

Chapter 1

Overcoming an Alcoholic Environment

Ten million Americans are alcoholics, tragic statistics tell us. And that would be sad enough if theirs were the only lives that were ruined. But families suffer too. Spouses are abused, neglected, and lied to. Children are cheated of life's basic necessities - above all a tender, loving parent.

Did you know that one out of every three Americans is a close family member of an alcoholic? Much effort and concern goes into helping the drinkers themselves, and for this we thank God. But what about help for their loved ones, help for the victims of an alcoholic environment?

Many aren't even aware they are living with an alcoholic. Drinkers don't have to wallow in the gutters of skid row to qualify as alcoholics. They might be attractive, articulate, successful professionals - attorneys, physicians, executives, even pastors, priests, and rabbis. What they have in common with down-and-outers on the streets is that their drinking is out of control.

Now, any alcoholic consumption can be dangerous - we all know that even a few drinks can cause death on the highways or loosen one's moral restraints on a night of temptation. But alcoholics have a special problem. They no longer drink merely because they are enjoying it - they simply can't make themselves stop.

Once, they could have a glass of wine on holidays or at dinner and maybe a bottle of beer at a ballgame. Then they began drinking more frequently, perhaps seeking escape from the pain of a crisis or relief from the stress of daily living. Gradually the deadly addiction developed. All too suddenly they became helpless alcoholics, having crossed the line between drinking by choice and drinking by necessity.

Alcoholics are usually dishonest with themselves and with others. They convince themselves that there is no problem, that they can stop drinking anytime they please. They also become masters of manipulating others in order to maintain their habit and still function in their environment.

Unfortunately, families of alcoholics usually help them live their lie by sharing their denial of reality. Psychologists call this "enabling" or "facilitating" the addiction. In the book *Love Is a Choice: Recovery for*

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Codependent Relationships, we find the story of Claudia Black, a pioneer researcher in this area.

Claudia “was quite young - three, perhaps - when she awoke one morning to see her drunken father sprawled unconscious in the front yard. Terrified, she ran to her mother. ‘Mommy! Daddy is lying out there! Something’s wrong!’

“Calmly her mother replied, ‘No, dear, nothing’s wrong. Daddy is camping.’

“Claudia clearly remembers nodding at that very tender age and agreeing, ‘Daddy is camping.’ Thus as a tiny girl she learned to see a terrifying piece of reality, deny its reality, turn it upside down and say, *No, things are not as painful and frightening as they seem. It’s really okay somehow.”

Daddy is camping?! Why this compulsion to deny such an obvious reality as alcoholism? Well, for one thing, denying the addiction helps everyone maintain some sense of normalcy and stability. Deluding themselves that everything is OK also relieves them from the responsibility to confront a growing threat to their home. And besides, who wants the whole neighborhood to know that there’s an addict in the family? That would be embarrassing.

So everyone pretends nothing is wrong. The family goes on with business as usual while Daddy goes “camping.”

Enablers have three unwritten rules that let them live their lie and avoid dealing with a loved one’s addiction: (1) don’t talk; (2) don’t trust; (3) don’t feel. Don’t talk about the problem; don’t trust anyone for help; don’t deal with your own feelings of shame, anger, fear, and desperation. What a sad way to live! But that’s exactly how millions survive the presence of alcoholism in the family circle.

Well, how do you break loose of bondage to an alcoholic environment? The first step is to stop denying reality. Daddy isn’t camping - he has a terrible problem that is ruining his own life and devastating the family. Daddy needs help, and he needs it now!

I think of the experience of a man I’ll call John. His co-workers noticed that he drank a lot when they had lunch with their clients. John’s performance was obviously affected, but nobody made any real efforts to help him. His wife, Brenda, knew he often stopped at a tavern on his way home. When she complained, he vigorously denied being a problem drinker. And so Brenda, unable to persuade John to reform his ways, gave up and cooperated with his alcoholic habits.

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When John was too drunk to keep a dinner appointment, Brenda would lie and tell their friends he had to work late. She brushed aside her children's questions and made them go to bed before their father staggered in the door. Frequently she would pour his vodka down the drain, even though she knew he would only go down to the liquor store and buy another bottle. Beyond scolding him now and then for drinking too much, she did nothing to help with his alcoholism. Well, what could she do?

