

## **Loss of Control Over The Drinking**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Most people start drinking to have a good time or to feel good. At the beginning of alcohol use, there is usually a normal or reasonable level of importance placed on the drinking. Although the drinker likes what alcohol does for him, alcohol does not take center stage in his life. For an alcoholic, relief drinking begins relatively quickly, where alcohol serves psychological or emotional purposes. Alcohol reduces inhibitions, changes feelings, grants a sense of camaraderie with others and assists him to fit in.

As the alcoholic begins to apply alcohol as “problem solver” to more areas of his life, he not only drinks more, he comes to rely on alcohol as “problem solver”. Increased use and increased tolerance happens. “Tolerance” is where the alcoholic needs more alcohol to achieve the same results. As alcohol comes to take on more and more importance in the alcoholic’s life, changes are taking place, not just in the person’s living skills repertoire, but in the brain as well.

An essential component in a definition or a diagnosis of alcoholism is the loss of control. Loss of control is identifiable by a professional early on. Eventually, loss of control is identifiable by significant people in the alcoholic’s life. One of the reasons that family members do not catch on more quickly is that they usually believe that there must be a complete loss of control every time the alcoholic drinks.

Instead, when family members observe that sometimes the alcoholic will come home after two beers at the bar, and sometimes they will close down the bar at 2:00 a.m. after promising that they will be home after two beers. Family members take the observation of the first event as evidence that the alcohol still has control and when they close down the bar at 2:00 rather than coming home, that they are deliberately breaking their promise, being inconsiderate, or acting out anger.

The fact that the alcoholic can sometimes drink only two, or go for six months without drinking, just feeds the denial that there is a problem. These “pieces of evidence” of continuing control distorts the overall picture of what is happening in the alcoholic’s life. Many people believe that to be alcoholism, loss of control must be present consistently. In reality, alcoholics in early alcoholism may obviously “lose control” infrequently.

What is loss of control? Loss of control can be described as “After the first drink, the alcoholic cannot reliably predict how many drinks he will end up having, what he will do when drinking, or what will happen.” Loss of control could also involve the inability to keep the drinking stopped once someone decides to quit drinking. Alcoholism brings with it negative consequences of the drinking. These negative consequences keep occurring, creating crises with each new event. The continued use despite negative consequences create a snowball effect where the continuing consequences cluster together to create even bigger crises.

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