When a Man Loves a Woman:

Alcoholism and the Effects on the Family

Bonny Troye

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The movie “When a Man Loves a Woman” depicts how alcoholism can affect the whole family. The story begins with Alice in a bar and her husband Michael comes in and they pretend that they do not know each other. It is obvious from the very start of the movie that Alice has been drinking. Though she's a fun and loving person, Alice is often reckless and, when drunk, even neglects her children, nine-year-old daughter Jess, from a previous marriage, and four-year-old daughter Casey, whose father is Michael. As the story goes on, it shows several different instances where Alice’s drinking causes problems.

One scene shows Michael and Alice on vacation in Mexico. They are out on a boat and Alice is drunk and falls overboard. Michael jumps in and saves her. This scene is important because that is Michael’s role in Alice’s life. As her drinking continues to get worse, he is there to save her. The next morning she swears she is going to stop drinking so much, but it doesn’t happen. The catalyst for her getting help is a very difficult scene to watch. She comes home obviously drunk, sends the babysitter home and proceeds to wash down aspirin with vodka as her daughter watches from the other room. When Alice discovers Jess watching her she backhands her across the cheek. Alice then gets in the shower and as she passes out she falls through the glass doors of the shower. Jess calls Michael, who is a pilot on a trip, and says “mommy died”. She clarifies and says that Alice fell in the shower. Michael promises to have someone come and help them, but it is obvious that he is devastated that the girls are there alone.

After this incident, Alice checks into a rehabilitation center for help. The remainder of the story revolves around how Alice’s alcoholism affects the family they have built. Michael struggles with his new role in her life, as she comes out of rehab a stronger more independent woman who doesn’t need him to “fix” her anymore.

Alice’s behavior would be considered ‘abnormal’. According to our text abnormal behavior has the following criteria:

* a psychological dysfunction
* associated with distress or impairment in functioning that is
* not a typical or culturally expected response

When Alice began drinking she would continue to drink beyond her ability to function as a parent or spouse. As she discovered her fears of living without alcohol her drinking got worse. At a point in the movie she states “I start at 4 in the morning and it goes on all day…I have to be high to do anything…I am scared all the time…I drink a quart a day, vodka so you couldn’t smell it…I hid it”. These statements define her addiction and exemplify the criteria of abnormal behavior. She was obviously unable to function without alcohol and the fact that she drank every day shows that it is not a typical response to her fears.

Alice displays the symptoms of Axis I Substance Dependence diagnosis. These symptoms include:

* Increased tolerance for the substance
* Withdrawal symptoms or continued use of the substance to avoid withdrawal symptoms
* Substance often taken in larger amounts over a longer period than was intended
* Persistent desire for substance or unsuccessful efforts to control substance use
* Substance use in place of important activities
* Substance use that continues despite its causing or increasing persistent physical or psychological problems

Alice made comments in the movie regarding the fact that she drank even at Jess’ birthday party, just to get through it. On scene showed her going to have drinks with a friend, even while she knew she needed to be home so Michael could leave on a business trip. As she began drinking that night, she forgot that he needed to leave and got home too late for him to go. After the incident of her falling out of the boat, she swore she would drink less, but was unable to follow through with that decision. When she did finally go to the treatment center she experienced severe withdrawal symptoms.

The question that I had was “what were the long term effects on the children”. While the movie depicted what Alice and Michael went through after her treatment and recovery, it did not really delve into how the girls were affected. My research shows that children of alcoholics have specific characteristics that they take into adulthood.

Alcohol is the most frequently used drug in the United States. Even in moderate quantities, alcohol affects perception, motor processes, memory and judgment. Alcohol use is correlated with increases in aggression, hostility, violence and abusive behavior.

“The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism reports that more than one half of adults in the U.S. have a close family member who has abused alcohol or is addicted to it”. Children who live with a parent who is an abuser or addicted to alcohol experience various levels of low self esteem, feelings of guilt and despair, loneliness and fear of abandonment, chronic depression and high levels of anxiety and stress. As an adult, children of alcoholics experience difficulties trusting others and have relationship issues .

Many spouses and children become codependent, also known as enablers. Enablers try to protect an alcoholic from getting in trouble by making excuses for their behavior. Codependents make the problem worse by permitting the drinking to continue .

Alcoholism is a genetically complex disease like diabetes and heart disease. Genes alone do not preordain that someone will become an alcoholic. Environment plays an important role in the development of the disease.. Nearly 14 million Americans meet diagnostic criteria for alcohol use disorders and more than 18% of Americans experience alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence at some time in their lives. . Alcohol continues to be popular because of its short term affects. People consume alcohol to relax, makes them feel more courageous, less inhibited and more entertaining. These positive consequences can overpower the negative consequences.

There are many challenges of growing up in an alcoholic family. Adult children of alcoholics (ACOA) suffer a wide range of negative effects including:

* four times more likely to become an alcoholic
* higher rates of mental disorders such as depression, rage and fear of responsibility
* higher rates of marrying into alcoholic families
* higher rate of divorce

There are some positive character traits that are common in ACOA’s. They “tend to be highly motivated, ambitious, attentive and affectionate. They also show plenty of empathy because they understand other people’s pain” .

Some characteristics of an ACOA are:

* People pleasers that lose identity in others
* Have relationships with compulsive personalities (alcoholics, workaholic, gambling)
* Overdeveloped sense of responsibility, more concern for others than self
* Dependent personality
* Choose insecure relationships
* Confuse love with pity, tend to love those who need rescuing

Although the movie was basically Alice’s story, when she received her 180 day pin, she explained her addiction and realized that she will never know how it affects her children in the future. During the incident that sent her to treatment, her young daughter was left alone with her and that will stick with her for a lifetime.

It was enlightening to find out how many people are affected by alcoholism. This movie did a good job of depicting how alcoholism can affect the entire family. The affect was felt by not only her husband, but her babysitter and her children were deeply affected by Alice’s addiction. Every day families like this one deal with the affects of this devastating disease. While this movie had what you could call a “happy ending”, many people never recover and continue the roller coaster ride.

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