



Helping everyone affected
by a parent's drinking



COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A PARENT

FOR ADULTS



FREE Helpline 0800 358 3456
helpline@nacoa.org.uk





Our helpline receives thousands of calls from children, young people and adults dealing with the loss of a parent who had an alcohol problem and the many feelings that come with it.

We hope this booklet will help.

It can be life-changing to talk with people who understand and won't judge. Nacoa is here for you.

Hilary Henriques, Nacoa CEO

How are you feeling?

The death of a parent is one of the hardest things you're likely to experience. For those whose parents had problems with alcohol or other addictions, it can be even more difficult.

You may not even know what to say about how your parent died. Perhaps you didn't have contact with them, or your relationship was complicated.

Grief can make you feel:

- sad, angry, scared, embarrassed, irritable, lonely, or numb
- confused and have lots of unanswered questions
- relieved but then guilty for having these thoughts
- you don't want to be alone / you don't want to be with others
- have difficulties sleeping, eating and concentrating



Remember...

- ✓ It is not your fault. You were not responsible for your parent's drinking, nor their death.
- ✓ Alcohol problems are like an illness where the person has lost control over their drinking. They continue to drink even when it is affecting their lives, their health and people around them.
- ✓ It is OK to talk. Alcohol problems can become the family secret. The family rules *don't talk, don't trust, don't feel* develop to keep the problem hidden from the outside world.
- ✓ It can be hard to go against these rules, even after someone dies. Talking about your feelings is not betraying their memory and can help you feel better.
- ✓ You are not alone. Whether they died directly from their drinking, from other health problems, suicide, or something else, we are here to listen. You can talk to Nacoa no matter how long it's been since your parent died.

"My counsellor has termed my grieving process as 'complex grief' due to the large variety of emotions that a child of an alcoholic parent experiences."

Hattie

"When he died I didn't know whether to cry or to be angry. I felt so guilty because in a way I had given up on him."

Karen





Let yourself feel and express feelings

It is OK to feel however you are feeling. Feelings come and go. Strong feelings can be uncomfortable. However, letting yourself feel them, with the support of people you trust, can help you heal.

Distraction can help to get through parts of the day but having space to grieve and be however you are is important too.

Here are some ideas to let your feelings out:

talk about them

draw or paint

write a journal or poems

scream into a pillow

breathe!

snuggle in a blanket

talk or write to your parent as if they were still alive (include things you didn't get the chance to say or news you want to share)

ask for a hug

let yourself cry



Talk to someone you trust

Talking can help you feel better. Maybe you have a friend, family member, counsellor, support group member, or someone else you could talk to. You can always talk to us at Nacoa.

Look after yourself

Try to keep doing things that keep you well, like eating healthily and getting enough sleep.

Keep doing things you enjoy

Sometimes grief can take over. Taking a break can help. Having fun doesn't mean you've forgotten about your mum or dad.

Find time for activities you like, whether it's sport or hobbies, going for a walk, reading a book, watching TV or gaming, or meeting up with friends.



Find ways to remember your parent

Share memories of your mum or dad (both positive and negative). Some people make a memory box of items that remind them of their parent, or perhaps create a photo album or playlist of songs.

Plan for key dates

Dates like birthdays or anniversaries of their death might be difficult. Perhaps create a tradition like lighting a candle, eating a special meal, or watching a particular film.

"Every day I think about my mum. I miss her so much and wish she were here. As I've got older I have learned that it is ok to talk about my feelings and remember the happy times that we had. She wouldn't want me to be sad and she did love me."

Nicky



Ways to feel better

Find out more about alcohol and the effects on the family

When someone has an alcohol problem, the need to drink becomes so important that they may hurt or upset people they love.

Understanding how alcohol affects the person drinking and others around them can help you make sense of your situation.

Hear from people in similar situations

Read experiences on Nacoe's website, talk online on Nacoe's message boards, or access other support such as listed below. You are not alone.

scan to read personal
experience stories



Be kind to yourself

There's no right or wrong way to be when a parent dies and no set amount of time to grieve.

Some days will be easier than others. You can learn to live with grief and find things to look forward to again.