The first thing Brenda could do to help John was to get help for herself. The stress of living with an alcoholic had made her a bundle of raw nerves. All the rage and resentment she tried to repress seethed within her soul. Her sense of self-worth had plummeted after years of John's shameful behavior - behavior that he managed to make her feel guilty about. Brenda was an emotional and spiritual wreck. Before helping John, she had to come to terms with her own problems.

Brenda found the help she needed at Al-Anon, a non-profit self-help organization for loved ones of alcoholics. Al-Anon has an effective program of peer counseling, where people who are learning to overcome an alcoholic environment share their advice and their testimonies of success - and failure. There's a lot of solid emotional support at Al-Anon meetings, the kind that encourages family members of alcoholics to take positive action rather than just feel sorry for themselves.

At Al-Anon, Brenda learned not to nag, yell, beg, or embarrass her husband about his drinking. Such methods never worked, anyway. She also stopped helping him lie about his drunken absences and quit bailing him out after his bouts of irresponsible behavior. She began practicing tough love - giving John the support every husband needs without letting him manipulate her.

Although Al-Anon isn't geared to any religious persuasion, dependence upon God forms a vital element in the program. Brenda met some Christian women there who invited her to their own weekly prayer group. That's where she finally discovered what she needed more than anything else - a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Brenda had unconsciously made John the lord of her life by centering all her hopes and dreams in him. She depended upon him for emotional support, only to be devastated every time he broke his feeble promises. She learned to depend more upon the promises of God's Word. She especially came to appreciate the Psalms. One of her favorites is Psalm 62:5-7:

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“Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge” (NIV).

It's nice to have the emotional support of a loving spouse, but our ultimate hope must be in God alone. No human being can provide that solid-rock foundation for our lives. Brenda finally accepted Jesus as the friend who never fails. He became the central focus of her life. She formed the habit of rising early every morning for personal Bible study and prayer. There she found the strength to survive and to thrive amid the difficult circumstances of an alcoholic environment.

When we unite our will with God's strength, we can do all things through Christ. Brenda's new faith in God brought wonderful healing to her damaged emotions. At last she felt prepared to help John. She employed a radical strategy often recommended by counselors as the only hope of breaking through the wall of denial behind which alcoholics hide their addiction. Here's how it works.

A meeting is arranged involving all the important people in the alcoholic's life - spouse, children, parents, fellow workers and supervisor, best friends, and the pastor. Without giving advance notice to the alcoholic, all of them meet at an appointed time and place for a loving but forceful confrontation. The meeting must be chaired by someone trained and experienced. One by one around the circle, group members explain how the alcoholic has been hurting them, as well as himself. Nobody condemns the one they are trying to help, but the group refuses to be manipulated or lied to.

During such an encounter, the spouse might find it necessary to threaten a separation in the marriage unless the alcoholic agrees to get help. The work supervisor might make continued employment contingent upon cooperation. On the positive side, both spouse and employer, along with everyone present, offer wholehearted support and affirmation if the alcoholic decides to confront reality.

Naturally, such a meeting is quite painful and emotional. Sometimes the alcoholic gets angry and stalks out. Usually, though, he or she will break down and agree to enter a treatment program. A specific pledge is secured as to what will be done to get help, and that it will happen immediately.

Obviously, this crisis-encounter session must be delicately planned and orchestrated. Especially important is the leadership of someone who is trained and experienced. The people at Al-Anon are well

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equipped to assist in setting up a tough-love confrontation to rescue an alcoholic loved one. You can locate your local chapter of Al-Anon in the phone book, along with Alateen, a support group for teenagers of alcoholics. If you have any trouble locating either Al-Anon or Alateen, contact Alcoholics Anonymous, or AA. That organization is everywhere in North America, and they will be able to help you.

Well, I'm happy to report that John's crisis intervention turned out well, and he is responding to counseling. But you may be wondering, Was it wrong for Brenda to threaten her husband with separation if he didn't get help for his alcoholism?

You understand, first of all, that we aren't discussing divorce. The Bible does give permission for divorce in situations involving sexual unfaithfulness - although even then the marriage can often be rescued. In other cases, such as with an alcoholic who refuses to get help, the loneliness of separation can be a positive influence in reforming behavior. Time alone to think can be just the medicine needed to convince the alcoholic that he or she cannot continue destroying the family. Remember, the goal of such a separation is to ultimately preserve the family unit.

Now, one final word about John. He is determined to be a responsible husband and father, even though he's made many mistakes along the way. Brenda has learned to forgive all the pain he has caused the family - not because he deserves mercy, but because God accepts all repenting sinners despite their many shortcomings.

