



# 7 things that change everything

A book for adult children of  
alcoholics on creating the life  
you want and deserve

Jody Lamb

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## 7 THINGS THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING

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For the millions of people who share variations of the same story.

May you create the life you want.

## Introduction

Hi.

Thank you for reading this book.

Let's talk about you for a minute, shall we?

If you're reading this book, the odds are high that you:

- experienced tough times, messed-up stuff, or dysfunction in your life
- are an adult child of an alcoholic like me, or were majorly affected by some other kind of situation with a parent
- want something more out of life than you currently have
- realized that the time to change your life is now because you're afraid of what might happen if you don't

Well, we have a lot in common.

As I write this, I'm picturing the setting to be a cozy coffee shop. I'm sitting across from my new friend: You!

You just grabbed a cup of coffee, pulled up a chair, and asked, "So, what you have you learned?"

For the last 10 years, I've been healing from tough experiences, reprogramming my brain, and creating the life I want. A journey it is, but I am living in a way that I could not have imagined a decade ago.

Let's get back to you for a sec. I'll say this slowly, with a pause between sentences for effect.

You are normal. You are not alone. And you're going to create the life you want.

Before I jump into what I've learned, it's important to know that I am not a counselor or clinical professional. I am not advising you on what steps to take in your life. I am only sharing what has worked for me. I have found a lot of joy and serenity through learning from other people. So, to pay it forward, I am simply sharing my own experiences and journey.

Okay? Great.

The second thing to know is how I reached this point. If some time-traveling wizard had told me ten years ago that I'd be sharing this story with you via this book, I would have laughed. "Right," I would have mumbled.

In 2009, I was twenty-six years old. I had a high-stress job as a marketing manager for a global consumer goods company in the North American market at the peak of the economic recession.

Two years before, I'd moved from my apartment back into my parents' home because my mother's substance use disorder had reached its worst point. I'd been coping with the effects of Mom's alcoholism my whole life, but it worsened through my college years. My father was

constantly working to make ends meet and did not have the education or skills necessary to know how to deal with what was happening. I moved back home because my amazing little sister was young. She needed me.

Like other eldest children of alcoholics, I took the role of the responsible adult in the household at a very early age. But Mom's drinking and destructive behavior had become so out of control at that point that I even considered seeking custody of my sister.

But I didn't, because I was certain that I could get Mom to stop drinking and accept help, finally. So, I moved back home. My life was made up of two worlds: Work responsibilities and home responsibilities.

My mother, an extraordinarily kind and compassionate human being, was an unrecognizable monster during this period. She often went on drinking binges for a few days at a time. She was up until two or three in the morning every night—either screaming and yelling about nonsensical stuff or sobbing about something I couldn't understand.

It was chaos with a capital C.

I was constantly terrified—waves of nausea took up permanent residence in my stomach. I feared Mom would drive her car and kill someone or that she'd burn down the house by leaving something on the stove or passing out with a cigarette in her hand.

A few years of this mental and physical drain took a toll. I broke.

It started on a Saturday morning. Twenty-six-year-old me woke early and pulled my comforter over my head.

The comforter was bright yellow and freckled with pale blue flowers. Though I'd once loved its floral cheeriness, I'd grown to hate it. It had rips in certain spots where the stuffing was slipping out due to too many washes and there were pink nail polish smudges from hurried manicures before bed. But I hated it because, in the eight years I'd owned it, nothing about my life had changed. That morning, I wished it would transform into magical fabric that could make me disappear. Poof! Gone.

That morning, under the un-magical old comforter, tears found their way down the sides of my face, across my cheeks to my neck and onto my pillow.

Dread. Hopelessness. Life was a never-ending Groundhog Day with the only difference from the day before being that I dreaded everything a little bit more.

*I. Can't. Do. This.*

Hope. I felt it slip away almost entirely.

*I am going to die. Somehow, someday.*

Was this extreme depression? Yes, and I kept it to myself.

People who knew me well during this time may have noticed a slight change, but I was careful to be regular-Jody enough to not raise any red flags. I didn't laugh quite as much. I was quieter. But no one really noticed.

No one knew my situation because I didn't want them to know about it.

If I can just get Mom to stop drinking, I thought, then we can all *finally* live happily ever after. Then my dad and sister won't have to worry so much. Then my stomach won't be in knots all day. Then I can sleep. Then the panic attacks will go away. Then I can take vacations, exercise, go dancing, attend concerts, date again. Then I can write books. Then I can... live.

