Spouses or Significant Others of Alcoholics

Whether married or in a relationship, whether straight or gay, spouses and significant others of alcoholics suffered significantly. As you have seen, alcohol reduces inhibitions and leads to poor judgment and risky behavior. Alcoholics have a high incidence of infidelity. Affairs are painful for the spouse or significant other of an alcoholic.

Guilt runs rampant for these spouses. Many times, alcoholics will blame their spouse for the drinking. Hindsight is 20/20 here, and while most spouses can see this was not the case after significant amounts of therapy and treatment, this is what they hear repeatedly when they are in the midst of the alcoholism, and they begin to believe it.

Denial is a strong defense mechanism for these spouses. They remain in denial and continue to enable the alcoholic’s behavior. For outsiders, this looks crazy, and it is, but for the spouses who have lived with this year in and year out, this defense mechanism has become part of their personality and coping strategies.

The alcoholic’s preoccupation with drinking prevents him or her from participating in any meaningful way in the marriage. This causes added stress and strain on the nondrinking spouse and on the marriage. This is exacerbated if children are involved.

Communication between an alcoholic spouse and a nonalcoholic spouse breaks down, and there is no meaningful communication about finances, parenting, child rearing, marital issues, or any other significant issue.

Spouses avoid social contacts and isolate themselves because they do not want anyone knowing about their terrible family secret.

Parents of Alcoholics

This is a difficult topic for parents whose children are alcoholics, particularly if one or both of the parents were or are alcoholics themselves. With research showing that children who grow up in alcoholic homes have a predisposition toward alcoholism, many parents carry private guilt at the fact that one of their children has become an alcoholic; however, there are also many proponents to spin this research in a way that shows it is the genetic/heredity predisposition as opposed to the nurture of the environment. Whatever the cause, the guilt of these parents is real.

Social (divorce, domestic violence)

Social consequences to alcoholism include work performance issues as previously addressed, legal issues related to alcohol-related offenses (e.g., drunk driving, drunk boating, public intoxication, etc.), and marital conflict that can lead to divorce and
Family Dynamics In an Alcoholic Environment (Enabling, Covering Up, etc.) (Boyd, 1992)

The enabler: This is the spouse who takes care of and protects the alcoholic spouse.

The dependent: The alcoholic spouse who is not allowed to experience the negative consequences of his or her actions.

The hero: The overachieving and overresponsible child who is typically, but not always, the oldest child.

The scapegoat: This is the child who acts out and is defiant and is typically, but not always, the second born child.

The lost child: This child is a loner, isolates him- or herself, and is shy. This is the forgotten child of the family given that this child’s needs are frequently ignored by the parents.

The mascot: This is the clown or funny child who seeks to be the center of attention as a way to diffuse the intensity of the family situation.

Reference
