
How to Cope with a Parent's Substance Abuse

An Interview with Psychologist Lorie Honda

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A parent's substance abuse can be painful and difficult for anyone at any age. The only way to survive a parent's substance abuse is to be able to know how to cope. To help understand the impact parent substance abuse can have on an adult child and how an adult child can cope with their parent's substance abuse, I have interviewed psychologist Lorie Honda.

Tell me a little about yourself:

"I am a licensed psychologist specialized in work with children and adolescents, but I also provide services to adults, collaterally in consultation when working with their children, and also in individual therapy for needs within the scope of my practice. I received most of my training on the East Coast, including a Masters degree at Harvard University and my doctorate at Columbia University. I also specialize in therapeutic work with Asian-Americans and children with hearing impairments. I have a private practice in downtown Davis in Northern California and hold a position as Senior Clinical Advisor for Child Haven, a family mental health agency where I have worked for 11 years as a clinician and later as Clinical Director for several years. I have provided supervision to multiple masters-level clinicians and over 25 doctoral students regarding their work with children and adults who have experienced trauma, neglect and/or sexual and physical abuse. I derive a great deal of meaning and purpose from my work as a psychologist, and employ a strength-based approach to helping clients live an enriched and fulfilling life."

What type of impact does parent substance abuse have on the adult child?

"Coping with a parent struggling with substance abuse can be painful and challenging throughout the offspring's lifetime and in different manners at different ages. It can be traumatic for a child to not have the sense of security or assurance that the parent can be counted on to protect and care for that child. This feeling can at times haunt a person throughout a lifetime, if left untreated. Seeing the parent as incapacitated, unreliable, and possibly abusive can deeply fracture the child's ability to trust that he/she can rely on others without feeling vulnerable. This can at times be manifested in adulthood as the adult child is unwittingly drawn to similarly hurtful and damaging relationships. The adult offspring can also display patterns of co-dependency in which he/she comes to incorrectly believe that his/her sense of value as a person is contingent on how much that person helps others. The experience of being parentified as a young child, having too much responsibility to care for and clean up after the parent and hide any evidence of the substance abuse, for example, can habituate the child to feeling a disproportionate sense of worth in this caretaking role. Later as an adult, maintaining similarly dysfunctional relationships, in order to "cure" the other person or to prove his/her loyalty as a partner, can be part of this self-destructive mindset. These are but a few of the many ways in which adult sons and daughters can be adversely and unfortunately affected by their parents' substance abuse."

What can an adult child do to cope with their parent's substance abuse? What type of professional help is available for an adult child who is trying to cope with the parent's substance abuse?

"The good news is that there are a lot of effective and proven resources available to help a son or daughter of a parent who has struggled in the past or is currently struggling with alcohol abuse. One of the most time-tested resources is Al-Anon, a support group that helps those intimately connected to chemically-dependent individuals to better identify the way in which their own patterns of behavior and attitudes can contribute to, and even enable, the destructive interpersonal dynamics experienced with their addicted loved ones. Ongoing weekly therapy is also extremely important, in helping a person begin to heal from the trauma experienced as a child, adolescent and/or adult. Involvement in therapy can potentially help that person to repair his/her relationship with the loved one, re-gain control and meaning through taking ownership and responsibility for his/her own life, create healthier boundaries with others so that his/her needs are clarified and met, and begin to create opportunities for more fulfilling relationships with others. Therapeutic support groups and self-help literature are also available as effective adjunct resources."

What last advice would you like to leave an adult child who is coping with their parent's substance abuse?

"Be compassionate with yourself. Remind yourself again and again that your parent's choices are not your own, even if the consequences seem to directly affect you and you're tired of dealing with them. Re-focus your perspective on what control you do have over things that are important to you in YOUR life. Give yourself permission to listen more intently to the voice deep in you that you have quieted and edited for too long, so that you can finally discover what it is that YOU truly want, need, feel, dream for, etc. Honestly examine any addictive, self-destructive patterns of behavior that you, too, may have. Get emotional support from friends, family, and a professional ally to start taking the courageous steps that allow you to make healthier decisions and eventually move past this painful period of your life."