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You Don't Have To Drink Everyday to be Alcoholic

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

I hear it every day. People seeking help for a variety of emotional, mental health, or relationship issues often overlook the roles that alcohol is playing in their current difficulties. They often have some pre-conceived notion that you have to drink every day, drink throughout the day, or consume vast quantities of alcohol, to have a drinking problem.

Many of the people that discover that they are in fact, alcoholic, or that they do in fact, have an alcohol use disorder, describe themselves as a social drinker, a periodic drinker, or maybe even a binge drinker. Drinking is causing problems in their lives, but defense mechanisms allow them to explain those problems away and not see the impact of the drinking.

Defense mechanisms are not the same as lies. Defense mechanisms operate without your awareness. They distort reality enough to provide emotional/psychological comfort in face the engaging behavior that is hurting you. Defense mechanisms, especially outright denial, assist people with drinking problems to not recognize the significant roles that alcohol plays in their problems. People think, "I can't be alcoholic; I don't drink everyday." A lot of alcoholics don't drink every day.

The idea that not drinking on a daily basis is proof that your drinking is still under control, can be about denial. One of the most common events that I see with people at the transition stage of finding recovery, is the struggle to reconcile what they believed about alcoholism and what they are observing in their own lives. They may have minimized the extent that they drink -- "I only drink on weekends." "I only drink about three times a month." They may minimize the amount they drink. "I only drink one or two beers." And they may rationalize what happens when they drink. "I was distracted by the radio when I backed out into the car behind me leaving the bar." "Although I planned to only have two drinks, my friends just kept buying rounds, and we won't get to see each other for a long time. I didn't mean to be there all night."

The reality is that you have a drinking problem when you cannot accurately predict what will happen once you take that first drink. Just because you can go for weeks or months without drinking, does not mean you are not alcoholic. If once you take that first drink, you may not be able to stop at one or two, you probably have a problem. Remember too, that defenses come in to play during the drinking. As you are telling yourself that you will only have one or two, then for the third you have an

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internal debate about why it is ok to take the next drink, it feels like you are making a conscious decision about drinking, but you have lost control.

Loss of control is another misconception that serves as a form of denial for someone on the verge of identifying and doing something about his/her drinking problem. People believe that to have lost control over their drinking that it must be total, consistent loss of control. Not true. You don't have to be obviously out of control each time you drink to be out of control. If you plan to drink one or two and don't know for sure that you will end up drinking one or two, you have lost control.

People often rationalize the negative or hurtful behavior that they engage in while drinking with, "I don't do that every time I drink". That does not reduce the pain caused by the behavior. The behavior is problematic, whether you do it once or daily. You can drive drunk once in your lifetime, but if you hit someone and kill them, your life is forever altered.

If you, or someone that loves you, suspects that you have a drinking problem, you probably do.

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When You Need A Little Help...

