

## Information for Young People

Do you...

- Feel too embarrassed to take friends home?
- Feel confused when your mum or dad change when they drink?
- Feel nobody really cares what happens to you?
- Feel guilty and don't know why?
- Feel different from other young people?
- Keep secrets about the problems affecting your family?
- Tell lies to cover up for someone's drinking?
- Believe no one could possibly understand how you feel?

You are not alone. Many people keep alcoholism a secret, so sometimes it can feel like you are the only one; however, research suggests that 1 in 5 children in the UK have a parent with a drink problem. This means other people you know at school, college, clubs etc. may be experiencing similar problems, and may be trying to hide it from the outside world.

If your parent, step-parent, grandparent, carer or anyone else important to you has a drink problem, it can affect you, even if you are not living in the same house, or they are no longer drinking. A child of an alcoholic can be 1 or 101 – it doesn't change the fact that your parent is, or has been, dependent on alcohol, along with the problems this brings.

Alcoholism is like an illness and can affect people of all ages and from all walks of life. People with an alcohol problem have lost control over their drinking and usually need help to stop. There is help, but as hard as it is for those around them, only the person drinking can make the decision to accept help. However, you can feel better whether your parent continues to drink or not.

This booklet offers information and advice that we hope will help.

Hearing how other people are feeling can sometimes help us to make sense of our own emotions. Many people have shared their feelings with us:

*"Finding someone who I felt comfortable talking to was the beginning of everything changing for me. Things could have been very different for both of us. Without your help and support, Mum could have drunk herself to death and I could have spent the rest of my life watching her. Now I know there is help for Mum and for me. Now I can get on with my life." Paul, 15*

*"Just talking and knowing there is someone there who reads this and understands really helps! Thank you!" Helpline caller, 15*

*"Hi, I am 13 and both my parents are alcoholics. I live with my mum who is the worst. When she isn't drunk (not very often) I love her to bits, but I can tell when she has had something to drink and she is a*



*completely different person. I don't feel safe or comfortable around her." Helpline caller, 13*

*"Nobody knows what it's like at home and I don't have the bottle to tell them. I don't think my mum would approve but I need someone to talk to and know what it's like. I really can't deal with it anymore." Charlie, 12*

*"At this moment in time, my Mum is upstairs crying in her room. I've no idea what to say or do. I really don't see a way out of the darkness or if I'll ever be rid of the 'deep' anger; living in this house leaves me feeling over-whelmed. Thanks for listening; it helps to know you are there." Tony*

*"Everything revolves around Dad's drinking. We pretend everything's okay but I can't stop thinking about what's going on when I'm not there. Sometimes I think it's me that's the problem." Philip, 15*

*"I was too scared to tell anyone my friends or school because I was so worried they would take me away." Tuesday, 19*

*"When I used to go to my friend's house I noticed how happy her mum and dad were. They didn't seem to shout at each other. Her mum would make us tea. My friend didn't have to do things like that. I was confused – Why was it different in my house?" Nicky*

*"When my parents are drunk they take it out on me. I don't care about the abuse I get but I do care about what happens to my younger brother and sister. I don't want this for them or me so I am doing something about it. I'm calling." Kerry, 13*

*"After shopping I would hear the bottles clinking in her bag and my stomach would sink." Nicky*

*"I enjoyed school but I remember feeling different from other children there. I often felt embarrassed. Sometimes I hid things or told lies." Amy*

*"Everything revolves around Mum's drinking. We pretend it's not happening. I can't stop thinking about what's happening at home when I'm not there. Sometimes I think I'm going mad." Paul, 15*

*"Mum hasn't drank for a long time now. She told me it is very hard. I have just got to believe that she won't again." Nicky*

*"I get so embarrassed when I see my dad drunk. My mates laugh and I laugh too, but I'm not laughing inside." Kevin, 14*

## What you can do

### Find out more about alcohol and the effects on the family

Understanding how alcohol affects the person drinking and everyone else in the family can help you make some sense of the chaos that often exists when a parent has a drink problem. This can make it easier for you to cope with what's going on. There are some question and answers in this booklet and more information, including videos, on our website ([nacoa.org.uk](http://nacoa.org.uk)).





