Review Article

The Effects of Parental Alcoholism on Children

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Abstract

Alcoholism is often referred to as a family disease. It is called this because of its devastating impact on families. Children of alcoholics experience a wide range of consequences that affects their social, emotional, and psychological well-being. These adverse effects can often be long-lasting, and if not resolved, cause problems well into adulthood. The aim of this paper is to define alcoholism, provide details of an alcoholic home and its effect on children, and discuss potential resiliency and protective factors to support children of alcoholics.

Keywords: Alcoholism; Children; Alcohol

The Effects of Parental Alcoholism on Children

Alcohol use is commonplace in the United States (US), at social events, sporting events, and at homes. Its use in marginal to moderate amounts confers little health risks, however intake above recommended health guidelines, greater than two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women, can pose a problem [1]. Research on the long-term effects of alcohol use has largely been observational, but nevertheless has been revealing in its effects on social functioning. According to Chan [2], with excessive alcohol use comes poor physical health, mental health disorders, and a lower quality of life. Violence, accidents, and trauma are associated with higher morbidity and mortality with concurrent alcohol use. Mental health disorders such as suicide and dementia are more evident with heavy drinking. While these effects are detrimental to the user, children of alcoholics are greatly affected as well, often harboring traumatic behavioral health issues for a lifetime.

A child's environment plays a pivotal role in their development according to Bronfenbrenners's bioecological theory [3]. Children are highly influenced by not only what they experience in their environment but also by what their parents experience [4]. In the US, according to Murray [5], there are eleven million children under the age of eighteen living with at least one alcoholic parent. Alcoholic parents are often unable to meet their child's basic needs as they are preoccupied with maintaining their dependency on alcohol. These essential needs include nutrition, education, safety, structure, consistency, and affection. As these needs go unmet, children are left in homes filled with fear, uncertainty, and chaos [5]. Not only do these children experience intermittent or chronic neglect, but they are at significant risk of numerous psychological and developmental problems. This paper will provide an overview of alcoholism, describe an alcoholic home, detail the harmful ways that parental alcoholism can affect middle age children and adolescents, and explore resiliency and protective factors to support children of alcoholics.

Defining alcohol use disorder

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [6], alcohol use disorder (AUD) or alcoholism is a medical condition that is characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse health, occupational, or social consequences. Drinking more to get the same effect or experiencing withdrawal symptoms when decreasing intake or stopping suddenly are also part of the disorder [7]. Patterns of drinking that causes repeated significant distress and problems functioning has had in the past year an alcohol use disorder. Alcohol use disorder can be mild, moderate, or severe based on the number of symptoms that are experienced. A few signs and symptoms include being unable to limit intake, feeling a strong craving or urge to drink, unsuccessful attempts to cut down, experiencing withdrawal symptoms, and continuing to drink despite social, relationship, or work problems [7].

Prevalence

There is substantial data that exemplifies the magnitude of the problem. Based on the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 28.8 million adults ages eighteen and older had an alcohol use disorder in the past year. Approximately 53 percent of Americans have one or more close relatives who have an alcohol dependency problem. In addition, 43 percent of American adults have been exposed to alcoholism in the family by either experiencing in childhood or with a spouse or partner [8]. Furthermore, about one in ten children live in households with at least one parent who had a past year alcohol use disorder [9]. Based on these numbers, it is evident that alcoholism is a serious problem that affects many families.

Literature Review and Literature Search

A literature review was conducted to identify relevant research and literature on the impact of parental alcoholism on middle age children and adolescents. This literature review will provide an overview of alcoholism, describe what growing up in a chaotic alcoholic home resembles, and the harmful ways that it can affect children. It will also explore resiliency and protective factors that have been shown to support children of alcoholics. The studies that were selected for review comprised of thirteen research studies.

A chaotic alcoholic home

As Rebeta-Burditt [10] said, "Alcoholism isn't a spectator sport, eventually the whole family gets to play" (p.169). For a child growing up in an alcoholic home it is an experience rife with chaos, fear, and uncertainty. According to Iacopetti., *et al.* [11], the behaviors of an alcoholic parent can often be unpredictable and out of control in such a way that consumes the whole family and causes children to experience fear, sadness, and confusion. As children find a way to live and survive within the dysfunction, they often take responsibility to care for their parent and others in the home. In a research study conducted by Tinnfält., *et al.* [12], children between the ages of seven and nine were interviewed about their experiences of living in a home with an alcoholic parent. The children were read a short vignette about a child bringing home a friend to find their parents being drunk and having a fight. After the story was read, the children were asked to describe how the child in the story might have felt. The children connected the story with their own experiences and said the child felt sadness. They described sadness that could be felt in their throats and hearts. They also mentioned that they took on a great responsibility for their parent's addiction by trying to control every situation [12]. In addition, Dayton [13] explains that kids learn to maneuver in and out of their parents' mood, which rule the atmosphere, so children of alcoholics become parentified children. Parentified children are little caretakers who learn from a young age to manage adult problems and become independent before they are ready.

Furthermore, in an unpredictable and unreliable environment, a child no longer feels safe under those who they depend on for survival. They can feel left out in the cold, unseen, and disconnected. Not only are they being hurt and confused, but the very people they go to for solace and explanation of what's going on, are the ones causing the pain [14].