I was supposed to be livin' it up. Life was zooming by. Friends were moving to the big cities, accomplishing dreams, getting married, having kids, and making dreams reality.

Instead, I was trapped in a world that, at the time, I believed I'd been born into and held me there against my will.

Of course, I discovered later that while I'd been born into such circumstances, *I* was keeping myself there. At the time, I didn't know it. All I knew was that *grownup* felt nothing like I had planned as a girl. When I was eight or nine years old, I wrote plans for my adult life in my diary:

- Start a good-cause organization to help people or animals
- Do something new every day, even if I have the flu
- Write
- Laugh. Often. Every day

It was simple, really. I would be living—*truly* living—and taking good care of me.

When I landed in grownup land, none of that happened.

I felt I had no say in this.

After college graduation, I accepted a position at a fast-paced public relations firm located about an hour from my parent's home. When I wasn't working, I was being the stable adult my sister needed. After two years, I realized that things had become very bad at home for my sister, who was still a kid, because of Mom's drinking. So, I leapt from that role to a marketing job in corporate America that would enable me to move back home.

I had newfound energy around saving Mom. I had a college degree and a grownup job!

*Ok, this is it. I will finally get Mom to stop drinking.*

I was going to do it all—succeed in my career, raise my sister, help my dad cope... and save Mom.

It's important to mention that at this point I was not only trying to save Mom because she was my mother, but because she is an extraordinary human being.

It had to be done—this noble endeavor. It was the right thing to do. Sacrifices were necessary. No more social life. No more dating. Even if I wanted to do these things, I had no energy or time left for them.

When I arrived home for my new job in my beat-up Dodge Intrepid (R.I.P., Purple People Eater), things were significantly worse than I'd recognized until I was right there in the middle of it around the clock.

Dad worked insanely long hours to make ends meet. It was 2007, the start of the economic recession, and this was commonplace in metro Detroit.

Everyone needed me, but especially my sister. She was several years younger than me; born to the same parents.

It was bad, but I believed the solution was right around the corner.

So, my daily life went something like this:

- 6 a.m.: Lay in bed in a blanket of anxiety with what-if-scenarios running through my mind
- 6:30 a.m.: Force myself to get out of bed
- 7:30 a.m.: Drive to work, already defeated
- 8 a.m.–6 p.m.: Work high-stress job
- 6 p.m.: Attend activities at my sister's school
- 7 p.m.: Force myself to eat some kind of dinner
- 8–9 p.m.: Do more work
- 9–11 p.m.: Chaos
  - Mom would enter super-drunk mode at this time of night. She yelled and slammed things around. Sometimes, the rage was directed at me. There was always something. My sister and I hid in our bedrooms. We turned up our music or TV. I tried to shelter my sister from it, but she knew exactly what was going on. Dad worked the midnight shift, so he was never home at night.
- 11 p.m.–2 a.m.: Lay in bed, unable to sleep
  - In addition to the anxiety that enveloped me, with Mom in such a drunken state, I couldn't let myself sleep until I knew she had passed out. Too many times she had decided to cook something at 1 a.m. and forgot about it on the stove.
- Repeat

Now, this kind of life may seem crazy to people who have never lived with someone with an addiction or in some other kind of dysfunctional environment.

But this was life for years. Hundreds of days.

Let's go back to that Saturday morning under the cheerful, floral comforter I wanted to burn.

Over the next several days, it was increasingly difficult to concentrate on anything and to laugh and smile.

Everything was an obligation.

Throw my internal monologue from those days onto a film screenplay and it'd stress most people the bleep out. But you, my friend, you'd get it.

I tried to snap out of it—to push those feelings out using the only way I knew how: Ordering myself to just think happy thoughts.

On my drive to the office every morning, I passed a beautiful lake.

*Look at the sunrise! Appreciate the cotton-candy-pink sky and how it looks on the water's surface.*

But I couldn't chase out The Dark Thoughts, those powerful jackasses. They ran amuck in my brain and paralyzed any other healthy thoughts.

The more they gripped me, the more guilt stormed in.

*How dare I feel like this! I am a woman in the United States of America in the twenty-first century! I have a college degree and a job! I have no health issues. Shame on you! Be grateful. There are oppressed, exploited, abused, tortured, starving, helpless people in the world.*

New Guilt partnered with Old Guilt, which had been around for years because I'd failed to save my mom.