## Remember you are not responsible for other people's drinking

You can't control someone else's drinking or behaviour. Pouring away, watering down or hiding alcohol may make things worse, and the person drinking may become angry, aggressive or secretive. Remember your mum or dad's drinking is not, and never was, your fault.

### Try to remember the six Cs:

1. I didn't **cause** it
2. I can't **cure** it
3. I can't **control** it
4. I can take **care** of myself
5. I can **communicate** my feelings
6. I can make healthy **choices**

## Remember alcohol affects the brain

Alcohol can make people forget things. They often don't remember silly, embarrassing or other things they have done when drunk; these are known as memory blackouts. Try not to argue with your parent when they are drinking; it may make things worse; they may say things they normally wouldn't and will often not remember the conversation later.

## Be realistic

When someone has a drink problem, alcohol often becomes their main priority. The need to drink becomes so important that they may hurt and upset people they love. Promises are often made that are not kept. This can be very difficult for everyone in the family. Young people may feel let down or forgotten.

## Ways to feel better

### Talk to someone you trust

Talk about how you are feeling to a friend, relative, teacher or Nacoa. This is not being disloyal to your family and it can make you feel less alone. Sharing your feelings can help you feel better. At Nacoa we understand what it can be like when a parent has a drink problem. We will listen and we won't judge; you can trust us.

### Make time for yourself

You are important too. Find time for things that interest you, whether it's sport or hobbies, going for a walk, reading a book or watching TV, walking the dog or just meeting up with friends. Perhaps join an after-school, youth or sports club, a Scout or Girl Guide group, or find people with similar interests. Sometimes worries can take over, and taking a break (even if just for a short while) can help you to feel less stressed.

## Understand that your feelings are normal

It's OK to hate the problems that alcoholism causes, yet love the person who is drinking. Alcohol problems in the family can result in a lot of complicated, confusing and upsetting feelings. Talking and writing about your feelings can help you make sense of them. Some people like to keep a daily journal, write poems, or





draw and paint. Sometimes, people find it helpful to write a letter to their parent(s) explaining how they feel – a way to externalise experiences and emotional pain. Some people write with no intention of sending the letter.

### Read people's experiences

Hearing about the experiences of other people often helps to make sense of our own feelings, and helps us to feel less alone. Although every family is unique, there are many similarities in how alcohol problems affect the family. You can read other young people's experiences on our website ([nacoa.org.uk](http://nacoa.org.uk)).

### Read about the problem

The last page of this booklet contains details of books that may be helpful when a parent has, or has had, a drink problem. There are more suggestions on our website ([nacoa.org.uk](http://nacoa.org.uk)). Some of these books may be available at your local library.

### Contact Nacoa

At Nacoa, we understand what it can be like when a parent has an alcohol problem. Our helpline is free and confidential. We won't judge and we are here to help. Sometimes just talking or writing to someone anonymously about how you are feeling can help.

When you call or email, you can tell us little or as much as you wish. Your calls or emails can be long or short and you can contact us as often as you want. You don't even need to tell anyone you've talked to us. You can call us on 0800 358 3456 or email us at [helpline@nacoa.org.uk](mailto:helpline@nacoa.org.uk). We also have online messageboard for people affected by their parent's addiction <http://www.nacoa.org.uk/messageboards>.

### Meet others with the same problem

There are places you can go to meet young people in similar circumstances. Nacoa is always happy to research sources of support in your area. There are a few Alateen meetings around the UK for young people aged 12-17 affected by a family member's drinking. If you are over 12 you can go to an AI-Anon Family Groups meeting; however, this is likely to be mainly adults. If you are a young person providing emotional, physical or practical support for your family because of substance misuse you see if there's a young carer's project near you ([youngcarer.com/young-carers-services](http://youngcarer.com/young-carers-services)).

