

CLIENT READING

Growing Up Around Someone Else's Drinking

A self-reflection guide for adults

Who this guide is for

This guide is for adults who grew up close to someone whose drinking caused problems: a parent, step-parent, grandparent, sibling or other caregiver. It is also useful if the problem was drug use, gambling, or another compulsion that took over a household. And it applies whether that person is still drinking, is now sober, or has passed away.

Addiction is often called a family illness. The person who drinks is not the only one affected. Everyone around them adjusts, usually without noticing, to keep the household going and to stay safe. Children are especially good at adjusting. The ways we learned to cope as children were sensible at the time. Many of them simply outlive their usefulness and follow us into adult life, work and relationships.

The questions that follow are not a test, and there is no score. They are an invitation to notice patterns, with curiosity rather than judgement.

How to use it

- **Go slowly.** Read one section at a time. There is no need to finish in one sitting.
- **Answer honestly, not ideally.** Tick the box that fits how things usually are, not how you think they should be.
- **Notice your reactions.** A question that makes you uncomfortable, or that you want to skip, is often worth coming back to.
- **Use the writing space.** A few words are enough. These notes can be a helpful starting point in our sessions.
- **Look after yourself.** Thinking about childhood can stir up strong feelings. If it becomes too much, stop, do something grounding, and bring it to your next session.

This is not a diagnostic tool. Many people tick “often” on several questions for reasons that have nothing to do with alcohol. What matters is what the patterns mean to you.

The reflection questions

1. Approval and self-worth

In a home organised around someone's drinking, a child's sense of being "good enough" often depends on how things are going at home on a given day. Praise may be unpredictable and criticism harsh. Many children learn to work hard for approval, to keep a low profile, or to aim for perfection as a way of staying safe.

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Do I look to other people to tell me I am doing well, or that I am acceptable?	☐	☐	☐
Do I brush off or overlook my own achievements?	☐	☐	☐
Does criticism, even mild or fair criticism, hit me harder than it seems to hit others?	☐	☐	☐
Do I hold myself to standards of perfection that I would never expect of anyone else?	☐	☐	☐
Do I feel that if I make a mistake, something bad will follow?	☐	☐	☐

Pause and reflect

When did you last feel proud of yourself? What made it easy or difficult to stay with that feeling?

My notes:

2. Responsibility and caring for others

Children in these families often become the responsible one. They cover for the drinker, look after siblings, manage moods and fix problems that should never have been theirs. In adulthood this can look like generosity and competence. It can also lead to exhaustion and a quiet resentment.

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Do I take on more than I can reasonably manage, and struggle to say no?	☐	☐	☐
Do I still feel responsible for other people's feelings, choices or wellbeing, the way I once did for the person who drank?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find it easy to care for others but hard to care for myself?	☐	☐	☐
Do I feel guilty when I put my own needs first?	☐	☐	☐

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Do I sometimes feel that people, or life in general, take advantage of me?	☐	☐	☐

Pause and reflect

Whose wellbeing do you feel most responsible for today? What would it feel like to put some of that weight down?

My notes:

3. Living on alert

When home life is unpredictable, a child's nervous system learns to stay switched on, scanning for trouble and preparing for the next crisis. As adults, many people find calm unfamiliar and even uncomfortable, while chaos feels strangely normal.

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
When life is going smoothly, do I feel uneasy, waiting for something to go wrong?	☐	☐	☐
Do I feel more alive, focused or useful in the middle of a crisis?	☐	☐	☐
Do I react with fear when people around me are angry, or when I deal with people in authority?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find myself watching other people's moods closely, adjusting my behaviour to keep the peace?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find it hard to relax, rest or play?	☐	☐	☐

Pause and reflect

What does "safe" feel like in your body? Where, and with whom, do you feel it most?

My notes:

4. Feelings

In many families affected by drinking, feelings were not spoken about. Anger might have been dangerous, sadness ignored, and the truth about what was happening denied. Children learn to doubt their own perceptions, and as adults may struggle to know what they feel, let alone say it.

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Do I find it hard to know what I am feeling, or to put it into words?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find it hard to express feelings to others, especially anger, sadness or need?	☐	☐	☐
Do I doubt my own feelings, or the feelings other people express to me?	☐	☐	☐
Do I sometimes confuse feeling sorry for someone with loving them?	☐	☐	☐
Do I question my own memory or judgement about what happened in my family?	☐	☐	☐

Pause and reflect

Which feeling was least welcome in your family when you were growing up? How do you relate to that feeling now?

