

The “Cutting Back on Drinking” Resolution
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

If your New Year’s resolution this year is to cut down on your drinking or drug using, and if it was your resolution last year, chances are very good, that your problem is serious enough to seek professional help. People want to believe that they a “little” drinking or drug problem, instead of acknowledging that they are addicted. Sometimes when people do realize that they have a real addiction, they still believe that they are exempt from needing professional help to conquer it. They believe that avoiding the friends that they partied with, or not going to the bars, or changing forms of alcohol or other drugs, will allow them to regain control over their use.

Loss of control is the core characteristic of addiction. Yet, the defense mechanisms that all people are skillful at deploying, tells the addicted person, that they “really” have not lost control. “Denial” as we generally refer to those defenses, tells the addict that “the problem” is anything but the chemical. Common “denial” techniques that are beliefs, excuses, or alibis, that allow the alcoholic/addict to continue to drink/use are listed here:

“I don’t drink as much as Henry. He’s a real drunk!”

“I don’t drink until 5:00 p.m.”

“I don’t drink everyday.”

“I only drink beer.

“I have never been arrested for DUI/DWI.”

“I don’t get sloppy, fall down drunk.”

“I only smoke pot.”

“I don’t use illegal drugs. The doctors prescribe medication that I need.”

“I am drinking because my wife/husband is trying to control me. I would quit drinking if s/he just left me alone.”

“I am self-medicating because of pain/depression/anxiety/loneliness/insomnia.”

“I never shot anything up.”

This is a short list. The list is really inexhaustible. People can be very creative in denying to themselves that their drinking/using is “the problem” rather than “the solution.” These are the things that people tell themselves to retain or regain some emotional comfort while continuing to drink or use. It is painful to know that you are destroying your life with certain behaviors and to feel unable to stop doing it.

How do you know if you have addiction rather than “substance abuse”? When you are using an illegal substance, it is at least substance abuse. When you are using a drug in a way that it was not meant to be used, in quantity, frequency, form, or in inappropriate contexts, with subsequent inappropriate behavior, and negative consequences, then it is at least substance abuse. Many people, because of denial, identify their problem as substance abuse, when in fact, it is addiction.

Characteristics of addiction involve a change in priorities, which life gets more and more narrowly focused on drinking/using and recovering from it, where other things previously

important to the person, are abandoned or neglected in favor of drinking/using. Family members may know that there is a problem and make statements like “Your drinking/partying is more important than me or the kids.” Other major symptoms involve the fact the drinking/using persists despite recurrent negative consequences (i.e., family arguments, DUI, bar fights, falls, accidents, etc.), unsuccessful attempts to quit or “cut back”. Loss of control involves the use of more of the chemical, or use over a longer period of time, or more frequently than intended. Loss of control does not have to be each time a person uses. Addicted people often try little experiments to prove to themselves that they are not addicted. Common examples are deliberately drinking two beers in a sitting (instead of a case), or quitting drinking/using for a week or month, or changing from alcohol to xanax, valium, or ativan. When you have been trying these little experiments over time and you keep returning to using, you probably have addiction.

So, if your New Year’s resolution this year is to “cut back” on your drinking/using, do yourself a favor, and seek professional assistance to determine what level of problem that you are dealing with. It does not matter whether you are dealing with substance abuse or addiction. Let a professional guide your self-improvement efforts this year. The probability that you will be successful, this time, was improve dramatically.

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