

**Denial Enables Addiction to Persist Despite Obvious
Negative Consequences of Drinking/Using
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

"I am not alcoholic!" "I do not have a drinking problem!" "I can quit any time I want". This is not the only form of denial that alcoholics and addicts have. If it were only that easy! Despite the alcoholic's best attempts to regain control, they cannot effectively control the compulsion to drink and cannot guarantee that they will not experience negative consequences of the drinking. Family members and others feel compelled to intervene in their behalf.

Many alcoholics and addicts come to the helping profession as a result of some level of coercion. The judge says, "Go to treatment or go to jail". The spouse says, "Go to counseling or I'm getting a divorce". The adult kids say, "Go to treatment or I'm not going to let you be around my kids any more". The boss says, "Go to treatment or you are fired". These are all examples of coercion as intervention.

To most addicts at this point, these threats or "bottom lines" seem completely unjustified. The addict usually feels that others are trying to take control over him or her- which, of course, they are. What the addict doesn't realize is that they are out of control.

Family members often ask me, "How can the addict not know that they are out of control?" The simple answer is "denial". The addict does not realize that they are out of control because of denial. This denunciation of reality is one of the main symptoms of addiction, and much maligned by non-addiction professionals and addicts in denial of their own addiction.

"Denial" is a term that is used to generally conceptualize defense mechanisms used by alcoholics and addicts that allow them to continue to drink or use other drugs. "Denial" is also specifically used to denote the defense that tells the alcoholic/addict that there is no problem or that the drinking is not the problem. Rejection of the truth about their condition allows them to continue the drinking in the face of negative consequences from the drinking, and allows for re-establishment of some level of emotional comfort in the process. This rejection of personal insight defends the alcoholic against emotional distress by allowing him or her to distort reality to themselves in such a way, that they cannot see that it is the chemical use that is causing problems in their lives.

They may use outright denial such as "I don't have a drinking problem", or they may use a variety of others, including rationalization, intellectualization, justification, or blaming. Denial must operate outside of awareness or it will not work. These defenses allow the addicted person to identify other people or issues as the source of problems in their lives and to continue to pursue the solution of choice - drugs or alcohol.

It is often said that alcoholics operate in delusion. They often harbor the hope that the treatment professional or team will tell them that they were right all along, that it is their family that is in error, that the family is being unreasonable with trying to get them

to quit drinking or using drugs and that they can learn to drink or use drugs without the negative consequences. People often come to treatment with the agenda of learning how to drink or use drugs socially. They often initially resist the notion that abstinence is the only way to recover. Or they may harbor the idea that they cannot quit drinking--that it is not possible, or that their life would be totally miserable without alcohol (or other drugs).

When enough of the "delusion" has lifted they are able to admit that their consumption of alcohol or other drugs is causing enough of a problem for them to need to get some level of help. These cognitive distortions do not disappear. At the beginning of recovery, people may think that they can just "put the plug in the jug" and be perfectly fine. They may believe that it is the job, the family, the stress, the time of year (or any manner of other things) that is "causing" them to drink. They would, of course, believe that when that "thing" is taken care of, they will not drink any more and that everything will be just fine.

They may believe that if you want to quit drinking and have made a decision to do so, that is all that is needed. The whole idea of learning about addiction, learning abstinence skills, joining a support group, talking about feelings, issues, and changing other behaviors that supports their drinking may seem ridiculous to them.

Alcoholics and addicts often operate under the delusion that they can regain control over the alcoholism with some bare minimum of effort. A common example is when newly recovering alcoholics or addicts attempt to stop using by avoiding the people they used to drink or use with, and the places that they frequented. This is a useful tool, but insufficient for continuing abstinence.

Early recovery skills must be learned that empowers the alcoholic or addict to fight cravings and to maintain abstinence each day. These are the most rudimentary skills for recovery and without them, there is no recovery. However, these skills, in and of themselves, are insufficient for sustained abstinence over time. It is also important to know that "recovery" is so much more than abstinence. Recovery is active and brings with it lifestyle, relationship, attitude, behavioral, emotional, and spiritual changes. Alcoholics and addicts cannot recover passively. Most people need help with building recovery skills.

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