

# CHAPTER 12

## Families Living in Closets: Talking about Alcoholism In and Out of Family Households

*Jimmie Manning*

### KEY TERMS

Alcoholism  
Family communication  
Privacy management  
Supportive communication

### ABSTRACT

Alcoholism is a disease that has a detrimental effect on the physical and mental health of both the alcoholic individual and his or her family members, especially those who live with the alcoholic. This case offers vignettes from the author's life to illustrate how his family coped and continues to cope with alcoholism. Examining this communication in conjunction with research about seeking help for alcoholism, support for those who are affected by it, and through a lens of communication privacy management (Petronio, 2002) helps to illuminate some of the tensions families face as they feel they are forced to conceal alcoholism from others. These tensions can affect family members' mental health as well as the mental and physical health of the alcoholic.

An *alcoholic family* is one where at least one immediate family member is diagnosed or undiagnosed as an alcoholic (Berger, 1993). The American Psychiatric Association offers three criteria to consider if someone is an alcoholic: physiological issues, such as hand tremors when one is not able to drink; psychological issues, such as always suggesting that drinks be served throughout the day; and behavioral issues, such as inability to maintain friendships because of alcohol use (Silverstein, 1990). The most recent comprehensive study predicts there are at least 26.8 million children of alcoholics in the United States alone (Mulligan, 2001). Children of alcoholics are likely to face depression, generalized anxiety, poor interpersonal relationships, and low self-esteem, among other negative effects (Menees & Segrin, 2000). Unfortunately, those who are most likely to be able to identify alcoholism are fellow family members, and, for a variety of reasons (e.g., denial from other family members, punishment from the alcoholic family member), they are often reluctant to acknowledge alcoholic behavior (Dayton, 2012).

As one might expect, communication in alcoholic families is often facilitated in ways that seek to minimize expression of embarrassment, anger, or resentment, especially as it is directed toward the alcoholic family member (Rangarajan & Kelly, 2006). Children of alcoholics have an especially difficult time coping with this lack of expression, and this frustration can be exasperated by other family members not acknowledging or encouraging discussion about the alcoholism or the dysfunctions it is causing (Wegscheider-Cruse & Cruse, 2012). These communication patterns, as well as the psychological states and traits developed as a child of an alcoholic, will almost certainly extend into adulthood and the relationships established there (Wegscheider-Cruse & Cruse, 2012). To examine some of these communication patterns in depth, this case study draws from my personal experiences as a 16-year-old boy in a small town in Kansas. It is my hope that these stories, all taken from one particularly memorable week in my life, come together to illustrate one family's way—and likely many others' too—of communicating about and coping with alcoholism. I blend these narratives with discussion of research findings and communication theory to help illuminate the mental and physical health concerns that face alcoholic families.

## A FIRST CLOSET: MR. BREAKFAST

"Bye, Jimmie!" my cousin yelled at me, moving toward the door. "Bye, Uncle Jimmie!" she called to my dad.

Cousin Jamie was taking off with Aunt Glenda. As usual, we were all hanging out in one of the town coffee shops. This one, Mr. Breakfast, was a kind of waffle house



knock-off and one of my dad's favorites. He would sit with his buddies, other blue-collar workers, and, as they would say, "shoot the shit."

I plopped another quarter in the Pac-Man machine, thinking I probably had time for another game before my old man was ready to go. That's when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Excuse me," said a guy with a white beard. I'd never seen him before, but I did notice he was sitting across from the table where my dad and his buddies were drinking coffee.

"Yeah?" I asked, trying to focus on my game.

"That's your father over there, isn't it?" he asked, pointing at my dad who, from the looks of his face, was in the middle of a joke. The later it got, the more animated he became.

"Yeah," I said. "Do you need to talk to him?"

"No. That's okay," the man said, still standing close to me.

"He driving, or are you driving?" the man asked.

"Um, he will," I said, now feeling nervous. My chest tightened up. I was so distracted from the game I got eaten by a ghost. "Is there something wrong?"

"No," the man said. "No, just—it's starting to snow a bit. You might think about driving him. Okay? I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Okay," I said. My next round started, so I returned my attention to the game. But as the man exited, I noticed he was doing something with my dad's windshield wiper. From the looks of it, it was a piece of paper.

When my dad and I left an hour later, he noticed what turned out to be a card under his wiper. He picked it up and put it close to his weak eyes so he could read it.

"What the hell?" he said and threw it on the ground.

"What's it say?" I asked, looking at the card on the wet ground and noticing some red writing on the back.

"Don't worry about it," he told me. "Just get your ass in the truck, peckerwood."

After we got home, curiosity got the best of me. I put on my shoes and told my parents I was running to the grocery store to get some poster board for a school project.

"We have some in the store room," my mom said.

"It's not the color I need," I replied, and hurried out the door before anyone could ask any more questions. I drove toward Mr. Breakfast, just a few blocks from our family home. I pulled into the parking lot, and the card was still there. I hurried out of my car and picked it up.

On the front of the card, with red ink bleeding through from the other side, it said, "God can help you find serenity. Call for help with your addiction today."

My heart pounded, and I lost my breath. Then, after realizing what happened, I put the card in my pocket, got in my car, and drove to the grocery store to purchase my alibi.

## **Families, Alcoholism, and Supportive Communication**

I now understand why the man was offering support to my family the way he did. Alcoholics are reluctant to seek help for their disease, sometimes because they are in denial, but also because they worry about job loss, social stigma, affordability of treatment, and inability to complete a program when they consider seeking help (Berger, 1993). Family members are also reluctant to seek support, often because they fear the tangible punishments their alcoholic family members might face. Additionally, families facing alcoholism are often stigmatized and subject to gossip or openly expressed public concern (Berger, 1993; Krull, 2010). Skepticism about whether alcohol treatment is in-depth enough or if there is enough community support to help alcoholics is also a common concern. As Anderson, Amaral-Sabadini, Baumberg, Jarl, and Stuckler (2011) noted, public campaigns to offer support to alcoholics and educate about alcoholism have been woefully inadequate worldwide.

Still, public programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous for alcoholics or Al-Anon for family members of alcoholics continue to strive to offer instrumental and emotional support (see chapter 14, this volume) to alcoholic families (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2013; Al-Anon Family Groups, 2013). Creating the links between individuals affected by alcoholism and the groups themselves can be difficult, however. That leaves many families without support and many alcoholics without treatment. Such treatment should come under the direction of a professional clinic with health care providers who are trained to handle such situations (Barnett, 2003). These professionals will interact with the alcoholic—and often his or her family members—to make an informed and often systemic treatment plan. Unfortunately, as Barnett (2003) noted, many individuals and families try to handle alcoholism on their own—and those interventions are unsuccessful. Getting a family member to realize that he or she is an alcoholic is a task that usually requires a delicate blend of instrumental and emotional support to be offered from family members and friends. Getting an alcoholic to acknowledge his or her disease is crucial to the healing process, and most family members are unable to help alcoholics see their dependency (Wegsheider-Cruse & Cruse, 2012). Alcoholics also tend to shut down discussions about the disease, too, and often in forceful ways (Krull, 2010).

## A SECOND CLOSET: HOME

After I made a big, fluorescent green chart with all of the other debaters' names on it—one that would never be used—I went to bed, still thinking about the card. Then I heard a sound that still, to this day, makes me uneasy: There was banging on the stove top.

The burners on our family stove top had a hard time lighting. So to get the gas circulating and the fire going, usually there had to be banging. Banging this hard on the stove top this late at night was a bad sign. It meant dad was lighting a cigarette, and with the banging happening this hard, it meant dad was angry.

"So who have you been telling about me drinking?" he asked my mom.

"Jim, I just want to finish flossing my teeth and go to bed," she said. "I have to work tomorrow. I don't have time for this."

"You'll have time for whatever I tell you," he said.

