



PUNCH-DR FAMILIES

(Living with an alcoholic)



UNK

PHOTOGRAPHER: TIMMY COONEY, MODELS: KYRILIA, TEAL-BRRE, ZHAN

Peter found his mum in the spare bedroom. Unconscious. Another 'little celebration', he guessed! Her snoring was loud. Ragged. But what Peter noticed first was the smell. Vomit. Plus alcohol. Plus the urine which had soaked her clothes and the bed. Plus ... well, you know ... it was obvious ... This wasn't the first time. Far from it! And Peter knew the score. He was 16, after all. He should ease her breathing. Get help. Phone AA. But a traitorous thought was playing on his mind ...

WHY BOTHER?

She's no longer, really, your Mum, the voice whispered. Go on, get out of here! Pretend you never found her!

She was his own mother, of course. She'd borne him and raised him! But she was also a drunken embarrassment who – *more times than you can remember!* – had shamed him in front of his friends. Only last week she'd sworn she would never touch another drop – but then she'd blown her housekeeping on vodka, and hidden it – in the toilet cistern, of all places!

She's become a stranger, thought Peter bitterly. And, without touching the crumpled figure, he ran from the house, slamming the front door behind him ...

Alcohol abuse. It affects male and female, old and young, rich and poor. It begins when someone drinks too much. And it ends when ... well ... sometimes it never ends.

How widespread is the problem? Estimates vary. But everyone agrees: *too* widespread! And for every alcoholic, there are often two or three or more family members whose lives are seriously damaged ...

Not all who over-drink admit they've got a problem or seek treatment. And not all who suffer the distress of living with an alcoholic realise that help is available.

A nice guy ... when he didn't drink!

Shelley put up with Jim for 16 years before finally calling it quits. She'd known he was a drinker when they got married, but she hadn't realised he had a problem until the night one of his sons needed emergency medical help:

"Jim's children were staying with us, and one of them got very bad ear-ache. I had to take him to the hospital – his dad was too drunk! He was out of it, and I realised that if there was ever a crisis I'd have to just manage on my own.

"Our arguments about his drinking started early in our relationship. I remember the time he took his boys to a football match. When they arrived home, it was obvious they'd all been drinking – the youngest was only 13 – and Jim was quite drunk.

"I was wild with Jim for being so irresponsible – and we had this raging row. Then he tried to hit me ...

"That was the first sign of violence. Jim's usually a kind and loving man. Up until

then, he'd been a reasonably 'happy drunk' – but the alcohol was starting to take over.

"Our close friends didn't realise Jim had a problem because most of his drinking was done secretly. It was very confusing living in our house, because when Jim was nice he was terribly nice. But then it was as if he couldn't cope with harmony any longer.

"He needed to be angry because he needed an excuse to drink. He had to blame someone – and I was usually the target.

"He's a mechanic, and he'd come home very dirty after work. But he wouldn't go and have a shower. He'd sit down on our expensive lounge suite in his dirty clothes. Jim's business had gone down the tubes (bad cheques, missed appointments, that sort of thing), and we'd had to sell our home. So I really valued the few things we had left and I wanted to look after them. I'd ask him – very gently – 'Darling, do you think you could have a shower and change so the lounge suite doesn't get dirty?' He'd give me a black look, and I'd back off. But then, for the rest of night, he'd keep challenging me.

"Sometimes he'd fall asleep drunk on the couch and pee in his pants. The couch would be drenched! If he did it in the bedroom, I could clean up without anybody knowing – but not in the lounge ..."

An incurable disease? That's right!

For centuries, men and women who had drinking problems were looked upon as weak in the morals department, short on character and will-power. But, today, medical professionals and therapists agree that alcoholism is a disease.

Like diabetes, it can be halted, but not cured. The alcoholic can't change things by willpower alone. Nor can relatives or friends rescue him by pleading, threatening or promising. An alcoholic usually has to 'hit rock-bottom' – become deep-down convinced that drink is, for him, terminally destructive ... and deep-down determined to beat this thing.

Alcoholism does nasty things to nice men (it can make you impotent) ... to nice women (it can make you sterile) ... and to nice relationships (it often results in conflict, financial stress, violence and divorce).

Sometimes alcoholics can stay dry for

mood. He'd have money and he'd give us some and everything would be fine.

"But when he came home mad, things could get really scary.

