



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Adult Children of Alcoholics - Part 2

**Guest(s):** Dr. Curt Grayson and Anonymous Panel

**Air Date:** August 01, 2023

[Listen to the Broadcast](#)

**Dr. James Dobson:** Well, hello, everyone. I'm James Dobson, and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

**Roger Marsh:** Welcome, friends, to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, I'm Roger Marsh. And if you were with us yesterday, you know that this week we are devoting some time to a very serious family health matter. I'm talking about the physical, mental, and spiritual effects of alcoholism and alcohol abuse. Now, alcoholism affects millions of families each and every year. It tears at the fabric of our society. It costs us thousands of lives, and that doesn't begin to mention the pain and suffering and torment that those involved in alcoholism experience. Over the years, Dr. Dobson has written about this subject and he's spoken about the toll this disease has taken as it spreads across generations of American families. And you know who suffers most? Oftentimes, it's the children of alcoholics who bear the brunt of the pain.

Well, on today's edition of Family Talk, you've joined us for part two of a classic three-part series discussing how alcohol has had a negative impact on our guests today, and also on how the disease has followed them into adulthood. Now, I want to remind parents listening that the content you're about to hear is intended for a mature audience and parental discretion is advised. Now, if you are ready, you will not want to miss a moment of our discussion today.

**Dr. Curt Grayson:** My parents were divorced when I was about five. My father never developed a drinking problem. He was not a very harsh disciplinarian. My mother and stepfather, who were both drinkers and were actually alcoholics, the disciplining was kind of sporadic. My mother would discipline us, but she wasn't strong enough or big enough to really hurt us as we grew up. But as soon as she got my alcoholic stepfather into the scene, he didn't know limits, and when he hit, he hit for good.

Roger Marsh: Well, what a deep cut, a painful and heartbreaking memory. That was our friend, Dr. Curt Grayson, and you will hear from him a little bit more in just a moment. Sadly, you may know someone who can identify with the trauma of that troubling story. Maybe that's even your own pain as well. And still, countless adults are dealing with the torment associated with alcoholism in their family and the agony that it caused in their lives as they grew up. Remember, if you or someone you know is in crisis or in trouble, seek help immediately. You can call 911 for medical help or local law enforcement. You can also call 988 for the suicide and crisis hotline. And if you're looking for a good Christian counselor in your area, simply visit [www.connect.aacc.net](http://www.connect.aacc.net).

Now, most of the voices you'll hear today have chosen to remain anonymous; however, one of the voices that will be identified is that of Dr. Curt Grayson, who is a licensed counselor. He's also the co-author of the book entitled, *Creating a Safe Place: Christian Healing from the Hurt of Dysfunctional Families*. In today's program, our own Dr. James Dobson will share a list of characteristics of adult children of alcoholics. So let's join Doctor right now for that discussion.

Dr. James Dobson: We were talking last time about the experiences of these four people as children of alcoholics and what they went through, the pain that they experienced individually. There's an amazingly consistent pattern from one person to the other; and I'm told if we had 100,000 people here, that would be true as well. There are just these common characteristics.

It would probably be wise now in this second broadcast to talk about what those characteristics are. People are going to recognize themselves. And so I have a list here of 13 characteristics. I'm going to read them rather rapidly and then ask you all to comment on what I've read, okay?

Joe: Sure.

Ann: Okay.

Chris: Sure.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Great.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, here we go. Number one, adult children of alcoholics have to guess at what normal is. They think that what they experience is what everybody experiences. Two, adult children of alcoholics have difficulty in following a project through from beginning to end. Three, adult children of alcoholics lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth. Four, and I'm not going to repeat

adult children of alcoholics, I'll say they judge themselves without mercy, very hard on themselves. Five, they have difficulty having fun. Six, they take themselves very seriously. Seven, they have difficulty with intimate relationships. Of the four of you, Chris, you've never been married. Have the other three had marital difficulties?

Ann: Yes, definitely.

Joe: I'm divorced.

Dr. Curt Grayson: I'm divorced.

Dr. James Dobson: All three are divorced. Isn't that interesting? Number eight, they overreact to changes over which they have no control. Number nine, they constantly seek approval and affirmation. Number 10, they feel they are different from other people. Number 11, they're either super responsible or super irresponsible. You can't lose on that one, can you?

