

*Horses Healing Hearts is an Education and Prevention Program. We are not a therapy program.*

### **Differences between Awareness, Education and Therapy for COAs (Children of Alcoholics):**

COA-specific services can be viewed on a continuum with awareness raising activities that can benefit everyone on one end to intensive psychotherapy that is only needed by some COAs on the other end of the continuum. Each type of service has different goals.

#### **Awareness:**

Awareness activities such as public service announcements (PSAs), print advertisements, posters, etc. let COAs know they are not alone. These activities and messages are critical because they break the “don’t talk” rule. In most alcoholic families, children are told not to talk about the parents’ drinking so they are reluctant to tell outsiders. Public awareness activities aimed at youth universalizes their experience and reduces some of the isolation, shame, and confusion.

#### **Education:**

Education goes a step further by explaining why parents break promises, act differently when drinking, feel and act sick when not drinking, forget things, etc. To be effective, education must fit the cognitive development and learning style of each child. In providing education, consideration must be given to the fact that some children become highly anxious during this time and may not absorb and integrate the information. Others may have learning disabilities that make it difficult to listen and learn in groups, to read or to write stories, or draw pictures about their feelings or family. Just as awareness can help reduce the isolation, education can help reduce the pain. Understanding that a child is not responsible for the parents’ drinking or other activities, that drinking can make it hard for a parent to take care of a child can help a child separate him/herself from the parents’ problem.

Giving COAs an opportunity to talk about their situation, listening, and expressing empathy is important because for many COAs, it is not permissible to talk about their situation at home. Statements by non-alcoholic spouses such as, “you shouldn’t feel that way.” “Grow up,” “You don’t know what it means to be upset,” “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about” are characteristic of parent responses given to COAs who do express feelings. As a result, many COAs learn it is not safe or wise to express feelings.

#### **Therapy:**

Therapy may be short term or long term and reflect a variety of theoretical orientations, such as family systems, psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, etc. Theoretically, therapy is a treatment for a problem, which implies that the COA involved in therapy is having a problem that needs to be remedied. As with the other levels, therapy treatment should be appropriate for the developmental level of the child. Therapy should also improve functioning in areas where the child is having difficulty, such as social functioning, functioning at school, etc.

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