"He never hit me, just made me feel horrible. But he used to beat Mum up. I felt I should be able to stop him. I was the oldest. My little brother and sister would be crying and stuff. And I'd be telling them, 'It's all right'. But they'd see Mum getting bashed right in front of their eyes – and they knew it wasn't right.

"Eventually, I heard about this group called 'Alateen'. At their meetings they have a topic they talk about, and they read stuff from books, and you discuss it.



This wasn't the first time. Far from it! Only last week she had shamed him in front of his friends. She'd blown her housekeeping on vodka, and hidden it in the toilet cistern! "She's no longer, really, my mum," thought Peter bitterly. "She's a drunken embarrassment!"

a time in their own strength. But more achieve sobriety only with the help of their peers – attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for example.

For family and friends, peer-assistance works best too – the kind found at Al-Anon and Alateen group meetings.

Good old dad, beating up mum

Mia's only 20 – although she feels older. She's struggled for years with an alcoholic dad. And she, her mum and her siblings have never known what normal family life feels like ...

"Things would be fine till about 7:00 or 7:30. But then we'd start to get tense, because we knew that Dad would soon arrive home. Sometimes he'd be in a good

The thing I noticed was, these were people just like us – but they were describing exactly what had happened to me!

"By now Dad was in treatment. And when Mum started going to Al-Anon, I noticed a change in her. Before, she'd blame all her problems on everyone else, and get angry and yell – especially at us. I always thought my parents must be really mean – that they didn't love me. But when I started reading the Al-Anon books I realised it wasn't that they hated me. It was more like they were sick."

There's not much accurate data about kids with alcoholic parents. It depends on how severe the alcoholism ... and how sensitive the child. However, research does show that, as a group, these kids:

- exhibit a higher risk of emotional or personality problems
- have more problems at school, from bad grades to dropping out altogether
- find it harder to make and maintain friendships – a high priority with most young people.

My lady's an addict: booze and casino

Keith's no longer a young man. And the adult kids from his first marriage weren't too happy when Keith decided to marry again.

"My second wife is quite a bit younger than me. And there's no fool like an old fool! We met in a hotel, enjoyed each other's company, decided to get together. I bought a camper van and we toured the North Island. And it was absolutely fantastic – except when it came to drinking. I'd say, 'Come on honey – let's leave it. I've had enough.' But she'd always say, 'I'll just have one more ...'

"I didn't take much notice at first. But there came a time when, after a night out, I'd get up – and she'd be missing. Taken the car into town – gone to a bar and got rotten.

"She came from a very tough background. Molested as a child. Ran away from home several times. Anyway, the drinking was getting worse. I helped her start up a small business, and that went well at first. But then she fell in with some high-flyers who introduced her to the casino. And that was fatal.

"She now had two addictions – alcohol and gambling. Three really, because she was pinching my sleeping pills, too.

"She started losing her grip on the business, and I got pretty angry – her bank account would go overdrawn, and we'd

have cheques bouncing! We used to fight. I'd tell her, 'You're going down the tubes!' She'd clear out and not come home for several days, and I'd go crazy with worry. Then I'd get a call: she'd been picked up D.I.C. – and I'd come running.

"We had to go to court just recently – the third time. She'd been at the casino, and was so drunk she could hardly stand. But her car was parked in a tow-away area. She insisted on shifting it and – blow me – the cops got her again! So she's got a six-month suspended sentence. She has to do periodic detention. And she has to attend the 'Bridge Programme' – a drying-out course run by the Salvation Army."

It's a familiar story. If Keith tried to talk about her drinking, she was very good at turning it back on him. "She'd tell me I'm dull. I'm cramping her style – stuff like that. And it's partly true: I don't enjoy going out and getting drunk with people I hardly know. So she'd announce, 'Well I'm going anyway!' – and off she'd go.

"She's been warned by the magistrate that, if she's caught again driving while disqualified, she's straight off to jail. But she's still driving! She rings me up when she's in trouble, and I've been giving her money and ... well, all the things I shouldn't do, I can see that now.

"I've just started going to Al-Anon. I feel a lot happier, knowing I'm not the only pebble on the beach. But I understand the Al-Anon message isn't some sort of technique to force the alcoholic to change. It's MY attitude that matters ... although putting that into practice is hard.