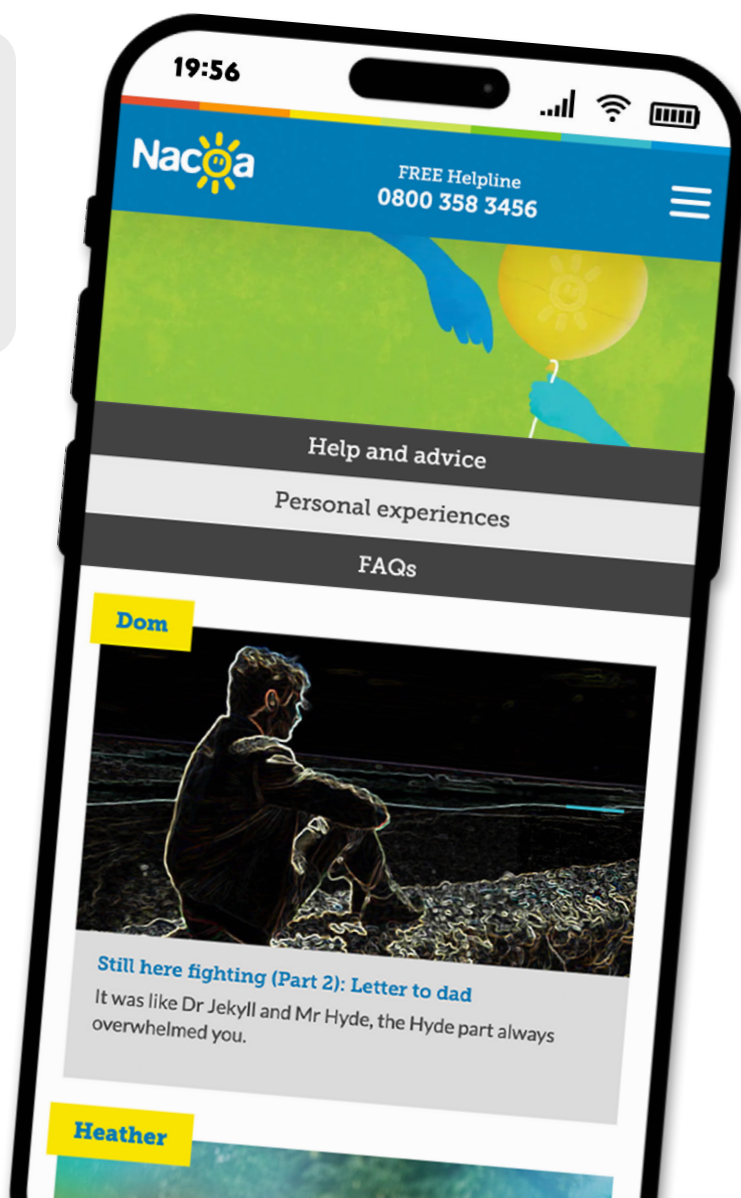
"Grieving for her was as much about understanding her alcoholism as it was about coming to terms with losing her."

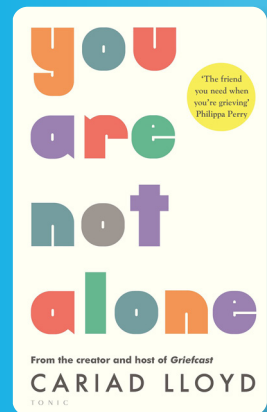
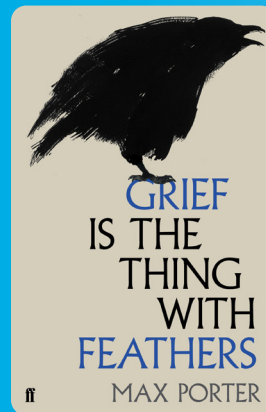
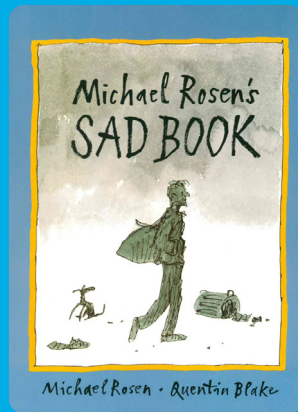
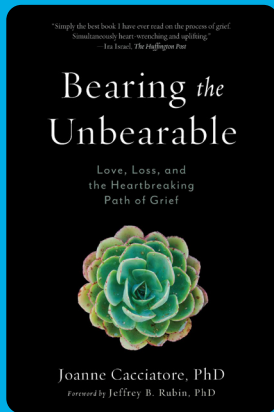
James

