

PARENTS OF COAS

By Stephanie Abbott



Acknowledgment of children's pain is one of the most poignant aspects of recovery. Such pain can be so difficult to face that parents may try to deny that it is there. The children, sensitive to parental grief, may also deny it.

I knew a man, sober for many years and working in the field, who pronounced that concern for children of alcoholics was a "fad" that wouldn't last very long. I suspected that he didn't want to look very hard at the special difficulties that his sons had with their marriages. Acceptance would mean that the children need healing, and that it doesn't come about simply because the parents are now sane and sober.

In the early years of recovery, many people find enormous challenges in changing those responses to people and events that got them into trouble. They work at being more responsible, letting go of problems they can't solve, and people they can't change, and making amends to those they have harmed. Many think making amends consists only of explaining why they were the way they were, saying they were sorry, and changing behavior.

Some adult children, whose parents are still sick, would be relieved to have that admission, as they struggle with the realities of painful family sys-

tems which revolve around active addiction. Or their parents are dead, and the children know some things will never be resolved.

But others cope with their anger about the past, even when their present relationship with their parents is fairly good. Mothers and fathers then have to deal over a period of years with hurt and resentful children with few guidelines. Some have resolved the matter in their own minds with the Amends Step (Ninth Step of AA and Al-Anon), and can't understand why it doesn't heal the resentment. They don't know that this step is mainly for their own benefit and healing.

Listening to many parents and adult children, I have come to understand some of the barriers to forgiveness and letting go of the past. It doesn't seem to be enough to acknowledge

"...RECOVERING PARENTS CAN BE VERY INTRUSIVE..."

the way it was in the family. It can sound very much like self-justification and the children may want no part of it. What

they often do want is for the parents to listen to how it was for the children without interrupting and explaining.

Another complaint I hear is that recovering parents can be very intrusive with their own recovery programs. In their anxiety to repair the damage to the children they may be very critical.

Comments such as "you are headed down the path I followed" or "you are very codependent" are rarely appreciated. Another intrusion may be giving more information about their own private life than is appropriate.

There are many good support groups in most areas that can help teenagers and adult children with their struggles; these groups can be found at school, at Al-Anon or Alateen. Going to these groups does not mean there is something wrong with the person who goes, or that attending means the problems are the fault of the child.

Sometimes nothing seems to be enough. The parent has made amends, listened to how it was without self justification and worked at respectful communication. Yet the relationship still is not as good as the parents hope it to be. It may be time "to accept the things we cannot change."

Stephanie Abbott, MA, is a family counselor, on the adjunct faculty of Marymount College, and editor of NETWORK.

Recovering parents and their children today can:

- Accept what happened, and separate from it, until the grief loses its power over today;
- Remember there is more to their history than alcoholism;
- Make today a new past that will feel good to remember;
- Cherish their hard-won depth and understanding.