



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Adult Children of Alcoholics - Part 1

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

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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 to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Today's topic and the subject of our program for the next three days is something that affects millions of families and tears at the fabric of our society. It costs us thousands of lives, not to mention pain, suffering, and torment. I'm talking about alcohol abuse and the disease of alcoholism.

Dr. Dobson has written about this subject before and has spoken about the toll this disease has taken across generations of American families. And you know who suffers the most in these situations? Oftentimes, it's the children of alcoholics. You know, there are many consequences of alcohol abuse, especially for the children of a parent who is battling addiction. According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, right now, there are currently 7.5 million children in America, ages 17 and younger, who live with a parent who is abusing alcohol. That is nearly one in 10 children.

I know alcoholism has been prevalent in many generations in my family, and I'm sure there are many listening right now who realize that alcohol does reach almost every family in America. Now, over the next three days here on Family Talk, you're going to hear some gritty and raw stories from a panel of people who grew up in homes with a parent or both parents who were alcoholics. This brave group of men and women will share their stories and how they are still dealing with the trauma and the aftermath caused by the destruction that alcohol brought to their family units. We'll also hear how emotionally scarring having an alcoholic parent can be for a child.

Now, this is a sensitive, emotional, and powerful subject. I know it's going to resonate with many in our listening family. But here at the Dr. James Dobson

Family Institute, our prayer is that you will find hope and encouragement from their stories. Now, we're going to hear from panelists that will be addressed by name by Dr. Dobson. All but one of them choose to remain anonymous, so those names, of course, will be names that we've given to them for the purpose of these broadcasts. I also want to remind parents that the content you're about to hear is intended for mature audiences, so parental discretion is definitely advised. Okay. Let's join the panel right now along with our own Dr. James Dobson for this special edition of Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: Three of the four do not want their names given, and we're going to honor that for you all. I'm just going to give enough information for people to kind of understand where you're coming from. First we have Ann. Ann, as I said, is not your name, but it's good to have you with us today. Next we have Chris, who's a licensed psychotherapist in the state of Colorado. And then, we have Joe, who's an industrial engineer.

Finally, and we will identify this person, we have Curt Grayson. Curt, like the others, grew up in an alcoholic home. Curt has a doctorate in Organizational Psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology in Los Angeles. Curt, I know back in 1986, you started a small support group for adult children of alcoholics at the First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton, California, in Chuck Swindoll's church. You called it New Hope. You are no longer involved in active leadership with New Hope, but I'm interested in what you did there. I think it has relevance for us. Start at that point. Tell us what New Hope was all about and how did it work?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Well, the support group, the idea really is, is it's a chance for people to come and talk about what they experienced in an alcoholic home. I know in my own situation, I realized that we never talked about the alcoholic home, we just lived around it. It's kind of like the story of the elephant who walks through a house and no one acknowledges that the elephant is there. And this is a safe place for people to come and share the pain that they went through and also find hope in talking about it.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, people who don't know anything about adult children of alcoholics and don't understand the process here will say, "Well, why would people want to come wallow in that every week? Why not forget it? Get on with their lives. Why spend one night a week talking about the misery of their childhoods in the homes of an alcoholic?"

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: What's your answer?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Well, I feel like it's important not to stay in the past. My goal, as an adult child of an alcoholic in recovery, is to move forward in my life. But I know what we experience with a support group by talking about what happened to us, we're able to free ourselves up and not be prisoners of the past.

Dr. James Dobson: And you were commenting in my office that the great benefit of a session like that is not just sharing the pain, but sharing it and then still being loved.

Ann: That's correct.

Dr. James Dobson: Somebody still cares for you.

Ann: That's right. It's so important to feel that acceptance and love out there, that you can reveal what's happened to you in your life and that people will not reject you. You're so fearful of the rejection coming.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Yeah. Absolutely.

Ann: And there you can go and feel the love. By opening up and sharing the real you, each week it becomes a little easier to share a little more. And with the love and support of friends that actually give you hugs and encouragement, it encourages you to go on. And you can heal the past by getting in and dealing with issues that you haven't looked at. You might be-

Dr. James Dobson: You've buried them down there.

