

Reference document for the individual

Alcohol addiction



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Introduction

Generally, alcohol consumption evokes a variety of emotions from happiness to sadness, stress and so on. It is estimated that 75% of the population drinks alcohol, of which 10% experience addiction and distress.

Someone who deals with alcohol addiction will show more or less apparent signs of distress. In order to overcome such an addiction, they need a lot of motivation and a strong will to regain control over their life, which is a huge effort when compared to the devastating effects these problems can bring.

Very often, since work is also affected by this problem, the individual suffering from alcoholism will need to seek help from his or her employer.

Definition

Alcohol is considered to be a depressant. First because of its main ingredient being ethanol, which has several effects on the brain's neural activity, such as increasing the release of dopamine in the brain – also known as the happy hormone – and stimulating endorphin production – a natural morphine produced by the brain – creating its relaxing effect.

There are three very different types of drinking behaviors that must be defined, starting from normal drinking to addiction and heavy drinking.



Recreational drinking

Generally, recreational drinking doesn't involve health risks and bears no consequences to yourself or others.

Heavy drinking

According to the *DSM-IV-TR* (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 4th revision) heavy drinking involves “a maladaptive pattern of drinking, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by at least one of the following occurring within a 12-month period:

- Recurrent use of alcohol resulting in a failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home (e.g., repeated absences or poor work performance related to alcohol use; alcohol-related absences, suspensions, or expulsions from school; neglect of children or household).
- Recurrent alcohol use in situations in which it is physically hazardous (e.g., driving an automobile or operating a machine when impaired by alcohol use).
- Recurrent alcohol-related legal problems (e.g., arrests for alcohol-related disorderly conduct).
- Continued alcohol use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or intensified by the effects of alcohol (e.g., arguments with spouse about consequences of intoxication).”

Heavy drinking is therefore considered to be a serious health problem that can have major consequences in both personal and professional life.

Addictive drinking

Again, according to the definition of the *DSM-IV-TR*, alcohol addiction means “a maladaptive pattern of drinking, leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by three or more of the following occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:

- Need for markedly increased amounts of alcohol to achieve intoxication or desired effect; or markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of alcohol.
- The characteristic withdrawal syndrome for alcohol; or drinking (or using a closely related substance) to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- Drinking in larger amounts or over a longer period than intended.

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- Persistent desire or one or more unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control drinking.
 - A great deal of time spent in activities necessary to obtain, to use, or to recover from the effects of drinking.
 - Important social, occupational, or recreational activities given up or reduced because of drinking.
 - Continued drinking despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to be caused or exacerbated by drinking.”

In this case, the person suffering from alcohol addiction may encounter problems at work because there is contamination of observable symptoms across all spheres of life (personal, family, professional and emotional). The collateral damage will therefore become obvious and very stressful for the person attempting to somehow keep it all secret.

Signs and symptoms

Several physical, psychological and behavioral indicators point to problem drinking. These indicators are signs that a person may need qualified psychological help and support from those around him or her.

Physical signs

Physically, an individual suffering from a drinking problem will show the following signs:

- Red eyes
- Perspiration
- Trembling
- Impaired coordination
- Alcohol breath
- Slurred speech
- Diarrhea

- Vomiting
- Etc.

Psychological signs

Psychologically, certain signs or symptoms are also representative of this type of problem:

- Irritable or aggressive behavior
- Impaired concentration
- Memory problems
- Mood swings
- Isolation
- Etc.

Behavioral signs

Alcohol issues may also be detected through behavioral signs such as:

- Frequently borrowing money from colleagues
- Lying
- Invoking odd excuses
- Having inappropriate reactions
- Frequent last minute absences, most often after pay days or an authorized leave
- Repeatedly late
- Leaving early, often without telling colleagues
- Irregular quality of work
- Errors of judgement
- Etc.

Behavior at work and quality of work are directly affected by a drinking problem. It is therefore important to meet with a colleague and/or his or her manager in order to address the issue quickly for multiple reasons such as:

- Intoxication caused by excessive drinking may alter:
 - Judgment
 - Vigilance
 - Perception
 - Motor coordination
 - Emotional state (abnormal behavior)
- Excessive drinking effects like hangover and fatigue can directly affect a person's productivity and even have an impact on the safety of a colleague.
- In the long run, heavy drinking can result in chronic drinking (or addiction) causing severe health issues.

