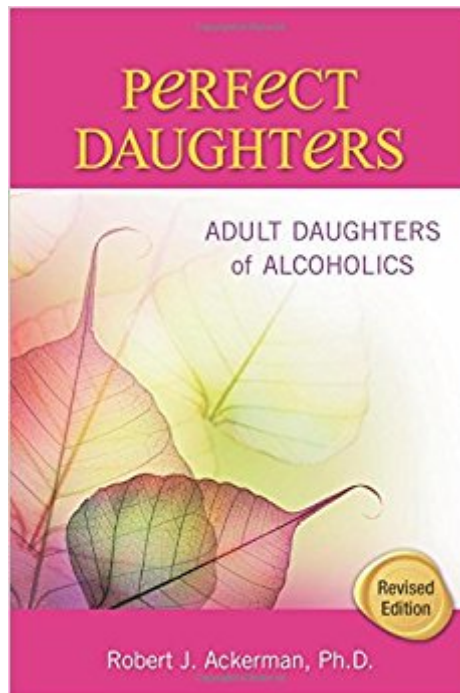




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Perfect Daughters: Adult Daughters Of Alcoholics



Synopsis

This new edition of *Perfect Daughters*, a pivotal book in the ACoA movement, identifies what differentiates the adult daughters of alcoholics from other women. When this groundbreaking book first appeared over ten years ago, Dr. Ackerman identified behavior patterns shared by daughters of alcoholics. Adult daughters of alcoholics-"perfect daughters"-operate from a base of harsh and limiting views of themselves and the world. Having learned that they must function perfectly in order to avoid unpleasant situations, these women often assume responsibility for the failures of others. They are drawn to chemically dependent men and are more likely to become addicted themselves. More than just a text that identifies these behavior patterns, this book collects the thoughts, feelings and experiences of twelve hundred perfect daughters, offering readers an opportunity to explore their own life's dynamics and thereby heal and grow. This edition contains updated information throughout the text, and completely new material, including chapters on eating disorders and abuse letters from perfect daughters in various stages of recovery, and helpful, affirming suggestions from Dr. Ackerman at the end of every chapter. This book is essential for every one who found validation, hope, courage and support in the pages of the original *Perfect Daughters*, as well as new readers and every therapist who confronts these issues. Also includes: a comprehensive reference section and complete index.

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Customer Reviews

[View larger](#) If I do everything just right Daddy won't drink Over 1200 women share

their lives as daughters who grew up in homes with alcoholism, substance abuse or other dysfunction. Gender matters Daughters internalize the experience of living with an addicted parent differently from sons. And, whether the addict is the mother or the father makes a difference. Daughters of addicted moms hold the mother more accountable and express more anger and resentment than daughters of addicted fathers. Daughters tend to excuse and defend addicted fathers. Baggage - the unwanted accessory - Do you recognize inappropriate behavior, and tolerate it? - Do you attract high-risk partners; are you a high-risk partner? - Do you know what a positive relationship looks and feels like and how get your own healthy needs met? - Are you afraid of becoming a parent, or feel you aren't parenting your children well because you lacked positive parenting role models? Perfect Daughters have strong feelings of isolation keep things to themselves feel that everything's their fault feel they aren't good enough to be loved. have a disproportionate need to control have a disproportionate need for approval; especially from the addicted parent

Robert J. Ackerman, Ph.D., is the author of ten books, including A Husband's Little Black Book; A Wife's Little Red Book; Before It's Too Late; Children of Alcoholics; and many others. His books including Perfect Daughters, have become the cornerstone of Recovery and ACoA movements. He has appeared on Oprah, CNN Headline News and The Today Show. Dr. Ackerman is the chair of the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Training Institute, as well as Professor of Sociology at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is also a founding board member of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics.

From Chapter 2 - Home Groan: Daughters In Alcoholic Families Your Age Daughters who were born into an alcoholic family may have totally different perceptions and experiences than daughters whose parent(s) became alcoholic when they were fourteen. The younger you were when your parent became alcoholic, the longer you were exposed to active alcoholism and the higher the probability that you were negatively affected. Additionally, your developmental stage of childhood might have influenced how you perceived alcoholism. For example, a five-year-old sees only the behavioral effects of alcoholism, which she equates with drunken behavior. A fifteen-year-old can equate alcoholism not only with being drunk, but also with a variety of perceived motivations as to why the alcoholic drinks. Children do not automatically recognize that a parent is an alcoholic. As a matter of fact, many adult children will not accept even now that one or both of their parents is or was an alcoholic. In childhood, recognizing that the parent has a drinking problem occurs in three