My notes:

5. Relationships and closeness

Our first relationships teach us what closeness looks like. If love came with unpredictability, broken promises or fear, adult relationships can feel confusing. Some people keep others at a distance. Others hold on tightly, or find themselves drawn to people who are familiar in painful ways.

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Do I keep to myself or withdraw from people, even when I would like company?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find intimate relationships difficult to trust, sustain or enjoy?	☐	☐	☐
Do I stay in relationships mainly because I am afraid of being alone?	☐	☐	☐
Am I drawn to people who are compulsive, unavailable, unpredictable or hurtful?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find it hard to ask for what I need from the people closest to me?	☐	☐	☐

Pause and reflect

What did you learn about love in your family? Which of those lessons would you like to keep, and which would you like to set aside?

My notes:

6. My own patterns

Growing up around addiction can shape our own relationship with substances and behaviours. This is not inevitable, and it is not a judgement. Seeing it clearly is often the first step towards choice.

Question	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Have I had problems with my own compulsive behaviour, such as drinking, drugs, eating, spending, work, gambling or screens?	☐	☐	☐
Do I worry that I might become like the person whose drinking affected me?	☐	☐	☐
Do I find myself repeating family patterns I promised myself I would never repeat?	☐	☐	☐
Do I think that someone's drinking may have affected who I am today?	☐	☐	☐

Pause and reflect

Is there a pattern in your own life that you would like to understand better? What do you think it does for you?

My notes:

Making sense of your answers

Look back over your answers. You may notice that one or two sections stand out, or that your “often” answers cluster around a particular theme. That is useful information, not a verdict.

A few things are worth keeping in mind:

- **These patterns were adaptations.** Seeking approval, staying alert, looking after others and keeping feelings quiet were intelligent ways of surviving a difficult environment. They are not character flaws.
- **Strengths often sit alongside the struggles.** People who grew up this way are often loyal, perceptive, capable in a crisis and deeply caring. The aim is not to lose these qualities, but to have more choice about when and how you use them.
- **Recognition can bring mixed feelings.** Relief, grief, anger and guilt can all arrive together. You may feel disloyal to a parent you love. Both things can be true: you can love someone and still acknowledge how their drinking affected you.
- **Change is possible at any age.** Patterns learned early can be understood, softened and gradually replaced. It takes time and, usually, the company of others.

An unwritten family rulebook

The psychologist Claudia Black described three unspoken rules common in families affected by alcohol: don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. Ask yourself which of these you still live by, and where you might begin, carefully, to break them.

Possible next steps

Bring it to therapy

If something in this guide resonated, bring your notes to our next session. We can look together at what happened then, what is happening now, and what you would like to be different. There is no need to have it all worked out first.

Peer support

Many people find it helpful to hear from others with similar histories. Two well-established fellowships may be worth exploring. Both are free, confidential and open to anyone who feels they might benefit.

- **Al-Anon Family Groups** for anyone affected by someone else's drinking, whether a parent, partner, child or friend.
- **Adult Children of Alcoholics & Dysfunctional Families (ACA)** specifically for adults who grew up in alcoholic or otherwise dysfunctional homes. Most South African access is through online meetings.

It can take a few meetings to find a group that feels right. Different groups have different atmospheres.

Further reading

- Janet G. Woititz, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*
- Claudia Black, *It Will Never Happen to Me*
- Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization, *Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families* (often called “the Big Red Book”)

Support in South Africa

Al-Anon South Africa	24-hour helpline: 0861 252 666 alanongso@iafrica.com www.alanon.org.za (meeting finder on the site)
ACA (Adult Children of Alcoholics)	www.adultchildren.org (online meetings worldwide)
Substance Abuse Helpline (Department of Social Development)	24 hours: 0800 12 13 14 SMS: 32312
SADAG Suicide Crisis Helpline	0800 567 567 (if you are in crisis or feeling unsafe)

If you are feeling overwhelmed between sessions, please contact me, or one of the helplines above.

A closing thought

None of us chose the family we grew up in, or the circumstances that shaped our early years. What we can choose, slowly and with support, is how we relate to that history now. Understanding where a pattern came from does not erase it, but it does give us room to respond rather than react. That room is where freedom begins.

Acknowledgement: some themes in this guide are adapted from the Al-Anon Family Groups leaflet *Did You Grow Up with a Problem Drinker?* (S-25). This guide is an independent resource from Integrated Life Counselling & Therapy and is not Al-Anon Conference Approved Literature.