The Thoughts tangoed around with Guilt, and I was no longer even operating my own brain—they were having a full-fledged, out-of-control good time, which was killing me. I felt like I was going to die, somehow, someday. I saw no way out and no chance to ever feel any differently.

However, my sister needed me and so I realized I HAD to do something. The problem to solve, at that rock-bottom point, was STILL getting Mom to stop drinking.

I went looking for the solution—a miraculous guide gifted by the universe so that I could just get it all solved and achieve the Mission: Save Mom and start my life.

What I discovered is that the playbook doesn't exist—it can't because everyone's situation is completely unique. I created my own playbook. I had the ability all along.

This book isn't about the details of my childhood, teenage years, or young adulthood. I do share what-happened-to-me details on JodyLamb.com. It is important to acknowledge those experiences, but this book is about the journey I began a decade ago and the seven powerful realizations that changed my life.

## Chapter 1: Everyone is screwed up

Ten years into this and following thousands of conversations, I write this full confidence: Everyone is screwed up.

Majorly.

The self-help industry is worth billions of dollars.

Among those who feel exceptionally screwed up is a large percentage of the population: Adult children of alcoholics.

The first books to introduce the Adult Child of an Alcoholic (ACoA) Syndrome were published in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, those same books top the bestseller lists.

Addiction is a frequent topic in mainstream media. Yet for all those who love people with addiction, it exists in our lives largely as a secret.

Recently, a co-worker stopped me in the hallway in our office and whispered, “I never told anyone this, but my father was an abusive alcoholic.” She’s fifty-three years old.

Also, a high school classmate recently messaged me with a heartbreaking story about her brother’s recent relapse after being sober for two years. “I don’t really have anyone to talk to about this,” she wrote.

All these years later, it still blows my mind how people who love people with addiction suffer alone.

When someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, you write about it on Facebook and people show up on your doorstep, lasagna in hand. But when someone you love has a substance use disorder, you bottle the news and your emotions and suffer in secrecy.

Addiction is significantly more common than any other disease or tragedy. You likely know more people who love someone with addiction than all those who have cancer, heart disease, or some other ailment combined.

Ten summers ago, I unburied that fact and, in the process, discovered a shocking fact: I am normal.

### The Al-Anon meeting

I picked the parking spot seven steps from the door so that I couldn’t leave without notice again.

“You can do this,” I whispered, then pulled on my car door handle and pushed the door open wide with my shoe.

“Good evening,” said a passerby as I unfolded myself.

I turned my face in her direction, enough to show my half smile, then nodded.

The woman was wrinkled and friendly. Old-lady perfume lingered heavy in the air as she passed.

I closed my car door, paused for the beep to confirm I'd locked it, and followed a yard behind the woman through the church meeting center entrance, to the blue arrow sign on the white concrete walls, and down the stairs.

Hard-sole sandals that clickety-clack are a curse when you don't want to be noticed.

If I'd worn soft rubber-soled shoes, I could have easily turned around, headed back up the stairs, and bounded to my car before Perfume Lady—or anyone else—could notice my escape.

It's not that big of a deal, I lied to myself. I had heard of Al-Anon mostly from my grandmother, who urged me to go to those anonymous support groups for family and friends of alcoholics. The idea was less than appealing.

I needed a solution, not a forum to vent my feelings. But there I was—on my way to an Al-Anon meeting, propelled only by desperation. I went to that meeting still in pursuit of the solution to get Mom to stop drinking so that we could live happily ever after.

But as Perfume Lady rounded the corner to reach the basement's long hallway of meeting room doors, I slowed my sandal's clacks and paused.

I heard keys jingle behind me, and I knew that if I quickly left, those people might stop me and urge me to return.

*Go.*

I stepped through a door that bore a handwritten sign: "Al-Anon. Welcome!"

About thirty people smiled or nodded when I appeared with that frightened, I'm-new look in the doorway. I sat at the giant square made up of pushed-together tables.

After exchanging a few smiles and nods, Perfume Lady started the meeting. Then, the stories began. These were not the vent sessions I'd imagined. They were raw stories about friends, siblings, children, spouses, parents—of all ages and backgrounds.

One by one, I listened to those stories like I'd never listened before. They spoke of fresh situations and what they'd learned. They spoke of situations that occurred years ago and how they'd healed.

All the while I wanted to shout, "That's MY story. That's exactly how I felt. Yes, that's basically what happened!"

They described that tightly held, heavy, complicated ball of mixed feelings. They knew the madness, unpredictability, chaos, pain, and heartbreak. Their words were about them, not the addicted people they loved; they described how they felt, how they reacted, how they lived. They were variations of the exact same story.

So *my* story, they already knew.

I realized I wasn't there for Mom or anyone else. I was there for me. *I* was ill.

Before I could think myself out of it, I let go and this shook from my lips: "Hi."

I stared at the center of the table, shocked that I'd begun speaking.

"I'm Jody."

"Hi, Jody," they greeted me back without delay.

I uncrossed my arms and sat taller. I cleared my throat and looked up to acknowledge the thirty sets of eyes I felt on my face.

Some smiled and some shifted in discomfort at the awkwardness of my delay and my obvious fear.

"I'm a mess," I whispered. "I've lost control of my life and myself because I'm obsessed with fixing the alcoholic in my life. I am lost."

And I told my story from my earliest memories through to that day.

"And now I'm sitting here," I said in conclusion.

A silver-haired man cleared his throat, pushed a box of tissue across the table, and said, "Jody, you've put the key into the ignition and the wheels are in motion now. You are on your way. Your life will forever be better from this moment on. You had a one hundred percent normal reaction to your world."

He said this with full confidence, like he'd heard my story zillions of times before.

*One hundred percent normal.*

Considering that I'd spent most of my life feeling the opposite of the elusive "normal," there was incredible freedom in that realization.

For the weeks and months that followed, I was a sponge, absorbing everything I could find at the bookstores and libraries and on the emerging internet. I read groundbreaking books about the effects of addiction on families.

About thirty years ago, these books flew off the bookshelves—much to the surprise of the publishers. They were modern-day equivalents of a viral video that ends up on *Good Morning America* and brings light to some mammoth issue that affects many people.

In my reading spree, I learned facts that blew my mind.

**Alcoholism is extremely common—more than your brain can process without blowing a fuse. Ready for this?**

- **One in four kids has at least one parent who abuses alcohol in the United States**

One in four. A quarter of the people you went to school with. Twenty-five percent of the people who live in your neighborhood, ride on the train with you, shop at your grocery store, work at the same place. Wow.

Statistics are similar in Canada and the U.K.—and worse in other countries.

*How can this be?!*

This was a terribly bittersweet discovery.

I was relieved that these problems were not unique to my family and me. But I didn't want *anyone* to know how it feels. In fact, it's a kind of torture that I would want spared from the world's greatest villains.

I remember sitting on my bedroom floor, sobbing and thinking about all the children experiencing this, and all the adults like me walking around with the weight of years of built-up pain.

It isn't fair that this cycle repeats over and over in families.

FLIP!

Every day, when the sun sets, I think of the kids. I ask the Universe/God/whatever you want to call the higher power, to bring them safety and serenity.

- **Addiction is a killer**

I hate addiction with every cell in my being. Through my education, I learned that:

- My family members' drinking problems are substance use disorders, and that addiction is a widespread issue on both sides of my family
- The science behind addiction is powerful. Chemical dependency has unreal destructive power, leaving temporary and long-term effects on the human brain
- Addiction kills people. It takes the very best people in a family—the kindest, smartest, funniest, and sweetest ones, it seems
- Addiction has no prejudice; it affects men and women, and all races and socioeconomic backgrounds

- **There's a thing called Adult Child of an Alcoholic Syndrome, and it's very real**

When I read Janet G. Woititz's book, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, my reaction went something like this:

*WTF. Is this book about me?! She described almost everything I've struggled with throughout my life.*

Then, as she cited the common traits shared by adult children of alcoholics, my response went like this:

*Check. Uh huh. Yep. Uh, yeah. Affirmative. You got that right. Word.*

Among the traits that make up ACoA Jody Lamb: Hypercritical of herself; feels different from other people; overly responsible and frequently takes on other's people's duties or problems as her own; freaks out about changes over which she has no control; frequently seeks approval from others; has difficulty in intimate relationships; never feels satisfied and holds onto unrealistic expectations.

*Delightful.*

I felt like Dr. Wotitz had studied my brain and wrote a book about it.

**But the realization was powerful. The man at the Al-Anon meeting was right: I did have a one hundred percent normal reaction to the environment around me.**

In a whirlwind few weeks, I realized that I'd been normal all along, and that my normalcy was the barrier to my healing and creating the life I wanted and deserved.

*You are normal.*

This echoed in my mind as I read about the extraordinarily satisfied people with many of these traits. They'd overcome this stuff, healed, and created the life they wanted.