Negative impacts

Children living with alcoholics can experience a wide range of psychological, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and behavioral consequences. Such an environment has a consequential impact on a child's development. A child's basic needs can go unmet while the alcoholic parents' needs take precedence. The impact of parental alcoholism on children are so immense that they can sometimes last a lifetime.

Psychological and emotional effects

Children from alcoholic homes have longstanding effects from their experiences growing up in an abnormal environment. They don't experience the relative normalcy that nonalcoholic homes have in regard to the norms, and relationships of a nuclear family. For this reason, children do not have a clear understanding of what "normal" is such as healthy family dynamics and relationships [15].

Trust is a fundamental part of child development. According to Durwin and Reese-Weber [16], children develop a sense of trust in the world when their needs are met positively and consistently. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, feeling physically and emotionally safe are fundamental needs of a child. In an alcoholic home, trust is repeatedly broken due to the unpredictable behavior and unreliability of the alcoholic parent. As a result, children learn from an early age not to trust people and experience fears of abandonment. Children develop trust issues, have low self-esteem, and have trouble maintaining relationships as an adult [17].

Interpersonal effects

T [15] explains that children raised in alcoholic homes have difficulty interacting with others which stems from the alcoholic parent being emotionally and physically unavailable. As these children get older this can cause problems in their relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners. The result can be judging themselves too harshly, the need to seek approval from others, becoming people-pleasers, obsessive perfectionism, hoarding, isolation, excessive self-consciousness, and becoming over-achievers [15]. Additionally, a study by Hall and Webster [18] identified some basic rules found in an alcoholic home. One of the rules identified was nothing is ever good enough, but you are still expected to strive for unobtainable perfection. As children live in a world of extremes and see things in an absolute or polar manner, they believe they are the cause of making a situation good or bad [18]. So, if something bad happens, they believe it occurs because of something they did or did not do. This belief eventually becomes how they view himself or herself. The result is the need to be a perfect child.

Behavioral problems

Decades of research have shown that children who grow up in homes with an alcoholic are at increased risk for behavioral problems including alcohol use, internal and external behavior issues, and poor academic performance. According to Miller [18], children of alcoholics are three to four times more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder than those without alcoholic parents. Exposure to alcohol in the home can encourage early experimentation of drinking in children and adolescents. Based on research by Sun., *et al.* [19], higher rates of alcoholism had been found in the offspring of an alcoholic twin than in the children of a nonalcoholic twin, indicating that when genetic factors were excluded the development of alcoholism in children of alcoholics is due to environmental factors.

Children of alcoholics are at higher risk of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Internalizing behaviors refers to internally focused symptoms within self, while externalizing refers to grouping of behavioral problems that are manifested in a child's outward behavior [20]. Internalizing behaviors can include anxiety, fear, depression, sadness, and/or social withdrawal. Internalizing disorders are associated with a host of detrimental outcomes that can include school drop-out, substance use, and suicide [21]. Aggression, rule-breaking, and/or impulsivity are all externally focused behavioral symptoms. Research suggests that childhood externalizing behaviors are a major risk factor for later juvenile delinquency, adult crimes, and violence [22].

Studies show that children of alcoholics represent a group at-risk for poor school performance, increased absenteeism, and school dropout. In a study conducted by Casas-Gil and Navarro-Guzman [23], researchers examined the direct outcome variables measuring academic performance among a sample of 226 children, 108 of them from parents who misused alcohol and 118 students from nonalcoholic parents. The study identified five variables on which performance by children of alcoholic parents was poorer: intelligence, repeating a grade, low academic performance, greater absenteeism, and dropping out of school [23].

Resiliency and protective factors

The development of children from alcoholic families is most often hampered by their environment, resulting in poor outcomes as far as their educational, emotional, and behavioral growth. However, there are exceptions to this unfortunate norm where some children display tremendous resilience and grow up to be productive members of society. Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life

experiences [24]. Protective factors are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce risk factor's impact [25]. It is important to recognize that not all children who are exposed to significant adversity will develop emotional and psychological scarring.

In an online study, researchers asked 333 voluntary participants that self-identified as an adult child of an alcoholic to identify protective factors that supported them through their journey from childhood into adulthood [13]. The participants named qualities such as self-reliance, humor, sensitivity, inner strength, and humility. Chassin., *et al*. [26] explains that a strengths-based framework is needed to highlight factors that allow children of alcoholics to become resilient. These factors include both intrinsic qualities and environments that offer support and opportunities for mastery. Intrinsic qualities include intelligence, locus of control, social skills, ego development, and affectionate temperament. Environment factors that promote resilience include maintaining routines such as birthdays and vacations, parental supervision, and extra familial influences such as friends [26]. Becoming resilient can also come from nourishing relationships from kin such as an aunt, uncle, sibling, grandparent, teacher, counselor, or pastor. According to Masten and Coatsworth [27], relationships from "caring prosocial adults" are one of the greatest predictors of resilience among children of alcoholics.

Conclusion

In the US, alcohol use is common and is associated with abuse and addiction, or alcohol use disorder. When a parent struggles with alcoholism, a child in the home can experience a wide range of psychological, emotional, interpersonal, and behavioral consequences. These consequences can last a lifetime. However, some children do display resiliency which are associated with certain protective factors. The literature sheds light on the issue as it pertains to behavioral health disorders in children. Although there are many negative effects of alcoholism, there is research showing that there are protective elements. These elements may be further studied and perhaps used to develop and implement support programs, education efforts, and preventive measures to help children of alcoholic homes.

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