

THE FEELING OF SAFETY OF ACOA IN THE ALCOHOLIC FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of article is the analysis of the life experiences of 40 participants of Adult Children of Alcoholics therapy meetings. The article highlights the feeling of security of the individual family member in an alcoholic family. The author notes role of the dysfunctional family, the impact on individual family members and the negative effect on their adult life.

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INTRODUCTION

Social reality is changing at a great speed, causing an increase in problems in daily life. The discussion regarding alcoholism is one of the most important in today's world. People who are unable to cope with the new conditions they face look for help in drugs which allow them to forget themselves momentarily. The phenomenon of alcoholism encompasses a variety of social classes. Reaching for 'the bottle' becomes an uncontrollable habit which then turns into alcoholism. In an alcoholic family, mechanisms are in place which neither bring the family together nor

serve the family systems¹. It is often a process of pseudo-integration which serves to negate the problems which do exist and makes the search for solutions to them impossible. Living in a relationship with an addict causes a tendency to control everybody and everything; this vigilance becomes a defence against shame. It ensures the feeling of some kind of security giving the sense of authority in predicting coming events. A dysfunctional family system hinders children's correct development as those who grow up in such a family are usually the victims of addictions and co-addictions caused by those closest to them. They suffer much both emotionally and physically, which usually come to light in adult life. The fundamental decision that the non-drinker in the family must make is whether to object to such behaviour or to adapt to it². The greatest problem in dysfunctional families is disturbed emotional relationships. Particularly significant in the family are: the tendency to emotional abuse, neglect of chores, lack of respect of personal borders, physical abuse, inability to express feelings and sexual molestation.

The following article, based on research carried out in a group of people attending therapy sessions of Adult Children of Alcoholics in the Addiction Prevention Centre, is simply to flag up the problem in an alcoholic family.

ACOA'S SENSE OF SECURITY

There are many threats in today's world. The contemporary man has to deal with sudden problems caused by the world around him and is threatened; on a military, environmental or moral level. But man longs to be secure, i.e. to have the feeling/ sense of security. He works better and functions more reliably when his life is under control and the world around him does not have anything unexpected in it³.

The issue of security is undergoing somewhat of a revival in social sciences, though the social aspect of the problem is rather rarely taken up and discussed. Public, political and economic security is presented, whereas there is a decidedly noticeable lack of research into the security

¹ M. T. McKie, *Families, violence and social change*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, Berkshire 2005, p. 25.

² A. Margasiński, *Rodzina Alkoholowa z uzależnieniem w leczeniu*, Cracow 2011, p. 61.

³ A. Pieczywok, *Wybrane problemy z zakresu edukacji dla bezpieczeństwa. Konteksty – Zagrożenia – Wyzwania*, Warsaw 2011, p. 130.

of the individual. Individuals who find themselves in a risky or dangerous situation often highlight the lack of sense of security; for example in families with an alcohol problem. Some definitions place security in the category of need. I agree with the view expressed by Karen Horney, who claims that the need for security is a key motivation which defines man's way of life and activity⁴. This activity is connected to the constant effort to avoid threats which may, for example, lead to the loss of social position. So, in the effort to fulfil this need for security, family members become, to a certain extent, dependant on the addicted member. Security is one of the fundamental needs for every human being. It is a state, which ensures the feeling of existence, guarantees its continuation and also gives the opportunity for further growth and development.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow, placing security secondary as regards needs, has proven that the not meeting this need makes the realisation of needs of higher priority impossible. Man has limited means of development in a situation of permanent threat. He is then only concentrated on meeting this need, missing out on love, affiliation, experiencing beauty and any actions towards self-development⁵. Man's security is a complicated system of mechanical solutions to his needs which ensures the security of his life and possessions. It is also a series of activities and decisions made by man to limit the risks of danger in its broadest sense. Security is a state of security and the guarantee of its continuation, giving the feeling of stability and allowing for the further development of the individual. The necessity for order and harmony is one of the most basic existential needs of man and is characterised by the lack of fear regarding the loss of valuables such as life, health, emotions, respect, work, or goods, both material and intangible. ⁶ The lack of security causes anxiety and the sense of danger. Psychologists note the personality conditioning associated with the feeling of security, which include:

- Constant fear experienced in life, which is accompanied by the feeling of danger,
- Passive egocentrism – low self-esteem and critical views of others,
- Low self-esteem – an affective attitude to self,

⁴ K. Horney, *Neurotyczna osobowość naszych czasów*, Poznań 2007, p. 202.