Why couldn't *I* be one of them? Hope. I felt it return.

## Chapter 2: You caused nothing

For most of my life, I carried a uniform made of a thousand pounds of carefully stitched guilt.

When abundant knowledge filled my brain, I understood my mother significantly better, and I realized all that we'd experienced had nothing to do with me. I CAUSED NOTHING.

"Duh," say the people unaffected by someone else's drinking or substance use.

For those who know this life, you feel me here. Because I lacked education and understanding about addiction, I believed that I wasn't good enough of a daughter to make my mom complete/happy/satisfied/motivated enough to stop drinking. I was a failure because I couldn't save her from addiction.

Upon discovery of the living monster that is addiction, I shed the guilt uniform.

Addiction is covered abundantly in mainstream media these days due to the rise of opioid addiction.

There is more awareness of how common it is, but I do not believe there is any change in awareness and action related to helping people who love the people with addiction.

When I was a girl, I knew of the word addiction only in reference to the homeless people who quietly clutched bottles covered in brown paper bags or the wild-eyed, energetic people who begged for spare change as my parents and I walked down the street.

### **Education = freedom.**

Man, oh man. I wish that I had understood addiction years before.

As I became an educated ACoA, there was an immediate change in the way I viewed everything and, therefore, how I reacted to it. I just understood it.

### **Education about what the heck had been going on in my house enabled me to instantly see the formerly invisible monster that had hold of my mother.**

*If her addiction had nothing to do with me and I had zero ability to control it, then what the F was I doing obsessing over it?!*

Life changed for the better right away when I asked this question.

Free from that responsibility in my mind, but not in practice yet, I realized that I was normal but also quite ill.

Implying any illness in me would have infuriated me just a few months before.

"I AM NOT THE ONE WITH THE PROBLEM!" I'd have exclaimed.

Loving a person with a substance use disorder is much like standing outside of a glass room that's on fire with your loved inside, burning in the flames, in a trance controlled by the room. Only your loved one can open the door to escape but the room is too powerful, so they self-destruct in a catatonic state.

There you stand, screaming, pounding on the glass. *Please! Please! Come out and get help!*

But they choose not to.

There cannot be greater torture than this scenario.

What I didn't realize is that while I focused on what was happening on the other side of the glass during the first twenty-six years of my life, I was inhaling the smoke; I was immobilized by the thousand-pound guilt suit. I was paying zero attention to my own health.

I was slowly dying.

How can this happen?

It was all very simple, really.

I viewed saving Mom and my family as my duty. I am noble. I am tough. I stay fiercely loyal to my duties as a daughter, I thought.

It was all I'd ever known: It was easier to stand at the glass, where it was warm and familiar.

It was hard to move: Walking away with that kind of weight requires you to use muscles that you don't normally use.

Detaching from the problem felt terribly wrong: That went against my moral compass and my ethical standards. I felt like a traitor—like I was failing to uphold my duties.

I have painful memories etched into my heart because walking away from the glass room and setting boundaries was extraordinarily difficult.

Things I stopped doing that felt terribly wrong at the time:

- Cleaning up messes, figuratively and literally, for my parents
- Doing things to attempt to prevent my mom from drinking, from pouring out bottles to hiding information that I feared would trigger her to drink
- Paying for living expenses for people who ought to be able to live on their own
- Answering phone calls from people when they've been drinking
- Living in a house with my mom

When I took my sister and we moved out of Mom's house, the scene was fit for a Hallmark Channel original movie. I put my cat in a carrier in the backseat and helped my dog into the seat next to him. I sobbed into my hands for ten minutes before driving away and staring at the house in my rearview mirror. I felt like I was abandoning Mom, which felt as wrong as leaving behind a sick child.

But later, I saw it all very clearly.

THEY WERE THE BEST THINGS FOR ME TO DO.

Walk away from the room. Your life depends on it.

### Chapter 3: You are one decision away from the life you want

Clinical books about ACoA and other issues tied to dysfunction shined a massive spotlight on this: I was fully focused on controlling what I literally had no ability to control.

You can't make someone stop drinking or accept help—just as you can't turn night into day or a snowstorm into a sunny beach.

It's time to let go of what you cannot control and make decisions that support the life you want.

I realized that when I was a kid, teenager, and young adult, I was wrapped up in my family's unhealthy, dysfunctional life. For all those years, my life was my family's life. I didn't have my own. We had one big, unhealthy life centered around the chaos of my mother's substance use disorder.

When Mom was not doing well, I wasn't doing well. I wish I could go back in time and give younger me a glimpse at my life today after I started my ACoA healing journey. I wish I could give her the confidence that I would have the life I have today.

I am living proof that you can create a life you currently can't even imagine if you get help and put in the work to heal and create the life you deserve and want. Ten, fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five years ago I never would have imagined my life would be what it is today.

It was terrifying good decision-making that made this happen.

Shortly after attending the first Al-Anon meeting, I thought about all the things I'd enjoyed as a girl. Writing, of course, was the immediate memory. So, I enrolled in a creative writing course at my local community college.

But on the first night of class, I scolded myself as I hurried out the office to arrive by the six o'clock start time.

*I don't have time for this; I have commitments. I'm an adult now and I already have a college degree. Writing was just a thing I did as a kid. I'm going to be the oldest person in the class and I'm going to feel uncomfortable.*

But then, healthy thinking made its way into my brain.

*Stop. Get out of your own way.* This quieted my negative thoughts.

When I arrived at class, we wrote and read and then discussed words and stories. I felt energy and excitement about writing—just as I did as a little girl. From that day onward, I looked forward to that class, and amazing things happened:

A homework assignment was so cathartic, I kept writing and it turned into a book manuscript.

I made a friend in the class who invited me to join a local writer's group.

In the writer's group, I made more friends who inspired me and who shared similar interests.

With encouragement from my new friends, I joined writer's organizations and attended workshops and events, where I made *more* friends who became not just writer friends but incredible regular friends.

I became one of the first bloggers to write about my experience as an adult child of an alcoholic.

In 2012, the book manuscript was published and hit the world as one of the first middle-grade novels to address parental alcoholism.

At schools and community events, I shared what I'd learned in life with thousands of children and grownups who inspired me.

I'd found such joy again in writing, the pastime little-kid me loved.

I also learned how to take better care of myself in many other ways. I began walking and running again. I ate more healthily. I rekindled friendships I'd abandoned.

All because I decided to go to that first writing class. It was the greatest thing I'd ever done for myself.

### Decisions after relapse

My dad died suddenly about four years after I started my ACoA journey.

In the weeks that followed, I lost my mind. I forgot everything I'd learned and relapsed into my old ways of thinking and living. I just **HAD** to be back at my parents' home because my sister was only seventeen, with a year of high school still to finish, and I feared Mom was going to die. I moved out of my apartment and into my old bedroom in Mom's house. I was attempting to control everything—to be the glue and to pick up the pieces, just like I always had.

For the next ninety days or so, I was in hell. I wasn't sleeping or eating. I didn't even remember driving to work. I just arrived. While I coped with the bills and details that had to be addressed, we were also coping with Mom's grief-fueled plummet.

I did everything I had tried as a girl to convince Mom to stop drinking. I wrote letters. I pleaded through tears. At one point, I successfully convinced her to see a therapist, which she did a few times but then announced she didn't want any help.

At work, I was in a robotic, emotionless state. My creativity was gone and I had trouble keeping up with my work. One day, a friend asked that I join her for lunch.

"No, I have too much work to do," I said, and literally gripped my desk.

"You're going," she said.

I was too tired to argue so I slowly rose from my chair, pulled my purse from my desk drawer, and closed it with annoyance.

I'll never forget that lunch in a crowded Coney Island restaurant down the street from our office. I told my friend how I needed to convince Mom to get help and that I was doing this and that to keep our big life going. I shared the tall list of everything I *had to* do to stop the out-of-control spiral we were all on with Mom. It felt good to say it all aloud. I paused, expecting a soft I'm-sorry-that-your-life-sucks sentiment.

"What the f#\$\* is wrong with you?!" my friend asked instead. She stared at me with such anger that I thought she might chuck her fork at me.

"What?" I asked, startled.

"Your mom is a full-grown woman!" she shouted. "Why are you pretending to be her mother? You have to take care of yourself and your sister right now. It's not a hard decision. It's the *only* decision."

Tears fell fast from my eyes onto my chicken gyro. The construction-worker guys in the booth beside us shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

She was right. That's when I realized my sister and I were at the glass room again, inhaling more smoke than ever before, and we had to get away to save ourselves.

It was EXACTLY what I needed to hear to realize the insanity of what was occurring. The next week, I took my sister, and we moved out. It was the best thing I've ever done.

The day I packed up the last two boxes, I hugged Mom goodbye. As she waved from the front door, I sobbed... and did so for the next three days.