### Access counselling services

Some people find professional counselling a helpful way to work through the lasting effects of growing up with parental alcoholism. If you think counselling might be right for you, you could talk to your doctor who may be able to refer you. There is also likely to be a counsellor you can talk to at your school or college. We can happily research organisations that offer counselling to young people in your area.

### Ways to stay safe

Sometimes, when people drink they can change, and hurt themselves and people around them. Call Nacoa and we can help you to make a plan just in case you get scared. It does not have to be about the drink problem but anything which frightens you. Making a plan means you will have all the things you need to stop feeling scared when you need it most.



- Think about where you feel safe. Some people feel safe in their bedroom, with their brothers and sisters or other people they trust, like a friend, grandparent or neighbour.
- You could make lists of places where you feel safe and friends and family you trust with their telephone numbers so you have everything you need to keep safe and separate from the problems at home. Make sure you've got their numbers saved in your phone or you could make a card of important numbers to keep in your pencil case, wallet or bag.
- If you are frightened at any time, contact Nacoa and we can help you to find a safe place or phone ChildLine on 0800 1111 and ask for help. The Police and Ambulance Service are also here to help and want you to be safe. You can call 999.

Even if you have other people – like Social Workers – in your life you can continue to contact Nacoa. Nacoa is here for life. You can call as often as you want, even if you just want to talk to someone so you are not alone.

## Questions and answers about alcohol problems

### When does someone have a problem with drink? Is my parent an alcoholic?

If you feel affected by someone else's drinking, there could well be a problem. The following questions look at what alcoholism is and why people continue to drink even when it's affecting their lives and those around them. Remember that Nacoa is here for everyone affected by their parent, step-parent, grandparent or carer's drinking. We will focus on the impact it is having on you, whether they've been diagnosed as having a problem or not.

#### What is alcoholism?

Alcoholism is like an illness where people have lost control over their drinking; they may set out to have one or two drinks and end up drinking more than they intended. People who are dependent on alcohol have a compulsion to drink, spend increasing amounts of time drinking, thinking about drinking and recovering from drinking, with unsuccessful attempts to stop or cut down. They can become physically dependent on alcohol, needing to drink to get rid of unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. People usually need help to tackle their problem drinking.

#### How can I stop my parent from drinking?

When someone has an alcohol problem, they have lost control over their drinking. Denial is a common feature and the drinker may not even realise they have a problem. There is help available, but they have to accept they have a problem and want to stop. Your parent's behaviour is not your fault and you can't control their drinking. Look after yourself and avoid getting into an argument when they are drinking. You can feel better whether your parent continues to drink or not. Try talking to someone you trust, like a friend, relative, teacher or Nacoa.

#### Is there a cure for alcoholism?

Alcoholism is treatable – people can find help for their drink problems and go on to live healthy lives. For some people this is possible by not drinking alcohol at all. This is often referred to as 'being in recovery'. The person in recovery will usually have to work at staying sober and remaining free of alcohol or other addictive substances and behaviours. Some people do this with the help of self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous.





Some people need medical help and go into treatment or rehab where their physical and psychological dependence is addressed over a series of weeks, months and sometimes years. Some rehab centres offer residential programmes, followed by supported living before returning to the family. Others offer a daily programme where patients continue to live at home. Funding is sometimes available from the local authority after a referral by the GP. Nacoa will happily research rehab or treatment centres so you have an idea of what might be available for your parent(s).

### Why can't our doctor do anything about it?

Doctors can offer advice and suggestions, but the person with the drink problem has to accept they have a problem and want help. No one can be forced into treatment. This may be difficult for family members to accept but talking to the doctor can still help to find support for yourself.

### What is denial?

Denial often goes hand in hand with addiction and is not the same as lying. The drinker believes that alcohol is the solution to problems, something that helps them to function normally in their everyday life. They may blame other people for their drinking, and will often find ways to excuse their behaviour. Denial can spread into all areas of life as a way of coping and hiding the problem from him/herself and others. Sometimes family members can also be in denial as a way of coping; pretending the problem doesn't exist or keeping it hidden from the outside world.

