

ADULT CHILDREN OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

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There is a strong correlation between adult children of alcoholics and adult children of dysfunctional families. Many of the characteristics listed below were written in the book *Adult Children of Alcoholics*¹. I have adapted and added characteristics which give us a more complete picture of the dysfunctional characteristics often seen in people who come out of disturbed families.

No characteristic is written in stone. When somebody makes a choice to improve themselves these characteristics can be replaced with healthier traits. People become this way because in their dysfunctional family of origin they learned to develop these defensive and/or negative traits to survive. It is important to note that all individuals and families are somewhat dysfunctional to a lesser or greater degree.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

¹⁸ "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." (John 3:16-21 NKJV)

The first step to change is admitting that something needs changing – you will know if it needs changing because it doesn't work.

⁸Bring forth fruit that is consistent with repentance [let your lives prove your change of heart]; (Matthew 3:8 AMP)

If you are unhappy and relationships are not working for you, stop making the same mistakes over and over again. It's time for change. You may not have the power to change someone else, but you do have the power to change yourself.

¹ Woititz, Janet, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, Health Communications Inc., Pompano Beach, FL, 1983.

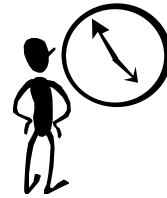
❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families guess at what is normal.**



- They simply have no experience with what is normal.
- Not knowing what is normal they will still look at things that they think to be normal and try to copy them; habitual behaviors.
- To keep people from finding out that they do not know they guess at what is normal or appropriate.
- They often display an inability to express the right emotions at the right time.
- Some will think too much of themselves based on an artificially inflated self-esteem (e.g. grandiosity).
- Others will think poorly of themselves based upon the lies of childhood criticisms, condemnations, and abuse.

❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families have difficulty in following a project through from beginning to end.**

- From procrastination to moving from one incomplete project to another.
- Low frustration tolerance.
- Giving up to easily OR the opposite extreme of stubbornly and/or obsessively becoming preoccupied with a project to the extent that the major point of the activity is lost.
- An unproductive life-style is the result of procrastination; ¹³ *Loafers say, "It's dangerous out there! Tigers are prowling the streets!" and then pull the covers back over their heads. ¹⁴ Just as a door turns on its hinges, so a lazybones turns back over in bed. (Proverbs 26:13-16 MSG)*



❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth – They wouldn't necessarily see it as lying.**

- Justifying and rationalizing faulty beliefs.
- Denying of unpleasant realities (denying the problem), cover-ups, broken promises, and inconsistencies.
- Self-deception can be seen in those who lie; sincere delusion which is denial.
- Integrity is destroyed by lying; ²⁵ *What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. (Ephesians 4:25 MSG)*

❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families judge themselves without mercy.**

- They can never be good enough in their own eyes.
- They believe that their family would be better off without them.
- They can never meet their own expectations, not to mention those of others.
- They often feel both earned and unearned guilt.



- Judging is rarely done with standards of fairness; ² *And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.* ³ *He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay.* ⁴ *He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited...* (Isaiah 11:2-4a NLT)

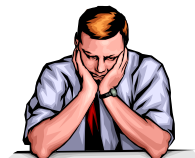
❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families have difficulty having fun.**



- They do not deserve to rest and relax or have fun.
- If they relaxed and had fun they would perceive themselves as wasting time.
- They will be punished or something bad will happen if they relax and have fun.
- A balanced life is impossible to attain without rest and relaxation; ³ *And God blessed (spoke good of) the seventh day, set it apart as His own, and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all His work which He had created and done.* (Genesis 2:3 AMP)

❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families take themselves too seriously.**

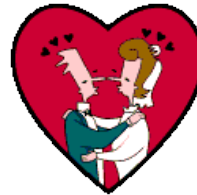
- They may disapprove of other's who behave silly.
- They are at war with themselves.
- The pressure to be adult helps keep the child repressed.
- Takes work too seriously.
- They become easily insulted or offended.



- Many will have trouble being happy or laughing; *But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful.* (Psalms 68:3) *Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.* (Psalms 126:2) *When times are good be happy. . .* (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families have difficulty with intimate relationships.**

- No reference for a healthy relationship.
- They do not know how to meet their own or others intimacy needs.
- They feel loved one day and abandoned the next.
- “I hate you - Don’t leave me!” OR “I love you – Don’t touch me!”
- They usually have problems in relating sexually.
- They are emotionally and relationally immature.
- Low frustration tolerance in relationship.
- High level of anxiety in relationship.
- Many can only be friendly with those who never say “No.”



❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families over-react to changes over which they have no control.**



- Exaggerated fear of the unknown.
- Not being in control is seen as painful and too discomforting.
- Being in more control is always the solution.
- If changes occur you will lose control.
- They become too absorbed in the relationship with person and/or object.
 - They obsess and will tend to try and dominate.

❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families constantly seek approval and affirmation.**

- Receiving approval and affirmations are difficult.
- Having rarely received affirmations as a child you rarely give them as an adult.
- They continually worry about not being approved, accepted, or recognized.
- Will do almost anything to receive approval and affirmation.
 - There is even a need to receive approval and affirmation from pets.
- Obligation and powerlessness steal away the joy that can come from approval and affirmation.

❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families feel that they are different and somewhat isolated from other people.**

- To a certain extent they are different from those who come from healthier families.
 - Even if the circumstance does not warrant it the feeling prevails.
 - They will tend to pick role models that are inappropriate.
 - They will tend to pick people who are worse than they perceive themselves to be.
 - In this way they can feel better about themselves.
 - They feel less likely to be rejected by those who are worse off.
 - They are more likely to make you feel accepted.
- ³⁵/₁₇ They excuse this by saying, "They accept me for who I am."
- In most cases that is a lie. They are accepted because they can be used and abused.



❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families have all or nothing thinking.**

- They are either totally responsible or irresponsible.
- They are ambivalent about most things.
- They can feel love as quickly as they can feel hate.
 - An extreme feeling might be, "I hate you, don't leave me!"
- Saying "No" can be very difficult OR it becomes the one of most predictable words in their daily vocabulary.
- Because of lack of cooperation in the family it is difficult to cooperate with others.
- The constant fear of being exposed as inadequate causes them to either avoid or try too hard.



❑ **Adult children of dysfunctional families are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved.**



- Because it takes a long time to develop a close relationship you tend to hang onto what you have even if it hurts you.
- Even if they use and abuse you the fact that they stay around or keep coming back is enough to make you sustain the relationship.
- Because you don't believe you are deserving of genuine love you are willing to settle and stand by that person.

- Because you have low self-worth or esteem you are willing give the benefit of the doubt to those close to you.
- Any relationship is safer than no relationship OR the opposite becomes the norm, having no relationship is safer.
 - This generally leads to quickly rebounding in relationships OR going for long periods depriving oneself of all close relationships.
 - ³⁵/₁₇ Once the intimacy needs have bottomed out, panic sets in. The deprived individual throws caution to the wind and grabs the first person – safe or unsafe – who gives them the slightest amount of attention and nurturing.
- They often hold out false hope and experience frequent disappointments as a result.
- They will protect their own dysfunctionally close relationships when others are finding fault and point their own finger at other dysfunctional relationships.

□ **Adult children of dysfunctional families are impulsive.**

- They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences.
 - This impulse leads to confusion, self-loathing, and loss of control over their environment.
 - In addition, they spend an excessive amount of energy cleaning up their mess.
 - They tend to look for immediate as opposed to deferred gratification.
 - They have difficulty being patient with others.
- In growing up if they didn't get what they wanted in that very moment that was the end of it – All or nothing thinking.