This raises important questions: Is alcoholism a sin or merely a disease? Could it be both a sin and a disease? No doubt many have a genetic weakness for alcoholism - but all of us suffer from compulsions and predispositions to sin in one way or another. And whenever we indulge these weaknesses, we must face the consequences.

Consider this. It might seem compassionate to tell our loved ones they are helpless victims of a weakness beyond their control. But that's really not good news for them. And it's not true. You've seen the television ads urging addicts to get help for their problem, to phone that toll-free number. Obviously, addictive behavior is avoidable, not like diseases for which you have no choice about getting help. Alcoholics are not helpless victims in the same way the people they hurt are victimized.

So, thank God, alcoholics can live without the bottle. Let's encourage them that they can change. The power of Jesus can help us

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overcome all of life's challenges. When we unite our will with God's strength, we can do all things through Christ.

Remember the story Christ told about the prodigal son? That young man abandoned his father and left home for a far-off land, where he wasted himself with wild living. Finally, the Bible says, he "came to himself." In other words, he confronted his situation. Then he made the big decision (Luke 15:18): "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you'" (RSV).

No more fooling around here. No more excuses. The prodigal took full responsibility for his drunken carousing and called it sin: "I have sinned," he said. Then he did something about it - he took action and went home. You know the story. The father ran to welcome his repentant son, forgiving him fully and freely with the pronouncement (Luke 15:24): "This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

Notice that the son had been lost, spiritually dead. Not just sick but dead lost. Thank the Lord, though, now that the boy had confronted his addictive behavior and come home to his father, he was alive and safe.

Let me tell you a story that really touched my heart. It's in that bestselling classic by Dr. James Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough*.

Paul Powers had been a victim of child abuse. Both his mother and father were alcoholics. When he was seven years old, his mother came home drunk from a party and collapsed in the snow before their front door. She caught pneumonia and became deathly sick.

One afternoon she called Paul to her bedside. He got there just in time to watch her die. The boy ran sobbing to his drunken father to tell him what had happened.

"Shut up!" he shouted, pushing the boy away. "Boys don't cry like babies."

The raging man then proceeded to break his son's nose, shatter two of his ribs, and knock out some of his teeth. That was just the beginning of years of escalating abuse for that poor, motherless boy.

At the age of twelve, Paul emerged from his alcoholic environment and committed his first murder. The judge asked Paul's father what he wanted done with the boy. He replied, "Send him to hell!"

Can you imagine! So, young Paul went behind bars with his hate and resentment. Five years later, someone visited the prison with a Billy

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Graham film, and for the first time, Paul met Jesus. The love of God melted his heart and won him to repentance.

Upon his release from prison, Paul married a fellow believer, and they began a little ministry distributing Christian films. Times were tough financially. When Christmas season came, all they had to their name was eight dollars for groceries.

Paul's wife went to the store with those few precious dollars and came home, having spent one of them on some gold wrapping paper. Paul became furious at what he perceived as her extravagance. While he and his wife argued, their three-year-old daughter sifted through the bag of groceries. Delighted at discovering the wrapping paper, she took it to the living room and proceeded to cover a shoe box.

Well, Paul saw his daughter sitting on the floor cutting up that wrapping paper, and his temper flew off again. Resorting to behavior he himself suffered as a child, he grabbed the little one and hit her violently. Then he sent her sobbing to her room.

The next day, when the family exchanged their few gifts, Paul's daughter ran behind the tree and retrieved her gold box. She handed it to him with a happy smile. "Daddy, this is for you!"

He unwrapped the paper and lifted the lid to find the box completely empty.

"Why did you give me an empty box?" he asked.

"Daddy!" the little one protested. "The box is not empty! It's full of love and kisses for you. I stood there and blew kisses in there for my daddy, and I put love in there too. And it's for you!"

Well, Paul broke down in tears, taking that precious little girl into his arms. For years afterward, he kept her gold box beside his bed. Whenever he felt hurt or discouraged, he reached into the box and lifted out an imaginary kiss from his child. Then he would place it on his cheek and say, "Thank You, Lord."

My friend reading these pages, if you are struggling to overcome an alcoholic environment, the experience of Paul Powers shines hope in your pathway. What the Lord did for him, He can do for you too. He can rebuild your heart and your home, and He wants to begin just now.