### Why has this happened to me? Have I done something to deserve it? Is it my fault?

You do not deserve it and it isn't your fault. Alcoholism affects people of all ages and all walks of life. There are many research studies which look at the reason why some people become dependent on drink and others don't. A number of factors play a part – a history of alcoholism in the family, how we deal with life's challenges, changes in brain function and more. However, there is no definitive reason why people drink and there is no reason why this has happened to you. Young people can often feel guilty and ashamed that they have not been able to help their parent to stop drinking, feeling in some way that they have caused it. Please be assured that someone else's drinking is not your fault; you did not cause it and you can't control it. Parents sometimes blame children, and everyone else, for their drinking. You had no control over the problem starting and you can't make it stop. Only your parent(s) can take responsibility for their behaviour; but you can look after you.

### My parent had/has a drink problem; does that mean I will too?

Nacoa's research study suggests that people who grew up with parental alcoholism are almost three times as likely to develop a problem with alcohol compared to the general population. This does not mean that they will end up drinking like their parents, but that they are more likely to do so if they follow the don't talk, don't trust, don't feel rules which promote drinking or ignoring problems (denial) as a way to cope with life's challenges.

People who grew up with parental drinking often report an uneasy relationship with alcohol and are aware that they may not know if/when they cross the line into uncontrolled drinking. Some people make a decision not to drink alcohol at all, whilst others drink socially. Many people worry they will turn out like their parent(s) but being aware of all the risks, looking after yourself and adopting healthy ways to cope, e.g. talking to someone you trust about your worries, can help.





## How many people are affected by their parents' drinking?

Research suggests that 1 in 5 children in the UK are currently living with parents who drink hazardously. Remember that you can still be affected even if you are not living in the same house or if your parent is no longer drinking. This means other people you know at school, college, clubs etc. may be experiencing similar problems, and may be trying to hide it from the outside world.

## What can I do to feel better?

Look after yourself. Remember you can't control someone else's drinking and you certainly didn't cause it. Speak to someone you trust who understands the problem. Contact Nacoa and speak to one of our trained volunteer helpline counsellors, who understand what it can be like when a parent has an alcohol problem. We will listen without judging and help you to find ways to cope. You can't change your parent's behaviour but you can change how you feel about yourself. We can help you explore things that you enjoy which take you out of the situation and your worries for a while.

## Helpful books

### Courage to be Me: Living with Alcoholism Al-Anon Family Groups

Written by young people whose lives are affected by someone else's drinking. Describes what happened in their homes, and how they dealt with it.

### Emmy's Question Jeanette Auth

When nine-year-old Emmy finds a wine bottle hidden in her toy chest, she suspects it's connected to her mum's behaviour. After joining a group for children of alcoholics she comes to better understand her mother's disease.

### My Dad Loves Me, My Dad Has a Disease: A Child's View Claudia Black

An illustrated workbook that explains and portrays addiction from the viewpoint of children who have at least one addicted parent. It gives children and young people a chance to share their thoughts and feelings around addiction.

### An Elephant in the Living Room: The Children's Book Jill Hastings & Marion Typpo

An illustrated story to help children and young people understand and cope with the problem of alcoholism or other drug addiction in the family.

### Missing Mummy: Living in the Shadow of an Alcoholic Parent Emma Spiegler

Offers an insight into the emotions of a child growing up with an alcoholic parent, through a compilation of poems.

### The Truth About Leo David Yelland

The story of Leo, in his last year of primary school, who loses his mother to cancer, and finds himself coping with his alcoholic father.





The National Association  
for Children of Alcoholics

## Other sources of support

Some other national organisations offering support to young people are listed below. You can also contact Nacoa (0800 358 3456 [helpline@nacoa.org.uk](mailto:helpline@nacoa.org.uk)) and we will happily research services, both national and local to you that may be helpful.

### Al-Anon Family Groups

[www.al-anonuk.org.uk](http://www.al-anonuk.org.uk)

Helpline: 0207 403 0888

Support for anyone whose life is, or has been, affected by someone else's drinking, through local meetings and literature.

### ChildLine

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Helpline: 0800 1111

24-hour helpline and website providing support for young people around a range of issues.

