

Adult Children of Alcoholics was officially founded in 1978 in New York. Tony A. is considered the primary founder along with members of an Alateen group. Alateen is a Twelve Step program for children of alcoholic parents. Alateen is sponsored by Al-Anon.

The Alateens and Tony formed a specially focused meeting that broke away from Al-Anon and became the first ACA group. The new group, Generations, focused on recovering from the effects of being raised in a dysfunctional family rather than the Al-Anon focus of being powerless over alcohol.

Tony is the author of The Laundry List, the first piece of ACA literature. The Laundry List is a list of 14 characteristics or common behaviors that detail the adult child personality. Tony also developed the ACA Solution of attending meetings, focusing on ourselves, working the Steps and feeling our feelings. Tony died in April 2004 at the age of 77.

Jack E. is given credit for establishing ACA in California and placing The Laundry List in a narrative form known as The Problem. The Problem is read at the opening of most ACA meetings. Tony's comments on ACA History are from a 1992 interview. This history has been updated based on interviews with Tony and Tony's family.

While Tony's story mentions our eventual separation from the Al-Anon fellowship, ACA cooperates with Al-Anon and enjoys a mutual respect of this program.

Hope For Adult Children – Adapted from an Interview With Tony A.

At the end of 1976 or the beginning of 1977, four or five young people who had recently “graduated” from Alateen joined Al-Anon, a Twelve Step fellowship for the spouses, friends and relatives of alcoholics.

In Alateen, these young people had explored the impact of being raised by alcoholic and co-alcoholic parents now known as codependents. The teens looked at the effects of living in an alcoholic household. Entering Al-Anon, they were faced with the concept of learning to live serenely in a dysfunctional setting. Stepping up to Al-Anon meant they were faced with attending meetings that focused primarily on adult issues or spousal drinking. Some of the Alateens felt unsafe in their homes and believed they could not relate in Al-Anon.

Tony said Al-Anon taught a few skills to the young people, including how to get their own needs met. These bold teens formed their own Al-Anon meeting which they named Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics. This first meeting met in the Smithers Building in Manhattan. This group used the Al-Anon format but improvised the meeting discussion. The discussions involved the neglect, abuse and fear that the Alateens thought they could not fully share in Al-Anon. A second meeting known as Generations would be formed, but it would have no affiliation with Al-Anon.

While the first new group was being formed, the Alateens heard about an Alcoholics Anonymous member sharing in AA about his experiences of growing up in a violent alcoholic home. This was Tony, a 50-year-old recovering alcoholic and New York City stockbroker. Cindy, a member of the Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics group, heard Tony's AA story and asked him to be a guest speaker at the newly formed group. Tony said he was 30 years older than the Alateens, but their age difference dissolved when he began telling his story. “When we began,” Tony said, “There was a wonderful feeling of mutual love, empathy, and understanding.”

Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics was technically an Al-Anon meeting, however, something special was happening with each meeting and with each story being told, Tony said. The founding principles of ACA were being unearthed and spoken in these early meetings. The dysfunctional family rules of “don't talk, don't trust and don't feel” were being challenged. However, the meeting struggled because of a lack of structure and focus, Tony said. After six or seven months, instead of the increasing membership as expected, the fledgling meeting had dwindled to three or four people. The meeting was about to fold. Out of instinct and spiritual insight, Tony said he invited members of AA to join the little group. He reasoned that some of them, after all, had alcoholic parents of their own. He was right. Seventeen AA members showed up for the next meeting of Hope For Adult Children of Alcoholics. At the following meeting there were 50 people. At the next there were more than 100 people, mostly from AA. The somewhat radical Al-Anon meeting was on its way with a lot of help from some good AA friends. Yet, the group still lacked consistent structure and clear distinction of its message.

The Laundry List - ACA's first piece of literature

A second meeting known as Generations was established, but it had no affiliation with Al-Anon. This group met at St. Jean Baptiste Church. Tony served as the chairman of the meeting but he also attended the Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics meeting during this period. ACA was still not officially established. Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics was connected to Al-Anon, and the independent Generations meeting still had no true focus other than the Alateens sharing raw emotions about their abuse and neglect. For about six months, the Generations meeting operated with no format. Tony recalled how the members of the group strongly encouraged him to formalize a format to address the somewhat chaotic group sharing. This confrontation by the group created the moment and circumstances by which Tony penned our first piece of ACA literature. On the day after Generations members urged him to formalize the group, Tony said he sat down at work and jotted down 13 characteristics of an adult child of an alcoholic. “It was as if Someone Else was writing the list through me,” Tony said, describing the experience.

The list of common behaviors took two hours to complete, and Tony added one more trait when he edited the traits with Chris, a group member who offered to type up the list. Tony realized he'd forgotten to add a mention of fear. But he had second thoughts. *No, they'd never admit fear...* he thought. *Excitement. Yeah, better. They'd accept excitement.* “We became addicted to excitement,” Tony wrote.

With that addition, ACA had its 14 characteristics or common behaviors that would be read as The Problem in the Generations meeting. He also wrote The Solution edited by Chris.

When Tony read The Characteristics at the next meeting, one of the members, Barry, said, “Hey, that's my laundry list!” Since then the 14 common behaviors or traits have been known as the “The Laundry List.”

Tony marks this as the official beginning of ACA or ACoA. It was early spring of 1978. No one quite remembers the exact date of this moment but The Problem and The ACA Solution would allow ACA to become a worldwide movement of adult children.