stages. In the first stage, a child begins to realize that her house is different from that of her friends. However, just because families differ does not mean that something is wrong. During the second stage, the child begins to suspect that the differences between her home and other homes is something that should be covered up or denied because she doesn't want her friends to know. In the third stage, the child becomes aware of what the difference is, which is that her parent drinks too much. Most daughters of alcoholics reach the third stage around age thirteen (Ackerman, 1988), which does not mean that the daughter tells anyone, but rather that she admits to herself that she knows what the problem is in her house. After all, many adult daughters admit the alcoholism only as adults, long after their childhood has ended. Other factors influence the age at which daughters reach stage three. The gender of the alcoholic parent and whether one or two alcoholic parents were present are both contributing factors. For example, most daughters of alcoholic fathers reach stage three when they are twelve years old. (Approximately 60 percent of the adult daughters in this study had an alcoholic father only.) Daughters of two alcoholic parents typically admit the drinking problems when they are approximately fourteen years old. Perhaps both parents did not become alcoholic at the same time, or if a daughter has two alcoholic parents, she did not have a nonalcoholic role model to compare her adults to. Therefore, realizing the inappropriate behaviors in one's parents may take longer because they were both doing the same thing and not until being exposed to other parental role models does a daughter begin to admit the differences. (Only 20 percent of the adult daughters studied had two alcoholic parents.) Daughters of alcoholic mothers often do not reach stage three until they are almost nineteen, perhaps because women traditionally have developed alcohol problems at later ages than men, or the daughter wants to deny a drinking problem longer in her mother than in her father. Another reason could be that adult daughters of alcoholic mothers are much less likely to know someone else with an alcoholic mother since only 20 percent of adult daughters have an alcoholic mother only, as opposed to the 60 percent who have an alcoholic father.

Alcoholic Mothers, Alcoholic Fathers Are daughters of alcoholic mothers affected differently than daughters of alcoholic fathers? You may have entirely different memories, perceptions and experiences of your childhood depending upon the gender of your alcoholic parent. Additionally, if you had two alcoholic parents, the effects of the alcoholism of each one were probably not equally received; that is, you probably identified more with and were influenced more by the alcoholism in one parent than in the other, and experienced more positive or negative feelings from one than from the other. The impact and feelings of adult daughters of alcoholic mothers and fathers are discussed more fully in later chapters.

Contributing Others While you were growing up, did you have someone special whom you could share your feelings with about your

family life? Perhaps the person was another relative, a best friend, teacher, neighbor or, in some cases, your nonalcoholic parent. If you had someone who cared about you and your problems, she or he made a contribution to your life by helping you with your feelings. This special person allowed you to share your family secret. You may not have solved anything together, but just being together with another person and believing that someone else cared about you and supported you was helpful. Unfortunately, only 13 percent of adult daughters indicate that they had someone with whom they could share their feelings during their childhood. Those daughters who did have such a person in their lives were much less likely to seek treatment as adults than those who had no choice but to keep all of their emotions and feelings to themselves. If you had such a friend, relative or confidante, as you proceed in your recovery from your childhood, you will realize how much she or he contributed to your life. I wish I could have had real parents. I've always wondered what it would have been like to have someone to care about me and to share my deepest hurts and secrets and successes with.

Nancy Parenting Behaviors and Styles Although one or both of your parents were alcoholic while you were growing up, what kind of parent or parents were they? For example, how did the alcoholism affect the ability of the alcoholic to fulfill the parenting role? On the other hand, how did the alcoholism in the family affect the ability of your nonalcoholic parent to fulfill the parenting role? Many adult daughters express that their strongest negative feelings about their childhood are more associated with how the alcoholic behaved toward them than with the actual drinking. In other words, the parenting that you received or didn't receive can affect your memories about your childhood more significantly than the drinking alone. How much the alcoholic parent attempts to still try and be a parent can affect a child. You may have had a parent who made an effort to be an effective parent, but who was unable to break the addiction from alcohol. Not all parents, alcoholic or nonalcoholic, have the same behaviors or the same styles of parenting. Growing up with a parent who ignores you is different than living with one who tries to control you, regardless of their alcohol use. We felt that our father really did love us; he just wasn't very good at it. He messed up everything he tried, but he did try.

Carol Other daughters were convinced that their alcoholic parent would lie awake at night trying to think of what else they could do to upset their daughter! And when our father used to get us up in the middle of the night and march around the house singing "'Onward Christian Soldiers,'" it would be a school night and we would think that we should be able to sleep like normal kids. And we'd say, "'Mom, please help us, come to our rescue,'" and she never did.

Cathy Adult daughters indicate that the behavior that they remember most about their alcoholic parent is the verbal belligerence. This type of alcoholic parent is argumentative and verbally abusive, walking all over everyone's beliefs and self-esteem. Other

daughters state that the alcoholic parent was offensive to them, including behaviors ranging from embarrassing them in front of friends, to physically or sexually abusing them. Thirty-one percent of adult daughters experienced physical abuse as children, 19 percent were victims of sexual abuse, and 38 percent witnessed spousal abuse in their families. These rates of abuse were three to four times higher than among women who were raised in nonalcoholic families. Daughters who experienced not only parental alcoholism but also abuse were affected more and differently than adult daughters of nonabusive alcoholics. In my own recovery, I found that I slowly experienced and found ways to express anger at Dad for his various abusive rampages while he was drunk. The surprise was that I had seen my mother as a victim all those years and never held her responsible for the hell my brothers and I went through. Valerie Some adult daughters indicate that the alcoholic parent was passive and paid little attention to them or other members of the family. Other adult daughters state that the alcoholic pretended to be carefree, taking nothing seriously. This approach might have been fine according to the alcoholic's thinking, but adult daughters adjusted to this pattern by taking everything in their lives seriously, perhaps too seriously. As you might suspect, verbal belligerence and offensive behaviors occur more among alcoholic parents than did passive and carefree behaviors. Additionally, daughters who experienced verbal attacks and abuse indicate far more negative effects than do the daughters of passive and carefree alcoholic parents.

Your Perceptions Eighty percent of adult daughters perceive that having an alcoholic parent highly affected their lives. Twelve percent indicate that they were moderately affected, and 8 percent believe that they were unaffected. What is the source of their perceptions? Are their perceptions the ones that they had as children, or do they come from their experiences as adult daughters who see things differently now? Your understanding of your childhood as a child may be totally different from how you remember it now. Whatever most of us define as real, we usually react to as if it exists. Whether it is real or not, we respond to it based on our perceptions. All daughters of alcoholics do not share the same perceptions of their experiences. This section began by asking what it was like in your home as a child. What did you think about your family as a child? Did you perceive and believe not only that something was wrong in your family, but also that you were being affected? If you thought that something was wrong, did you know what it was or did you think it was you?

When I was growing up I just felt very lonely all of the time. I felt like I didn't have any friends, that life was passing me by, and I was depressed often. I can't say that at the time I was experiencing it, I recognized it as being unnatural. You know I thought there was something wrong with me. Paula Having an accurate and consistent perception of a situation is difficult when the situation is chaotic and constantly changing, when it contains mixed messages, or when we are not able to understand

what is happening. Many adult daughters admit to being confused as children not only about the drinking, but also about how they should behave in their own families. For example, if you wanted to perceive that your parent did not have a drinking problem, then you would have tried to behave as if your mother was not alcoholic. However, this attempt became confusing when you found yourself doing things to compensate or cover up for a condition that you wanted to perceive did not exist. Our perceptions of having an alcoholic parent can depend upon several things. The first and foremost is denial. While growing up, if you wanted to deny that your parent was alcoholic, you probably also denied that any problems from drinking existed. On the other hand, you could deny the impact of the drinking by convincing yourself that any dysfunctional behaviors in your family had nothing to do with drinking. Another way to distort perceptions is to minimize. Such statements as "It really wasn't that bad," "It didn't affect me," or "He isn't drunk, he just doesn't feel well," are all examples of attempting to minimize the impact of the alcoholism in your life. As a child, how well did you understand what was going on in your family? In other words, did you know that alcoholism or alcohol problems were causing the pain in your family? If you did not fully understand what was happening, you probably do not accurately perceive the situation. As a child, your uncertainty about the situation could explain differences in opinions about what occurred. All of these different perceptions and their reasons can explain why many adult daughters admit that they recognized the alcoholism in a parent as a child or teenager, while other adult daughters indicate that they did not perceive the problem of alcoholism until they were adults. My mother was an alcoholic, and I didn't know that she was an alcoholic when I was a child. So for me, being a child of an alcoholic didn't start until I was about fifteen years old. Before that, the experience was more of being a child in a family that was unloved and that I was a troublemaker and not wanted. Because of that, I felt I was to blame when I did find out that my mother was an alcoholic.

Renee Your Resiliency A frequently heard cliché is that "children are resilient." Although this idea has been around for a long time, only in the past twenty years have therapists and researchers explored the validity of this concept. Much of this interest has come from our concern about "high-risk" children. Children who have been raised in troubled families-alcoholic, abusive, emotionally stressful, parents in conflict-or in dangerous physical environments have often been considered at-risk emotionally, physically and developmentally for many problems in their own lives. Certainly daughters of alcoholics fit this category. On the other hand, some adult daughters were able to go with the flow as children and adolescents. They seemed to be able to adjust to situations, maintain a sense of purpose in their lives and, above all, keep a positive attitude. Parental alcoholism was not going to rain on their parade; the umbrella that protected them was resiliency. Many definitions are available for

resiliency, which can be described as the ability to thrive despite adversity. Resiliency enables people of all ages and backgrounds to lead healthy and fulfilling lives despite formidable obstacles. Different behavioral and emotional outcomes for many adult daughters might result from the amount of resiliency developed during childhood. For example, while you were growing up, did you have people or institutions in your life that helped you? Did you have places to go that allowed you to feel good about yourself or at least forget about what was happening at home? Avis Brenner believes that all children under stress need an "emotional oasis" (1984). The child under stress needs a time-out somewhere from the trauma. Fortunately, some adult daughters had these places to go to and positive people in their lives. Many studies on resiliency reveal that certain protective factors occur in the lives of high-risk children that help them successfully cope with their situations (Benard et al., 1994; Garmezy et al., 1976; Werner and Johnson, 2000). Children who have these protective factors are more able to endure the dysfunctional situations in their lives and still emerge as relatively competent and content children. The following are the six most common protective factors identified in the lives of resilient children.

1. They know how to attract and use the support of adults. If you had people in your life helping and supporting you, perhaps not only did others want to help you, but you were also the type of girl that others enjoyed being around. Teachers, group leaders and adult relatives were there for you, and you were able to accept and use their support. Many adult daughters state that were it not for a certain adult or group of people in their lives, they would not have made it.
2. They actively try to master their own environment, have a sense of their own power and often volunteer to help others. Few children can master the environment of an alcoholic family. However, children of alcoholics who could master other environments in their lives lessened the impact of their alcoholic families. For example, these children were able to fit in well in school and church, with youth groups and with friends. When you master your environment you feel comfortable in it—that you have something to contribute and that being in that environment is worthwhile. Most importantly, you feel good about yourself. Daughters of alcoholics who mastered an environment had a place not only to feel good about themselves, but also to enjoy an emotional oasis from their families.
3. They develop a high degree of autonomy early in life. You cannot totally separate from an alcoholic family. However, those daughters of alcoholics who were able to establish an identity other than being a daughter of an alcoholic were able to develop a certain degree of autonomy. I used to call this "the front-porch phenomenon." Whenever I was inside my house, I would shut down. In the grip of too much tension and too much dysfunction, you become part of a dysfunctional system even if you don't want to. Being a spectator was not possible. I was enmeshed whether I liked it or not. When I left the house, however, and stepped off the front porch,

I felt a tremendous sense of relief and I believed that for a while I could be my own person. How about you? Did you have a chance to separate for a while, or did being a member of an alcoholic family totally overshadow your identity? 4. They become involved in various activities or projects and do well in most things that they undertake. A little bit of success somewhere provides a wonderful way to offset a lot of pain in your family. Daughters of alcoholics today have more opportunities to become involved in activities than many of the adult daughters who were part of the original study on which this book is based. Adult daughters often share that they felt like failures at home or were put down by the alcoholic. The actress Suzanne Somers, a daughter of an alcoholic, publicly tells her story and states that she was constantly called a ""zero, the big 'O,' or nothing"" by her alcoholic father, which must have been incredibly painful. Daughters who were involved in various activities and did well in them had a chance to experience successes in their lives. These daughters, even in pain, were able to use their talents and feel good about themselves. One woman in the play A Chorus Line tells of the pain in her family and the marital infidelity of her father, who left the family, but she states that, ""Everything was beautiful at the ballet."" For a few hours a week, she danced there and the world danced with her. 5. They are socially at ease, and they make others feel comfortable around them. I think that I have done a lot for children. I have developed programs for high-risk children, worked with youth mental-health workers, helped to found organizations to advocate for children's issues and listened to thousands of children. I would, however, be the last person to say that I love all children. You could put some children around me for a long time and I don't think that the word ""love"" would come up between the two of us too often. Some children are easier to help than others. When they are comfortable in social situations and others feel comfortable around them, children are more likely to benefit from help. Whether the person who is going to help realizes it or not, if she is comfortable around the child she will give the child everything she has. If, however, something about the child makes her uncomfortable, she is likely to be hesitant or cautious even if she is not aware that she is doing it. Many adult daughters have great social skills. They know the right things to do around other people and thus others are at ease in their presence. If these adult daughters possessed these traits as girls, they probably had more people who were willing to interact with them and thus be supportive. Daughters who have always struggled socially may not have been as fortunate. 6. They develop a healthy sense of humor. Traditionally we have always thought that having a healthy sense of humor around stress was an adult characteristic. We now realize, however, that children who have a healthy sense of humor are more resilient to stress. I'm not talking about being sarcastic. Being sarcastic about your situation is much different from having a healthy sense of humor. Sarcasm does not indicate that

