

CHAPTER 22

Problems with Alcohol

No one sets out to become an alcoholic. People simply like how alcohol makes them feel—relaxed, without a worry in the world. Young people are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the misuse of alcohol. A teenager's body takes more time than an adult's to recover from alcohol abuse.

Under the influence of alcohol, people often do things they regret later. For example, the majority of casual sexual encounters come about when one or both partners are under the influence of alcohol. When

you are drunk, you do not really know what you are doing. You say things that sound incredibly clever to you, but incredibly stupid to everyone else. Chances are that the following morning you will not like what you have done, if you can remember anything at all.



What are the effects of alcohol?

Alcohol has varying effects on different people. Most people think that alcohol is a stimulant, but, medically speaking, alcohol is a depressant. It slows down your reaction times and clouds your ability to judge movement and distances. Even walking and speaking become a problem when you drink too much.

It's important to realize that alcohol is a drug and is addictive. The more you drink, the more you want to drink and the more you need to drink to get the temporary feeling of excitement and well-being. But drinking is not all pleasure. After a night of drinking you will certainly feel the effects—a hangover. It is not at all exciting and glamorous. It is a horrific headache accompanied with feelings of regurgitation. The main reason is dehydration: Alcohol makes the water move out of your body cells and into the blood and urine in order to flush out the excessive amounts of alcohol, which is toxic for your body.

Moreover, over a period of years alcohol will cause cirrhosis of the liver and such effects as brain damage, stomach problems, vitamin deficiency, high blood pressure, depression, etc. It is very dangerous for pregnant women to drink. Even a small amount of alcohol in the mother's bloodstream may cause mental retardation or other birth defects in the child.

The overall social costs of alcohol abuse are staggering. Alcohol causes the loss of millions of working days, is directly related with many industrial accidents and is often a factor in suicide. The people who suffer most from alcohol are often not the drinkers themselves but other, innocent people. For instance, driving under the influence of alcohol shows a terrible disregard for human life, not just of the driver and his passengers, but of many innocent parties as well.

Sergei's Story

My name is Sergei. I am 28. Six years ago I got married. We had two sons, 5 and 3 years old.

One day I came home from work a little early. I thought it would be a surprise for my wife and the boys. But when I got home, I found they were still out. There was a note on the table from my wife saying that they were shopping and would be back at five. I settled down to read the paper.

When I looked up, it was already five thirty. When six o'clock came, I began to get worried. I called some friends to see if she was there; they hadn't seen her. At seven o'clock I called the police. I knew something was wrong as soon as I told them my name.

"We need you to come to the station," a voice said. "A car will pick you up in ten minutes."

Those ten minutes, and the short drive to the police station, were the longest of my life. As I entered the building, a grave-faced officer approached. "Mr. Ivanov," he said, "I'm very sorry. There was a runaway car accident this afternoon. Your wife and your children ... " He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. They were killed at once."

In one afternoon my whole life was wiped out. All gone.

It turned out that the driver was only 20 years old. He'd been drinking, and had lost control of the car just as my family was about to cross the road. He wasn't even scratched himself. But he took away everything that had made my life worth living.

Alcoholism in a family

Children of alcoholics often suffer terribly. Teenagers with an alcoholic parent usually experience a mixture of fear, anger, depression and confusion. They want to express their love toward their mom or dad, but the affects of alcohol have made them act like different people, not the parents their children once knew. Often children feel guilty, ashamed and responsible for their parents' behavior, even though they can't really do anything about it.

Here are the stories of two teenagers:

Tanya's Story

"My name's Tanya, and my father has a serious drinking problem. I'd say he's an alcoholic. Because of him, life at home is often miserable and always nerve-wracking. I never know just when he's going to get drunk. Sometimes he's all right for a week or so, and I start to imagine that he's got over it and he'll be a normal dad again. Then I'll come home one day and find he's been on the bottle again. I think that's the most difficult thing, never knowing what I'm going to find when I get home. Never knowing what to expect. So far he hasn't hit me, but he gets so angry sometimes I think it's just bound to happen one day.