But then...

The smoke cleared. My sister and I got better. I remembered everything I'd learned about my ACoA Syndrome and got back on track in creating the life I wanted. I forgave my mom, my dad, and myself for our illnesses.

But what blew my mind was this: My mom was then forced to step up and take care of herself and her life. There was no one there to do it and so she did.

Then I realized that all my life, blinded by our codependency, my dad and I had contributed to Mom's problems by preventing her from having to be an adult and keep herself alive.

I'm unsure how long it would have taken me to realize this if I hadn't made the decision, albeit reluctantly, to go to lunch with my friend.

## Chapter 4: You hold the pen

When I got started with all of this, it felt like I'd gone to the doctor, who confirmed the Adult Child of an Alcoholic Syndrome diagnosis, and been handed a stack of two-color pamphlets created in the 1970s that left me like: Okay, I'm an ACoA. Now what? Give me a flipping playbook on how to heal from all these traits!

There was a *blank for Dummies*, an *Idiot's Guide to blank*, and a webinar for everything under the sun, how could there not be a playbook for ACoA people like me?

The clinical books are great. But they don't spell it out like: Ok, do this and do that and then you will have this and feel this. I just wanted someone to lay it all out with step-by-step simplicity.

I went to two therapists who were noted as having ACoA trauma specialties. The first therapist was more robot than human who read generic questions from a notebook. When I began speaking about specific, common ACoA issues, she seemed unfamiliar with them. This was not very helpful; I bravely announced this at the end of the session. I never returned.

The second therapist? Well, I am quite certain she was high or drunk or both.

I wondered if I was being punked as she slurred her questions.

*I'm an ACoA who has dealt with disappointment my whole life, now I need help and the therapist is high?*

It was like fearing the dentist and when you finally go to an appointment, the dentist's pearly whites aren't white at all, they're Austin Powers-ish.

Yeesh. With zero confidence and loaded up on disappointment, I shut down.

Those two bad experiences tainted my view of therapy.

Then, someone recommended a therapist who was both an ACoA and an alcoholic-in-recovery himself. So, I went to see him. Expectations? Low.

Within a few minutes, I felt that he just got it. He got *me*. His words supported everything I'd read in the clinical books about the effects of addiction on families. He asked unexpected questions that made me think about everything specific about my life differently. He suggested practical things that I could implement into my life.

When he asked me questions, answers flew out of my mouth that shocked me. I had information and direction that I didn't even know I had.

So, there I was, writing *my* playbook. I'd held the pen all along.

My playbook writing continued as I listened to other people's stories at Al-Anon meetings and online. They spoke of setting boundaries, self-care activities, and of forgiveness, meetings, therapy, and letting go.

My path was illuminated, step by step. I just knew exactly what to do.

I made friends without thinking about it. I worried less. I realized I needed more sleep, more food, more exercise. The more self-care I completed, the more it became routine. When I felt I didn't need to attend Al-Anon meetings anymore, I went anyway, for a very long time.

The universal guide about how to heal from tough times and reprogram your brain does not exist because every human being's experiences, needs, and wants are different.

You hold the pen.

## Chapter 5: Your brain is ready to be reprogrammed

My brain was programmed a certain way when I was very young. This defined my thinking and my interpretation of what I saw and how I reacted.

From almost the beginning of my life, I assumed every problem in my family was mine to fix, even when I had absolutely nothing to do with it. If Mom skipped her dentist appointment without letting the office know. Or if she was rude to the neighbor, I'd apologize and make up excuses to explain her behavior. Or if Mom's car needed a repair so I got dropped off at work while she drove mine.

Um, can we say codependent?

Codependency is now a mainstream term. Simply put, in my opinion, codependency is being so completely preoccupied with someone else's problems that you fail to take care of yourself—and that preoccupation makes you feel needed. The problem feels like your purpose in life.

It's a very powerful thing, and it is ALL down to my brain's programming.

So, when I started my ACoA healing journey and identified my unhealthy thinking and behaviors, I wondered, how in the world can I change? I've been thinking and living this way for twenty-six years, which may as well be a century! I'm a textbook example of a codependent, eldest child of an alcoholic.

Perhaps the most damaging thing about the way my brain was programmed was my inability to take care of myself. Self-care, which was basic to my coworkers and friends, was my undeveloped skill. Things like getting enough sleep, eating healthily, and not taking on other people's work/projects/problems were new to me.

