An ongoing longitudinal study of alcoholics and their families has identified different drinking styles and personality types, which in turn, may cause a family to respond differently to the abusive drinking.

"As others have suggested, we found that alcoholics come in a variety of shapes and sizes," says Theodore Jacob, a professor in The University of Arizona School of Family and Consumer Resources. "Of particular interest, we also found that the alcoholic's drinking pattern can exert important effects of family relationships."

Jacob says alcoholics with aggressive and anti-social personalities, and an episodic or "binge" drinking pattern, are more likely to end up in hostile and coercive family situations during periods of drinking. In contrast, a second group of alcoholics is characterized by passive, unassertive and anxious personality styles. Their steady drinking pattern is confined primarily to the home.

The steady drinking pattern, he explains, is more easily incorporated into family life because it is more predictable, controllable and less intrusive to the family than the episodic pattern. In fact, the presence of alcohol may aid interaction among family members of steady drinkers, leading to what seems to be a more stable family life. Yet, that pseudo-stability grows increasingly destructive.

"The major implication of such findings is that these alcohol-related changes in family interaction may serve to support and reinforce continued drinking," Jacob says.

These early findings come from a study Jacob and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh started more than 12 years ago. The research project is designed to explore the role family relationships play in perpetuating parental alcoholism and fostering abusive drinking in alcoholics' children. The study, funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, is expected to run a total of about 20 years.

When the study began, Jacob says, relatively little data existed on how families with alcoholic members are similar or different from families without an alcoholic member.
“Up until the 1970s, there really had been very little rigorous work done in terms of family studies of alcoholism,” he says. “We decided the area was ripe for a longitudinal study, which is unique in the field.”

The 150-family group of subjects, recruited through newspaper advertisements, was divided into three study groups. One in which the husband was an alcoholic, another in which the husband was diagnosed as clinically depressed and a third, in which there were no known disorders. Five years ago, the research team began recruiting families in which the wife was diagnosed as either alcoholic or depressed in order to identify any differences that may occur in family behavior based on the sex of the parent. The group also hopes to discover whether family patterns are similar for other types of disturbances, such as depression.

The researchers have maintained contact with the families through yearly telephone calls, birthday cards and contact with a family member or friend who knows of the whereabouts of the family.

“We're doing very well keeping in touch with our families,” Jacob says. “On our first follow-up, we saw 90 percent of the original families. Now, on our second follow-up, we're looking at about 80 to 85 percent of them.”

Now entering its second phase, the research emphasis will shift from observing family interactions, to looking at how those interactions may have affected the now-adult childrens' social and psychiatric development, and possible alcohol abuse pattern. Particular attention will be given to looking at how episodic and steady drinking patterns may have affected the children.

“The interest now, is in determining how these children are faring,” Jacob says. “Can we relate their adult functioning to any of the data we collected early on? Are any of the family patterns we discerned 10 years ago predictive of how these children function today? That's what we're hoping to find out.”

—By Jan McCoy

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