⁵ K. Zaremba, D. Zbrozczyk, *Poczucie bezpieczeństwa jednostki w różnych sferach funkcjonowania*, [in:] *Wybrane problemy bezpieczeństwa. Ekologiczny, personalny i społeczno-kulturowy kontekst bezpieczeństwa*, A. Urbanek, D. Zbrozczyk (ed.), Słupsk 2016, p. 166.

⁶ H. Filipczuk, *Dziecko w placówce wychowawczej*, Warsaw 1988, p. 105.

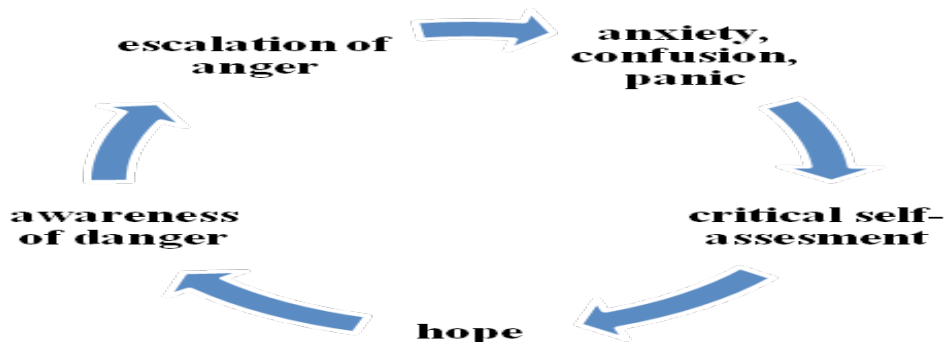
- Tendency to risky behaviour and activities and a lack of judgement regarding the danger coming from such actions,
- Early childhood threats, for example, destructive parental influence, negative childhood experiences.

The conditioning mentioned above only signal a few chosen aspects of danger. They usually occur in modified form in connection with one another.

Worry, anxiety, fear and angst are found among family members of alcoholics. This causes the sense of insecurity and fear. The lack of those negative aspects is identified as a state of security. As a result, it is clear from even the most superficial of analyses, that important psychological, emotional states and feelings are included in the concept security. Two aspects create security:

- The ability to identify a threat and the appropriate reaction to it (the ability to protect oneself from danger),
- The tangible state of psychological comfort and the lack of sense of threat associated with it⁷.

The aspects noted above can be presented in the form of a cycle which occurs in members of an alcoholic family.



Source: author's own

On the basis of these short reflections, the thesis may be put forwards that there is a need to work out a correct diagnosis of societal security in order to prevent the wrong social phenomena which occur.

⁷ E. M. Marciniak, *Psychologiczne aspekty poczucia bezpieczeństwa*, [in:] *Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne Państwa. Wybrane zagadnienia*, S. Sulkowski, M. Brzeziński (ed.), Warsaw 2009, p. 57.

