

# The other side of *alcoholism*

In a society focused on helping the addicted person recover, the loved ones are often forgotten. But friends and family need help too and must not be afraid to ask for it, writes **Kathy Donaghy**

**T**he very public battle of TV star Ant McPartlin with alcohol and prescription drugs has cast the spotlight on addiction and the carnage it can cause once again. The 42-year-old has gone back to rehab as he faces a drink driving charge and his show *Saturday Night Takeaway* continues on without him as he tries to deal with his demons. This weekend, his television partner Declan Donnelly will host the hit programme alone for the first time in the 23 years the pair have been working together.

ITV has pledged allegiance to Ant & Dec, saying the presenting duo will never be replaced on *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*, and while the public gaze has been firmly centred on Ant getting treatment, now the focus shifts to what Dec will do next, and whether he'll continue to branch out solo.

Behind the scenes and often totally forgotten are the loved ones of the alcohol-dependent person whose life can be consumed with trying to help their loved one stay away from drink.

Addiction counsellor Austin Prior says the loved ones' first thoughts are never for themselves.

"The first thing they ask me is:

'How do I stop them drinking?' My

answer is you probably can't but you can do something to help your own quality of life. If you can make a change, there is a possibility they will change," he says.

Prior says that for loved ones of addicts, often there's a huge problem of their own self-worth.

"When you're looking at someone you love going through a self-destructive pattern and you're trying to help them and failing, your first instinct is to blame yourself. It's only when they start to realise that they have to help themselves that this shifts," he says.

"Living with an alcoholic, you start to normalise abnormal situations, saying things like 'it wasn't that bad — he wasn't violent'. The starting point is it's not okay. One of the hard questions for people to answer is could they do things differently? That means stopping cooking and ironing and covering up. If someone is hungover and not able to go to work, the partner or parent often rings their work. Stop covering up," says Prior.

"The message we try to give is self-care. I wouldn't ever say the first option is to walk away. But you are trying to convey a message like 'when you're drinking I don't want to be around you'.

"Sometimes the loved one

becomes dependent on the drinker in their lives and they become obsessed with trying to fix things and cover up. They have to start taking care of themselves. Even though it's not perfect, it can be better," he says.

"Once they learn the lesson of self-care, they stop blaming. Al Anon has the three Cs: you didn't cause it, you can't control it and you can't cure it. Can you imagine the huge sense of freedom that comes

with that?" For children of an alcoholic parent, the damage can last long into adulthood. A new initiative being supported by **Alcohol Action** Ireland aims to cast a spotlight on the largely silent voices of those impacted by parental or other harmful drinking.

Mary\* grew up in a family of seven where her father was an alcoholic. "I knew nothing else — I didn't realise it wasn't typical until much later. Back then there was no help for people in that situation. Neighbours would have heard the shouting and roaring but there was no help," she says.

"My father would disappear for weeks on end. Money was always an issue. There was always this huge shame — you couldn't talk to others about it, loyalty was critical," says Mary, who is now in her 50s.

"There was physical abuse. Many



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| a time I would end up protecting my mother. She would get upset at his behaviour and I'd be in between the two of them. It's very difficult to remember good times."

It was only when Mary went for counselling in her own marriage and the counsellor asked about her background and sent her on a course to help her deal with her issues that she realised how much she'd lost out on in her early life.

"I thought I'd survived, that I'd got through it. Meeting other people through the course made me realise the extent of what I'd lost. I realised that it was important to break the cycle for the next generation so as not to make the same mistakes I'd come across."

Tony\* describes his childhood as "a blighted upbringing" as his father's alcoholism cast a shadow over everything. Fear, anxiety and trepidation are words he uses to describe growing up not knowing

what way his father was going to walk in the door.

Now having just entered his 60s, he feels it's high time the voices of the loved ones of alcoholics were heard as it stimulates a more open and honest conversation. "It may even begin to melt the hard Irish drinking culture into something healthier and with much more awareness," says Tony, who lives in the mid-west.

Tony says he has undergone therapy and no longer feels any anger towards his father who died many years ago, only the loss and sadness for what could have been.

Tony was in his mid-40s when he got married and had a child and says he never felt ready to be a father before then.

"That's as a direct result of my upbringing. I went abroad for years. I think I was running away. I remember being taken in by a

family when I lived abroad and they treated me like a son. I found the whole experience alien. I was like an emotional plank — I couldn't handle this normality," he says.

"If I hadn't decided I needed to do something about it, I could still be like that now. I was in therapy for years. There are supports there. Find others in similar situations

and talk to them. The feelings of shame close the heart and close you off. But the future is brighter and there is light at the end of the tunnel."

*\*Names have been changed to protect their identity*

Alcohol Action Ireland will soon launch an initiative that aims to amplify the 'silent voices' of those impacted by parental or other harmful drinking. This initiative will raise awareness of the trauma experienced by children and adults, and the need for evidenced based interventions to recognise and support those harmed by alcohol abuse. If you have been impacted by such trauma and wish to find out more about this initiative, you can contact [Alcohol Action](mailto:silentvoices@alcoholactionireland.ie) confidentially via email at [silentvoices@alcoholactionireland.ie](mailto:silentvoices@alcoholactionireland.ie) or call 01-878 0610.

## How to talk to a loved one about addiction

**A**lan Martin, counsellor at Cuan Mhuire addiction treatment centre in Galway, says that often the family members of addicts are more traumatised by their experience than the addicted person.

He says once they realise this they must stop covering up and stop enabling the addicted person's behaviour. "They have to realise they must help themselves by starting to build up their own self-esteem and getting on with their own lives," explains Martin.

He says people need to reach out for help through Al Anon or other treatment centres. "It's never too late to get help. Adult children of alcoholics can carry so many behaviours from childhood — it's so important to get help," he says.

"Stop enabling and detach with love. Enabling is allowing the person to continue by covering up. No human being can change another person."

For more information, see [cuanmhuire.ie](http://cuanmhuire.ie).

If someone is hungover and not able to go to work, the partner or parent often rings their work — stop covering up





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**Going solo: Dec (right) is set to present alone for the first time in 23 years on Saturday as Ant seeks treatment for alcoholism**