As with mental illnesses, alcohol addiction is still a delicate subject for people who tend to feel uncomfortable and even powerless when dealing with such an issue. However, it is important to understand that omitting to take action, when in presence of objective signs and symptoms, can lead to devastating consequences for both the person affected as well as his or her colleagues and the entire organization. Thus there is a shared responsibility within the organization for the support to be provided.

Talking about it

Even if a person is not ready to talk about it, admitting to themselves that they have a drinking problem is an important first step in the larger process of reflecting on their relationship with alcohol. There are some signs that can help them determine whether alcohol is playing too big a role in their life.

For example, maybe their daily thoughts are consumed with drinking; it is affecting their productivity at work, morale, relationships, quality of life or sleep; or they have tried and failed to cut back or quit.

Thinking about their alcohol use can help an individual identify why they want to drink less. There are many different reasons why someone might want to cut back (for their physical health, their mental health, better sleep, etc.). Thinking about how they use alcohol can also help them parse out what they need to do to make a change—and to prepare for withdrawal, which may lead to a feeling of emptiness and/or changes in their habits, lifestyle or social circle.

Talking to a professional

Quitting drinking on one's own is possible, but it can be difficult, especially if the person experiences physical withdrawal symptoms. Furthermore, uncontrolled drinking may be a sign or result of other problems, meaning that a more comprehensive approach to treatment is often necessary for the person to get better.

There are many organizations and professionals that can help someone through this process, including family physicians, psychologists, support groups and treatment centres. Anonymous hotlines such as Alcoholics Anonymous can also be a good first step if the person is not ready to talk openly about the issue.

A person who wants to stop drinking completely should first talk to a professional, who will craft a personalized treatment plan and monitor their progress. If necessary, it may be decided that checking into a treatment centre, where a multidisciplinary team of professionals can help the patient address the issue from a variety of angles (physical, social, psychological, etc.), is the best course of action.

Talking to friends and family

Alcohol has been normalized as a great social lubricant, while addiction carries a stigma. For that reason, it's easy to understand why someone who wants to change their relationship with alcohol might worry what others will think.

However, this fear should not keep the person from talking to their friends and family about their drinking. The recovery process will be much easier if they are surrounded by people they can lean on for encouragement and support, rather than try to make the many changes involved alone. If there are people in their circle who do not care about their well being, the person might decide to keep their distance, at least for a little while.

The person's loved ones may also seek support so they know how to help and respond as the person tries to drink less. There are many support groups for friends and families of people with alcohol use disorders.

Talking to a support group

It can be difficult for someone struggling with alcohol to talk to friends or family about what they are going through, because they may fear they will be judged or not understood. A peer support group is a place where they can talk openly with people who have been in similar situations and will listen to them without passing judgment.

Talking to an employer

Alcohol use disorders and other addictions are recognized as disabilities under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This means an employee does not need to be concerned about losing their job if they disclose their addiction to their employer, as it cannot be cited as grounds for dismissal.

An employer and/or union may be able to provide workplace accommodations. For example, they may give the employee access to an employee assistance program or appointments with a health care provider, make it possible for them to seek treatment (with or without financial assistance), keep them on as an employee while they take an unpaid leave of absence for their treatment, and provide support as they return to work.

Comprehensive treatment that takes into account every facet of the individual's life is the best way to ensure a successful recovery.

Treatments and available resources

A key success factor to the effective treatment of alcohol addiction is to coordinate stakeholders, specialized care facilities, doctors, employees and even insurers who cover the treatments.

In some cases, a simple consultation – with or without treatment – will produce interesting results and the withdrawal will be to cease drinking or to taper off alcohol consumption.

Specialized addiction help can be found through the assistance program or other community resources such as:

- Drugs: help and referral (in Quebec): www.drogue-aidereference.qc.ca
- Addiction Prevention Centre (in Quebec): www.cqld.ca
- Éduc'alcool (in Quebec): www.educalcool.qc.ca
- Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aa.org
- Drug and Alcohol Helpline (in Ontario): www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca
- Etc.

Conclusion

People struggling with alcohol addiction don't typically reach out for help. They often lose self-esteem and refuse to talk about their condition. In some cases, only peer-pressure from family, friends or colleagues raises their awareness, opening their eyes to the impact of their alcohol abuse and also to how valuable they are to people around them.

If you decide to raise the subject, the person might feel shame or be surprised when being confronted with the different observations, which can lead to a negative reaction and isolation. It is therefore important to keep in mind that caring and empathy are as important as the person's willingness to find a solution.

The following resources can also be helpful to manage an alcohol addiction issue:

- Take advantage of Health *InSight* Support Services
- Turn to your company's EAP
- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency