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## Chapter 13

# Relationships: Applying What We Have Learned

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*I*n ACA we become willing to apply what we learn in the program to our daily lives and to relationships. We must be willing to apply the principles of the Steps and to reparent ourselves if we want to change.

Moving away from codependent behavior and toward healthy relationships is one of the results of working the ACA program. We are not saying relationships become workable overnight, but they also are not as impossible as we once thought. For us, relationships can be a measuring stick for how well we have applied the ACA program in our lives.

Because of ACA, we have learned there are many kinds of relationships other than romantic involvement. This was a surprise to many of us who never had friends or who tended to sexualize relationships that ended in pain and loneliness. In ACA, we learn there are friendships, business relationships, and casual acquaintances in addition to romance. We also learn that it is okay to be alone. Learning to be alone in recovery is different than the isolation we practiced before recovery.

There are also unique relationships that are fulfilling and open up to us because of our ACA involvement. Some of us have become a big brother or big sister to a child from a single-parent home. This is a rewarding relationship for those of us who never had children for fear of harming or neglecting a child. In ACA we learn to trust ourselves and to contribute to a child's life.

Another unique relationship can include being paired with a new employee at work in a mentoring role. In this relationship, we are teamed up with a new employee to teach the person a new job or skill. We can use our listening skills and sense of patience learned in ACA to make this relationship enjoyable and meaningful. By addressing our control and perfectionism in ACA, we let others make mistakes and learn from them.

We have learned that not every relationship needs to lead to romantic or sexual involvement. If we have addressed our area of abandonment and shame thus far, we no longer see people as a potential source to medicate our fear of abandonment. We no longer use people to divert us from our own feelings by focusing our attention on someone else. We can finally face down the 12th Trait of the Laundry List. We no longer fear abandonment so much that we remain in unloving relationships.

Through ACA, we can begin to see people as individuals we would like to know rather than possess. This is freedom from codependence. For some of us we become a true friend to someone else for the first time in our life. This happens a lot in ACA. Many of us did not know how to be a friend to another person before working the ACA program. Through ACA, we have been given the gift of being called "friend." We have done the work. We know what it means to be a true friend.

Romantic relationships can bring great fear to adult children. Even some of us who have practiced an ACA program for years can struggle with intimate relationships. For the most part, if we are struggling with relationships we could have unfinished business in addressing our fear of abandonment. This fear is usually coupled with a fear of feeling our feelings. We must get past this fear that we cannot survive our feelings. We can. This is ACA. It is different than when we were children and were either forced to stuff our feelings, or we were traumatized and left alone to lie in pain.

Through recovery we learn to think about a relationship before entering one. This is new for us. Before finding ACA, we tended to jump into a relationship without thinking. We were impulsive and perhaps seeking excitement. When problems arose, we felt trapped or too embarrassed to

leave. We worried what others might think, or we stubbornly stayed believing we could make the relationship work. But nothing changed. With ACA, we have a chance to do things differently. We have the gift of choice. We can think before we act.

Since relationships can be challenging, we ask new people to wait at least a year before attempting a more intimate relationship. The reason seems obvious. We are people who are vulnerable when we get here. We want to please others so we can easily focus on another rather than the ACA program. There is no true recovery in focusing on another at the expense of the Twelve Steps or attending meetings regularly.

Most of us know what an unhealthy relationship involves. It can be summed up in a few words: attempted control of another.

A healthy relationship involves talking about feelings, mutual respect, and a commitment to trust and honesty. There are many other elements to a successful and intimate relationship, but these are a good start. Not surprisingly, these are the tools and principles included in the ACA program: feelings, respect, trust, and honesty.

We learned about feelings and talking about feelings in great detail in Step Four. We learned that feelings can be our spiritual connection to the God of our understanding in addition to our connection with another. Feelings are how we let others know that we are angry, lonely, compassionate, or joyful. We also learned that the feelings of others are different than our own. We learned that others' feelings are not our feelings, but we can empathize with someone who is feeling fearful or alone. This is a critical aspect of romantic or intimate relationships. We can love someone and empathize with the person's feelings, but each person is responsible for his or her own feelings in the relationship. When we understand this, we can support our spouse or partner without trying to fix them. We avoid trying to talk them out of their feelings. We can listen to them instead of giving suggestions on what to do. Feelings pass. We learn that listening is sometimes the best support we can give our lover or partner. We let them feel their feelings and ask for the same when we have feelings.

