



ACAs TODAY

By Stephanie Brown



In 1945 a new idea was born: children of alcoholics. In the mid-1970s another new idea followed: adult children of alcoholics. The popular media embraced both concepts and soon a social movement was sweeping the country.

Alcoholism had been named before, but never had the concept of parental alcoholism been named so clearly and the implications spelled out: that parents' drinking has an impact on their children and that the experience is often traumatic, with lasting maladaptive and negative consequences.

As the idea achieved popular acceptance, children and adults of all ages began to identify with the descriptions, calling themselves

"COA" and "ACA" or "ACOA." Individuals began to seek professional treatment as "ACAs," but

there were few services available. The social movement was far ahead of professionals in its knowledge base and legitimacy.

Professionals tried to catch up. Some in the addiction field responded with ACA-labeled "treatments" built on the popular literature. Some mental health and addiction specialists, myself and colleagues included, provided traditional psychotherapy modified to include the family focus on alcohol and its impact on the child.

Acceptance of the idea remained slow in the field of mental health. Addiction professionals, while accepting the idea, did not know what to treat or how to treat the newly-named ACA. The skeptics worried then and now about responsibility. Isn't this blaming the parents?

The media was explicating an idea that was absolutely right, but there was no "next step" in terms of traditional treatment. The professional world felt challenged by this idea and frequently responded with

skepticism, resistance and anger toward the popular press, and, unfortunately, to the idea itself.

Skeptics repeatedly asked for research, for empirical evidence that any such group existed.

The new label created a dissonance among professionals that remains

today: so much of addiction and mental health theory has been based on the individual, separate from the influence of others. How do we make sense of a label that is inter-generational, familial, and interpersonal? The labels COA and ACA indicate that the child and adult child are to be understood in relation to the central significance of parental alcoholism.

There was a feeling of urgency and emotional venting that shocked the professional world. The popular media was expressing a hunger for information and treatment that could not be met by professionals. At that time, most of them did not have the knowledge to provide appropriate treatment.

And many were wary of the intensity of feeling unleashed by the simple act of naming and describing reality. Many ACAs were also afraid of feelings and memories that were now legitimized.

Society now said "talk," but many could not. The prohibitions of the family, of some worried professionals, and critics who judged ACAs as self-created victims, still silenced countless individuals. But the idea was stronger than its critics.

Important facts about children of alcoholics that were called speculation, because they had been described by clinicians rather than researchers, have now been established by research. The social movement peaked in the early 1990s as it lost its newness and allure for the press.

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