Other sources of support:

- Adult Children of Alcoholics & Dysfunctional Families (ACA)
- Al-Anon Family Groups
- Cruse Bereavement Support
- DrugFAM
- The Good Grief Trust
- Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs
- Suicide & co
- Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide

Nacoe is here for you





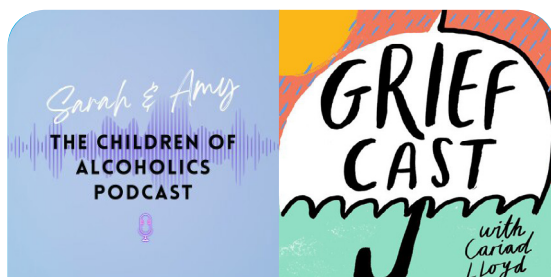
books



leaflets



films/tv



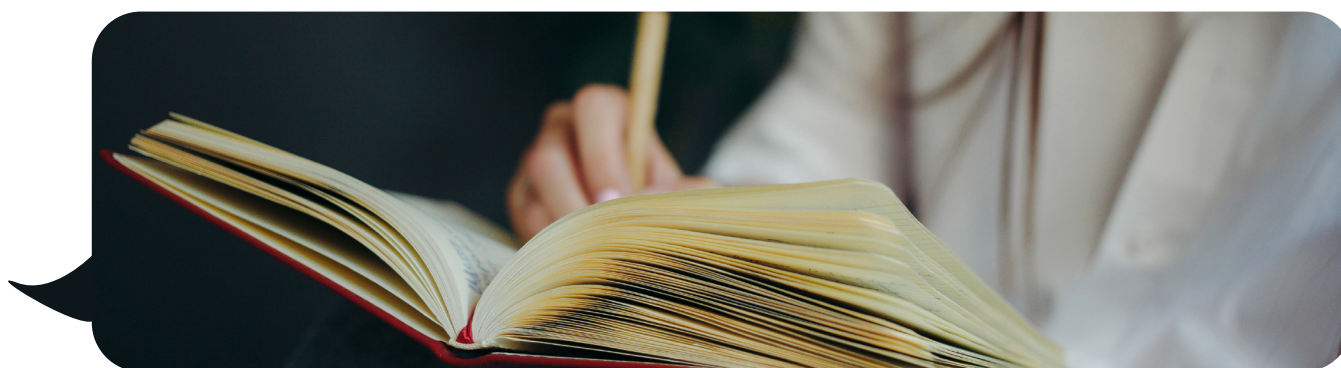
podcasts



The Invisible Suitcase: understanding grief and how to manage it | Child Bereavement UK

videos





Nacoa volunteer Jess's father was a friendly, intelligent and funny man. He also drank a lot. Jess wrote this letter soon after he died and shares it here to help others know they are not alone.

One night she searched 'Grieving an alcoholic parent', thinking she was grieving 'wrong'. That's how she found Nacoa and finally felt it wasn't her fault.

Dear dad,



When you died, there were two kinds of reactions: The people who wanted to ease the pain of losing a parent, who wanted to make sure you left a good legacy and told me how often you talked about us, how proud you were of me.

Then there were the others who said, "I didn't know you had a Dad", who struggled to comprehend how painful I was finding your death because I never really talked about you.

I loved you but our relationship was complex and so turbulent that I only spoke of you to the people closest to me.



When people talked about childhood memories, it never really felt appropriate to talk about the days spent showing you AA leaflets, the afternoons waiting at the windows where you never showed, or checking the doors were locked when you passed out.



The grieving process felt so different. When people talked about losing a parent and their journey, I couldn't relate.

I wanted to believe you could change

The thing I still grieve the most is the loss of hope that you will one day be sober.

