

Why Would An Alcoholic Drink Despite All the Problems Associated With It? **By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Family members are often astounded that alcoholics continue to drink when it is obvious to them that the drinking is causing major problems not only to the alcoholic but to the family and other significant people in the alcoholic's life. Family members ask the question, "why does an alcoholic drink", with the implication that if you can discover the "reason" that an alcoholic persists in drinking in the midst of the devastation caused by that drinking, then you can somehow fix whatever the reason is, and the addiction will be cured. Family members quickly point out that the alcoholic has low self-esteem, ADD, depression, is underemployed, married too young, etc. Family members think that the drinking is part of some other "disorder" and that if you fix the problem, the drinking will stop. It doesn't work that way. The drinking has to stop. Then you identify the roles the drink played and how to replace those roles with healthy living alternatives.

The "reason" alcoholics drink, changes over time. In the beginning the alcoholic usually drinks for the same reason any drinker does - to be a part of a group, to have fun, to feel good, to experience euphoria. Alcohol lowers inhibitions, so that the drinker feels more comfortable socially and more self-confident. As the drinker discovers that alcohol helps to temporarily relieve some discomfort or temporarily solve some problem, alcohol (or any other mood altering drug) is applied to a wider range of circumstances or situations. A common example would be the reduction of the anxiety associated with social situations. The chemical would take on the function of "problem solver". Because it works it is applied across a broader spectrum of situations and is used more and more often.

Tolerance can develop as the frequency and amount increases over time. Likewise, amount increases as tolerance increases. Tolerance means that increasing amounts of alcohol are necessary to achieve the same results. Tolerance is a symptom of addiction. Loss of control occurs with addiction. Loss of control means that once a person takes a drink, they cannot predict with any certainty, how much they will drink, or what will happen when they do. It is now generally accepted that chemical dependency is a brain disease, with research pointing out that the brain changes as a result of prolonged use, that the brain becomes qualitatively different in addiction. The changes in the brain are responsible for the cognitive, emotional distortions of the addict, including the compulsion to use despite the negative consequences. Alcohol and other drug (AOD) use is self-reinforcing neurochemically. Use becomes a conditioned response from the positive reinforcements of the desired effects, including avoiding the unpleasant effects of withdrawal. Environmental and genetic factors are involved in the risk for AOD dependence. High tolerance for AOD from the beginning of use is one indicator of increased vulnerability to addiction]

Loss of control and negative consequences coincide. Examples of negative consequences could be anything from arguments with spouse, DUIs, compulsive spending, financial problems, calling in sick, irresponsible behavior, loss of job, to death. Now, when the alcoholic drinks s/he is drinking to escape the pain of those consequences.

Once the alcoholic becomes addicted, the progression of the illness seems to take on a life of its own. The course of addiction seems to be a series of crises, with the crises getting closer together and more extreme as the addiction progresses. There is an old proverb that describes the progression of the illness this way, "A man takes a drink, the drink takes the drink, then the drink takes the man". It is a self-reinforcing circular pattern of powerless attempts to regain control over the continuing drinking and a life that keeps getting more and more unmanageable.

So why would the alcoholic just keep drinking in the midst of all that powerlessness and unmanageability? Compulsivity and denial. Alcoholism involves compulsive drinking. Compulsive means that you feel compelled to engage in a behavior, regardless of whether it is reasonable or rational. Denial makes it more emotionally comfortable to engage in compulsive behavior while telling yourself that it is not compulsive, that you are not out of control, and that other issues are "the problem". Denial is a symptom of alcoholism. The alcoholic sees the alcohol as the solution instead of the problem. Although family members often believe that the alcoholic's denial is lying, it is not the same thing. Denial is a form of self-delusion that allows the alcoholic to continue the drinking without having to experience the pain of the reality of the damage that it is creating in his/her life.

Some of the most common forms of denial used by alcoholics are blaming, minimizing, justifying, projection, anger, diversion, rationalizing. Denial does not end with early recovery. Some denial persists for a long time into recovery. It is not possible to eliminate all denial in one swift action. Layers of denial are peeled away over time as the alcoholic examines his/her life, and gains insight into the addiction, his/her behavior and the damage caused.

The short answer of to "Why does an alcoholic drink" is, "An alcoholic drinks in the beginning because it is fun, then because the drinking is self-perpetuated by compulsiveness and denial. Ultimately, the alcoholic continues to drink because they are alcoholic."

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