. Early professional intervention can prevent more serious problems for the child, including alcoholism. Early intervention can help children address their own emerging problems such as those listed above. Consider getting children involved with support groups such as Al-Anon and Alateen.

See pages 212-213 for Al-Anon Family Group

Headquarters contact information.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Consult with a qualified healthcare provider in order to assess and evaluate the extent to which your children have been affected by your ex-wife's alcoholism and drug addiction.
- 4) Contact your local chapter of Al-Anon to get information about local Al-Anon and Alateen meetings.
- 5) Teach your children as much as you can about the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction.
- 6) Teach your children as much as you can about Recovery.
- 7) Teach your children how to integrate the Twelve Steps of Al-Anon and Alateen into their lives.

G.B.U.

*Steve*

## 5) What is the Support Group, Al-Anon?

**D**ear Dr. Steve:

I've been married to my husband five years. To put it bluntly, he's an alcoholic. However, if you ask him, he would disagree. Time after time I reach my breaking point with him. But no matter how much I kick and scream, threaten and cajole, nothing changes. And I'm just as pathetic—I never follow through on my threats to leave him. We have two children, both under age five. What concerns me most is how living with an alcoholic will affect them. Although my husband doesn't physically abuse us, he's more sarcastic and hurtful than ever. He blames me for his problems. That is if there is even a problem because to listen to him, there are no problems, except for me. According to him, I'm the one who's crazy and needs help. Well, he's right, I do need help. If I keep living like this I may go crazy! He says he enjoys drinking and has no plans to quit. I tell him I can't live like this forever! I come home from work and there he is watching the kids. I can tell he's been drinking. I'm afraid for their safety. What if he trips and drops the baby or passes out and the kids get into trouble? I could never forgive myself. Part of me says I should leave. Maybe if he has time alone he'll want to get help. I know I can't change him or make him get help. But I can't accept our lifestyle as it currently is. We love our children very much

and need to raise them as best we can, but he's not capable of this when he's slurring his words, being nasty to me, stumbling around, and scaring the kids. Help me. I need a change.

*Admitting that you* have a problem and asking for help is the first step towards sanity for you. Although the path ahead of you is long and filled with many unknowns, you don't have to travel this journey alone. There are self-help groups in your community that can provide you what you need most—support, love, wisdom, and tools to cope with an active alcoholic.

The name of these self-help support groups is Al-Anon. The only requirement for membership in Al-Anon is that you have experienced a problem in the past or are currently experiencing a problem with a friend or relative who abuses or is dependent on alcohol and other drugs. In these support groups, friends and family members share their feelings and experiences about the impact on their life from either a friend or family member abusing alcohol and other drugs. At an Al-Anon meeting, you are able to talk about your experiences with a friend or family member who abuses or is dependent on alcohol and other drugs, learn from the experiences of other people who have been equally affected by a friend or family member who abuses or is dependent on alcohol and other drugs, develop coping mechanisms to deal with an active abuser of alcohol and other drugs, and heal from the love and support of others who struggle with many of the same problems.

Al-Anon's program of recovery is adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous and is based upon the Twelve

Steps, Twelve Traditions, and Twelve Concepts of Service. Integrating the Twelve Steps into every area of your life is an essential aspect of coping with a friend or family member who was or is currently abusing or dependent on alcohol and other drugs.

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

affairs.

The above information about Al-Anon was reprinted with permission of Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., Virginia Beach, VA. See pages 212-213 for contact information.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Consult with a qualified healthcare provider in order to assess and evaluate the extent to which you've been affected by alcoholism.
- 4) Contact your local chapter of Al-Anon.
- 5) Read as much as you can about the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction.
- 6) Read as much as you can about what Recovery is.
- 7) Meet as many people as you can at Al-Anon meetings.
- 8) Integrate the Twelve Steps of Al-Anon into your life.

G.B.U.

*Steve*

## 6) What is the Support Group, Alateen?

**D**ear Steve:

I feel so responsible for all that's gone wrong with my life the last ten years. I'm sure you've heard this story a thousand times before but my husband is an alcoholic. The longer he drinks the worse it gets. He used to be a good-natured drunk, but these past five years he's become mean, abusive, and down right cruel. It's impossible to know who's going to walk through the door each night. His mood swings are unreal. I blame myself because I should know better. I grew up with an alcoholic father. Yet, I've put my three kids exactly through what I went through growing up. The shame, the fear, the terror of watching my husband completely out of control, you can't imagine the guilt I feel for putting them through it. I know how confused they are. I watch them go through life like zombies just like I did. What can I do to make things better for them than they were for me as a child?