We learned about respect at our first ACA meeting. We learned that we were respected and accepted for who we were. There were no pledges to sign or promises to make in ACA. We did not have to people-please or placate anyone in the meetings. We were respected for having survived our family of origin and reaching out for help. At our first meeting, we were offered unconditional acceptance and respect. We realized we could focus on ourselves and respect ourselves as well.

Another aspect of respect is asking for what we need, so that we can respect others and avoid passive-aggressive behaviors in our relationship. We can ask for what we need in a relationship instead of expecting someone else to read our minds. In ACA, we learn the difference between asking for what we need and making unrealistic demands on another. We figure out what we can live with and live without. This helps us understand what we truly need, instead of what we think we want. We respect others by telling them what we like and dislike. We listen to others do the same.

Gradually we learn to trust others, but trust begins with ourselves. We cannot trust another until we trust ourselves. We got our first inkling of trust from our ACA support group. This is perhaps the first group of people who truly accepted us and allowed us to recognize trust. We can talk openly in ACA about our lives without being judged.

That said, our groups are not perfect. Fellow ACA members have let us down, but for the most part, we know we can trust our group to listen to us and support us when we do not feel good about ourselves. They also share the good times with us. Our group members celebrate our growth and recovery with us.

With this kind of trust, we feel more confident in risking our feelings and hopes with another person. We know that we have a place to talk about our relationships and lives when things get clouded. We are not alone anymore. With trust, we let go of control in our relationships. We can trust another person to be who they are without having to monitor their thoughts and actions. With trust, we lay down a hypervigilant watch for signs of abandonment. We have exposed our false belief that we are not good enough. With the help of our home group, we have faced our fear that abandonment is inevitable.

Because we have an ACA group to rely on, we know we are going to be okay no matter what our significant other is doing or not doing. We know that we can focus on ourselves. We have friends we can trust. We learn that we do not have to depend upon a romantic relationship to supply all of our needs.

In addition to feelings, respect, and trust, honesty is a baseline element of any loving relationship. We cannot have an intimate relationship without honesty. We learned about the value of honesty beginning in Step One. We admitted that we are powerless over the effects of growing

up in a dysfunctional home. We talked honestly about what happened in our families. We broke the “don’t talk” and the “don’t remember” rules. We got honest about our family secrets. This was not easy since we were raised with a strong emphasis on keeping secrets or not challenging authority figures who defined our reality. But we must have honesty in our relationships. This is a deal breaker for us. If someone is chronically dishonest with us, we must consider terminating the relationship. Because of ACA we are giving more of our true selves in a relationship, and we learn that we can ask for more.

We could write many more pages on relationships, but many of the answers are in front of us. With feelings, respect, trust, and honesty we no longer confuse love and pity. As our Promises state: “We will choose to love people who can love and be responsible for themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Our Relationship With Our Family**

In addition to learning about the various types of relationships, we also realize that our existing relationships change as we begin to grow spiritually and emotionally in recovery. The changes we are making in our lives are not always accepted or understood by those closest to us. ACA is an anonymous program so we do not have to tell anyone that we are a member of the program. However, some of us will tell a brother or sister about the involvement. Some family members are supportive of our decision to join ACA. Others are confused or suspicious of the program. A few ACA members have been abandoned by their families when they begin the recovery process. They have been accused of being disloyal to the family. This is only natural since the ACA member is confronting denial and family secrets. The member is breaking his or her loyalty to the dysfunctional family system.

If the family withdraws support, this might feel new, but in reality the abandonment has always been there. We must realize that the family is actually withdrawing codependence instead of loving support. This is a critical distinction. We are not losing anything except codependence. We replace the codependence by focusing on ourselves and attending meetings.

Nonetheless, we can feel fearful or disappointed by our family’s reaction. We can also see their pain, and we want to help. Through ACA, we realize we are powerless over another person. We know we cannot change anyone but ourselves. We cannot give ACA to someone who does not want it.

