

Young Living: My Parents Drink Too Much

by *Abigail Wood*

Q: I'm seventeen, from a good home and I love my parents, but they drink--to excess. I can't stand seeing my mother stagger around and babble like an idiot every evening. I might not care so much, but when she's sober she's a great person, intelligent and lots of fun. After six at night I really hate her. And my father is so impossible when he's drunk I don't even talk to him. If I sound bitter, it's because I am. Everyone knocks the younger generation and many parents are ashamed to be seen with their children for fear their long hair won't please someone they meet. In my case it's the other way around. I die a thousand deaths when we go anywhere and my father thinks he should take drunken command of the whole place. I never bring friends home because I don't know what condition my parents will be in. My mother has had some accidents driving, but so far only the car has been smashed. When I see them both driving down the winding road to get more beer, I know that one day they won't make it back. I did talk to my father once about my mother's drinking. He agrees she has a problem but can't help her because he doesn't realize *he* has one. My mother has promised to stop, but to no avail. I feel my parents aren't alcoholics because they can stop sometimes. I can't talk to anyone about it because everyone thinks they're the greatest. But sometimes I feel I can't bear it another minute.

A: Compulsive drinking is painful to live with under any circumstances, but when you're still struggling with the standard turmoil of the teens, it's especially agonizing to see your parents skidding toward self-destruction. They were your first heroes, your earliest source of support and guidance. When those trusted guides seem incapable of managing their own lives, you feel betrayed. Their alcoholic abandon seems abandonment, rejection. (If they loved me, how could they do this to me? And why me? What have I done to deserve this?) Inevitably your heartbreak and fear get

mixed with anger, hate, bitterness... which only increase your misery.

But parents are not just mentors for their children. They're human beings, subject to all the frailties, irrationalities and weaknesses of the human system, including those which brought them to their present state.

People drink for many reasons. Most can stop when they want to, if they want to. But when drinking reaches the pattern you describe, it's no longer mere overindulgence. It has become an illness that cannot be consciously controlled, any more than diabetes or tuberculosis can be stopped with good resolutions. The fact that they function some of the time can be deceptive; it may mean only that the illness is not at its deepest stage. Whether it's called problem drinking, habitual excessive drinking or alcoholism, what's involved is an abnormal sensitivity to alcohol combined with certain compulsions that create a desperate craving for it--so desperate that those who have it are quite unable to stop themselves. And the only treatment that works so far is a rigorous one--total abstinence.

Deep down every compulsive drinker knows he has a problem, however much he tries to deny or conceal it even from himself. Your parents don't want to have car smash-ups or cause you pain; inside, they are full of shame and guilt. It's partly to drown those feelings that they continue to drink.

There is nothing you can do to make them stop. Only they can take that step when they're ready to face themselves. Their promises and your pleading, reasoning or reproaches can do no good and will only make things worse by increasing their guilt-load.

But there are things you can do to help yourself. Learning all you can about alcoholism in order to understand what they're up against will make it easier to be patient and less resentful, less judging. (Young people often demand, "Accept me as I am"; can you try

applying that idea in reverse?) Love cannot exist without compassion and self-discipline. As you work to change your attitude, you'll be able to see your parents as persons, to separate your problems from theirs. You'll discover that you needn't die of shame when they're drunk. You are not your parents; when they stagger, no one will point a finger at you. (Although people do hold parents responsible for their child's actions--and hair length--no one holds the child responsible for the patent!)

Don't isolate yourself from friends--see them away from home if it's easier. And do seek outside help. It's really too much to try to handle alone. An excellent source is Alateen, an organization formed by and for teens with a compulsive drinker in their family to help one another cope with their troubles. The national office (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Box 182, Madison Square Station, New York 10010) will tell you whether there's an Alateen chapter near you (or look in your phone book). If not, they will send you literature and provide member pen pals. The service is free and confidential and has been immensely helpful to many young people in your situation.

Q: I'm fifteen and am having a real hassle with my father. My father is an alcoholic. He has lost countless jobs and causes unbearable embarrassment for our family. He picks on me for everything from cleaning my room to curfews. He insults me, tells me how to organize my life--as if he was an example! After all I've seen, heard and had to take from him, my resentment shows and instead of swallowing it calmly, I'm always on the defensive, ready to lunge back. I'm not wild, I don't drink, smoke, experiment with drugs or--well, I don't even date. And my mother sides with my father! I used to think she did it just to keep peace but she agrees with him and then punishes me. They're constantly arguing and yelling, but the minute I talk back to my father she gets all uptight. If he really wanted to do something for all our good, he'd leave. God only knows why my mother hasn't thrown him out long ago. I've tried to talk to her but

she won't understand. My father gave up listening to me long ago. I'm so afraid it will be like this for my younger brother, too; he has already started to show his resentment. Are other kids in my position? What can I do? Please don't pass this off as a minor matter because it gets worse every day.

