

HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

UNDERSTANDING ALCOHOL AND DRUG MISUSE

Most things in life have the potential for benefit or for harm, depending on the way we approach them. Alcohol and other drugs are no exception. For many people, having a drink is simply a pleasurable custom at meals and social gatherings and taking a prescription drug is a health-preserving measure or an act of temporary necessity (for example, to relieve physical pain).

However, it's easy to misuse these substances, unwittingly or otherwise. We can misuse medicine, for example, by taking too much at once or by taking it longer than the recommended time. Some people mix prescription drugs inappropriately; "many of which have contributed to highway and work-related accidents - and serious health problems, especially among senior citizens," says Richard Garlick, director of communications at the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA).

With alcohol, the greater the frequency and the more often that you drink, will increase the likelihood of having an accident, getting into problems at home or at work or suffering damage to your health. Liver cirrhosis, high blood pressure, strokes and certain types of cancer are much more common among people who drink heavily over a long period of time. So are stomach upsets, poor concentration and difficulty sleeping. In a study conducted by the Addiction Research Foundation and the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Western Ontario, it was learned that excessive alcohol drinkers had more health and social difficulties as a result of their drinking than was expected in the average person.

What does it mean to be "addicted"?

When drinking and other drug use (illegal or prescription) begins to control a person, health professionals consider it a "chemical dependency" or an "addiction". Being addicted implies that the person feels compelled (physically, mentally or both) to drink or take drugs on a regular basis and experiences distress without it. People who drive while drunk, or who drink even though they know it might worsen a stomach ulcer for example, are said to "abuse" alcohol. Those who feel they cannot get through the day without drinking, using illegal drugs or taking prescription drugs differently than recommended to lift their spirits, are likely addicted.

Over time, someone who is addicted will often need to take larger

amounts or the same amount more often in order to obtain the same effect. When use of the drug is stopped, they will feel an intense craving and very likely, symptoms of "withdrawal".

Withdrawal can begin with irritability and trembling; and potentially progress to more severe, even life-threatening symptoms, such as seizures. If you have been using large amounts of alcohol or another drug for a long time, it can be extremely dangerous to try to quit "cold turkey" without professional support.

Why do people turn to alcohol and other drugs?

Few people do it with the intention of doing harm. Some people try it out of curiosity or because they want to fit in with a particular crowd. Says one young man, "a bunch of us would go out drinking after work and I didn't want to be different. A few drinks sharpened my sense of humour. But my boss didn't think it was very funny when my hangovers made me late for work."

Most people who experiment with alcohol and other drugs may not go on to become addicted, although some illegal street drugs (crack-cocaine, for example) can create a dependency almost immediately.

Family history of addiction puts a person at higher risk. A variety of biological, social and personal factors also come into play. From what France Guillemette, a Montreal counselor from Warren Shepell Consultants, has seen of many people with addictions, "it often comes down to a difficulty coping with such emotions as boredom, anger, anxiety, or lack of self-confidence. On a deeper level, chemical use is often a way for people to feel in control or to fill some emptiness inside themselves."

"If you had my problems, you'd take something too!"

When alcohol and other drugs seem to go hand-in-hand with a particularly difficult or challenging time in life, it's easy to see events or other people as the problem and the chemical as the solution. "Most of us first tend to look outside of ourselves for answers, but chemicals can distort perception of ourselves and our circumstances to the point where our judgement may no longer be reliable," says Guillemette. One man who thought that alcohol helped him make "razor sharp" business decisions eventually found his career crumbling as a result of some of those decisions. A young woman convinced herself the people who loved her "never really cared" and saw those who were profiting from her drug use as her "best friends".