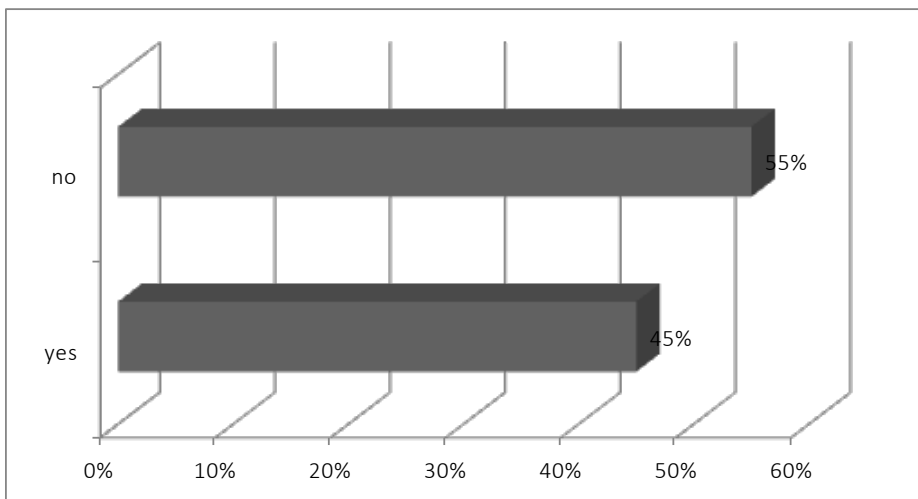
OWN RESEARCH

The research was carried out by way of poll during therapy sessions of Adult Children of Alcoholics in an Addiction Prevention Centre in one Polish city of approximately 30, 000 inhabitants. The questionnaire used was created by the author, and due to the low number of therapy attendees, the research was carried out on 40 members of the Prevention Centre.

The research problems for which answers were sought are the following:

1. How was the sense of security in the therapy participants' family home?
2. What feelings accompanied those participants in their childhood in the family home?
3. What opinions do ACOAs give of their childhood?
4. Which needs were unmet in the participants' family home?

CHART 1. SENSE OF SECURITY



Source: author's own

Feelings, i.e. subjective sense of various states, do not only apply to security, but also to happiness, contentedness, sadness and despondency. The sense of security depend on the experiences of the individual, the level to which needs are met, in the past, present and future. This level is influenced by external factors, which are independent of the individual's actions as well as internal factors which consist of the actions taken by each to protect themselves from threats. The level of security shaped in child-

hood determines the level of security in adult life⁸. The participants were asked about their sense of security in the family home. The results are presented in chart 1 and table 1.

TABLE 1: SENSE OF SECURITY

Sense of security	Research Group N=40	
	N	%
Yes	18	45%
No	22	55%

Source: author's own

The participants' answers reveal that 55% of those questioned did not feel secure in the family home, whereas 45% did feel security.

The family is a basic value in the life of every person, it is a place associated with security and a place to all-round development. Situations do exist, however, in which right functioning and correct upbringing of a child is threatened – here we refer to alcoholic families. The consequence of growing up in an alcoholic family may be the lack of sense of security and the experiencing of extreme anxiety. The ACOAs who were interviewed were unable to fully experience the fear they felt as a result of experiencing violence. They felt alone or had to defend their siblings or mother or comfort their relatives. In adult life, ACOAs suffer from anxiety disorders. Anxiety occurs in tense or peaceful situations and can cause either avoidance, or conversely, attack⁹.

Another problem of ACOAs is the tendency to uncontrolled outbreaks of anger. Violence and alcoholism cause anger in children which is repressed. This anger returns in adult life. Outbreaks of anger towards relatives cause the feeling of guilt. Children of alcoholics frequently experience great stress in their own families, which go beyond the limits of normal human experience. As a result, anxiety disorders as a consequence of the harm inflicted may come to light in adult life. The trauma potentiates all feelings and may influence the perpetration of feeling and behaviour in two categories – all or nothing. Consequently, emotions may be conscious or remain sub-conscious. In the first case, the victim of trau-

⁸ P. Jabkowski, A. Kilaraska, *Poczucie bezpieczeństwa i poziom przestępczości w Poznaniu. Mieszkańcy – samorząd lokalny – instytucje państwa*, Poznań 2013, p. 20.

⁹ B. E. Robinson, J. L. Rhoden, *Pomoc psychologiczna dla dzieci alkoholików*, Warsaw 2005, p. 82.

ma relieves the trauma in every new traumatic situation, whereas in the second case, he reacts with psychological numbness which may take the form of emotional anaesthesia. The following chart illustrates the development and the specificity of developmental disorders in alcoholic families.

TABLE 2: OUTLINE OF REGULARITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS IN ALCOHOLIC FAMILIES

Developmental phase	Correct development	Developmental disorders in alcoholic families
Early phase	Shaping of family identity	Thematic super specialisation
Middle phase	Systematic development in areas of specialisation	Developmental deadlock
Late phase	Education and transmission of family identity	Premature closure of development

Source: A. Margasiński, *Rodzina Alkoholowa z uzależnieniem w leczeniu*, Cracow 2011, p. 69; P. Steinglass, *The Alcoholic Family*, Basic Books 1987, p. 101.

Feelings are the conscious or subconscious sensitivities, which can be either positive or negative. They can be caused by varying situations, circumstances or events. In the following question, those questioned were asked to speak of the feelings which they had during their childhood.

TABLE 3: FEELINGS DURING CHILDHOOD

What feelings did you have during childhood	Research Group N=40	
	N	%
Fear of rejection	6	15%
Sadness	8	20%
Guilt	6	15%
Shame	18	45%
Hopelessness	16	40%
Anger	18	45%
Loneliness	6	15%

Rejection by parents/carers	6	15%
Uncertainty	14	35%
Contentment	8	20%
Joy	4	10%
Other	1	2,5%

Source: author's own

The sum of the answers exceeds 100% because a maximum of three answers could be given.

The most common feelings experienced in childhood for almost half of the respondents were anger and shame. These were followed by hopelessness – 40%. For 30% of the ACOAs the emotion they felt was insecurity and for 20% contentment and sadness. These were followed for 15% of all respondents by fear of rejection, the feeling of guilt, rejection by parents/ carers and loneliness. On the other hand, 10% chose joy, and only person (2.5%) took the opportunity to give a different answer and pointed to security.

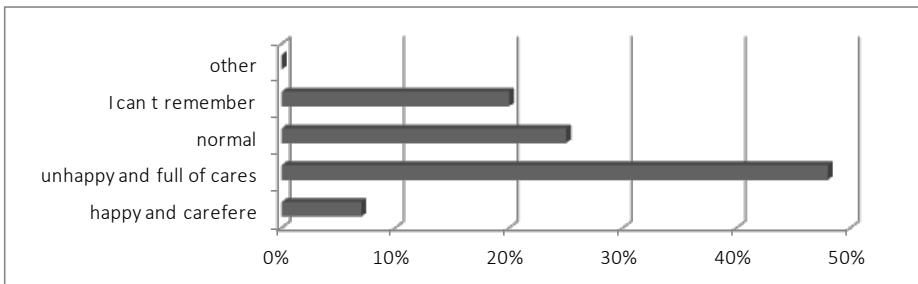
Alcoholism is a disease which destroys not only the life of the addicted but also those people close to the individual. As a rule, the behaviour of the alcoholic is unpredictable and causes family members difficulties and pain and causes feelings of shame and embarrassment to rise in them. Therefore, out of fear of alcoholic binges or excess, the family avoids all social contacts. It tries to hide the problem from those in their close circle of friends, leading to a deepening of the family's social isolation. Keeping the disease a secret causes a range of problems such as lying and constant shortage of money. Nevertheless, non- drinking members of the family do often undertake to keep the family balance. They create all kinds of strategies to cope with the problem and make various adaptations to keep up with the current situation.¹⁰ A considerable number of ACOAs chose to remain single, being unable to stay in a relationship or breaking up out of fear of rejection. They are scared of trusting another person and they associate intimacy with the obligation to care for their partner or with mutual harm. They desperately need love, yet are terrified of rejection. They also fear that their partner may turn out to be an alcoholic in the future.

¹⁰ A. Klodecki, *Funkcjonowanie z problemem alkoholowym i sugestie działań terapeutycznych*, Warsaw 1990, p. 84

Distrust and anxiety mean that ACOAs consistently keep their distance from their partner or break up one after another relationship. They also believe that they do not deserve love. They aim to break up any relationship that becomes too good and too close. They act in such a way that they remain in control of the possibility to end the relationship¹¹.

The research group was asked in this regard to give their opinion about their childhood. Most often childhood is associated with fun, happiness or joy; it is, however, not always the case. For some, this period may be the worst period of their lives and influence the rest of the individual's life.

CHART 3: OPINIONS REGARDING CHILDHOOD



Source: author's own

TABLE 4: UNMET NEEDS IN THE FAMILY HOME

What was lacking in the family home?	Research Group N= 40	
	N	%
Peace/calm	24	60%
Money	14	35%
Fun	10	25%
Love	10	25%
Parental attention	8	20%

¹¹ H. Skrętkowska, *Problemy w tworzeniu bliskich związków z DDA*, „Świat Problemów” 2012, nr 2, p. 30.

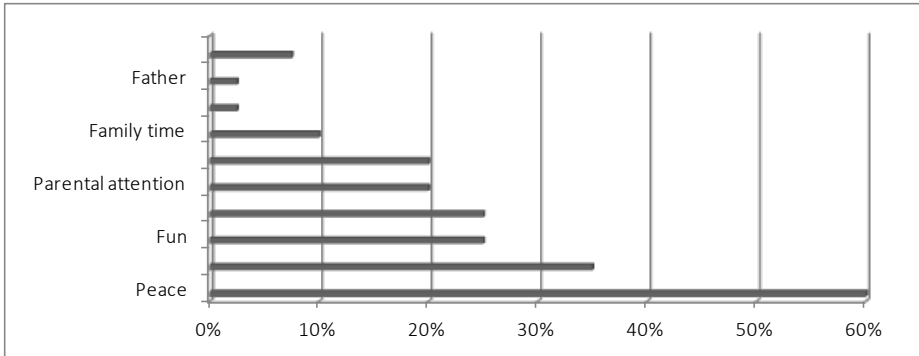
Food	8	20%
Family time	4	10%
Joy	1	2,5%
Father	1	2,5%
No response	3	7,5%

Source: author's own

Seven percent of those questioned responded that their childhood was happy and carefree, whereas 48% that it was unhappy and full of cares. 25% declared their childhood was normal and 20% of the respondents said that they did not remember their childhood or remembered too little to say how it had been. Here, nobody chose the option to give another answer.

Need is defined as a certain item, characteristic or state whose presence or lack influences the functioning of the individual. Here, the group was asked what was lacking in the family home.

CHART 4: UNMET NEEDS IN THE FAMILY HOME



Source: author's own

The sum of the results exceeds 100% as the respondents could choose as many options as were applicable. 60% of those questioned pointed out the lack of peace/calm and 35% that money was lacking. 25% lacked fun and love and 20% noted the absence of parental attention and food. 10% missed spending time with their family and only one person (2.5%) noted the absence of his/her father and 7.5% did not give any response.

Depending on the individual situation, the effects of growing up in an alcoholic family can vary for ACOAs. Much depends on the attitude of the second, non- drinking parent as well as on the presence of those who support the child, for example, grandparents. Younger children who remain in the presence of the alcoholic are more at risk of greater disorders. The differences in the effects are also dependant on the way the parent drinks alcohol, the financial situation, lack of intimacy and conversation and conflicts with the law¹².

SUMMARY

A crucial factor for children is a family that functions well, which ensures its youngers members the correct environment in which to grow up and socialise. The family is also a societal institution and as such should prepare its children for their specific role within society. A child without sufficient love, sense of safety and security and stability does not have appropriate conditions in which to develop or build their own future. Internal breakup of the family disturbs both the way a child functions and makes the fulfilment of family functions impossible. One of the characteristics and pathological traits of a person in a difficult, pathogenic situation is escape into addiction. It is vital to note that the problem of Adult Children of Alcoholics is a serious social issue, which deserves serious consideration not only from supporting institutions but also from society at large.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis presented above:

1. Over half of the research group did not experience the feeling of safety/ security in their childhood.
2. The most commonly noted emotions experienced by ACOA in their childhood were shame and anger.
3. The research group recall their childhood being unhappy and full of care.
4. The research group noted a lack of peace/calm as one of the most common unmet needs in the family home.

¹² T. L. Cermak, *Czas na wyleczenie. Przewodnik. Droga do wyzdrowienia dla dorosłych dzieci alkoholików*, Kielce 2010, p. 32.

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