

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.