Not all families abandon the ACA member in recovery. Many families are supportive. A brother or sister, and sometimes a parent, will join ACA and find a new way of life. At the same time, some family members who have shunned an ACA member will have a change of heart. They open up a line of communication even though they might never enter the doors of ACA.

The following shares represent our relationship with our family or significant others once we find recovery. The shares reflect noticeable change and personal growth.

A couple of shares show how people enter recovery while a significant other may not be working a program. The relationship becomes more difficult because only one person is headed toward change.

### **My Family Thinks I’m a Little Crazy**

*Although I was the youngest child I’ve always been the one to take care of everyone in the family. I’ve never been able to speak up for myself or say “no” to anybody. I designated myself as the person who would solve every problem because it was easier than solving my own problems.*

*I have difficulty dealing with my family today. They ask me to do something now, and I politely refuse to accommodate them. I feel uncomfortable denying them. They often stare at me as if I had no right to refuse them. They expect me to do everything they ask me to do.*

*My sister and I don’t communicate any longer since she doesn’t understand who I am. She says I’m not the “normal” person I used to be. They assume the death of my other sister has seriously affected my behavior. They truly feel I’m the crazy one now.*

*None of my family can understand why I’m changing and working a program of recovery. I feel like I’m an infant learning how to walk, taking very small steps.*

## **His Family Knew He Was Changing**

*When I found ACA I wanted to tell my family, but I knew they might not understand. I remained quiet. As I recovered and stepped out of my role as the family mascot and screw-up, my family began to notice. I did not see my family a lot because I lived in another city, but they noticed a change in me at holidays. I had quit drinking and drugging so they noticed.*

*When I finally told them about ACA their response surprised me. One sister began talking about our father's alcoholism in a new light. Another sister smiled and said she loved me. She encouraged me to keep going in recovery. My mother never understood, but she was happy that I was staying out of jail and working steady. My alcoholic father was dead so there was no issue with him. I eventually forgave him after much anger work and prayer. He had a disease called alcoholism, but what he did to his family was not right.*

*Twenty years has passed since I started my ACA journey. My family has not changed that much, but I have. I still have a sister who is the lost child, and I have another sister who is the hero, knocking herself out for dinners and get-togethers. She is 60 years old. I gave her a recovery book to read years ago. I have nephews and nieces who are active in codependence and addiction. But I also have a nephew who is open to what I am talking about in ACA.*

*I am not overly concerned with my family. I don't view them as gloomy or lost. I see their pain and their loss, but I know I can't fix them. God will take care of them. I remember someone telling me once that I can love someone where they are at. I never knew what that meant until recently.*

## **Will She Stay if She's Not As Needy?**

*We need to move soon. I have been comparing my family's resistance to the coming move with my wife's reactions to the changes I am making in recovery.*

*As I got healthier in recovery, my wife felt threatened and became anxious because she was unsure of the outcome. This is a typical reaction of a spouse in a codependent relationship. As I became more independent my wife perceived me as less needy and, therefore, less needful of her. Her great fear*

*was that she would ultimately become expendable. She did not understand how people could have a relationship that was not based on need. Neither did I. It was beyond our experience.*

*Recovery was so threatening because we each believed we would not have a role to play in our marriage if the other person grew stronger. I was surprised to see that belief in her, and then I recognized it in myself as well. As we became healthier we asked counselors and people in support groups to tell us if we were making progress.*

*My wife got healthier, too. She looked more beautiful, more capable, and more independent, and then I started feeling anxious. I thought I had to grow as fast as she did so I would not become useless to her and then eventually be abandoned.*

*Knowing we both feel anxious and threatened by change, I will use this information to make our move less stressful. Keeping the kids in school for as long as possible will help provide stability for them. If our lives remain stable in the period leading up to the move, then the actual moving process will be more pleasant for all of us.*

## **I Changed My Focus to Change My Life**

*Before I came to this program I was barely surviving. I felt depressed, powerless, and alone. No longer willing or able to suppress my feelings, they came up effusively and erratically. I spent weeks crying, even sobbing, from the pain, the confusion, and the hurt about unfinished childhood experiences.*

*When I came to this program I was ready for a change. I am changing what I can. My feelings changed when I accepted my feelings, my past, and my post-traumatic stress. I did not accept that process easily. I had to convince myself my feelings were legitimate.*