Joe: Nope.

Dr. James Dobson: It's either one way or the other,

Joe: Right.

Dr. James Dobson: You can count on that.

Joe: Black or white.

Dr. James Dobson: And number 12, they're extremely loyal. This one surprised me. They're extremely loyal even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved. And number 13, they are impulsive. They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsivity leads to confusion, self-loathing, and loss of control over their environment. Okay, react to the list of 13. What jumps out at you from what you've just heard?

Chris: What jumps out at me is the tremendous need for approval, that I missed getting the affirmation I needed as a child, and what was okay one day was not okay the other day, and so there was tremendous confusion. And I have since learned that silence to me means disapproval. That means I have to guess. And so never quite knowing where I stand, now as an adult, before as a child, is I need that affirmation, that approval, "Chris, that's okay. This is not okay,"

because I don't have that developed inside me, because I didn't have the opportunity to learn that as a kid.

Dr. James Dobson: Chris, even though you recognize that now, you understand that's why you are as you are, do you still find yourself watching people, looking into their eyes, seeing if they are rejecting you or accepting you?

Chris: Oh, I am so hypervigilant. My head knows that, but my heart or the little girl inside me doesn't know that. And this little girl inside me needs to hug and say, "That's okay."

Dr. James Dobson: Curt, did you look for approval in your father and not find it?

Dr. Curt Grayson: I definitely did. I feel like there were a lot of times when I would go to my father with things that I had done, pictures that I had drawn or something, and I would say, "Look at this, Dad, look what I did," and sometimes he would barely look up from his book and then look back and really not respond to it and say, "Oh, that's nice," but he really wouldn't even look at the paper. Another thing with me, too, is sometimes, even now, when I'm in a grocery store, it's kind of embarrassing to say, but I can see a mother spank a little child or yell at a little child, and even though I'm an adult, there's a part of me, that little kid inside, begins to cower and actually be fearful. And I would never admit that, but other adult children of alcoholics experience the same thing.

Dr. James Dobson: Were you disciplined rather severely as a child?

Dr. Curt Grayson: My parents were divorced when I was about five. My father never developed a drinking problem. He was not a very harsh disciplinarian. My mother and stepfather, who were both drinkers and were actually alcoholics, the disciplining was kind of sporadic. My mother would discipline us, but she wasn't strong enough or big enough to really hurt us as we grew up. But as soon as she got my alcoholic stepfather into the scene, he didn't know limits, and when he hit, hit for good.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you know that 90% of all child abuse is alcohol related? It reduces the inhibitory function that would keep you from going too far.

Joe: My dad was very abusive too. However, he also was an adult child of an alcoholic and he didn't know it. So in a sense, he was an adult, but acting like a child on me, so to speak, when I was a child.

Dr. James Dobson: It just perpetuates itself, generation after generation.

Joe: On and on. It's a family disease.

Dr. James Dobson: Your children, Joe, are going to be adult children of alcoholics, because you were one.

Joe: Yes. They not only are going to be, they are.

Dr. Curt Grayson: As a matter of fact, really, in talking about adult children of alcoholics, we find it's a three-generational problem. So even if your parents don't touch a drop of alcohol, you are just as much affected. Because they were adult children of alcoholics, they did not learn how to parent by having no example.

Dr. James Dobson: So it sometimes skips a generation, doesn't it, the imprint?

Dr. Curt Grayson: It can.

Joe: But it's also unconscious. I didn't try to transfer this stuff to my kids, but it was transferred. It was transferred unconsciously. The good news is, today, they know about it. They know that there is help. They know what happened to me, and it's out in the open. There's no more secrets, not in my family.

Dr. James Dobson: And we're dealing with number nine on this list, adult children of alcoholics constantly seek approval and affirmation. Has that also been a characteristic of your life? And as a child, did you reach for adult affirmation and not get it?

Ann: Unlike Chris, I didn't strive to get those A's for approval. That probably was because my parents just about ignored me. As a child, I had no validation. I had no response from my parents. My mother was so busy taking care of the alcoholic, I was pretty much left on my own. There was no one encouraging me to do well in school or no one commenting if I did poorly in school. No help at all.

