

UNDERSTANDING ALCOHOLISM



What Is Alcoholism?

The American Medical Association recognizes alcoholism as a disease that can be arrested but not cured. One of the symptoms is an uncontrollable desire to drink. Alcoholism is a progressive disease. As long as alcoholics continue to drink, their drive to drink will get worse. If not dealt with, the disease can result in insanity or death. The only method of arresting alcoholism is total abstinence. Most authorities agree that even after years of sobriety, alcoholics can never drink again, because alcoholism is a lifetime disease.

There are many successful treatments for alcoholism today. Alcoholics Anonymous is the best known, and widely regarded as the most effective. Alcoholism is no longer a hopeless condition, if it is recognized and treated.

Who Are Alcoholics?

All kinds of people are alcoholics—young and old, rich and poor, well-educated and ignorant, professional people and factory workers, housewives and mothers. Only about three to five percent of alcoholics are “bums” or derelicts. The rest have families, friends, and jobs, and are functioning fairly well, but their drinking affects some part of their lives. Their family life, their social life, or their job life may suffer. It might be all three.

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Alcoholics are people whose drinking causes a continuing and growing problem in any area of their lives.

Why Do Alcoholics Drink?

Alcoholics drink because they think they have to. They use alcohol as a crutch and an escape. They are in emotional pain and they use alcohol to kill that pain. Eventually they depend on alcohol so much that they become convinced they can't live without it. This is *obsession*.

When some alcoholics try to do without alcohol, the withdrawal symptoms are so overwhelming that they go back to drinking because drinking seems to be the only way to get rid of the agony. This is *addiction*.

Most alcoholics would like to be social drinkers. They spend a lot of time and effort trying to control their drinking so they will be able to drink like other people. They may try drinking on weekends or drinking only a certain drink. But they can never be sure of being able to stop drinking when they want. They end up getting drunk even when they promised themselves they wouldn't. This is *compulsion*.

It is the nature of this disease that alcoholics do not believe they are ill. This is *denial*. Hope for recovery lies in their ability to recognize a need for help, their desire to stop drinking, and their willingness to admit that they cannot cope with the problem by themselves.

*What Are the Symptoms of Alcoholism?**

- *Loss of control*: The loss of control is usually progressive. At first the alcoholic can control his drinking most of the time. But

*For simplicity's sake, the alcoholic will often be referred to as a man throughout this book. It is understood that these statements apply to women alcoholics as well.

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he sometimes gets drunk when he doesn't want to. Eventually he loses more and more control. He may drink only on certain days or at certain times because he knows he can't always stop when he wishes. If he continues to drink, he will finally lose control of *when* he drinks too. He will drink when he would rather not drink, even when he knows he needs to be sober.

- *Progression:* The alcoholic may not drink more, but he gets drunk more often. He becomes less dependable. He becomes more and more obsessed with drinking and less and less concerned about his responsibilities.

- *Withdrawal symptoms:* When the alcoholic stops drinking, he may suffer from nausea and vomiting, headaches, and “the shakes.” He usually is very irritable. He may even hallucinate. This is known as DTs (*delirium tremens*). In the advanced stages, there may be convulsions. Hospitalization is sometimes required for the “drying out” period.

- *Personality change:* The alcoholic seems to have a dual personality. When he drinks, he is very different from the way he is when he's not drinking.

- *Blackouts:* These are a form of amnesia. The alcoholic really doesn't remember what has happened. Blackouts can occur even when the alcoholic isn't drunk, lasting a few minutes or entire days. They are frightening to the alcoholic and confusing for the people around him who don't understand why he can't remember what happened.

Why Is Alcoholism Called a Family Disease?

At first we may think alcoholism is called a *family disease* because it seems to run in families. Most Al-Anon members are or were spouses of alcoholics. They are often the children

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of alcoholics as well. They may have brothers or sisters who have the disease or who are married to alcoholics. Doctors have observed that there is often more than one alcoholic in a family. For this reason they have said that there is a *family tendency* to develop alcoholism, just as there is a *family tendency* to develop diabetes. However, it has not yet been proven that alcoholism is directly inherited.

In Alateen, when we say alcoholism is a *family disease*, we mean that the alcoholism of one member affects the whole family, and all become sick. Why does this happen? Unlike diabetes, alcoholism not only exists inside the body of the alcoholic but is a *disease of relationships* as well. Many of the symptoms of alcoholism are in the behavior of the alcoholic. The people who are involved with the alcoholic react to his behavior. They try to control it, make up for it, or hide it. They often blame themselves for it and are hurt by it. Eventually they become emotionally disturbed themselves.

- *The family's obsession:* Family members often end up being just as obsessed with the alcoholic's drinking as he is. The only difference is that they are trying to figure out how to stop it, and he is trying to figure out how to keep it up. As a result of their obsession, they forget everything else. Children are neglected, friends are dropped, outside interests dwindle, and responsibilities are forgotten. Much of the nonalcoholic parent's time is spent trying to figure out ways of changing the alcoholic. But nothing works.

- *The family's anxiety:* When the alcoholic gets into trouble because of his drinking, the family worries. They are so afraid of what will happen that they do anything to get the alcoholic off the hook. They do his work, pay his bills, pick up his messes, patch up his mistakes, and tell lies for him.

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Without realizing it, they make it possible for him to continue drinking. They don't know that removing all the painful results of the drinking only reaffirms the alcoholic's conviction that he can drink as much as he wants and nothing bad will happen.

- *The family's anger:* Family members eventually become frustrated by the alcoholic's behavior and their own inability to control it. Thinking that the alcoholic drinks on purpose because he doesn't love them, they turn on him in anger. They argue and fight, call each other names, and try to get even for all the hurt they have suffered. The home becomes a battleground. The family doesn't realize that the alcoholic drinks because he can't help it and that he hates himself for it. By punishing him for his behavior, they convince him that he is unlovable. This takes away the guilt he feels, because having been punished for his drinking, he feels the slate has been wiped clean. He figures he has made up for his bad behavior, so he can drink again.

- *The family's denial:* The alcoholic denies he has a problem. He denies he needs help. He promises never to drink again. By accepting his promises, the family is denying the problem too. It is the same as saying they think the alcoholic is behaving this way on purpose. They wouldn't accept his promises if they realized that he is sick and can't help himself. They deny the problem when they hide it from others and pretend it doesn't exist. They deny the problem when they make threats and don't follow through. The alcoholic's family often says one thing and does another. They are not aware that the alcoholic is "listening" to what they *do* and not to what they *say*.

- *The children are caught in the middle:* As the children of alcoholics, we are affected in many ways. We may be hurt directly by the alcoholic's behavior, especially if there is violence. When he is drinking, the alcoholic often makes promises he can't keep or doesn't remember making. We may find this

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hard to take until we understand the illness. There may be money problems. We may be ashamed of our home or afraid we'll be embarrassed in front of our friends. We may even blame ourselves for the alcoholic's drinking.

Our nonalcoholic relatives may give us problems too. As a result of their preoccupation with the drinking problem, they may neglect us, be irritable, inconsistent, demanding, or confused. They may try to get us to help control the alcoholic by watching him, keeping quiet so as not to disturb him, going to the bar to get him, or telling lies to hide the problem from the neighbors. They may even blame us for the drinking.

It is no wonder we end up hating ourselves, our parents, life, and everything in it! We may have trouble with schoolwork, be afraid of people, lack self-confidence, fear the future, or suffer from "nervous" disorders. Some of us have even run away from home or gotten into trouble with the law. However, there is hope. With the help of Alateen, we can learn to lessen the damaging effects of alcoholism on ourselves and become happy, emotionally healthy people.

To Sum Up

A person who has an uncontrollable desire to drink is an alcoholic and has the disease of alcoholism. The alcoholic uses liquor to escape from reality and responsibility.

Although he feels guilty, he cannot make himself stop drinking. This is true even when he sees it destroy all that makes life worthwhile and bring suffering to those dearest to him.

He is emotionally dependent on alcohol and truly believes he can't live without it. He is also physically addicted and has withdrawal symptoms when he tries to stop.

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He tries to escape from his remorse by more and more drinking. This occurs until the pain he suffers *as a result of* the drinking is greater than the pain he's trying to avoid *by* drinking. Only then will he be ready to stop. The desire to stop drinking must come from within. No one can force an alcoholic to stop drinking.

Because the alcoholic is sick, he hurts himself and others. Due to our close association with him, we too develop problems. The best way to help the compulsive drinker and ourselves is to build our own strength, correct our own attitudes, be kind, and learn how to detach from the problem.

Alateen can show us the way.