



21 Characteristics

In 1979, Jane Middleton-Moz and Lorie Dwinell identified the following 21 characteristics that adult children of alcoholics may exhibit. These characteristics may also be exhibited by anyone that has lived life and suffered any pain. Because of our unique experiences growing up, we will all react differently to different traumatic events in our lives. In fact, what one person finds to be extremely traumatic, another person may not find traumatic at all. Without healing intervention of some kind, as traumatic experiences happen in our lives our behavior may be affected and we may begin to exhibit some of these characteristics.

1. Fear of trusting. Some of us grow up believing that people are unpredictable - that others cannot be trusted because when we trust them, we are let down and hurt. These people may have great difficulty in trusting any responsibility to others or trusting that their feelings or needs will be taken care of.
2. Continuing sense of guilt. Some survivors of trauma believe that they have caused the trauma in their lives - that they are responsible for the behavior and actions of others, rather than being a victim of that behavior. They generally won't do anything to "rock the boat" for fear that they will be blamed for any failure, but this also means that they won't take an opportunity to create positive change.
3. Hyper-responsibility or chronic irresponsibility. Some of us learn that we must become extremely responsible at an early age - the "20 year old, eight year old". We believe that we must take responsibility for getting everything accomplished or it won't get done. Conversely, some of us have learned not to accept any responsibility for anything. That way, if anything goes wrong "It wasn't my fault. You can't blame me for anything."
4. Perfectionist. Depending upon the trauma, some of us grow up believing that we must do everything perfectly. We develop a fear of making mistakes or doing something wrong because when we made a mistake there were severe consequences. We may spend way too much time on inconsequential details, drawing attention away from other important issues.
5. Counter-dependence or fear of dependency. We may learn through our experiences that "I don't need to depend on you, I can do it myself." Some may learn to fear depending on others and will not share responsibilities or emotions as a result.
6. Need to be in control. Because of feelings of not having any control of life in younger years, some of us may overcompensate in later years by wanting to control everything around us. This can lead to micro managing, overbearing parenting, etc.
7. Difficulty hearing positives. Because of poor self-images, some of us have difficulty accepting positive feedback from others. We may ask ourselves, "What do they really want?" or feel pain or loss upon hearing others speak positively about us.
8. Overachievement or underachievement. Some of us may try to improve our self-esteem and sense of not being loved by seeking praise for our accomplishments. This could be getting good grades in school, joining every club and excelling in sports; or spending extra time at work and volunteering for every committee. Conversely, some of us may attempt to do very little so we can't fail and can't be blamed for anything.
9. Poor self-images. If we internalize the abuse, neglect or emotional distance that others direct at us, we may form a self-image that we "just aren't good enough". This could greatly impact our motivation to accomplish positive things.



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10. Compulsive behaviors. Some of us may become alcoholics or workaholics, compulsive gamblers, over-eaters, over-spenders, or behave in other compulsive and unhealthy ways. We may use these behaviors to avoid feeling grief and pain from the past traumas of our lives.
11. Need to be right. Sometimes we may replace the need to feel loved with the need to be right. We may fear being wrong or inappropriate because of baggage from the past. We may even place being right as more important than relating well with others.
12. Denial. Through denial we try to protect ourselves by ignoring the pain of reality. We may choose denial over issues with those around us, rather than dealing with the issues because that may lead to an end of the relationship and feelings of abandonment and failure.
13. Fear of conflict and anger. Because of fears of the consequences of conflict and anger, or fear of their own unexpressed rage, some people will develop behaviors that avoid conflict. This could include isolating from others or always accepting blame, but ultimately losing their own identity in the process.
14. Chaos junkies. If chaos was the norm growing up, we may find ourselves more comfortable with chaos and conflict than with peace and cooperation. Or we may use chaos to hide from other feelings. Some of us will choose professions that are always dealing with chaos.
15. Fear of feeling. Some of us were not safe to express or allow feelings, being hurt or abandoned as a result. We learned to withhold feelings, or even lost the ability to feel or express emotions. Without intervention we may continue to act very coldly or emotionless today.
16. Frequent periods of depression. Depression has been described as when our expectations are not being met and we begin to believe that they never will be. Eventually our feelings of anger or disappointment are turned inward against ourselves and may show as symptoms of depression.
17. Fear of intimacy. We may have learned that intimacy leads to being emotionally or physically hurt. We may become unwilling to feel close to anyone and find ourselves pushing others away.
18. Fear of incompetence. This may also be called the "impostor syndrome" - when we begin to believe that if people really knew us they wouldn't like us. We may act in ways that we feel aren't our true nature, putting on a false face hoping to be more acceptable to others.
19. Hypersensitivity to the needs of others. Some of us learned that life was much safer by being extremely aware of the changing moods of those around us. Today, we may still be scrutinizing the behaviors of others in our attempt to predict how they will behave next. This affects our ability to focus on other issues.
20. Repetitive relationship patterns. This may be an attempt to recreate the painful experiences of childhood - returning to what was normal. This could also be a reflection of our feelings of low self-esteem. We may look to find or create unhealthy relationships over and over
21. Inability to relax let go and has fun. When others were playing and having fun, some of us were learning to survive in difficult situations. Not only did we not learn how to relax and play, we may have a fear of doing so.