"I haven't heard from her for quite a while and I'm very concerned. Sooner or later I reckon she'll get stopped. She'll



lose the business, and her car. She'll come out of jail with nowhere to go, and she'll probably want to come back here. But I don't really know if I can handle that.

"I miss her dreadfully. She's lovely when she's not on the grog. But, enough is enough ..."

Begging, threatening, making excuses ...

It's not easy being the wife, husband or partner of an alcoholic. You can help – or, without meaning to, you can hinder.

Family members will often, unknowingly, reinforce the alcoholic's drinking – by making excuses for missed work or appointments, by replacing dud cheques, by covering up. Even just being more attentive and more concerned when the drinker is drunk – all these reinforce the behaviour.

Other common responses – constant rebukes and arguments, threats and restrictions, being over-suspicious, pouring hidden booze down the drain – these usually have the opposite effect.

But, on the positive, a partner can greatly help a drying-out alcoholic. Your encouragement to attend AA, your supportive talking and listening, your praise for progress made – plus your own attendance at Al-Anon meetings – these can make the world of difference.

A drinking problem? Who? Not me!

Roz lives with a guy who's still drinking. But the help she's received from Al-Anon has turned her life around ...

"It's hard to enjoy a normal life with a partner who has this disease. You're not on the same wavelength half the time.

"We're both quite social – going out a lot to parties, drinking here and there, like everyone does. But it gets to the stage where one person carries on, and the other doesn't. Then kids and extra responsibilities come along, and you can't cope ... because only one person is meeting those needs.

"One day I picked up a book that encouraged people like me to attend an Al-Anon meeting. I looked up Al-Anon in the local rag and started going. My partner didn't like that. He refused to babysit – things like that. Passive resistance. He's never admitted he has a drinking problem. It was just, 'Why the hell are you going there?'

"I do love him – although there are times when I could chuck him out. But I'm also convinced that if you don't learn certain lessons, you're doomed to repeat them. I don't confide in friends and family. They don't understand that alcoholism's a disease. They say things like, 'Well, if you know he's a drunk, what's the matter with you? Get out! Dump him!'"

"I have people I can talk to when I'm down and need a boost. And that serenity prayer is awesome ...

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference."*

Al-Anon has taught Roz not to keep spending energy and sanity trying to 'cure' the alcoholic. *"It's better, actually, to just leave them alone and let them hit rock-bottom. Tipping out their alcohol and trying to keep them under your thumb doesn't work either. But it's still hard, sometimes, to decide what you*

should do. Do you pick up their clothes? Make their breakfast for them? Wake them up and get them off to work? You need some guidelines to know when 'helping' stops being a help.

"I say, whatever struggles you have to go through, make sure you get to your Al-Anon meetings. Your alcoholic partner or relative won't like it and will try to obstruct you! But try and get to at least six meetings – to give it a fair go.

"No one really feels comfortable about going into a room full of complete strangers, baring your soul, breaking down and crying. But after a few meetings it

"I was always the 'responsible one' – and I carried that into my adult life. I tried to meet everyone's needs. But I never felt I had anyone there for ME to fall back on. So when I first went to Al-Anon I was a bit confused. After all, I was the one who had it together. Everyone else needed the help – not me, right?

"But what it's done is free me from the nagging feeling that if I'd only done something different, tried a bit harder, made them see sense, I could've helped my brothers! I realise now that, for an alcoholic, to live is to drink. I couldn't have changed a thing.



For centuries, men and women who had drinking problems were looked upon as weak, short on character and willpower. But, today, medical professionals and therapists agree that alcoholism is a disease. What's more, like diabetes, it can be halted, but not cured ...

gets easier ... and there's always a box of tissues on the table.

"You feel tremendously supported – by everybody. And you discover that your story is their story too!"

Like father, like sons: a daughter's burden

Tricia's brothers are heavy drinkers. So was her dad – until his death. Tricia doesn't live with an active drinker today, but she still attends Al-Anon regularly. She feels there's a lot of healing still needed ...

"When your family life is influenced by a drinker there are lots of roles that various members of the family take on. There's the 'family clown' ... and the 'responsible one' ... and the 'invisible child' ... and lots more.

"Al-Anon taught me to stop focusing on the alcoholics – stop worrying about whether they were going to come home drunk or drive drunk – stop trying to manipulate them. I had to learn to stand on my own two feet and not rely on my brothers for anything, because they could never deliver. I'd always wanted to give them that 'one last chance'. It felt very unloving to just leave them to stew in their own mess. But, really, it was the kindest thing to do.