Dr. Curt Grayson: That's right. Absolutely.

Ann: I had stuffed mine down my entire life. I had not dealt with feelings, because it was too painful to deal with feelings. I didn't know what a feeling was. I suppressed everything, including anger. I think that's one of the things that comes out. And it's okay to express anger. It's okay to say, "I was angry." Anger comes out of hurt.

Dr. James Dobson: Sure.

Ann: Out of being hurt deeply.

Dr. James Dobson: In that kind of Christian environment, where people meet with that common

understanding of the love of Christ in that atmosphere of openness, allows the healing to occur, doesn't it?

Ann: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, all four of you have gone through some of the same trauma. Let me just throw it open to the group. And talk to us about what it's like to grow up in the home of an alcoholic, or in some cases two alcoholics, mother and father.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: What is that experience like? We're talking to people right now who know already the answer to that because they have experienced it. There are others who have no idea. Explain for that second group.

Chris: I think the main thing for me is the fear, the absolute scariness of being a little child and not having parents around. And knowing, even though you don't have the words to describe it, knowing that there's no one in control, except yourself.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Chris: And then, so how do you deal with certain things? And one of the ways that I dealt with things is I hid. I actually had a little favorite closet that I would go in while my parents were verbally arguing, my father had been heavily drinking. And that was the safest place I knew, underneath my bed or in my closet. My best friend was a cocker spaniel.

Dr. James Dobson: What were you thinking in that closet, Chris? What was going on in there?

Chris: "Stop it, stop it. Please stop. It is too noisy." When it gets noisy, it gets dangerous. And I couldn't say that when I was age two or age three, but it's, "Something bad is going to happen. Something really bad is going to happen." And in my family, unfortunately, it got pretty violent. People got hit. I got hit.

Dr. James Dobson: And you remember that very clearly today from age two or three?

Chris: It's interesting you would say that. I repressed so many of these memories until about seven years ago. And then, when I became a Christian and asked the Lord to mold me and make me into His image, these memories started to occur. And I did not know that incest and physical abuse was part of my history.

Dr. James Dobson: My goodness. Joe, do you remember your childhood?

Joe: Sure do. There's something that's real important, I think, to say. Before I got into recovery, I didn't remember my childhood. People would say, "Well, what was childhood like?" And I'd think and I'd say, "Well, previous to about 13, 12 years old, I didn't recall."

But what it was like was very violent. My parents both were alcoholics. My experience was, for instance, coming home from school when I was a kid, I didn't know whether my mother was going to be drunk or not. And when she got drunk, she was usually violent. If she wasn't drunk, she was was a real nice lady. So there was a lot of different messages going on, a lot of confusing things.

Now, if my mother wasn't loaded that particular evening, things went okay. My dad came home. He didn't typically drink at work nor after. However, if my mother did drink during the day, I came home, the house was in a terror. My dad came home, he was absolutely angry. They got in fights. They beat one another up. What is that like for a little boy to see his mother get beat up by his dad? I can remember trying to get in between them when I was little and getting myself kicked around. It does desperate things, desperate, deep down things to one's own soul.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you seek to hide like Chris did? What would you do when your parents were in a brawl?

Joe: I usually... Well, sometimes I got in the middle of it. I was a real acting out type person, and oftentimes, they put myself and my three sisters to bed. We got out of the way when we were smaller. When I was in my teenage years, I finally got to the point where I could stop them. I was strong enough to stop them and I tried to make some peace there.

Dr. James Dobson: So this went on year after year after year?

Joe: Oh, sure, sure. 20 years. It goes on now as we speak. They live in my head.

Dr. James Dobson: Mm-hmm. Wow. In fact they did.

Joe: Well, I am an alcoholic.

Dr. James Dobson: Yes. One of the reasons Joe used that term is he is a recovering alcoholic. In fact, 70% of the children of alcoholics become alcoholics.

Ann: That's true.

Dr. Curt Grayson: That's correct.

Dr. James Dobson: That's the figure. Isn't that amazing?

Dr. Curt Grayson: That's correct.

Ann: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: 70%.