*I needed to acknowledge and accept that I was an abused child. Once I did the in-depth family-of-origin work thoroughly, I felt stronger. I moved forward in recovery more easily when I didn't have to spend so much energy feeling old feelings or repressing memories of the past. Only then was I able to turn my attention and energy into discovering who I am.*

*I still get flashbacks. I relive the childhood visions when they come. I confront the very real, very scary parts as though I am actually back there in time. After I cry, I feel and express my anger. To stop my need to relive each traumatic event endlessly, I expose the perpetrator aloud at meetings; I bash them symbolically in the guise of a cushion or punching bag. In these ways I validate myself. With the support of my meeting I no longer feel alone.*

*I am now making huge changes in my life by taking small steps. I have the same job I had, but now it is very satisfying because I'm using my full potential. My job hasn't changed, but I have. The same is true with my imperfect marriage. My husband and I have more intimacy, more honesty, and more interaction. Our marriage is becoming authentic. If we ultimately get a divorce, it will be a real divorce for irreconcilable differences, not for undefined identities, values, or boundaries. At this moment my marriage is a relatively minor issue. Divorce would be disruptive and not the right thing to do to myself at this time. I just have too many other things to do.*

*I'm growing a garden so I have beautiful flowers around me and delicious fresh fruit and vegetables to eat. I take the time to plan for my own comfort and take care of my needs. I exercise daily. I take long hikes. Even when I'm very busy and find it hard to legitimize taking time for myself, I take it. I know if I don't, I will lose the recovery I enjoy today. Taking care of myself is the right thing for me to do. It is the only way I can live today.*

### **He Held on to His Truth**

*Change has been difficult in my life, but absolutely essential. When I started coming to this program I started being truthful with myself for the first time. I was learning how to honor my relationships.*

*I found when I was honest with friends and family, it often upset them. Some of my friends moved a step or two with me, and others simply would not budge. I had to let those friends go. My best friend said he thought ACA was a Twelve Step cult when he ended our friendship. Even though I was new in recovery, I recognized this as his defense mechanism. When I was sharing insights in my recovery, he couldn't accept any of it because it was far too threatening. He had to keep himself safe by denying the validity of what I was telling him.*

*I also had to stay away from my parents for quite a while, because I just couldn't hold my truth and be in their presence at the same time. I needed to be around people in recovery.*

*At the same time there were despicable things I had done that I was too afraid to admit to anyone including myself. I came to meetings and shared this ugly side of myself. People in recovery would genuinely embrace me for having shared so honestly. Their acceptance was quite a contrast from what I expected.*

*It's been very scary to let go of my old predictable behaviors and embrace new behaviors with unknown consequences. I feel off-balance as if I'm stumbling or falling. When I do reach out for the unknown I inevitably grab hold of something new, something different, something better.*

*I write in my journal daily. I occasionally have an insight or two that comes to life when I share it. In doing my family-of-origin work, I recognized that my behavior in the past has caused me a great deal of pain.*

*I attend my meetings once or twice a week to provide me with the comfort, support, and the stability I need to participate in the change process. Having a safe place allows me to slowly take the little steps, admit the truths, and have the insights.*

### **Change in Me Sometimes Makes Others Uncomfortable**

*Change makes me feel unsafe, abandoned, and alone. I have never found a way to make change less scary. I am not a person who welcomes change. I learned to be safe as a child by following all the rules. I like rules. I like regulations. They make me feel safe. It's much more difficult for me to grow and recognize when people are stepping across my boundaries.*

*My family, my friends, and my boyfriend all had difficulty accepting changes in me. When I had made a change, my boyfriend would throw his arms up in the air and say, "I just don't know if I can put up with this!" The implied threat was that he would leave me if I continued in my recovery. He isn't alone in these feelings. The more I change, the more I get these little hints from people around me to go back to my prior behavior, because that's when they felt safe with me.*

*I thought the dysfunctional people who were continually disrupting my life would finally become aware of their bad behavior, change their behavior, and follow my rules. They didn't. They continued drinking, using drugs, or practicing other addictions. I continued trying to control other people. No one was changing.*