*First, stop blaming* yourself for what your life is today. You didn't cause your husband's alcoholism. His alcoholism is a fact of life that you can either deal with or remain paralyzed by. Consult a qualified healthcare provider. Tell the healthcare provider about your concerns for yourself and your children. You can make a difference for your children, but you have to take action. Get them the help they need. Talk to them about what

they're going through. Encourage them to express their feelings. Finally, get them out of their isolation. There are support groups available where they can talk about their experiences. At these meetings, they can express in a safe environment all that they've bottled up inside of themselves. Most importantly, your children's active involvement in a support group will normalize their feelings and empower them to cope with their father's alcoholism.

The name of these support groups is Alateen. Alateen, a part of Al-Anon, is for young people whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking. At Alateen young people can:

- 1) Share experience, strength, and hope with each other
- 2) Discuss their difficulties
- 3) Learn effective ways to cope with their problems
- 4) Encourage one another
- 5) Help each other understand the principles of the Al-Anon program
- 6) Learn how to use the Twelve Steps and Alateen's Twelve Traditions

At Alateen young people can learn:

- 1) Compulsive drinking is a disease
- 2) They can detach emotionally from the drinker's problems while continuing to love the person
- 3) They are not the cause of anyone else's drinking or behavior
- 4) They can't change or control anyone but themselves
- 5) They have spiritual and intellectual resources with which to develop their own potentials, no matter what happens at home

- 6) They can build satisfying and rewarding life experiences for themselves

Alateen is based on the following Twelve Steps which members discuss and apply to their own attitudes and relationships with others. This can help the Alateen member develop strength to deal with problems maturely and realistically.

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

these Steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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- 3) Consult with a qualified healthcare provider in order to assess and evaluate the extent to which you've been affected by alcoholism.
- 4) Contact your local chapter of Al-Anon to get information about local Alateen meetings.
- 5) Teach your children as much as you can about the disease of alcoholism.
- 6) Teach your children as much as you can about Recovery.
- 7) Teach your children how to integrate the Twelve Steps of Alateen into their lives.

G.B.U.  
*Steve*

## 7) What is the Support Group, Adult Children of Alcoholics?

Dear Dr. Steve,

I'm thirty-two years old. I've held the same job for the last seven years as a computer programmer. I'm married. My wife is wonderful. My two kids are great. I coach my son's soccer team. I'm the leader of his Boy Scout troop. I volunteer at my church. And I'm a member of our town's volunteer fire department. I'm out there man. I'm functioning. It would seem that I have everything going for me. But on the inside, it's a whole different story. I'm a walking time bomb. I feel like I could explode. I find myself feeling angrier and angrier. Then there are times I'm driving in my car and I begin crying uncontrollably for no good reason that I can figure out. My wife's been great to me. We never ever fight, I see to that! I love my wife, but I know I keep her shut out. There are times, when, I guess you could call it terror, the thought of her getting close to me, of really letting her in, terrifies me. Last weekend I was on a retreat with other men from my church. I finally broke down and started talking about these things and more, my life in general, what I went through growing up. The leader of the retreat told me I should investigate something he called Adult Children of Alcoholics. Sure, my dad drank, but was he an alcoholic?

I don't know. Anyway, what does his drinking twenty years ago have to do with me crying in a car when a song comes on the radio or wanting to throw my life away and run off and live in the mountains by myself?

*Your story is* not uncommon by any stretch of the imagination. For the sake of discussion, let me talk in broad generalities in order to explain the concept, Adult Children of Alcoholics, to you. Bear in my mind, what I am about to say is an explanation, not an indictment. If you don't see yourself in this explanation, then you have the answer to the questions that you brought back with you from your church retreat. If you do see yourself in any part of what I'm about to say, there's much that you can do about how you've been feeling lately.

First off, alcoholism and drug addiction is a family disease. Alcoholism affects not only the person who drinks but the family members as well. The disease of alcoholism thrives in an environment of enabling, denial, and secretiveness. It is not unusual to spend one's childhood in a household where alcoholism and drug addiction exists but is never acknowledged.

Because of denial, secretiveness, and enabling, excuses are made, explanations are invented, lies are perpetuated about drinking and the person who drinks. All of this deceit has an impact on each family member. Reality becomes warped, feelings become disregarded, family members are taught never to talk about what they're feeling, never to trust themselves, their feelings, their perceptions, nor anybody outside of the family. All too often children in this kind of environment go off into their

adult lives, never acknowledging to themselves or having acknowledged by others the reality of what went on in their childhood and the impact of what went on in their childhood had on them.

As a family organizes their emotions around the presence of alcoholism and the ongoing denial of alcoholism, family members adapt to the family alcoholism. Often times this adaptation takes the form of rigid roles—we call them survival roles. These roles are wonderfully adaptive in regards to surviving in one's family of origin, but paradoxically are the source of emotional and developmental dysfunction in their adult lives. This explains how one can be highly, highly functional as an adult when it comes to work, community service, and the day-to-day running of their lives and yet emotionally and developmentally, on the inside, these same highly competent adults, remain stuck in the emotional fallout from yesteryear because of what took place from being raised in a family that was emotionally organized around alcoholism.