"Mom still says she loves him, but I think she's losing hope. The other day she was crying her eyes out. I tried to comfort her, but she couldn't stop. She has to do all the work around the house now, all the little things Dad used to do. He's more like a child than a man, and it's getting worse. We don't have any close relatives or anyone I could really speak to. I just feel we're trapped in a cage. Last week it got so bad I just had to talk to someone, so I stayed behind after school and spoke to my teacher. She tried to be kind, but I don't think she knows what to do either."

Alexei's Story

"I hated my father for what he was doing. I hated him for drinking, and I was afraid of him when he was drunk. One day on the train he drank a whole bottle of vodka and started singing and laughing loudly. Then he started trying to kiss a lady in the next seat. When my mom complained, he hit her. I can't remember if I cried, but I hated him even more.

"Eventually, they got divorced, and I thought my problems were over. But they weren't. At school my work got worse and my grades slipped. I just didn't care about it so much anymore. I used to think about going to university, but now I think what's the use of even finishing school?

"In the end I started drinking myself, trying to lose my troubles in a bottle. Even though it works for a few hours, I always feel worse afterward. It looks like my dad has turned me into an alcoholic as well."

Can alcoholics get better?

Alcoholism is a disease. An alcoholic is a sick person, and therefore needs to be loved and helped, not judged and rejected. The difficulty is that an alcoholic simply cannot stop. At the same time it is impossible to help an alcoholic without his cooperation. So if one of our relatives suffers from this disease, he or she needs our support. It's almost impossible to cope with alcoholism alone.

Although medical treatment is used as a way to cure alcoholism, one of the most effective treatments is a form of group therapy. This is the approach of Alcoholics Anonymous, a worldwide association that brings together groups of alcoholics who

meet to support and encourage each other to get better. Alcoholics Anonymous offers a non-judgmental fellowship to which the person struggling with alcoholism can bring his despair and also accept himself or herself as a sick person needing to be cured. For an alcoholic the danger of becoming sick again remains for the rest of his or her life, so a person who wants to be cured has to find the strength to never drink again.

Probably the most important problem encountered by the families of alcoholics is a feeling of shame, resulting in isolation and sometimes despair. They may not believe that things can change. In such a situation it is important to realize that your family problem is not unique. Try to find other families suffering from similar problems. You would be able to find more ways to cooperate to help and support each other.

Suppose your alcoholic father wants to stop drinking. If you keep in touch with another family in which there is also a person eager to quit, such contact may help him, give him the kind of support he needs at moments when it is so tempting to have a drink. There are support groups for the children and spouses of alcoholics in many countries. If such a group is already active in your city, don't hesitate to turn there for help; they are sure to help you.

Never blame yourself for the problems arising in your family. Alcoholism approaches gradually, and during the initial stage every person can and must stop by himself. But when it becomes an addiction, an alcoholic needs the help of the entire family to cope with it. Remember, your mom or dad's alcoholism is not your fault. But you may be the very person who will be able to help your parent overcome it. Then the atmosphere in your family may improve.

Contacting other families with alcohol problems has another advantage. A drunk person is unable to analyze his actions correctly and therefore may be unaware of the pain and suffering he is causing his family. When one is sober, one does not remember what one was doing when drunk. Thus alcoholics often don't understand that they are torturing their families.

If you meet families with similar problems, the alcoholic in your family will have an opportunity to look at himself objectively, to see the consequences of alcoholism—the difficulties of children, relatives and his or her spouse. Often the family's financial situation worsens and relationships with friends become strained. To see it in another family is easier than in one's own, because there would be no moral disapproval or strong emotional involvement. This awareness might be the first step on the way toward the decision to stop drinking and to pursue the path of recovery.



Questions for Discussion



- Are there any positive aspects of drinking? Why do you think societies continue to allow people to drink?
- What are some problems that teenagers living with an alcoholic parent might have to deal with?
- Who might be able to help Tanya or Alexei with their problems—a friend from school, a relative, a teacher, a doctor? If you were Tanya or Alexei, whom would you ask for help?

For Your Journal



Imagine that you have an alcoholic parent. Write a letter explaining your feelings to a) your older brother who is away at university or in the army or b) a relative. This person has always been a help to you; but at the same time you are also a little afraid that he might develop a similar problem, because he also drinks a lot.