*I still interact with many family members who are unaware they are dysfunctional. They just think I'm sick, but I'm quite sure they are also dysfunctional. I am able to interact with them today by not participating in their current drama. That doesn't mean I don't ever get involved, but the minute I recognize the drama, which becomes easier and easier to do, I disengage and let them do whatever they need to do to get comfortable.*

*My hardest lesson to learn is that I am the one who needs to change her behavior. One of the gifts of the program is my understanding and recognition that reactions or over-reactions by family and friends to my change are not personal. Their reaction is not about me, but about their fear of their lives changing. My recovery is easier because of this insight.*

*In recovery, I feel the fear and take the difficult walk through the fear. I use the Twelve Steps, the meetings, and the telephone.*

### **My Parents were not Monsters, Just Alcoholics**

*I came to ACA with the deep, dark secret that I hated my parents. I knew there was something terribly wrong with me. People are supposed to love their parents. My father, however, was an alcoholic, and my mother raged incessantly. Both were violent. They frightened me, and I hated them for it.*

*My parents' illness affected my siblings and me profoundly. I believed if I had been a better daughter and a better person, my parents would not have acted the way they acted. Knowing that my behavior as a child had no effect on how my parents chose to live their lives is a wonderful gift.*

*I thought my parents, my husband, and my children were keeping me in bondage, locked up, and unable to live my life freely. I have learned in this program that I am the only person limiting my freedom because of my fears.*

*In ACA I've started coming out of denial. I discovered others who had parents like mine. By exposing many of my family's secrets in meetings I have changed the impact of my childhood on my life today. Merely stating aloud, "My father was an alcoholic," relieved me of the overwhelming stress of*

*keeping the secret hidden. I know now that the things my parents did which hurt me so much were not done to hurt me. My parents' behavior and their choices weren't about me. I've come to understand my parents were not monsters, just alcoholics.*

*I've been able to release many of my fears by using the Twelve Steps as the method and the meetings as a supportive forum. When I expose my fears to the light of day by telling others, the fears don't seem as bad or evil as they were when hidden within that dark place inside of me.*

*Confronting my fear was not easy, but it has changed my life dramatically. I certainly could never have made this change in myself, by myself. I thank ACA for being here and supporting me through this.*

### **I Wondered If I Contributed to the Dysfunction**

*I came to the program because I felt unhappy, abandoned, and generally miserable. Aspects of "The Problem" fit my life so well, particularly the parts on responsibility and choosing unhealthy relationships, even though neither one of my parents was alcoholic.*

*As a child I was abandoned quite often, though I wasn't aware of it at the time. I was expected to entertain myself, to make friends, and to work hard to make others comfortable. I didn't have many childhood friends. I had no instruction and few experiences in choosing friends.*

*I had no modeling for having, stipulating, or enforcing boundaries. I would allow children, family members, and others to use me to their advantage. I would do many things for others and then receive nothing in return.*

*Because of this program I've become aware of what I was doing. I was the giver in my relationships, because I wanted to be involved. I wanted my partners to reciprocate. I expected more than they were willing or able to give. When I would invest so much into my family or friends and they didn't respond with as much enthusiasm, I felt abandoned.*

*I began to wonder how I was contributing to this. My conclusion is that I am responsible for focusing my attention on people who were not in a position to respond appropriately, or they weren't who I thought they were.*

*This program has helped me become more aware of my shortcomings so that I've made changes in my behavior. I am more aware of how I overstep my boundaries, and how I try to force things to work the way I want them to work. I've stopped "fixing" my relationships and initiating all the family celebrations, even though I feel uncomfortable and guilty for abandoning family and friends. I'm learning to reallocate my misused energy more appropriately.*

*I am still uncomfortable with different family members who encourage me to please them as I had done in the past and do for them what they are unwilling to do for themselves. They prefer that I do all the work so they reap the benefits. These one-sided relationships just weren't working out well for me.*

*I am learning a better way to take care of my own needs, and I am more content because of it. I have a lot to offer people who will take responsibility for half of the relationship. I am no longer doing things to please others or to get love, appreciation, or respect. If I do things that happen to benefit or please others, I do them for self-education, self-love, self-appreciation, or self-respect.*

*My blinders are off. My denial is gone. I don't get excited about something that isn't there, something that's only a fantasy of what I would like. Instead I see what is really there.*

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<sup>1</sup> ACA Promise Number Eight.