you have the ability to deflect or reduce the emotional impact of strain. If anything, sarcasm might be an indicator of just how much the pain exists. I've listened to many adult daughters who made joke after joke or wisecracks about their alcoholic family, but you could feel the pain. A healthy sense of humor does not mean that you could laugh at everything as much as it might have indicated that you were able to have an alternative point of view about the situation. Also, a healthy sense of humor as a child meant that sometimes you knew that the best thing to do was to just "lighten up." You knew that you couldn't change the situation, but maybe you could make it less intense. G. K. Chesterton, a British philosopher, once said that the reason that angels can fly is because they take themselves lightly. ã ã Did you have any of the above contributors to resiliency while you were growing up? Such personality characteristics might help to explain differences among adult daughters. Looking at the resiliency factors might remind you not only of your childhood, but also your experiences outside of your family. Sometimes we need to look back to see who helped us, and sometimes we are able to remember good people and positive situations. Now you need to find more of those. ã ã ã ã ©2002. All rights reserved. Reprinted from Perfect Daughters (Revised Edition) by Robert J. Ackerman, Ph.D. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the written permission of the publisher. Publisher: Health Communications, Inc., 3201 SW 15th Street, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442.

I got this as suggestion by friend. It's great to relate to others who are ACA daughters as myself but I feel the author is referring too much to the 1980s and before rather than new evidence that has come out that is really helpful. Glad this book exists for those who need it.

I have been having a lot of the issues that other ACOAs go through. I have a tendency towards perfectionism, sometimes to the point of not even starting something, because I know that I won't be perfect at it. This book, while interesting to read, wasn't enlightening. I didn't really learn anything from it that I hadn't learned from other more informative ACOA books, and I felt that it didn't fit me and my issues. It also seemed very generalized, for a book specialized towards "perfect daughters" It covered a wide range of personality types, and the ways that a daughter of an alcoholic learns to cope, just not what I 'thought' a perfect daughter was. It would be a great book for those just beginning to explore this subject, and could probably give some a feeling of not being alone in their pain.

Not really what I was looking for as far as reading material. It's more of a collection of patient situations from years of therapy sessions. Read the excerpts before you purchase just to be sure it's what you want.

It was hard to see myself written on pages, which lead to a lot of tears and a lot of forgotten memories. BUT it was a breath of fresh air to know I wasn't alone. For my own sanity I read pieces at a time and took a slow pace. But this book helped me see the beauty of the "Curse" that was bestowed on me, and learn to use it to my strengths. I loved how it explained how people may react to your recovery process which was something I myself was struggling with. I would recommend this book to any daughter of an Alcoholic.

It wasn't the book for me. All it did was explain about things I already understood, and trying to give me comfort in the idea that other people experience similar things. That doesn't help me get over the issues that developed in my childhood. To each their own though.

This book was so helpful in discovering who I am as result of childhood and how it affects my decision-making and my behaviors. Awesome book!!! I highly recommend this book. It's empowering and I will definitely refer to this again on my healing journey. I have to say that the Audible edition isn't the best narrator... a little creepy at times and very dramatic LOL!!! Yet, I loved the book!!!

Throughout my whole life I felt excluded, lost, confused, and a stranger to myself. After recently looking for help I was told to read a book about adult children. Throughout reading this book I've started to better understand myself, my path, my past, and hope for the future. I highly recommend this book!

I felt like the author has been following me around for the best 30 years and then decided to write a book about me. I have read and re-read so many pages. I've been working towards recovery for a year now and this book is now my bible for my continued journey.

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