Dr. James Dobson: What does it do to you all today when you do something that you feel is done well or right and another person just doesn't happen to like it? Suppose at work you're trying to do a good job and the other individual doesn't mean to reject you or be insulting, but just says, "I think we ought to do it another way." Do you still feel it today? Are you still hypersensitive today?

Ann: You get the feelings. You get the feelings down inside, I think you're always going to be sensitive, but today I can speak out and I can voice that feeling.

Dr. James Dobson: Ah. What other items from this list of 13 jump out at you?

Joe: The one that jumps out at me, Dr. Dobson, is this one whereby we're so serious. For years, people used to say to me, "Joe, lighten up." And I'd say, "How?" I didn't really laugh until I was 40 years old.

Dr. James Dobson: Is that right?

Joe: That's true. And I know I didn't cry until I was 40 years old, in my memory. And it wasn't until recovery that those emotions were released. You see, I stuffed my emotions, and I only knew a few. And not knowing those emotions, how in the world could I laugh? How could I have joy in my life when I didn't have any joy in my life? So we can get into a veil of tears, but the truth of the matter is, for me, today, after a lot of work and a lot of recovery, recovery's a lot of fun and I'm laughing.

Dr. James Dobson: And you can laugh today?

Joe: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Yeah, I think with me, I wasn't so serious. As a matter of fact, I was the one in the family who was the family clown and comic, and I was able to laugh and keep people off balance.

Dr. James Dobson: That's one of the methods of coping.

Dr. Curt Grayson: That's right, that's right. And for me, besides being the one that stopped the fights, one of the ways that I stopped fights in the family is I told a joke. I was able to do a somersault. I was able to juggle. I learned to juggle when I was young. I would do kind of funny little weird things to get my parents' attention off either hitting me or getting in argument with each other.

Chris: I think, for me, that the inconsistency of the behavior of my parents, and especially my father, is that I never knew when playtime would end up to be a very dangerous time, that something would go wrong, the string on the kite would break, and all of a sudden my father would become extraordinarily upset and he would begin to drink more. And it turned out to be a horrendous... End up in a hitting or a beating or being sent to my mom.

Dr. James Dobson: So he had a low frustration tolerance, even when he was sober, that lent itself to more drinking.

Chris: That's right. He was never really sober. I mean, always the effect of the alcohol

was there. And so that playful little girl inside me, there's a part of me that's finding out she's there and it's fun to discover her. There still is some fear that it's still not okay to play because while I'm playing over here, there's some danger over here.

Dr. James Dobson: Chris, let me put you through something difficult, can I?

Chris: Sure.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's suppose that your father was able to visit you today, and he was sober, and you have an opportunity to talk to him. What would you say to him?

Chris: Wow. If I had the opportunity to see my father, what I'd really like to say to him is that I wanted him. And when he was drinking, what I had was a bottle, and I wanted him. And I wanted the safety and the playful times to be there and be there more often, but not to have the bottle.

Dr. James Dobson: Chris, would you forgive him?

Chris: By faith, I have forgiven him.

Dr. James Dobson: Would you tell him that?

Chris: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Not only for drinking, but for abusing you sexually?

Chris: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: You've forgiven him?

Chris: I have forgiven him by word of mouth. By confessing that and by faith, it's dropping into my heart.

Dr. James Dobson: Ann, what would you say?

Ann: Well, my dad's been dead for years now, and we never said, "I love you," so I'd say, "I love you, Daddy."

Dr. James Dobson: He never told you he loved you?

Ann: No.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he love you, Ann?

Ann: I'm sure he did in his own way, but he, too, was the adult child of an alcoholic and didn't know how to express feelings.

Dr. James Dobson: Did he ever put his arms around you? Did he ever take you on his lap?

Ann: I never remember any of the times like that.

Dr. James Dobson: Curt, what would you say to your father if you had an opportunity to talk to him?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Well, fortunately, both my parents are still alive. My mother was the alcoholic, so, really, a lot of my issues and talking would be with her. I'm really fortunate in that my mother has had eight years of sobriety, and that's been a blessing to me and to our family.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you been able to reconcile?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Well, I have a little bit. She understands, now that she is sober, some of the things that happened. And I'm able to really take a risk, as we talk about in our ACA support group. You can't always automatically right away go to your parents and say, "Now, I know I grew up in this alcoholic home, and I demand that you make reparation and admit what you did wrong." Some people don't get a chance to talk to their alcoholic parents till many years after they have gotten some recovery themselves. But I've been very fortunate to have sat down with my mother, and she's a very brave woman to have to listen to me and some of my anger and some of my pain and be very, very willing to hear it. And I don't think that's common, but I know it's been helpful for me.