A Ripple Effect

The effect of a person's addiction can result in profound suffering among family members and friends. Even normal family routines and events can often be difficult, largely as a result of the feelings of concern, anxiety and fear that pervade the household. Adds Guillemette, "it's sometimes very hard for a spouse, and more so a child to cope with the situation, and the suffering they go through can be heart-rendering." Family members' feelings may go unexpressed until counseling is sought out. Family and concerned friends are often aware of the problem before the person with the addiction is. Very often family members will reach out to the EAP for support, and to address how to best help the person, as well as to determine what action they can take to improve the situation.

How can you know if you have (or are developing) a problem?

The following questions can help you decide:

- ▲ Do you have any concerns about the way you use alcohol or other drugs?
- ▲ Are you using an illegal drug or obtaining a prescription drug illegally? Are you having the same prescription filled by more than one doctor?
- ▲ Are you "self prescribing"; that is, using some medicine regularly without (or against) the advice of a physician?
- ▲ Have you often failed to do what was normally expected of you at home, at work or at school because something you took or drank made you feel listless, irritable or sick?
- ▲ Do you need to drink or take something to help you through new situations or social occasions? Do you need it to "get started" in the morning or get to sleep at night?
- ▲ Is a party "not a real party" unless you are under the influence?
- ▲ Have you ever had memory lapses after using alcohol or medication?
- ▲ Within the last year, have you hurt yourself or someone else while you were under the influence? For example, did you damage property or abuse people; physically or verbally?
- ▲ Has a friend, relative, co-worker, doctor or other health worker been concerned about your drinking or drug use? Has anyone suggested (or demanded) that you cut down or quit?
- ▲ Have you discovered that you get less flak from family members if you don't do all your drinking or drug-taking in front of them?
- ▲ Have you ever tried to cut down or stop and found that you couldn't?

If you answered yes to many of the questions listed above, there is a possibility that you may have a problem.

What can you do if you think you have a problem?

The first step is to seek counseling assistance: you can start by calling your Warren Shepell EAP counselor. Your medical doctor could also be consulted for an assessment. "Seeking assistance in itself, can be scary," observes Guillemette. "Admitting to an addiction problem is similar to admitting that an important relationship isn't working. We can see the signs but because the thought of trying to change or end the relationship is so overwhelming, it's easier, at least in the beginning - to convince ourselves that everything is fine."

In some situations it may take some specific incident or "rock bottom" experience before denial of an addiction problem is

shattered. Everyone's "rock bottom" is different, and fortunately, more and more people are getting assistance and learning new ways to approach alcohol and other drugs before losing everything important to them.

Adds Guillemette "coming to terms with the knowledge that there's a problem gets easier when we realize we don't have to fix the problem all at once or all alone." Discussing it with someone who understands; taking it one step at a time; is an empowering process. We come to realize that we do have choices and we can take charge and responsibility for what we consume.

An "ounce of prevention"...

- ▲ Know what it means to "drink moderately." According to the CCSA, "moderate drinking" is one or two drinks a day. A standard drink equals one 12-oz. bottle of regular strength beer; a 5-oz. serving of table wine or a 1.5oz. "shot" of liquor. In certain circumstances and for certain people, the use of alcohol is either not recommended or is clearly inappropriate. As well, people who are consistently unable to control their drinking should not drink at all, advises the CCSA.
- ▲ Remember to support other people. Refuse to serve alcohol to people who are noticeably intoxicated and make sure these people have a "safe ride" home. Increasingly, hosts are being held liable for damages caused by their intoxicated guests.
- ▲ When buying over-the-counter medicines, read and follow label instructions carefully. Be sure to question the pharmacist if there is something about the product you don't understand.
- ▲ If you have a chronic health condition or disability, explore with your doctor drug-free ways to address your symptoms. Question your doctor and pharmacist about safe use of your medication; about side effects, such as drowsiness, and about the drug's potential for causing dependency.
- ▲ Teach your children responsible use of alcohol and other drugs. The "just say no" approach often is not enough. Education should be non-judgmental; it requires an open discussion with youngsters and respect for their desire to learn how to make appropriate decisions.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

English Service: 1-800-387-4765

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