Dr. Curt Grayson: And also, if you grew up in an alcoholic home, you're four times more likely to become an alcoholic yourself or to go on and marry an alcoholic.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. That's the amazing statistic, that you've seen all this tragedy and you turn around and link yourself to somebody who's going to perpetuate it in your adult life.

Joe: But there's another very important thing here, Dr. Dobson. Oftentimes, when we talk about alcoholism or the victimization of the alcoholic family, adult children of alcoholics, I think what comes across is a, for lack of a better term, a wimp factor. And that here we are. We're bellyaching about this and that and the other thing. The fact is, is that people who are raised up in that environment, and I include myself obviously, are tough people, very tough people. And it isn't that this is about, "Oh, look what happened to me." It isn't about that. We can live out a life of being a victim over and over again, but really I'm here today to really talk about not being a victim and being a victor over it.

Dr. Curt Grayson: That's right. I think that in a way, I know that I feel like I have become a survivor. If you've lived through an alcoholic home the way we have, you are a survivor.

Dr. James Dobson: One of your parents was an alcoholic?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Both of my parents were alcoholics. And I can really relate with Joe, because at the age of about five, maybe six, when my mom and my stepfather would fight, they were both alcoholic, I would stand in the middle of them, this little teeny kid, trying to push them apart. And as soon as they would hit each other and go to their separate corners, I would go and do about an hour's worth of counseling with my mother at age five.

Dr. James Dobson: You're kidding. Saying what to her, Curt?

Dr. Curt Grayson: What can a five-year old say other than, "Mom, I'm sorry it happened. I'm sorry I

couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop him this time." And I felt like at that age, I should have been the one to stop it.

Dr. James Dobson: Can you remember how you felt?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Certainly, I felt confused. Certainly, I felt panicked. I remember that. I've lost a lot of my memory, as Joe said, but the things that I do remember are some of the most traumatic things. And as I've started to deal with my recovery as an adult child of an alcoholic, many memories have come back, not memories that I've wanted to come back. But I've been able to get a feeling for the healing as I've gone through that. Especially to me, I remember the feeling of comforting my mother, comforting my stepfather, saying, "It's okay. I wish you wouldn't fight, but I understand that you did. And I'm sorry. It's my fault."

Dr. James Dobson: Now, several of you have already made reference to the fact that you couldn't remember a lot about your childhood, at least until you began to recover from some of those experiences. My wife, Shirley, went through the same thing. I mentioned to you all in my office a minute ago that Shirley and I went together day and night for a year before I knew that this was her childhood. Something so significant to her past she could not tell me. Even though we were very close and obviously heading toward marriage, she could not reveal it to me.

And I remember one night we were sitting out talking together and she said, "There's something I have to tell you." And I thought, "My goodness. What in the world?" And it was this big, heavy thing. And then, she told me about her childhood as though somehow this was a dark blot, a secret, some kind of something that would make me not love her anymore. It didn't have anything to do with my love for her. This is something her father perpetrated. And yet, she saw it as a great handicap, a great blot on her worthiness. And that's rather typical, isn't it?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Of course.

Chris: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you all feel that way?

Chris: Yes.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you feel somehow depreciated in value because of what you'd gone

through?

Chris: I think it's the shame, the shame of having a parent as an alcoholic. I also think as a child, feeling responsible. I know there were many, many times I thought, "If I could just do this, then daddy wouldn't drink so much." And one specific incident was I was in the fourth grade, and my first marking period, I happened to get straight A's. And I thought my father's drinking was a little less. So I decided if I went through the whole fourth grade with straight A's, maybe by the end of fourth grade he'd stop drinking.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Oh, my.

Chris: Well, I got all those straight A's. He didn't stop drinking. It got worse.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Exactly. Right. That's right.

Chris: But it's that feeling of being responsible. And if I could find the magic key to make everything okay, it'll be okay.

Dr. James Dobson: You're nodding, Curt. Is that familiar territory?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Well, I took it the other way. Instead of being a good kid, I caused problems in school. I decided my goal in life was to get D's and F's in second and third grade. And I proved to my family, that was about the time that my parents were going through a divorce. And my mother actually married my stepfather, and then the drinking got a lot worse. And I remember trying hard to get D's and F's, and not knowing why I was doing it.