Dr. James Dobson: Joe, what would you say to your parents if you had an opportunity?

Joe: Well, to my dad, I did have an opportunity. I had a chance to sit with my dad on his deathbed and talk with him heart-to-heart. However, that was before alcoholism and the like. But what I would say is the truth, that he hurt me an awful lot, and it made me very angry, and I forgive him because I know his pain. That's how I've found forgiveness. Who am I to judge? Who am I to judge?

Dr. James Dobson: Was he an adult child of an alcoholic?

Joe: Absolutely, and he was an alcoholic too. So I judged him for years and was real angry with him, but what good's that do?



Dr. James Dobson: We have such empathy for a child who is deprived, abused, hurt in this way. But when that child grows up and becomes a hurting, abusing adult, then we don't have empathy for him anymore. If we could have seen your father when he was a little boy, when he needed to be held, when he needed someone desperately to take him in his arms and pull him up close, and tell him he's important, and tell him that he's loved, and that was not there for him, there would be at least an understanding of why he was unable to meet your needs.

Joe: Sure. Even then, when my dad died, I thanked God back then that the pain was over for him, because I knew, even then, without any education or whatever, that it was painful.

Chris: There's another process to this, and this is Chris as an adult dealing with a little girl inside her. I have hated her. I have wanted to dispose of her. I've wanted to annihilate her. I've wanted to do the exact same things to the little girl inside me that my parents did to her. And to go-

Dr. James Dobson: Why do you hate her, Chris? She's [inaudible 00:17:40].

Chris: Hated.

Dr. James Dobson: Oh, that's in the past.

Chris: Yeah, that's in the past. Because she was so defiled and unacceptable, and she was the scapegoat of the family, and she was emotionally thrown out of the family when she was raped at age four. I no longer became the daughter that my mother and my father desperately needed me to be for them. I could not be me.

Dr. James Dobson: I had such a marvelous relationship with my parents, especially the relationship with my father I've done a lot of talking about, and people will write me and say, "I didn't have that. I envy that. I wish I could've had it."

Joe: Sure.

Dr. James Dobson: You spend the rest of your life thinking about it if you didn't have it, don't you?

Ann: I so longed for this loving, happy family, and thought I was going to create it when I broke away from that home. When I got married and went out on my own, I was going to create that loving, happy family.

Dr. James Dobson: And found yourself facing the same kind of things.

Ann: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you feel cheated in that way, Ann?

Ann: Sometimes I do.

Chris: See, there are those two kinds of tears that I have. I have the tears of the things that happened to me, the abuse, and I have the tears of what didn't happen. And now that I know some families enjoy and that does happen, I still believe that part of my heart's desire to be married is to have a little piece of that in my life.

Joe: Relative to meeting the child, myself in the past, I've done that in a way.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you really?

Joe: Part... Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you thought that thought before, Joe?

Joe: Absolutely. A main ingredient of recovery for an ACA is to go back, find the memories, find the pain, so that, in essence, we can experience the healing of forgiveness and then to begin to re-parent ourselves. I know that little kid that was back then very well today, finally, and he's a-

Dr. James Dobson: What was he like, Joe?

Joe: He's a neat little kid. He was sad back then, but he's a neat little kid. He's the one that allows me to laugh. He's the one that gives me spontaneity. He's the one that allows me to love and to play. He's the one that didn't get to play. And today, I take him to baseball games and things like that.

Dr. James Dobson: Interesting.

Joe: I've never done that before, and nor did my parents. I begged my dad to take me to baseball games. He would never do that. And today, I can take me to a baseball game. As simple as that may sound, that really works, because I'm learning how to love myself.

Dr. James Dobson: Chris said that for a time as an adult, she hated the memory of the little child inside of her. Did you hate that little-

Joe: Not consciously, but unconsciously. I mean, after all, I tried to poison him with

alcohol. Think about that. It was slow suicide. It was killing myself. What's that about? And so in answer of your question, yeah, but I wasn't really, really aware of it.

