

Ten Common Myths About Alcohol and Drug Addiction

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

People who don't know much about alcohol and other drug addiction, often buy into common myths and stereotypes about addiction and addicts. It is important to replace mistaken assumptions and judgments about addiction, so that you can approach those afflicted with the illness, with compassion and understanding. Many people mistakenly believe that if you call addiction a "disease" that somehow it exempts the alcoholic or addict from responsibility of their behavior. Below are some myths in italics. The truth is in regular print.

1. Addicts are losers and skid-row bums. Addiction is no respecter of persons. People from all walks of life can become alcoholics/addicts. Most alcoholics/addicts are employed.
2. Addiction is nothing but a voluntary behavior and a habit. The initial behavior of drinking or taking the drug is voluntary, but once addiction occurs, the drinking/using behavior is not voluntary. A habit is an established pattern of behavior that develops over time with repeated behavior. It is not compulsive.
3. Addicts can stop on their own if they just want to. A desire to quit using is necessary but usually insufficient.
4. Alcoholism is a self-inflicted moral problem. No one chooses to be alcoholic or otherwise addicted. Addiction is brain disease, not a moral dilemma.
5. Alcoholics can have control over their drinking if they use willpower. Once a drinker becomes alcoholic they are merely chasing the illusion of control, because they are out of control. Willpower implies that the addict still has consistent control.
6. Alcoholism is just a symptom of a mental health disorder. Although some alcoholics have co-occurring mental health problems, alcoholism is a primary disease, not a symptom of something else. Many people hopefully believe that if you find the "something else" and fix it, that the drinking will disappear. This is not the case.
7. You can't be an alcoholic if you only drink beer, or on the weekends. Alcoholism is not defined by what you drink or when you drink it. It is defined by what happens when you drink.
8. You can't be alcoholic if you don't drink daily and don't feel like you have to have a drink. Again, frequency of drinking does not define alcoholism. Nor does frequency of cravings or the compulsion.
9. You can't be alcoholic if you can stop drinking. Most alcoholics are able to exhibit some temporary indicators of control over their drinking from time to time. This fact is one of the biggest sticking points in an alcoholic's denial about being alcoholic. Loss of control is inconsistent loss of control until late progression
10. The "disease concept" of alcoholism has been discredited. Nothing could be further from the truth. The last ten years has seen a groundswell of sophisticated research in genetics and brain chemistry research that not only affirms the "disease concept" but expands it tremendously.