"I didn't tell anyone," she replied.

Silence. Then a loud slam from the front door. The creaking of the truck door opening. The truck door slams shut. It is soon followed by the slamming of our front door. After all these years there was still the pretense of him going to get the vodka "on the sly," even though he was being loud enough that probably the neighbors knew. And, of course, we would find him tomorrow morning passed out with the bottle in his hand.

"Jim," my mother said in a tender voice after he came back in and sat down. Usually she ignored him. In fact, she told us to just sit there unless we were forced to talk. It made things easier. But tonight she tried another approach. "Why don't you go and get some help?"

"I don't need help," he said.

"I think you do," she said. Her voice trembling. My heart beating.

"And what ... do you think ... they would do about my job? You know, the same people who sign off on rehab, they're the same ones that give me my paycheck," he said.

"I- I got your insurance papers today. It, it says they can't fire you for that. And they'll send you to..." She was stopped by a loud slam.

"Dammit! I don't want to hear it. Do I try to tell you to go and get help for your fat ass? They got clinics for that too! Your ass is bigger than Amarillo because you can't stop shoving food in your mouth day and night. But, no. It's all about me. Because you never do anything wrong. You're Queen Bee!"

These moments of violence were not uncommon. Yet, still, the body almost always acts the same: paralysis, heavy breathing, a seemingly audibly beating heart.

The door that separates the two halves of our house slammed. That meant it was over, and dad was going to one of the back rooms, probably to pass out. My body goes back to ease, but my mind is racing.

## **Offering Support to Members of Alcoholic Families**

Self-help literature tells those who are confronting an alcoholic that they need to demonstrate care and compassion (Dayton, 2012; Krull, 2010). Further, they should establish clear boundaries, stand their ground in the face of opposition, lead the alcoholic family member to a health professional, and, as difficult as it might be, prepare for the possibility of losing the relationship (Krull, 2010). Family confrontations of alcoholism are often difficult, as they are emotionally draining in a system that is already being taxed by making up for the alcoholic's behavior. For example, spouses of alcoholics often feel tired from the roles they play internally as part of the family, as they often have to perform the role of both parents (Berger, 1993). They also are exhausted from frequently avoiding confrontation or engaging it. As a result, the spouse or partner might also avoid social contact with others out of exhaustion, causing him or her to be viewed negatively as self-pitying, aloof, or both (Dayton, 2012; Silverstein, 1990). Those perceptions often cut them off from the social support they so desperately need to cope with alcoholism.

Self-help guides and scholarly research often fail to help people seek support from others as a member of an alcoholic family. Few resources also exist to help friends offer support to someone when they realize they are dealing with another's alcoholism. In writing this case study, I was unable to identify any literature that does so. This is an important missing link in understanding family alcoholism, as it might allow for doors to be opened for finding the healing that families so desperately need. I know from my own experiences that a little of this support can go a long way.

## **A THIRD CLOSET: LOVE'S CONVENIENCE STORE**

The following weekend I was with my girlfriend, Miriam, when we walked to a close-by Love's convenience store so I could get some comics. When you live in a small town and read comic books, there aren't many places to get them. Fortunately, Love's had a great rack.

As we walked in the door, I immediately saw my dad. I got kind of nervous, mostly because he hadn't met Miriam yet. And, well, my namesake could kind of be colorful when it came to talking to women.

"Hey Whimper," he said when he saw me. He always smiled when he saw me with a girl. "Who's this pretty lady?"

"This is my dad," I told Miriam.

"Hi, I'm Miriam," she said to him.

"Miriam, Miriam! It is Queen Miriam!" he said, laughing. "I've heard Jimmie talk about how beautiful you are many times, mostly at night when he's supposed to be in bed sleeping!"

"Is that right?" she laughed a little.

"I'm going back to the comics," I said, not thinking much of it. By now I was used to his obnoxious charm. It didn't occur to me that she might not be.

A few jokes later, Miriam joined me where I was squatting on the floor and trying to decide what to buy.