"I've noticed that a lot of women in Al-Anon come across as 'strong' types. Yet, oddly, when they get into a relationship, they seem to let men walk all over them. Like me! Well, I've learned that 'strong-ness' isn't really a strength. It's a defence. You're protecting yourself. And one day you're going to let your guard

down and put too much trust in a person who can't cope with it.

"Al-Anon has taught me that my life can be happy, regardless of what other people do. Because of my hurts and insecurities I used to lash out, I'd nag, I'd pick a time and have a go. But that just escalated all the problems.

"In Al-Anon I learned: when they're drinking, shut your mouth. Don't listen too hard to 'drink talk' – because most of it, 90%, is rubbish, going round and round the mulberry bush. I'll listen for a while, and then I'll say something like, 'I really understand that, and it's been nice talking to you. But look, it's very late and I've got to go to bed.' And I go ..."

AA's world-famous Twelve Steps:

These Steps are used by members of Alcoholics Anonymous to help them go sober, stay sober and grow spiritually. They've also been adapted by Al-Anon to help the relatives of alcoholics, as well.

WE ...

1. Admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable ...
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity ...
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him ...
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves ...
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs ...
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character ...
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings ...
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all ...
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others ...
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong promptly admitted it ...
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out ...
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Yeah, it's MY problem too!

Tina discovered that attending Al-Anon has done more than she expected. She'd hoped, vaguely, for some ideas on how to make her partner stop drinking. But what she found instead was a new way of being ...

"I justified everything I did. But, thanks to the Al-Anon programme, I don't have to be 'right' anymore. That gives you great power, because it opens you up to seeing the value in other people's opinions and ideas. It allows you to say, 'Yeah – this is partly my fault, my problem, too – and I have to do something about it.'

"My husband and I had separated. And my children, at the time, were getting on better – much better – with their dad,

who was still drinking. And that hurt. He was the loser, the dangerous role model, and I wanted to protect them from going down that same road. But why couldn't I get close to my own kids?

"The children had fun with him. He gave them love. And the more I tried to 'protect' them and highlight negative things about him, the more they defended him. So I went along to Al-Anon.

"At first it didn't seem to meet my needs. But a friend talked me into trying it again, and this time it sort of 'clicked.' I remember hearing one very powerful speaker. She emphasised that this is not a programme with a 'spiritual dimension' – it IS a spiritual programme!

now. Before I could only see the sickness – I'd lost sight of the person altogether. That means that I don't need to shut down relationships like I used to."

Meanwhile, back in the bedroom ...

Peter wandered along the rain-swept road. Lurid neon lights flashed, reflecting red-green-blue in the puddles. The local night life drifted past him, sad and sleazy, or just looking for somewhere to eat.

Peter couldn't shake off the image of Mum, face-down in the spare bedroom. Slipping into a card phone cubicle he called Francine, who lived next door.

"Francine? Could you pop in and take



What Al-Anon has done is free me from the nagging feeling that if I'd only done something different, tried a bit harder, made them see sense, I could've helped my brothers! I realise now that, for an alcoholic, to live is to drink. I couldn't have changed a thing.

"Not much of this made sense at first. I'd decided I was an atheist – I didn't like religion – I felt many of the institutions around it were man-made, all about power and money. But they told me not to worry about the 'God-stuff' if that didn't sit well with me. In this context, God was the God of your own understanding – and I knew that the programme had a lot to give me.

"I've since made some very close friendships within the Al-Anon family. And I've been 'growing' my own family back too. I've reconnected with my own father, and my relationship with my kids is much better now – because I've changed.

"As far as alcoholics in my life are concerned ... well, I can see the person

a look at Mum? She's been on a bender – again!"

Francine's voice was reassuring. "I'm on the way, Pete. Oh, and Pete ...?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you thought again about coming with me to Alateen?"

Oh, what a drag! What'd he done to deserve all this crap?

"Okay, Francine. Yeah, maybe I will ..."



KEEPERS OF THE VINE



**WHAT DO YOU THINK?
HAVE YOUR SAY!**



GO TO GRAPEVINE'S FACEBOOK PAGE. SHARE YOUR POINT-OF-VIEW AND READ WHAT OTHERS RECKON ...