At the conclusion of a Generations meeting in late 1979 or early 1980, two women from General Services of Al-Anon approached Tony. They invited the Generations group to join Al-Anon. To join, the meeting had to discontinue reading or using The Laundry List. The group unanimously agreed that it would not give up its Laundry List. This decision marked the beginning of ACA's break with Al-Anon. Today there are 580 ACA meetings across the globe. Al-Anon meetings that have an adult child focus are not associated with ACA or ACA World Service Organization.

In 1979, Newsweek magazine published an ACA article about Dr. Claudia Black, Dr. Stephanie Brown and Sharon Wegscheider (now Wegscheider-Cruse). The article was the first nationwide announcement that family alcoholism could and did cause life-long patterns of dysfunctional behavior even for those who never took a drink. The family systems concept of addiction and family dysfunction became more visible as well. Before that time, most addiction or mental health models focused on the individual addict. Black and others were saying that the disease of family dysfunction had long-range effects on the children, who became adults. The children were affected by the alcoholism even though they were not putting alcohol into their bodies.

The AA Adapted Steps for ACA Purposes

At this time, 1979 or 1980, Tony recalls raising questions about the adaptability of AA steps for ACA meetings. While Tony believed in the AA steps and their ability to sober up an alcoholic, he had reservations about the steps being a good fit for ACA. For one thing, the AA-adapted steps directed the adult child away from looking at the family system of dysfunction. Tony believed this occurred in Steps Four and Five, the steps on self inventory and an admission of wrongs. In these steps, the adult child is required

to focus primarily on one's self and one's wrongs. The adult child is directed away from raising the question of the effects of being raised in a dysfunctional home. Tony believed that this served as a disconnect between an inventory of the adult child's behavior and the contribution that dysfunctional parents had in planting that behavior. Tony believed in adult children taking responsibility for their behavior and changing; however, he also believed in fairly distributing the cause of an adult child's destructive and anti-social behavior found in Steps Four and Five.

Tony believed that the AA-adapted steps created a gross vulnerability for adult children in Steps Eight and Nine. In these amends steps, Tony believed, the adult child could be sent to make amends to violent or abusive parents still in denial about the harm they had rained upon the adult child.

Tony recalled the odd looks he received from AA members as he raised these questions. "They were looking at me like I was a little crazy...."

Tony advocated for a departure from the AA Steps. In 1979, with the help of Don D., Tony wrote his own variation of the Twelve Steps, which he believed more fitting for adult children and victims of abuse. These Steps encouraged taking an a "blameless" inventory of the parents and focusing on self love. During the next 10 years, Tony refined these steps, publishing another version of the Twelve Steps in his 1991 book *The Laundry List*.... In the end, Tony's version of the Twelve Steps balanced taking a "blameless" inventory of the parents with a focused program of self love and self forgiveness.

In 1984, the ACA fellowship voted to become an autonomous Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions fellowship, using the AA-adapted steps. This was seven years before Tony published his version of the steps. Some ACA groups use Tony's steps and his book, which is allowable under the suggested ACA literature policy.

For the most part, the AA-adapted steps have been accepted by the ACA fellowship. ACA members, in practice, have modified them to allow the person to look at the family system, beginning in Step One. This family history or inventory includes the behavior of the parents in addition to naming family roles, dysfunctional rules and abuse. Meanwhile, counselors and informed sponsors are aware of the vulnerability an adult child faces when considering a possible amends to a sick or abusive parent or parents. Some parents are too dangerous or too sick to approach.

In ACA today, the adult child looks at the patterns of family dysfunction and is encouraged to talk about all aspects of the childhood in ACA meetings and with a sponsor or informed counselor. At the same time, the AA-adapted steps require the individual to inventory one's self and to change destructive behavior. We take responsibility for our behavior knowing that some of that behavior was handed off to us by our parents.

Stepping Aside

At one point, Tony stepped away from the fellowship he helped found because he felt as if he was being exalted or placed in a position of authority. At the end of his life, however, Tony continued to practice ACA principles and share ACA recovery. In the last days of life, he answered calls from adult children seeking help. The following is a quote from 1992.

I never expected ACoA to become a worldwide program when it began. We were working on trying to keep a little meeting going back then. The first time I got a glimpse that ACoA had national or international possibilities was when Barry said to copyright the Laundry List. He did foresee this. But I had no idea. I felt the Laundry List should be anonymous at that time and never copyrighted it.

The concept of "Adult Child" came from the Alateens who began the "Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics" meeting. The original members of our fellowship, who were over 18 years old were adults, but as children they had grown up in alcoholic homes. "Adult Child" also means that when confronted, we regress to a stage in our childhood.

There are three parts of me, the Higher Power, me, and Little Tony. I have to love Little Tony—my Child within—if I'm ever going to unite with God. Little Tony is my connection to God. I learned this from a Hawaiian Kahuna teaching. Several months afterwards, I heard about the "Inner Child" work beginning in the therapeutic community.

When we started the "Generations" meeting, it was an anti-organization. My wish for the fellowship is to use the original Laundry List and the new ACoA Steps written in 1991 in my book.

This program is about learning to love myself and then others unconditionally. We are not God-connected if we don't. Trust has to become a process and love is a process. When I can trust and love me, I can trust and love others.

I think we have to become as little children. Feelings are the spiritual path of an adventure to know God. Our goal is God.

Tony A.
October 5, 1992

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ACA and Its Beginnings

An Interview About the Early History of ACA

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