

Child of an alcoholic ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My father is an alcoholic and I've been told that I should stay away from drinking altogether. I'm a freshman this year and it seems like most of my friends always want to go to keg parties or hang out and drink. Sometimes I drink with them, but then I feel guilty and worried afterwards as I think about my dad. It's hard to avoid alcohol here, but I don't want to follow in my father's footsteps either. Any advice or support you can give would help. Thanks.

— Southern Comfort

Answer

Dear Southern Comfort,

Kudos to you for taking stock of your own experiences with alcohol and acknowledging that a parent's use of alcohol has been unhealthy — doing these will certainly put you in the a position to make informed choices about your relationship with alcohol in the future. The self-awareness and knowledge about your dad's drinking patterns is one facet of the "Profile of a Healthy Drinker" (read [Trouble controlling my drinking](#) ^[2] for more information). And your concern is not without merit — because of genetic and environmental influences, children of alcoholics are about three to four times more likely to develop problems with drinking than children of non-alcoholic parents. However, this does not mean that all children of alcoholics will become alcoholics themselves!

So, what can you do about consuming alcohol while at college? Some children of alcoholics are comfortable drinking in moderation and are able to have a healthy relationship with alcohol. Others may be more comfortable in the decision not to drink. The point here is that the choice is yours. If you are in a situation where others are trying to encourage you to drink and you do not want to, you may choose to leave. A lot of options for socialization do not involve drinking alcohol. Check out [Fun without drugs?](#) ^[3] for ideas on how to handle social situations without substances. There are also many organizations nationwide that you can contact to find support, help, and other resources. Among them:

- [Al-Anon and AlaTeen](#) ^[4]

- [National Association for Children of Alcoholics \(NACoA\)](#) [5]
- [The Center on Addiction and the Family](#) [6] (an affiliate of [Phoenix House](#) [7])

It may be helpful to know that the issues you're currently struggling with are also common concerns for other people with alcoholic parents — so you're definitely not alone. There are an estimated 28 million people who come from alcoholic households in the U.S. One of the concerns you mentioned is that you feel guilty and worried as a result of your drinking. Both young and adult children of alcoholics commonly face a range of emotional issues. These include a strong sense of guilt, particularly for the parent's drinking, constant anxiety and/or fear of what will happen at home, embarrassment and confusion, an inability to trust yourself or others, anger, and depression. While this may be concerning, many children of alcoholics lead successful adult lives. Many have gotten help and worked through the difficult issues they face. If you want to talk to a mental health professional, your school's counseling service might be another place to look for support and assistance.

Although your father's trouble with alcohol may have influenced your family life and certain aspects of your adult life, *you are in no way at fault*. And, while you may be at more risk for developing problems with drinking because of your family history, you can make responsible and healthy decisions about your own alcohol use. You're stepping up to the challenge: you've identified a problem, and you're asking yourself and others how your situation could affect your attitudes about drinking and drinking behavior at school — these are great steps!

Alice!

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[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) [15]

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