"So that's your dad?" she asked.

"Yup," I said. "Ready to go?" I asked.

"He has pretty blue eyes," she said, walking with me to the register.

"Yeah, that's what people say," I tell her, handing my books to the clerk.

"Yours are prettier," she said, smiling at me. "They're this neat kind of green color, with little flecks of blue. But when you wear brown, there's some brown in them, too. I like that."

I'd never heard Miriam talk to me that way before—or any girl, really. We got in my car and drove back to my house. No one was home, so she and I went to my room to hang out. I turned on some Stone Temple Pilots and sat on my bed to look through my books. She sat down next to me, really close. Then she took the comic I was looking at out of my hand and replaced it with hers. Then she moved my face to look in her eyes.

"So your daddy. Does he drink?"

Immediately I looked down and concentrated on her hand holding mine. I wanted to cry.

"Yeah," I said, voice cracking and still not able to look at her. It was the first time I can remember telling anyone.

"It's okay," she said. Then she lifted my face back in her direction, leaned in, and put her lips to mine.

It was the most meaningful kiss of my life.



## Linking Alcoholism to Communication Privacy Management Theory

As this case has illustrated, families move into communication patterns that encourage silence about alcoholism (Krull, 2010; Wegsneider-Cruse & Cruse, 2012). In the first vignette, when a non-family member tried to break the silence by offering a card with information about seeking support, it was ignored by my father. When I asked about what the card said, my dad chose to silence its message. When my mother confronted my father about alcoholism, an unusual breaking of the silence by her, he reacted in a hostile way that was likely meant to encourage more silence in the future. Even when my girlfriend noticed my father's alcoholism and broke that silence with me, as was seen in the third vignette, it was something she had to initiate. My feelings of shame kept me in silence. As Bradley and Schneider (1990) indicate, family alcoholism is private information that must be controlled. In health communication terms, then, family alcoholism can be understood through engaging what communication researcher and theorist Sandra Petronio has conceptualized as communication privacy management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002).

CPM (see also chapters 4 and 7, this volume) is defined by five essential suppositions. First, CPM involves private information, such as the fact that my father was an alcoholic (Petronio, 2002). Only my family was supposed to know this, and we often confided in each other that we were worried other people would find out. That ties into Petronio's second supposition, that a "boundary metaphor" is used to mark what is public and what is private. The family unit, and a few of our family members that lived in town, were on the inside of this boundary. Everyone else was outside and off-limits to knowing about his alcoholism. In a sense, this information is something that we owned—and ownership defines Petronio's third supposition. In a CPM framework, information is owned by a party. In this case, my family was the party that owned the idea that my father was an alcoholic. As such, we controlled who we shared (or "co-owned") (Petronio, 2002, p. 3) this information with and how. Managing this ownership prevented us from feeling vulnerable.

My family engaged in implicit and explicit rules about what could be shared and what could not, thus creating a "rules-based management system," or the fourth supposition of CPM (Petronio, 2002, p. 3). Yet, my family fell prey to the fifth supposition that grounds CPM: Privacy management is dialectical (Petronio, 2002). Enacting privacy takes its toll, and the weight of alcoholism can make people—especially young people—opt for the comfort of disclosure. But disclosure is not always intentional either. Every bit of public presentation is seeped with some form



of disclosure as uncertainty fades and people come to a deeper understanding of who others are. I remember understanding the idea that others knew for the first time during the winter of my senior year of high school.

## A FOURTH CLOSET: WAL-MART

School was about to let out for Christmas holiday, and after the third loud fight between my parents in less than a week my mom decided that we—my brothers, sister, her, and me—needed to retreat to Wal-Mart and let dad cool down. Not that she phrased it that way.

“I don’t know why he has to start shit!” she kept repeating. “I’m so tired of living with a damned drunk!” It’s as if she were having a dialogue with herself, only out loud.

“I could smell the alcohol on him right when I walked in the door!” she said as we pulled into the parking lot. “I’m so glad he’ll be at work tomorrow.”

Almost immediately after we got inside the store, we saw her best friend, Mona. “Hi Mona!” my little brother Shawn yelled, waving at her. She pushed her cart toward us, smiling at Mom.

“Hi Barb. What’re you up to?” she asked. My mom sighed.

“Jim and I just got in a fight,” she said.

“What about this time?” Mona asked. I don’t think it was a secret to anyone who knew my mom and dad that they argued, although they probably didn’t know how much.

“I think he just had a little too much to drink,” my mom said, testing that tension between concealing and revealing. Then, out of nowhere, my brother speaks:

“I don’t have a father,” Shawn said, lowering his voice and sounding serious. “I have a drunk!”

All I can remember is my mouth dropping open. And my mom not making any kind of expression—because, believe me, I looked. And then over to Mona.

“Well, maybe he’ll get help one day,” she said matter of factly. It wasn’t as if anything had been revealed, or as if she were judging, or as if she were taking pity. It just was.

“Well, we have to get going,” Mom said. “I have to get stuff ready for Mikel’s class party.”

“Yeah, I’m doing Holly’s,” Mona replied. “Bye kids! Bye Barb!”

My mom didn’t reply. She just pushed her cart in the direction of the checkout stands. And then she left her cart there, items intact, as she guided us to the exit and

quickly out to the car. We got in fast, with Mom closing the final car door with a big slam. She turned and looked at Shawn in the back seat.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" she yelled. "Why would you tell her that?"

"Tell her what?" Shawn asked. It didn't seem like he was being disingenuous, either. I don't think he knew what he did.

"You're 14 years old! You know better than to call your father a drunk!"

"You did first!" he shot back at her.

"Not in front of Mona!" she yelled maniacally. She turned on the car.

"Mom, turn it off," I said. She didn't. Instead, she turned around to continue shouting at my brother.

"Do you know what's going to happen now? She's going to tell everyone! Now everyone's going to know!"

"I'm sorry," Shawn said. "I was just mad because of the fight earlier."

"I don't care! And now—now he might lose his job! Do you think people want a drunk firefighter? Or a drunk trimming their trees? And it makes us look like white trash!" She continued to get more upset. "You're grounded!" she added. "You can go to school, and that's it. You think it's so fun to tell everyone what a drunk your dad is, you can stay at home with him!" she yelled.

I was freaked out, and I could tell Mike and Kristen were, too. I thought a moment, and then I tried to take a gentle approach.

"Mom, I don't think she thought much of it. Settle down." I tried to rub her arm and comfort her, but she shook away. Then she started sobbing.

"You know Mona is going to tell everyone!" she choked through the tears. "And you know she's going to love it, too. Telling everyone how his own son was going around calling him a drunk."

"Well, mom. He is a drunk," I said, explaining as soothingly as I possibly could. "People have to know that by now."

"How?" she asked. "How would they know? No one knows!"

I reached in my coat pocket and took out the card with the smudged red writing. I handed it to her.

"This guy was in the same coffee shop as him for 40 minutes and figured it out. If he knows, I'm guessing your best friends probably know."

She read the card. Then she asked, "Where is this from?"

"Some guy left it on dad's windshield the other night when we were at Mr. Breakfast."

"Are you kidding me?" she asked, calming down a bit. Was I seeing relief? Or was she saving up energy for round two?

“No, it really happened,” I said. “Before he left the restaurant. I think he saw Dad going out to the truck so much, you know, to get a drink. And so he put it on the truck.”

“Did your dad see?” she asked.

“No. But when we got in the truck, he saw the card and read it. Then he threw it on the ground.”

“What did he say?” my mom asked.

“Get your ass in the truck, peckerwood,” I said, being honest. Then I heard Mikel yell from the back seat.

“Get your ass in the truck, peckerwood!” He smiled with an exaggerated grin. Mom didn’t usually put up with her 11-year-old son cussing, but given all the high drama I don’t think she or anyone else cared. We just laughed. A lot. Mikel was always good at keeping us laughing.