### The bad-cards mindset

In those early days and weeks of this healing journey, I wanted to give up. I felt there was no way I could change the way I thought and acted because I was one of the unlucky ones who experienced the dysfunction.

*Hey, brain, let's process this information differently, even though you've been running one way for twenty-six years.*

It was daunting because it was foreign.

I have met many people who grew up in dysfunctional family systems rooted in addiction, narcissism, or mental illness who have the bad-cards mindset like I did. They say that they were dealt bad cards in life and that's that. It is totally understandable how this view takes hold of our perspectives.

But the thing that erased my bad-cards mindset was the day I met someone who had been abused for her whole life and found herself in grownup land, convinced that she was destined for continued abuse because she was damaged. Her self-worth was in the toilet, and she was buried in issues. She believed she couldn't change her mind or her life circumstances. Then she did—

through education, therapy, and writing her own playbook. Today, she has a happy, healthy life that she never believed she could call her own.

Over the years, I've met hundreds of people who've done this, too.

Your brain is ready to be reprogrammed.

## Chapter 6: Little-kid-you deserves this

I laughed at my therapist. What he'd suggested seemed so ridiculous, so corny, so "*Deep Thoughts* by Jack Handey."

"Please just try for me," he said.

So, I did. I taped a photo of eight-year-old me onto my bathroom mirror.

My therapist recommended this after I shared with him how, when I was a little girl, I thought often about what my future life would be like when I had the ultimate ticket to freedom in hand: Adulthood. In fact, I'd described in detail in my diaries what life would be like and how being grownup would feel.

"Aren't you angry that little-kid-Jody had to grow up too fast, and that you do not yet have the life she planned?" he asked.

It turns out, I was.

Every time I saw that photo of little-kid-me, I didn't see *me*. I saw a little girl who's counting on me. I remembered that little girl's diary entries detailing grand plans. I remembered her immense hope, powerful belief in freedom, and excitement about life. I felt anger that she had to grow up so fast and take on adult responsibilities. I felt sadness. She'd be so disappointed in how *grownup* felt.

That inner-little-kid stuff is powerful, as corny as it may seem. It inspired me. Maybe it will for you, too.

A little-kid-Jody photo lives on my refrigerator forever. She smiles for the world without trepidation or shame and wholeheartedly believes in her light.

I must live in the way that tiny girl intended to live these grownup years. I *owe* her that.

You and little-kid-you deserve that, too.

## Chapter 7: Your only job in life is simple

If you're like me, you love a good you-had-one-job meme that pokes fun at a botched construction project or an advertisement with misspelled words.

The last thing I want is for my life to be summed up with one of those memes, because here's the thing: You and I have one job. It's simple.

I never knew this until I got started on my healing journey. Until then, my life was full of several consuming jobs—sister, daughter, granddaughter, niece, cousin, marketing manager, neighbor, citizen.

Your only job in life is to take good care of you: To make sure that you are healthy, happy, and safe. That's it.

Let's break this down, shall we?

### Your only job

**Your**—you. We're talking about you—just you.

**Only**—singular focus. Just this, nothing else.

**Job**—a responsibility: You. It's like you're your own secret service team with one mission to protect the V.I.P, you.

### in life

**In life**—we get just one. No do overs.

is to take good care of you.

**Take good care of you**—you are responsible for making sure you are safe and healthy. You are *not* responsible for your mother, your father, your siblings, your spouse, or your adult children.

This simplifies something that is, by nature, complicated: Life. But I've learned it's wholly true.

This simple concept was foreign to me, because my whole life I was busy trying to save my mother from her substance use disorder and to keep everything together in our home. I was taking care of my father and my sister—trying to be the glue to make sure everything was staying together. In the process, I never focused on taking good care of me.

Today, there is a giant sheet of paper hanging in my office. It's obnoxiously huge but the words it bear deserve marquee attention:

**Take good care of you. You are no good to anybody if you are unhealthy and not pursuing serenity.**

There is a reason why, when on a flight, the airlines instruct you to put your own oxygen mask on before you help the people next to you in the event of an emergency. You're no good to anyone if you pass out.

When it feels selfish or wrong, you're probably doing the right thing for you.

There they are. The seven main things I've learned. This is a journey, so we never stop growing and learning. The more I grow and learn, the more wisdom there is to earn.

For you, I wish serenity and greatness. May your life be everything little-kid-you hoped for and more.

## Resources



Many resources are available at [JodyLamb.com](http://JodyLamb.com).

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