Dr. James Dobson: Is it clear to you now?

Dr. Curt Grayson: I think I understand a little better that I was basically asking for a cry for help. I was saying, "Mom and dad, I'm unhappy. I don't like what's going on. And I'm going to show you that I need to get noticed."

Ann: Earlier you talked about seeking out those same kind of personalities in future relationships, such as if we don't become alcoholics ourselves, we tend to marry those-

Dr. James Dobson: You did, didn't you?

Ann: ... and get in relationships. And I did that. And what I've learned in recovery is that subconsciously, we seek out to recreate the situation that we lived with as a

child in trying to fix it. You want to go back and relive it and make it all better, make it right. So there's that responsibility again as that child, trying to take and fix it all for everyone.

Dr. James Dobson: Summarize the feelings for me. It's feeling rejected, unloved, unlovable.

Chris: Lonely.

Ann: Lonely.

Dr. James Dobson: Lonely. Lonely? Is that-

Ann: Lonely.

Chris: Lonely.

Dr. James Dobson: ... one of the common characteristics for you?

Chris: Isolation.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Isolation. Afraid.

Ann: A fear.

Dr. James Dobson: It's all a fear.

Chris: It's feeling as if there was something I could do. "There's a magic answer. There's something. If I could find that, then mommy and daddy will be better." And I also think that a big feeling with me was confusion, because I had Good Daddy and Bad Daddy. I would have daddy who would be so drunk that I believed that he was in a blackout, and he would do atrocious things to me, to my mom, to my siblings. And then, on another day he would make us the most fantastic kites, better than you could buy in any store. And he'd teach us how to build rubber band guns. He would be this wonderful... I have wonderful memories of my father.

Dr. James Dobson: Mm-hmm.

Chris: And that, as a kid, you want to hold onto and you tend to deny the other.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Chris: And the other happens, but what do you do with that?

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Chris: And at any moment, "Is it the Good Daddy or Bad Daddy? Who's going to come into my room?"

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Chris: It's really confusing.

Dr. James Dobson: Ann, what was your childhood like? We haven't heard the details of that yet.

Ann: As Joe mentioned earlier, I don't recall a lot of things in my childhood. I think that having been married to an alcoholic, I've mostly dealt with the issues today. And I'm just now getting into the ACA and dealing with some of the childhood issues that I know are there and that I need to work on.

I do have a memory that I think will help people understand a little about Christmas. In therapy several years ago, I found myself doing a lot of crying, waking up in the morning in tears and not knowing why I was crying. And as the therapist began to ask me to look into my childhood and remember what Christmas was like at my house as a child, all the pain came back. The pain that I had stuffed down and never looked at and never thought about all came out.

And what it was like was I was an only child. My father was the alcoholic in my home. And what he did was he would go to a bar and not come home until very, very late in the morning, two or three o'clock in the morning. And Christmas, he never bought my mother or myself a Christmas present in all of our life. There were two years that he did go on the wagon, so to speak, he became sober. And he did remember Christmas for us. And I remember him purchasing a gift for me, which I still have to this day.

Dr. James Dobson: So those two Christmases are the memories that you hold on to?

Ann: The highlights of Christmas for me. The other ones were mother and I were alone. Our relatives are in the East Coast, so mother and I were alone. And mother tried to make Christmas something special for me. But I would wake up early in the morning, and I would go and waken my mother. And it would be mother and I, and we would open the few little gifts we had. And then, the rest of the day was just like any other day of the year. There was no family. There was

no fun. There was no laughter. There was no joy. There was no meal shared. Dad was drunk in bed, passed out cold. He didn't even know Christmas existed.

Dr. James Dobson: Is it similarly for the others, do you think?

Joe: Yeah. I can remember one Christmas Eve. That vision that came to me is myself and my three sisters. We lived back East. It was snowing usually at Christmastime, and we'd be looking out the window, looking for the car coming up the road. My parents were usually out drinking, and they usually got home real late on Christmas Eve. And my older sister and I, we decorated the tree for my little sister. We became the parents, and we had our own little Christmas. But it was always, it just never was quite there. We always yearned to have a nice Christmas. And occasionally we did have a nice Christmas, which was real nice, because my parents weren't bad people. Don't get me wrong. They were good people, but they were sick.

Ann: Mm-hmm.

Chris: One of the things that I was thinking of, and I did not realize this until I was an adult, Christmas morning, it was like my father was there, but he really wasn't there because he was so sick with a hangover. But I didn't realize until I was an adult that not everyone left a bottle of bourbon and cookies for Santa Claus.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Absolutely.

Chris: And that brings in how the family feeds into it.

Ann: Yeah.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: In fact, the things I've read about this problem, one of the characteristics is that the children of alcoholic parents don't know what normal is.

Chris: That's right.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: Right? Because they haven't seen it. So they think what they experienced is normal.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: Which explains why they perpetuate it in their own-

Chris: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: ... families later on.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Chris: Yeah. Later then, as an adult, at least for me, there is a real sorrow of the loss of a family.

Ann: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Chris: I feel familyless. I feel orphaned.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Chris: Because I did not have that normalcy. I did not have that closeness.

Dr. James Dobson: Today, you feel that way?

Chris: Yes, I do.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Joe: Most of this stuff is unconscious, too. I didn't realize that all of this had happened. My unconscious, I guess, realized it because I was acting out all over the place and I eventually became an alcoholic, which I see as a response to some of this. But it wasn't like I woke up at 21 years old and said, "Hey, let's have a messed up life."

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Joe: You know? It wasn't like that. I just kept struggling.

Dr. James Dobson: I would like to just continue. Curt, I want to go back to something you said just before we went on the air, that when you start talking about this subject, the people who are hearing it, the listeners who have been there are predictably going to feel certain things.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: We have an obligation to speak to those. We're not only informing those today who don't know anything about this subject, but we're talking to those who are experiencing it now or have been through it as a child.

Dr. Curt Grayson: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: What are they likely to have felt in this last half hour?

Dr. Curt Grayson: I think if it's like me, if you stuffed your feelings for a long time and never admitted that the events that took place in the home are that tragic, or you've kept all the bad feelings away, people that I know that come to our support group every week, often within five minutes of talking, we begin to see tears. And we begin to see people who begin to get in touch with what happened to them, oftentimes, things shut out for many, many, many years. And so, I would like to say to the listeners, if you are feeling some pain or feeling some depression or some things that you're remembering in your life, it's very normal. As a matter of fact, it's healthy. And part of recovery is to begin to get in touch with these feelings, and that's part of why we're here today.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Curt, Ann, Chris, and Joe, thanks for participating today. And stay right where you are. We'll just continue talking.

Roger Marsh: Well, this has been quite a revelation. And it's only the beginning of our special three-day feature on the adult children of alcoholics here on Family Talk. It features Dr. James Dobson in a classic conversation with a special panel of guests, brave men and women who are still seeking understanding, reconciliation, and healing after years of pain and the scars brought by having a parent or parents who are alcoholics.

God's grace can provide the comfort and compassion that anyone seeks no matter how deep the wounds that you might have endured. In Psalm 23 verse four, remember when David writes, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, also known as the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Lord, you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Now, it can be very overwhelming to have to remember and then play back the painful buried memories from long ago. If you or someone you know needs help for alcohol abuse or for help dealing with someone who suffers from alcoholism, remember you can always get help from a licensed trained counselor. And we recommend a Christian counselor for biblically rooted support. To begin that

process, contact the American Association of Christian Counselors when you go to www.connect.aacc.net. That's connect.aacc.net to find a Christian counselor in your area.

Now, be sure to join us again tomorrow on Tuesday and again on Wednesday as the panel will return. And they'll be sharing with Dr. James Dobson how their childhood experiences had a troubling effect on them as adults. And remember, if you missed any part of today's program or if you'd like to hear all three parts in their entirety and share them with a friend, all you have to do is go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's D-Rjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of everyone here at the JDFI, I want to thank you for making us a part of your day. Be sure to join us again tomorrow for part two of our series on Adult Children of Alcoholics, a panel discussion hosted by our own Dr. James Dobson. That's coming up tomorrow, right here on the next edition of Family Talk.

Announcer:

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