What is the fallout? Let me provide you with a partial list of characteristics that describe who an Adult Children of Alcoholics might be. Adult Children of Alcoholics:

- 1) Guess at what normal is.
- 2) Have difficulty in following a project through from beginning to end.
- 3) Lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth.
- 4) Judge themselves without mercy.
- 5) Have difficulty having fun.
- 6) Take themselves very seriously.
- 7) Have difficulty with intimate relationships.
- 8) Overreact to changes over which they have no control.

- 9) Constantly seek approval and affirmation.
- 10) Feel that they are different from other people.
- 11) Are either super responsible or super irresponsible.
- 12) Are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that loyalty is undeserved.
- 13) Tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsivity leads to confusion, self-loathing, and loss of control of their environment. As a result, they spend tremendous amounts of time cleaning up the mess.

These characteristics are, of course, general in nature and do not apply to everyone. Some may apply and others not. And there are still other characteristics which are not on this list. But if any of these sound all too familiar, you may benefit by learning more about the phenomenon, Adult Children of Alcoholics.

As you can imagine, it is impossible to tell you from the letter that you've written what you should believe. However I would encourage you to look further in to the subject of Adult Children of Alcoholics. Go to your library and read books that explain in much more detail than I possibly could in this space Adult Children of Alcoholics, check out the relevant articles on this web site, engage the services of a knowledgeable, qualified healthcare provider. Just know that if something doesn't feel right about what you're going through emotionally, trust that and don't stop your searching for answers until you feel as good about who you are on the inside as you do about who you are on the outside!

See pages 212-213 for contact information about

Adult Children of Alcoholics.

## Pathfinder's Checklist

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Alcoholism and drug addiction are family diseases.
- 4) All family members are affected by the disease of alcoholism.
- 5) One can continue to be affected by family alcoholism even after they've left their home and are well established in their adult life.
- 6) There are identifiable characteristics that can be attributed to being raised in an alcoholic family.
- 7) These identifiable characteristics can erode one's emotional and spiritual well-being no matter what the circumstances of one's life may be.
- 8) You're not alone in what you're going through. There's a community of people who come together to break down the denial and heal the wounds that have been fermenting for years.

G.B.U.  
Steve

## 8) How to Confront a Friend or Loved One Who Has a Problem With Alcohol and Other Drugs

Dear Dr. Steve,

I've known my boyfriend five years. During this time we've had our ups and downs, but overall things have been pretty good. We've talked about marriage, but one thing troubles me—his drinking. Since I've known him, it's become more of a problem. My mother was stuck in a marriage for 35 years with an alcoholic. I don't want that to happen to me. How can I talk to my boyfriend about my concerns?

*If you have* concerns about your boyfriend's drinking, I would encourage you to not ignore them or be talked out of them. It's critical for your physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being that you trust yourself—trust what you're seeing, trust what you're thinking, and trust what you're feeling!

As for talking to your boyfriend about your concerns, let me offer you the following suggestions.

- 1) Do not put your conversation with him off until you find the perfect time. There is no perfect time to have a conversation with your boyfriend about his drinking and your concerns. Just remember, if your boyfriend does have a drinking problem, it will only get worse over time.
- 2) Do not confront your boyfriend when he is drinking or drunk. Have the conversation with your boyfriend at a time and place that you feel emotionally, psychologically, and physically safe.

- 3) Do not blame your boyfriend for his drinking problem. Alcoholism is a disease, not a moral weakness.
- 4) Do not threaten your boyfriend. Confront him only with actions that you will take if his problems continue without him addressing those problems.
- 5) Do not allow your boyfriend to change the subject or start blaming you or others. Keep your conversation with him on point: 1) his drinking, 2) your concerns about his drinking, 3) the impact of his drinking on you and the consequences of his continued drinking as it relates to you and your relationship with him. 4) Do not overwhelm your boyfriend with opinions and judgments about his drinking. Stick to the facts, not your judgments or opinions about his drinking. For example: a) On such and such a day, you drank to excess, got behind the wheel of a car and put me at risk. When that happened, it made me feel..., b) On such and such a day, you drank to excess and had an affair with the waitress at the bar. When that happened, it made me feel..., c) On such and such a day, you drank to excess and slugged a security guard at the dance club. When that happened, it made me feel.

Whatever you ultimately decide to do, please make sure that you don't neglect your emotional and spiritual well-being. Alcohol problems can adversely affect even the hardest of people. This may sound counter-intuitive but taking care of yourself can be helpful for your boyfriend as well. I wish you luck!