A: Your problem is far from minor, and you are not alone with it. It's estimated that there are nearly eight million alcoholics in this country and since many have children in their teens, you can see that countless other young people are going through the same torments--and worse. Remember, too, that some of your differences and battles you'd be having anyway as a part of the ordinary teen experience; growing up is never easy, and disputes over curfews, room cleaning and the like erupt in most families. (Is your record faultless in those departments? Or might there be legitimate cause for complaint?)

An alcoholic in the family does, of course, greatly multiply the difficulties. But the key to coping with them remains the same--understanding, in even larger doses. Read the answer to the letter just above. Now, realizing that your father's condition is really an illness, do you still feel he should be treated with indignation and expulsion--or with the patience and solicitude you'd offer anyone else who is ill? Whenever there's a prolonged and serious problem, it's natural to become confused, angry and rebellious over the hardship it causes. But both your parents need your help more than most and you may have to grow up faster than usual, to a maturity beyond your years. One way to start is to take a fresh look at things from a completely different point of view.

Example: You've been thinking of your father at the five-star troublemaker. But like all alcoholics, he himself is an unhappy, guilt-ridden, frustrated, self-hating, lonely man who needs the best in you--your loyalty and affection and courtesy. And like all of us, an alcoholic tends to take out his hostilities on those he loves most. It's especially important not to talk back or fight back. If things get too

heated, just move out of contact. When you're angry or upset, make yourself pause before you speak and hold back the caustic, provocative words. Or simply take a walk. Remember, he's ill and not in control of himself. That's why you must make an effort to control yourself. Compulsive drinkers are supersensitive and react quickly to hurt; don't criticize and don't be scornful. A brilliant sally may relieve your feelings momentarily, but it will only intensify the battle. Try to become the soother, not the irritant.

Think about the pressure that's on your mother too--emotionally, socially and probably financially. She can use the support of your affection and consideration. You can contribute to family peace also by helping your brother to understand the situation more clearly.

This is a large order. It will surely be hard to do an about-face toward your father when you are so filled with anger. But if you can change your attitude toward him, you'll be surprised at what a change it will make in you as well. For one thing, it will save now-wasted energy for other uses . . . such as developing outside interests. Do get in touch with Alateen too. Meanwhile you might take as your own watchword the essence of their serenity prayer: May I have the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Q: My father drinks all the time and my mother yells at everything. And I've never had a date in my life. I'm not bad-looking, an honor student and I've had leads in school plays. Because I'm always smiling, people think I'm happy. But whenever a boy asks me out, I have to refuse because I'd die if anyone outside the family found out about my parents. When I keep refusing dates, boy think, mistakenly, that I don't like them so they stop asking. It hurts

me to have to do this but how could I possibly introduce anyone to my parents? My mother often asks why I don't go out. But I never know when the two of them will be fighting or my father drunk. Next year my brother will be away and I'll be all alone. I don't know what I'll do.

A: Are you being completely honest? It's often easy to deceive yourself by using one problem as an excuse for not facing up to another.

Refusing every boy who asks you out because you don't know how your parents will behave sounds as if you're not ready to risk a date without their presence! Surely if your father isn't presentable, you can ask your mother to do the honors alone when the boy calls for you. If she wants you to go out, she won't yell at *him*. And you can say your father is sick--it will certainly be true.

But is it possible that you refuse for more obscure reasons--because you fear you won't live up socially to your high standards in other areas? Or that since your father has disappointed you so deeply, you're afraid to put your faith in any other male? Or could you just be having an exaggerated case of the trepidation most girls feel about dating--with its sexual implications? A little self-probing may help you find the nitty gritty, and a dash of courage will probably help you cope with whatever it is, through learning by doing.

This is not to say it isn't difficult and embarrassing to have parents who fall short of ideal. But almost everyone does. And if you speak of yours with respect and affection, and make only a simple explanation when necessary, you'll discourage discussion and your friends will respect you too.

To prepare for your brother's absence next year why not start cultivating some boys to take over? In other words, try the other words--"yes, I'd love to"--next time you're asked.