

# **Alcohol and Drug Abuse: Identifying the Problem and Finding Solutions**

*by Greg Henderson, MSSW, LCSW*

How many more tragedies need to occur? Each of us somehow or in some way has been adversely affected by the sobering consequences of alcohol related problems. The facts and statistics speak for themselves. One in every three suicide involves alcohol. Seventy-five percent of men and fifty percent of women involved in sexual assaults had been drinking prior to the assault. In the U.S., 70 people are killed daily in drunk driving accidents; that is, roughly one person killed every 22 minutes. Drinking and driving is the number one killer of Americans between the age of 17 and 24.

So why is alcohol the number one drug of choice for teenagers and adults? Because alcohol sales are big business. Television ads tell us that beer is part of sports. Mountain streams are the backdrop for "refreshing" beer commercials. Wine is the key to sophisticated entertaining. The most powerful medium in the world brings wine and beer into our living room and makes us comfortable with them. Along the way, society got the impression that beer is just a "thirst quencher" and wine is "light" and we forget about the alcohol. All too often, people forget the true nature of what they're drinking. They get behind the wheel of a car thinking they've only had a "couple of beers" or "just a little wine". What most people don't know is that a typical 12 ounce can of beer is just as strong as a 5 ounce glass of wine or cocktail with 1.5 ounces of 80 proof distilled spirits.

## ***Be Aware of Advertising***

Parents – when you see these myths of advertising, take the opportunity to teach your children the true facts.

- The models on the beer commercials are always young, thin and beautiful. But alcohol has plenty of calories and little nutritional value. Drinking it will not make you look any better.
- Advertisements feature celebrities and sports figures. But drinking will not make you famous or athletic.
- Alcohol advertisers are not trying to be more responsible by telling you not to drink and drive. But drunk driving is not the only way alcohol can affect your life.
- Advertisers hope you won't stop and think when you see their ads. Don't be conned. Learn the facts and teach them to your children and students.

## ***How does Alcohol Affect you?***

The reason that alcohol can cause such extensive damage to the body is because it goes everywhere. There is no body cell resistant to alcohol.

**Your Appearance** – According to researchers, more than one or two drinks a week promotes aging. Alcohol is considered a food with non-nutritional calories that quickly add up. Alcohol abuse causes acne, makes eyes glassy and gives your skin a puffy, broken vein look.

**Your Brain** - Alcohol is a depressant that slows down brain activity. While one or two drinks makes most people feel relaxed, more alcohol may cause feelings of anxiety, depression and often aggression. Alcohol use lowers inhibition, distorts judgment, impairs coordination and perception, and causes memory blackouts.

**Your Gastrointestinal System** – Alcohol irritates your stomach. Alcohol abuse can cause heartburn and eventually ulcers. Alcohol use is linked to cancer of the mouth, esophagus, stomach and intestines. The liver, due to its role in breaking down alcohol, suffers the most damage.

**Your Reproductive System** – Alcohol use in men and women causes increased sexual desire but decreases performance. Alcohol is toxic to unborn children causing permanent tissue and organ damage.

**Other** - Alcohol depresses the immune system, making it easier to get sick. It also disrupts your sleeping patterns. Alcohol has been linked to an increased risk of breast cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, constipation and stroke.

## **Signs**

Some signs that may indicate a drinking problem in a loved one include:

- **Changes in drinking patterns.** The person drinks more, or more often, or drinks in the morning.
- **Changes in appearance.** The person frequently or usually smells of alcohol, has slurred speech, blood shot eyes or unkempt appearances.
- **Changes in personality.** The person suffers memory loss, sleep problems, mood swings, irritability, distrust, or lack of interest in activities earlier enjoyed.
- **Health problems.** The person suffers frequent hangovers, chronic digestive problems, fatigue or shaky hands.

## **Helping Loved Ones**

Helping a person who drinks too much takes knowledge, compassion and patience. Some actions are helpful and others are not.

### **DO:**

- Try to remain calm, unemotional and factually honest about how the person's drinking abuse hurts you and others.
- Discuss the problem with someone you trust- a friend, clergy person, social worker, or someone who has experienced alcohol abuse or alcoholism either personally or as a family member.

- Try to maintain a healthy, normal atmosphere in the home and try to include the alcoholic or problem drinker in family life.
- Encourage new interests and participate in leisure activities that the problem drinker enjoys and encourage the person to see old friends in non-drinking situations.
- Be patient and live one day at a time. Setbacks and relapses are to be expected. Try to accept them with calm understanding and don't become discouraged.

***DON'T:***

- Punish, threaten, bribe, preach or try to be a martyr. Avoid emotional appeals that may only increase the problem drinker's feelings of guilt and compulsion to drink.
- Cover up or make excuses for an alcoholic or shield a person from the consequences of alcohol abuse.
- Take over the responsibilities of an abuser of alcohol
- Hide or dump bottles of alcohol, or shelter a problem drinker from situations where alcohol is present. Argue with a person who is intoxicated.
- Drink with an alcohol abuser.
- Accept guilt for the behavior of a problem drinker.

Be understanding and patient, but don't accept any responsibility or guilt for the behavior of another person. You are responsible only for your own behavior. The decision whether to reduce drinking to moderate levels or abstain entirely from alcohol is best made after consulting with a physician or other behavioral health professional.