To get more information about how to best cope with and confront your loved one's use of alcohol and

other drugs, contact Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. See pages 212-213 for contact information.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
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- 3) Don't ignore what you see, feel, and believe about somebody's alcohol and other drugs consumption.
- 4) Don't minimize what you see, feel, and believe about somebody's alcohol and other drugs consumption.
- 5) Remember that chemical dependency is a progressive disease. If you are suspicious now about somebody's alcohol and other drugs consumption, it will only worsen with time if your friend or loved one does have a problem.
- 6) Be clear about what you want to say to somebody whose alcohol and other drugs consumption concerns you.
- 7) Be clear about what actions you will take if your friend or loved one continues to refuse to address their problem. Communicate those consequences in a calm, non-threatening way.

- 8) Speak only the facts as you know them. Do not inject opinion, judgment, or blame in to your conversation.

G.B.U.  
Steve

### 9) How to Make Your Loved One Stop Consuming Alcohol and Other Drugs

Dear Dr. Steve:

Without rehashing the bloody details of the last three years of my life, let me just say that I believe that my husband is an alcoholic and is addicted to marijuana. My question to you is how can I get my husband to stop drinking and drugging?

*The simple answer* is that there is not much you or anyone else can do to force somebody who is either abusing or dependent on alcohol and other drugs to stop drinking and drugging.

I know that's not what you want to hear. In fact, you've likely fought hard not to accept what I've just said for much of the past three years. Emotionally, this must be a very difficult time in your life as you desperately seek a way out of the hell that the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction creates in your family's life. I can imagine that your emotions run the full gamut from helplessness to hopelessness to out and out rage as your life continues to deteriorate and spiral out of control. And all the while, as you find yourself feeling more and more sick, as you

feel yourself getting more and more crazy about your husband's drinking, he remains oblivious to those who are suffering around him.

That is because your husband is in denial about his drinking and the associated consequences of his drinking and drugging. It's likely that your husband has an explanation for each and every problem associated with his drinking and drugging. He can explain away any evidence of the problems that his drinking causes through rationalization and minimization. No matter how obvious his drinking problem may be to you and to others, your husband's denial is fortified by blaming other people or circumstances for his drinking. Sadly, your husband's denial of his problems with alcohol, his ability to rationalize his behavior, his reliance on blaming others for his problems enables him to keep drinking as everyone who cares about him feels helpless about how to help him.

Unfortunately, what experience has taught me is that your husband won't quit drinking and drugging until the consequences of his drinking creates enough emotional and circumstantial discomfort to force him to look more honestly at his drinking. I assume at this point that the negative consequences to your husband and your family from his drinking, whether they be legal, financial, family, interpersonal, occupational, physical, emotional, and spiritual have done nothing to slow your husband down. So until your husband is ready to stop drinking and drugging, until the pain from the consequences of his drinking and drugging overwhelms his denial of his problem and the fear he has about doing something about his drinking and drugging, there's little anyone can do to get your husband to stop drinking and drugging. In fact, as

you may have already discovered, family pressure applied on your husband to stop drinking and drugging may actually make the overall situation worse.

Not very helpful, am I? That's because the answer to your problem does not lie in your ability to change your husband's behavior. The answer to your problem lies in your willingness to take care of yourself. In other words are you willing to put less energy in to forcing your husband to stop drinking and drugging and more energy in to taking care of yourself? Taking care of yourself entails:

- 1) Learning about the disease of chemical dependency
- 2) Learning about the unhealthy role(s) that you may be playing in the life of your husband
- 3) Learning about the tools of Recovery that will empower you to detach from the problems created by alcoholism and drug addiction
- 4) Actively engaging the help and support of others

Where does one go to learn about chemical dependency? The best place to start is a support group called Al-Anon. Al-Anon is a support group for family members who have been and/or continue to be affected by family alcoholism. It's a safe place for you and your family members to go and be with people just like you who have been affected by the disease of alcoholism in much the same ways that you have.

But Al-Anon is more than a place for support. Through your involvement with Al-Anon, you can learn more about the family disease of alcoholism. You can learn effective coping tools for dealing with the disease of alcoholism. Most importantly, you can learn how to detach from the problems of alcoholism.

To get more information about how to best cope

with and confront your loved one's use of alcohol and other drugs, contact Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. See pages 212-213 for contact information.

Remember, it is your God-given right to go through what you're going through alone, but you don't have to.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

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- 3) Do not minimize what is going on in your life.
- 4) Start attending Al-Anon meetings.
- 5) Seek out the services of a qualified mental health professional who can help facilitate the changes you need to make before your situation can start to get better.
- 6) Stop pouring your energy in to getting your husband to stop drinking.
- 7) Put more of your energy in to taking care of yourself and your family emotionally and spiritually.
- 8) Check out Al-Anon. Give it a fair chance. Don't be discouraged.

G.B.U.  
*Steve*

## 10) What to Do if Your Loved One Continues to Consume Alcohol and Other Drugs

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

My husband has had a drinking and drug problem for years. I finally told him enough is enough, it's time to do something other than fight with me about it. He's in complete denial and says I'm the one with a problem. Wanting to prove, at least to myself, that I wasn't crazy, I made an appointment for a consultation with a counselor at a drug rehab facility. My husband refused to go with me. The counselor was nice, but not very helpful. Although she agreed with me that it's likely my husband did have a problem, she didn't offer any advice as to how to get him to stop drinking and drugging. The only thing that she recommended was for me and my kids to go to Al-Anon and Alateen meetings. What good will meetings do us if my husband keeps drinking?

*You ask a good question.* The counselor suggested that your family attend Al-Anon and Alateen meetings because chemical dependency is a family disease. Because it is a family disease, each family member is vulnerable to being adversely affected physically, emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, and spiritually and, therefore, may be in need of help for themselves whether or not the alcoholic continues to drink or not.

Interestingly, your question reveals a common misconception about the family disease of alcoholism and

drug addiction. The misconception that you're laboring under is that the only way that the family members of an alcoholic can be helped is if the alcoholic stops drinking and drugging. But the truth of the matter is that not only is it unnecessary to wait until your husband stops drinking, it is unwise to wait before you get help for yourself and your children.

It is unnecessary for you to wait for your husband to quit drinking before you get help for yourself because there is much that you can do and need to do for yourself, whether or not your husband stops drinking. The implementation of a program of self-care for yourself is the best way you can help yourself, regardless of your husband's drinking status. The first rule of self-care is focusing solely on you and your children while learning how to detach from the actions of your husband. Healing and Recovery begin when you take the necessary actions to focus on yourself by taking care of you and your children, not when your husband stops drinking and drugging.

Secondly, it's unnecessary for you to wait for your husband to quit drinking because there's much for you to learn about yourself. You must examine what unhealthy role(s) that you may act out in relationship to your husband's drinking and drugging. You are not to be blamed for his drinking but many of your choices have knowingly and unknowingly fed into his drinking. Until you better understand the relationship between your choices and your husband's drinking, it's likely that you will continue to act out unhealthy choices that only serve to fan the flames of his disease.

A third reason that it's unnecessary to wait for your husband to stop drinking is because he may never stop

drinking. Simply put, you should never predicate the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of you and your children on whether or not somebody is going to quit using alcohol and other drugs. There is a process of change that your husband must go through before he quits drinking. He may be years away from that process starting. What you have the most control over is yourself. You are in a position today to take the necessary action to start a process of healing for you and your children, with or without your husband.

Which brings us to why it's unwise for you to wait for your husband to stop drinking before you get help for you and your children. As I said earlier, each family member is vulnerable to experiencing the adverse effects of family alcoholism. Each family member's physical, emotional, psychological, behavioral, and spiritual well-being is at risk. As a result, it is unwise to put off getting help for you and your children because you're needlessly putting you and your children at risk.

Why the recommendation to attend Al-Anon meetings? Al-Anon meetings are a safe place to express your feelings, talk about your experiences with alcoholism, examine to what degree your choices have been maladaptive and self-destructive, and develop the skills necessary to cope with family alcoholism.

An important aspect of Recovery is support. Attending Al-Anon and Alateen meetings will give your children a place where they can have an opportunity to say out loud what they have been denying or kept bottled up inside of themselves. By participating in these meetings, your children's feelings will be normalized, their thoughts affirmed, and their perceptions of their harrow-

ing experiences validated. Also, by attending Al-Anon and Alateen meetings, your children can learn effective coping skills to empower them to deal with an active alcoholic.

Don't wait for your husband to stop drinking. You can begin the process of Recovery for you and your children with or without him!

See pages 212-213 for Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters information.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Take action even though your husband may continue to drink.
- 4) Have your children evaluated by a qualified health-care provider.
- 5) Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.
- 6) Learn more about the family disease of alcoholism.
- 7) Attend Al-Anon and Alateen meetings.

G.B.U.

*Steve*

## 11) Why Do I Need Help if My Wife is the Alcoholic?

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

I recently consulted a psychologist about my wife's drinking. I wanted to know what I could do to help her. After politely listening to my story, the psychologist told me I need to go to support groups and be in therapy myself. I feel like he's making me out to be the one with the problem rather than my wife, who has a drinking problem. What's up?

*Your reaction is* very understandable. Often, even the most well intended professional's message of help can be misinterpreted as blame and judgment. But here's the sad truth about chemical dependency. Alcoholism and drug addiction do not exist in a vacuum. Chemical dependency exists in the community of mankind. Alcoholism spills over into the homes of innocent children and spouses. Drug addiction spreads its toxic influence to all who come in contact with it—whether it be at home, the work place, your place of worship, or the community center where you spend your recreational time.

It's likely that much of your emotional, physical, and psychic energy has been consumed by your wife's drinking—cleaning up the messes created by her drinking, shouldering more than your fair share of the responsibility for your children's care, covering up for or trying to manage her drinking, hiding her bottles, emptying her secret stash—all of it is an incredible drain on your emotional and spiritual well-being. Because of the strain that

the disease of alcoholism places on you—how it taxes your emotional, psychological, and spiritual energies— it's likely that the quiet, insidious ways in which your wife's drinking has affected you and your family members' emotional and spiritual well-being has gone unnoticed.

But let me assure you of one thing, being a prisoner of alcoholism, and make no mistake about that, you are a prisoner, takes it toll on even the hardest of us after a while. Hopelessness begins to warp your spirit. You begin to feel alienated from your family and your friends as you find yourself becoming more and more isolated. The perpetual state of helplessness you find yourself in leaves you feeling chronically enraged. Constantly butting heads with the denial system of an alcoholic wears you down psychologically. You begin to doubt yourself. You begin to doubt what you see and what you feel. You begin to doubt everything about yourself and your life.

But let me be as clear as I can be about the following point. You are not crazy! You are not the cause of the problems created by your wife's drinking! Nonetheless, you have been negatively affected by your wife's drinking. Because of that, you not only are equally in need of, you **DESERVE** the support and genuine concern of other people. So it's time for you to do something different than you've done up to this point. Not because you have been going about things in the wrong way but because you need to find a different way of coping with your wife's drinking. It's time to start fighting back! But fighting back in a way that you may not have considered to this point in time. Namely getting support for you and your family by getting involved in Al-Anon and Alateen for your children.

See pages 212-213 for Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters contact information.

## Pathfinder's Checklist

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Acknowledge all the ways that the disease of alcoholism has negatively impacted your emotional and spiritual well-being.
- 4) Talk to supportive people about how you have been affected by alcoholism.
- 5) Give yourself permission to start feeling better emotionally and spiritually, whether or not your wife chooses to do anything about her drinking.
- 6) Ask for help and support from friends, family members, your spiritual community, support groups such as Al-Anon, Co-dependents Anonymous, and Adult Children of Alcoholics.
7. Hire the services of a qualified professional to help guide you out of the dark forest of the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction.

G.B.U.  
*Steve*

## 12) How to Distinguish Between an Act of Love and an Act of Enabling

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

I'm about to lose it. I swear to God if one more person blames me for being the cause of my son's drug use, I'll explode. Doesn't anyone understand that I love my son and am just trying to help? Whenever I try to explain myself, why I do the things I do for my son, everyone calls me an enabler and tells me my son won't quit using until I stop enabling. How can an act of love possibly be the cause of my son's drug problems.

*No reasonable person* doubts how much you love your son. In fact, your situation is one of the most heart-breaking aspects of chemical dependency—the dilemma of how a loving, well-intended family member can best rescue a loved one who has fallen into the abyss of chemical dependency. Given the choice of idly standing by and watching your son's life deteriorate, spiraling out of control right before your eyes or doing everything you can to save your son's life, well that's a no-brainer, you'll do everything you can to save his life.

But the question is not whether you should do anything and everything or nothing at all for your son. The question to focus on is, what is the best thing for you to do? Whenever a family member evaluates what's the best thing to do for their loved one who is suffering from the disease of chemical dependency, it's helpful to be mindful of a phenomenon referred to as enabling. When evaluat-

ing the effectiveness of your efforts to help your son, consider the question: Are you providing aid and comfort to your chemically dependent family member or are you merely pouring gasoline on an already raging out of control fire? To answer that question, let's first examine the difference between helping and enabling.

Helping is an act of providing assistance to somebody for something that they're not capable of doing at all or at least by themselves, whereas enabling is an act of providing assistance to somebody who could and should do something for themselves.

Helping is an act of assistance, whereas enabling is an act of insulating an individual from the consequences of their behavior.

Helping is an act that contributes to solving a problem whereas, enabling is an act that contributes to the perpetuation of a problem.

Helping is an act that empowers a person to grow and become independent, whereas enabling is an act that gives permission to a person to remain sick, helpless, and dependent on the enabler.

Helping is a statement of love for and belief in another individual, whereas enabling is a statement of pity for and lack of belief in another individual.

Helping is an act of support, whereas enabling is an act of control.

Why should you be mindful of the line between helping and enabling?

Think about it this way. Family, interpersonal, occupational, emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual, financial, and/or legal consequences are what can most effectively break through the denial system of a chemical-

ly dependent individual and eventually motivate a chemically dependent individual to seek help for their disease. Not your best intentions! Not your threats! Not your love! Not withholding of love! Not your pleas! Not your punitive actions! Not your self-righteous indignation! Not misguided applications of compassion! Not your pain! Not your apathy! Consequences and only consequences have the power to do what no amount of human willfulness can do—get the attention of a chemically dependent individual who is in denial.

As such, anything that insulates a chemically dependent individual from the consequences of their drinking and drugging is actually fortifying the denial system of the chemically dependent individual. Any act that fortifies the denial system of the chemically dependent individual enables the chemically dependent individual to remain active in their disease protected from experiencing any of the consequences caused by their drinking and drugging.

Be mindful of the following. It's possible to love your son to death—literally. If, in loving your son, your enabling allows him to avoid experiencing the consequences of drinking and drugging, then you're insulating him from the experiences necessary to open his eyes to the one truth that may save his life—until he accepts responsibility for the consequences of his alcohol and other drugs use, his life will continue to be ravaged by it.

Let me leave you with this last thought. You're not to blame for your son's behavior and your son's disease. You're a good person who no doubt loves your son! Your life undoubtedly is drowning in despair and desperation. You, rightly so, have no intention of standing by while your son throws his life down the toilet. Take your good

intentions. Mix your good intentions with more good information about the disease of chemical dependency. Don't try and defeat this disease all by yourself. There are dedicated professionals in your community who have dedicated their life to helping people just like you make the best decisions possible for both you and your son's emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. So how best to know what enabling behavior is? Let me suggest the following questions as potential guidelines for you.

### Pathfinder's Checklist

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Do you cover up for your son when he fails to go to school or work because he is "sick?"
- 4) Do you protect your son by accepting part of the blame for his drinking or behavior?
- 5) Do you avoid talking about his drinking for fear of how he will respond to you?
- 6) Have you bailed your son out of jail and/or paid for his legal fees?
- 7) Do you pay those bills of his that he is supposed to pay himself?

- 8) Do you loan him money?
- 9) Do you find yourself giving him one last chance time after time?
- 10) Have you finished a job or project that your son should have finished himself?
- 11) Contact Al-Anon. See pages 212-213 for contact information.

G.B.U.  
Steve

### 13) How to Detach From the Problem Rather Than Abandon Your Loved One

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

I seem to be having a harder time with Recovery than my daughter. She has been addicted to cocaine for seven years. She has short periods of abstinence followed by long periods of using. I can tell when she's using because the signs are all there. Her weight drops dramatically. Her health deteriorates. Things turn up missing from my house. The only time I hear from her is when she needs a bill paid. Okay, so I know what's going on and yet the thought of turning my back on her breaks my heart. I go to my Al-Anon meetings and they repeatedly talk to me about detaching with love. I know what the phrase means. I know why it's important to do. But I just can't turn my back on my daughter. Am I hopeless?

*No! You're not* hopeless. You just need to do some work for yourself about yourself. You see, that's the key to detaching with love. Keeping the focus on yourself rather than the chemically dependent family member. So just keep in mind, the key to detaching with love is maintaining a proper focus on yourself.

As you develop the discipline of keeping the focus on yourself rather than your daughter and her drug problem you'll discover that the key to serenity is finding the wisdom to know the difference between what you can and cannot change. By keeping the focus on you, you'll no longer be tempted to:

- 1) Suffer because of the actions and reaction of others.
- 2) Allow yourself to be used or abused by others.
- 3) Do for others what they could do for themselves.
- 4) Manipulate situations so others will eat, sleep, get up, pay bills and not drink.
- 5) Cover up for anyone's mistakes or misbehaviors.
- 6) Create a crisis.
- 7) Prevent a crisis if the crisis is the natural course of events.

Where to start with the business of detaching with love? First and foremost, you have to learn how to detach only from the situation, not the person. Your Recovery is not about abandoning your daughter, it's about not getting sucked in to the drama that your daughter creates. You can be there for your daughter without having to pay her bills, letting her rob you blind, and/or sucking you dry financially and legally.

How? Let's start with the word responsibility. You are responsible for how you feel, not your daughter's choic-

es. You are responsible for how you react to the situations that your daughter creates. As you change your reaction to your daughter's behavior, you'll begin to notice a change in the choices that you make as well.

The next important aspect of detaching is acceptance. Acceptance does not mean that you endorse your daughter's drug use. Accepting your daughter's drug use does mean that you've acknowledged to yourself that you're unable to influence her alcohol and other drug use.