Then after the laughter died down, Mom turned on the car radio and we drove home. No one said another word during the ride. Not even when we got in the front door.

## CLOSING THE CLOSET DOOR

That night, when I was getting ready for bed, my mom came into the bathroom as I washed my face.

“Do you think people really know?” she asked. “About your dad?”

I looked at her, and I could tell there was an answer she needed to hear.

“No,” I said. Dad’s identity—our family’s identity—was back in the closet. At least that’s what I let her believe.

“And Mona,” I continued, “She probably thinks he drinks like Nick. You know, gets a little schnocked every once in a while. They fight too, you know.” I had to make sure the closet door was shut for my mother.

“Yeah,” she said. “Okay.”

Then she went into the living room, sat down next to my snoring father, moved the capped bottle of vodka from his hand and into the side pocket of his reclining chair, and turned on the television set.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the communication dynamics that alcoholic families often face. Do you believe these communication patterns to be similar to other family situations? If so, what situations and how? If not, why do you believe alcoholism constitutes such a unique situation for these behaviors?
2. How does the portrayal of alcoholism presented in the personal narrative here differ from other portrayals of alcoholism you might have seen on television or in movies? How is it similar? How might individuals consider the legitimacy of such portrayals?
3. In this case, you saw some ways someone might “break the silence” to offer support or help for alcoholism. How do you think you would approach a family member who might be drinking too much? Is that different than how you would approach a friend who might have drinking issues? How might you approach a friend who has an alcoholic family member to offer support or guidance? What about a stranger who you see in an alcoholic relationship?
4. Do you believe the advent of the Internet and computer-mediated communication makes it easier to find support for alcoholism? Why or why not? If you were seeking information about alcoholism, where might you search online?
5. In this case, you saw communication privacy management applied to alcoholism in families. How might this theory apply to other health-oriented contexts? For example, what are some of the privacy boundaries associated with learning one is pregnant? Or with learning that one has cancer? What other health issues might especially involve privacy, and how can it be applied?



## REFERENCES

- Al-Anon. (2013). *Friends and families of problem drinkers find understanding and support at Al-Anon meetings*. Retrieved from Al-Anon Family Groups website: <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/>
- Alcoholics Anonymous. (2013). *Welcome to Alcoholics Anonymous*. Retrieved from Alcoholics Anonymous website: <http://www.aa.org/>
- Anderson, P., Amaral-Sabadini, M. B., Baumberg, B., Jarl, J., & Stuckler, D. (2011). Communicating alcohol narratives: Creating a healthier relationship with alcohol. *Journal of Health Communication, 16*, 27-36.
- Barnett, M. A. (2003). All in the family: Resources and referrals for alcoholism. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners, 15*, 467-472.
- Berger, G. (1993). *Alcoholism and the family*. New York, NY: Franklin Watts.
- Bradley, L. G., & Schneider, H. G. (1990). Interpersonal trust, self-disclosure, and control in adult children of alcoholics. *Psychological Reports, 67*, 731-737.
- Dayton, T. (2012). *The AOCA trauma syndrome: The impact of childhood pain on adult relationships*. Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI.
- Krull, E. (2010). When family members protect alcoholics. *Psych Central*. Retrieved from <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2010/when-family-members-protect-alcoholics>
- Menees, M. M., & Segrin, C. (2000). The specificity of disrupted processes in families of adult children of alcoholics. *Alcohol and Alcoholism, 35*, 361-367.
- Mulligan, K. (2001). Al-Anon celebration spotlights importance of family involvement. *Psychiatric News, 36*, 7.
- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Rangarajan, S., & Kelly, L. (2006). Family communication patterns, family environment, and the impact of parental alcoholism on offspring self-esteem. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 23*, 655-671.
- Silverstein, H. (1990). *Alcoholism*. New York, NY: Franklin Watts.
- Wegscheider-Cruse, S., & Cruse, J. (2012). *Understanding codependency: The science behind it and how to break the cycle*. Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI.