Daughter's in AA? What are our responsibilities as her family? [1]

Dear Alice,

(1) I have a daughter who just joined AA. She has a drinking problem. What are our responsibilities to her as a husband, father, mother?

(2) Should any alcohol be kept in her house or our house (we are the parents) when she is around?

(3) It has been said that alcoholism runs in families? Is this true? Does it seem to skip generations? If so, why?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As you have come to know, coping with a family member's drinking problem can bring out many questions and challenges. As a parent, it's not unusual to want to do everything you can to make sure your child is successful in her efforts to address her drinking problem? even if this child is herself an adult. It's also important to recognize that your daughter has to do this work for herself. As a family, you can be supportive and encouraging, but she will ultimately be responsible for her own actions and behavior.

One of the interesting things about this example is that in many families where there is a person with a drinking problem, everyone scurries around, walking on eggshells, always trying to make sure this one person's needs are met. In the meantime, other family members' needs fall by the wayside, causing resentment, sadness, anger, and low self-esteem. It would probably be useful for you and your family members to have the opportunity to talk with other people in similar situations? about your family dynamics, about your worries and fears, about many of the same questions you've asked here. In fact, there's an organization for just this purpose: Al-Anon [2]. Al-Anon is a non-denominational organization providing support to the families and friends of people with drinking problems, through self-help groups modeled after AA and the 12-step program. All meetings and inquiries are confidential. You can look at their website for more information and/or call their hotline number, 1.888.4AL.ANON (425.2666), for meetings in your area. In addition, to express support for your daughter as she goes through her recovery, your family can attend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) [3] meetings, either the same meeting she usually attends or a different one, depending on what she prefers.

Your family also wonders whether to keep alcohol around the house. Many people who have joined AA or are working through an alcohol problem with another program find that avoiding all situations where alcohol is present is their safest bet, at least at first. Your daughter may
decide that emptying the liquor cabinets of all temptations helps her to keep focused. This is something that she can certainly talk about in her AA meetings. On the one hand, the same logic might appear to apply to any alcohol that is normally kept around at your house. Talk with your daughter about how she would feel if there were drinks around if she visited, as well as the opposite: how she would feel if you threw everything out. While she may appreciate the gesture, your daughter may also express a desire to disrupt your life as little as possible, or may say that in order to really know that she's beating her problem, she has to be able to resist her urge to drink when in her usual social situations.

Think also about your household's needs and usual pattern of behavior. Maybe you all don't really drink much at home, and so giving away the few bottles collecting dust in the pantry wouldn't make much of a difference. But if you entertain company often, enjoy a glass of wine with dinner once in a while, or a beer with the barbeque, it's not unreasonable to want to go on ahead doing these activities.

You've also asked about alcoholism running in families, perhaps skipping generations. This is a common concern among parents in your situation. Recent studies indicate that it seems that there are several phenotypes, or genetic traits, that determine such factors as a person's dependence on alcohol and the number of drinks consumed in a sitting. For instance, many children of alcoholics have less of a response to the effects of drinking alcohol and have to drink more to compensate for this, thus increasing the probability of becoming an alcoholic. Scientists have even identified chromosomes 1 and 4 as being the pieces of genetic material that are directly linked to the development of alcoholism. There is also strong evidence from adoption and twin studies that a strong relationship exists between alcohol dependence and genetic tendencies. The statistics show that between 40 and 60 percent of those who developed alcoholism had alcoholic birth parents.

Along with the genetic factors involved, patterns of behavior and ways of relating also get transmitted through regular family living, such as turning to alcohol for comfort simply because someone watched his/her parents or older siblings do so. Certain psychiatric disorders, such as depression and anti-personality disorder, may also increase one's risk for alcoholism. On the flip side, alcoholism may cause underlying psychiatric disorders to manifest themselves.

When it comes to incidences of alcoholism within a family, sometimes the patterns are obvious, but usually they are so ingrained that they go unnoticed. Perhaps you're thinking of a grandparent or other older relative who had a problem with drinking, but wondering why your daughter has been affected rather than your generation. This is a good question, and one that may not have a complete answer. One possibility is that while one person might turn to alcohol or other drugs to cope with life's stresses, someone else might express the same frustrations through other self-destructive behaviors, such as compulsive dieting, workaholism, or being painfully shy. Others may learn to manage their hard-to-handle feelings and responsibilities through more productive outlets, which include community service, creative writing, therapy, or spirituality.

Talking with other people in a support group and/or with a professional counselor can help you sort through these options. It's important that you and each of your family members have the opportunity to explore questions like these, your feelings around your daughter's alcohol use, and her hope for recovery. An Al-Anon group is a good place to start. You can also find assistance through local community centers or YMCA [4] groups, a church or synagogue, or the help of a professional counselor. Read Finding low-cost counseling [5] for more information about locating a counselor near you. Your family may also find it helpful to read self-help
books on this topic, particularly any by Melody Beattie. The following organizations may also be of help:

- Children of Alcoholics Foundation [6]
- National Association for Children of Alcoholics [7]

Your daughter has likely been through a lot and has worked hard already to seek the help and support she needs. You and your kin can help her, as well as yourselves, by getting some assistance, too.

Alice!
Category:
Alcohol [8]
Helping & Getting Help [9]

Related questions

Finding low-cost counseling [10]
Child of an alcoholic [11]
How can I help my alcoholic family member? [12]
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