The last aspect of detachment is remembering that chemical dependency is a disease you did not cause and cannot control, and for which there is no cure. In remembering what I've just said, realize that there's nothing you can do to get your daughter to stop her drugging.

For those of you who may first be learning about the idea of detaching with love, let me recommend the following to you!

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Get honest with your feelings.
- 4) Talk to people who understand chemical dependency.

- 5) Get in touch with your Higher Power.
- 6) Work through your feelings of anger and resentment.
- 7) Join an Al-Anon group.

*G.B.U.*  
*Steve*

#### **14) How a Recovering Parent Can Heal the Relationship With Their Children**

*D*ear Dr. Steve:

I have been in recovery for six months after drinking and drugging daily for the last fourteen years. Although I am truly grateful for sobriety and what my life is today, my life is not without its struggles. At the top of my list of what I'm struggling with is how to rebuild my relationship with my children. I feel like they resent me and my sobriety. I know I put them through a lot. I know that they spent many years without the kind of father that they deserved. Nonetheless, I'm at a loss. I don't know how to reach them. I feel like I'm starting all over at this, learning how to be the parent they need and deserve. Any advice that you can send my way, would be greatly appreciated.

*Recovery is about* rebuilding lives, rebuilding families, and rebuilding relationships. There is no more important relationship to be repaired than the relation-

ship between a recovering parent and their children. I feel so strongly about the need for the recovering parent to learn how to [re]connect with their children that I wrote a book, *Ask Dr. Steve...How Can I Create a Great Relationship With My Children*. Please read it and practice it! It was written for people just like you who are in search of how to [re]connect with their children.

Given the limits of the space, let me address one aspect of the answer to your question—how to get reacquainted with your children and begin rebuilding trust.

First, explain the disease of chemical dependency to your children. No child is ever too young to hear the truth about something as important one's emotional, spiritual, and mental health and the disease of chemical dependency.

There are a few points you should make to your child as you explain the disease concept of chemical dependency:

- 1) Chemical dependency is a chronic disease that can be managed. Explain to them what you intend to do in order to manage your disease.
- 2) Chemical dependency is a bad thing that happens to good people—no one is to be blamed for having the disease or causing the disease.
- 3) Validate and affirm the feelings that your children have about you, your drinking and drugging, and the impact that your disease has had on their well-being. This is not the time to get defensive with them, although you will feel extremely defensive.
- 4) Emphasize that no matter how important your children are to you, you must make Recovery a priority in order to successfully manage your disease.

Although talking to them is a good start, what your children are most starved for is your time and attention. Don't try to buy your way back into their good graces. Be physically and emotionally present in their lives. Be where you're suppose to be when you say that you're going to be there. But don't just show up. Participate!

Regularly scheduled family meetings are a must. Your family has been fragmented for years. Rebuild cohesiveness by giving your family members a forum to safely express their feelings. Listen to what your family members have to say to you. Open yourself up to understanding what their feedback means about you and them. Your family has spent most of their lives organizing their lives around you and your disease. Fear has dominated their world. Family meetings can be a powerful forum for empowering each family member to [re]claim their voice and express all that they need to say.

The next suggestion applies to your words and deeds. Be consistent!!! Consistency should be applied to every area of your life. Your family is watching you, in many respects they're testing you. As much as they want you to succeed, they're waiting for signs that you are failing. It may not seem fair to you but you're on trial my friend. The best way to pass their test is to say what you mean, mean what you say and never forget to do something that you said that you were going to do!

The last suggestion I have is to introduce your children to the Twelve Step world. Take them to open A.A. meetings. Encourage them to attend Al-Anon and/or Alateen meetings. By participating in their own support groups, they can explore and express their anger, fear, hurt, guilt and shame in safe ways with people who can safely facilitate

their exploration. This is as important as anything that you can do with your children for your children!

Consider getting your children involved in Al-Anon and Alateen. See page 212-213 for Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters contact information.

## **Pathfinder's Checklist**

- 1) Visit [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com) for more information about chemical dependency and emotional and spiritual development.
- 2) Read Dr. Steve Frisch's, Psy.D. series of Recovery books. These books focus on chemical dependency, how to raise alcohol and other drugs free children, and Recovery for both the chemically dependent individual and their friends and family members. This information is available at [www.AliveAndWellNews.com](http://www.AliveAndWellNews.com).
- 3) Explain the disease concept of chemical dependency to your children.
- 4) Give your children permission to express the feelings that they have been experiencing.
- 5) Be aware that as much as your family is rooting for you to succeed, they will test you every bit of the way.
- 6) Be consistent in what you do and say.
- 7) Introduce your children to the Twelve Step community.
- 8) Read *Ask Dr. Steve...How Can I Create a Great Relationship With My Children*.

G.B.U.  
Steve