You tried to stop drinking so many times, it somehow never lasted but I would always find it within me to give you another chance because I think, like any child, I wanted to believe you could change and that one day I would be the most important thing in your life.

You will now never get to attend my wedding. You won't get to hold a grandchild or see the rest of my life play out.

It feels like a double-edged sword though, because all of these things would have had to be risk assessed—it wouldn't have been simple because alcoholics are unpredictable.

A wave of emotions

Then there's the part I always feel so guilty for saying: your drinking can't hurt me anymore.



What's happened has happened, and those memories will live with me for a long time, but with the loss of hope that you will become sober comes the comfort that you can't let me down again.

After you died, Dad, I felt a whole wave of emotions, and also like no one understood. There were days when I felt like everyone thought I had been grieving for so long: why would I miss someone who was inadvertently so toxic?



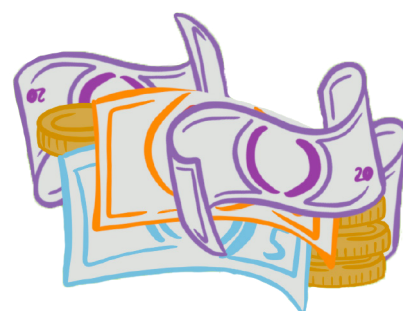
I was angry because even in death, your life was chaotic. There wasn't initially time to grieve because we were sorting out the mess you'd left and all of the skeletons in your closet. Skeletons that in time helped me to understand why you used alcohol to escape.

Then I was angry and blamed myself for not being enough to change everything. When you were sober, you were my hero.

We went everywhere together. You were the fun, playful parent, and I idolised you. There were amazing days spent camping, playing chess, and walking all over. But before you died, I don't think I had seen you sober for over a decade.

Was it my fault?

When you were drunk, I remember how it was always someone else's fault.



Yes, you'd fallen asleep on the sofa with a cigarette in your hand, but I was a child, and I shouldn't have been checking up on you.

Yes, we were helping you look down the sofa for money for wine before midday, but we didn't understand.

Now I am left wondering if it was my fault for giving up, for agreeing to meet you in pubs—if I could have done more. And every night, I have nightmares about the worst times.

Your death was really sudden and there was so much left unsaid. It still feels unfair that we didn't get to spend more time together.

It is as if there was a choice between hanging out with me or a bottle of wine, and the wine usually won.

What those people didn't see was how broken I was when you died: I couldn't leave the house for a while, I couldn't be around people.

You used to come and go from my life and that was my normal. I would ring you sometimes, and I'd have a sharp realisation that, this time, you weren't drunk, but you were no longer here.



I always felt guilty for talking about your drinking. I think I genuinely believed if I had been a better child then you wouldn't have drunk.

So I just didn't talk. I walked around feeling a sense of shame.

I miss you

I miss you every day. I miss the hope. I cannot get used to this new reality when in the end, no matter how much we tried to help, we couldn't keep you alive.

But if there is one good thing to come out of your death: it is that I can finally talk. I can finally say you were an alcoholic and I am slowly beginning to say that it isn't my fault.

I am learning that there are other people who have been through some of what I have and that the relationship you had doesn't dictate whether you should or shouldn't grieve.

You probably were a proud parent. You probably did love us and did talk about us. I just wish you'd been sober enough to talk to me, to tell me, and that I could have come before your addiction.

*love from
Jess*





Helping everyone affected
by a parent's drinking

Registered charity No: 1009143

Nacoa has been helping children affected by their parent's drinking or similar addictive problems since 1990. This includes children of all ages, many of whose problems only become apparent in adulthood.

patrons include



Tony
Adams



Calum
Best



Sophie K



Elle
Macpherson

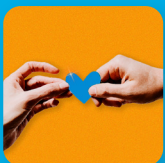


Vicky
Pattison

"My dad's drinking had a great effect on our family. He died when I was 19 and I blamed myself for this all my life.

Then I heard about Nacoa. It took a simple phone call to get in touch and they have been nothing but helpful and kind. I can now openly speak about my past and deal with my emotions and feelings."

Jordan



*Please support us by becoming a member,
volunteering or making a donation.*

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