Chris: There's a bitterness, too, that I experienced, and that is, if I didn't get parented when it was age appropriate, then why the heck should I have to learn how to parent myself? I want to be taken care of. I want to be parented.

Joe: Right.

Chris: And that's why I believe that fellowship and sponsorship and just being surrounded by support groups is so important, so through them I can parent myself.

Dr. James Dobson: Curt, what the adult child of an alcoholic does not want to do is bottle it up inside.

Dr. Curt Grayson: That's absolutely right. And I agree with Joe, I think, in some ways, part of my being an adult now and having come out of an alcoholic home is that to parent myself better or to re-parent and take care of my little boy inside is to some time look at my very busy schedule and learn to say, "No," and learn to set aside time for me to play. Now, for me, play is playing tennis, it's playing guitar, it's playing basketball. And I have to learn how to schedule in those times to just be this frolicsome, silly, little kid, because the rest of the time I'm too responsible.

Joe: Which is fun.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Which is... That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And fun is a curse. You can't have it, right? In addition to these 13 characteristics of an ACA, there are also behaviors that are typical, the compulsive kind of behavior. Ann, you developed an eating disorder, didn't you?

Ann: That's right. I've struggled with a weight problem now for about nine or 10 years.

Dr. James Dobson: Chris, you had the same situation, didn't you?

Chris: Yes, I did. Yes, I turned to sugar to try to feel better. And at one time in my life, I was obese.

Dr. James Dobson: While I was not a child of an alcoholic, I've turned to sugar, too, so I don't know

what excuse I have. Joe, you turned to alcohol. All of these are ways of dealing with pain obviously.

Chris: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Curt, what are some of the other approaches to dealing with this pain inside? What are some of the other compulsive behaviors?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Well, I think it's important to let people know that maybe people are feeling a lot of the emotions that we're feeling here today, and they're trying to think, "Was my father an alcoholic? Was my grandfather an alcoholic?" And maybe they're saying, "No," but maybe they're still identifying very much with what we've said here today. And there are other addictions. I mean, there are parents that are workaholics, that are are foodaholics, exercise-aholics, and various other kinds of compulsive behaviors that would, I feel, equally qualify people to be in a support group and deal with these issues. And the way I look at it is anything that made the parent preoccupied with themselves and not with raising the child and being there emotionally-

Dr. James Dobson: Deprived you in the same way, right?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Exactly.

Ann: When you were talking about that, Curt, it made me think that there are people out there that are going to say, "Well, my parent wasn't an alcoholic because my parent was responsible. My parent attended work every day, never missed a day of work. My parent was a civic leader. My parent wasn't a skid row bum." And we tend to think of an alcoholic as being somebody that's unable to hold down a job, that is unable to keep themselves, physical appearance, and is constantly drinking and under the influence and maybe passed out cold; whereas, that is not the stereotype of what an alcoholic is.

Dr. Curt Grayson: I think there's, the word there that I would use is, there's some people that are called functional alcoholics. And what that means is, just like you're saying, Ann, as far as somebody who has a job, they are very responsible in the community, but they are still just as addicted to the alcoholic. It could even be another legal medication. Some people are addicted to Librium, Valium, various other prescriptions that their doctors freely give them, without really knowing that they're addicted.

Dr. James Dobson: And their children have many of the same characteristics that we've been talking about.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Exactly.

Joe: Sure.

Chris: Right.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Exactly.

Chris: That's right.

Roger Marsh: A parent who is battling an addiction of any kind is doing tremendous damage to his or her family. If you or someone you know needs to reach out regarding substance abuse or perhaps needs mental health support, why not try a Christian counselor? You can be referred to one simply by going to the website of the American Association of Christian Counselors. Go to [connect.aacc.net](http://connect.aacc.net) to begin the process. Sometimes reaching out and asking for help is actually the first step to recovery.

I'm Roger Marsh, inviting you to join us again tomorrow for part three of the conversation with our panel, talking about the positive steps that they are now taking as adult children of alcoholics. Until next time, may you find peace and receive the Lord's blessing for strength and safety throughout the rest of your day. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.