

A LINE ON LIFE

11/1/89

Roots of Alcoholism *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Recently one of my readers asked me to write an article on what causes alcoholism. Why do people drink alcohol? Why do some of them become alcoholics?

It is extremely important for young people to gain **peer acceptance** and **adult status**. These two qualities combine to promote teenage drinking. Copying the smoking and drinking habits of significant adults makes it seem to them that they are taking on adults roles. These habits are easily gained badges of adulthood.

Drinking alcohol is also seen as a way to **rebel against adults**, when youngsters feel thwarted by them. This is especially true for children who are not allowed to drink *any* alcohol. With these youngsters, the needs for acceptance, control and rebellion are more likely to lead to abuse of alcohol than with children who have been allowed to use alcohol under relatively controlled conditions.

Advertising and the media have a major influence on the drinking patterns of Americans of all ages. Drinking is often shown as a way to gain greater health, sexier lives, rugged individualism and social sophistication. It is promoted as a casual, yet indispensable, part of social life – recreation, work, business and other social interactions. For the alcohol industry, mass advertisement is a tax-deductible business expense. The industry's budget for advertising is many times greater than all the public and private funds spent on alcoholism-prevention campaigns.

Most adults drink for recreation and enjoyment. Small amounts of alcohol cause a nice, relaxed feeling. Social drinking helps people to feel more comfortable and less inhibited in social gatherings. A few drinks make it easier to get to know others and enjoy ourselves.

Although *small* amounts of alcohol can enhance a situation, problems begin to occur when alcohol gets to *be* the situation. Potential alcoholics increase their dependence on alcohol to constantly make situations easier and more enjoyable. Instead of having a few drinks at the party, they will tend to have a few drinks just to feel like going to the party.

About ten years ago, men outnumbered women among those who were moderate to heavy drinkers, while women outnumbered men among those who abstained or were light drinkers. The differences were greater at the two extremes – 25% of the men and 40% of the women were abstainers, while 14% of the men and only 4% of the women were heavy drinkers. These figures were thought to be mainly due to cultural factors. More women abstained or drank less, because it was considered less appropriate behavior for women.

Changing gender roles have increased the number of women with alcohol problems. Entering the traditionally male work world, women are encouraged by advertising to consume more alcohol. More business and social conditions expose them to heavy drinking. The increased stress in their new roles might also encourage alcoholism. Women now make up about half of all alcoholics. Similar role changes with smoking have caused lung cancer to replace breast cancer as the number one cancer killer among women. (*"You've come a long way, baby."*)

Of course, alcohol is very closely related to **sexual activity**. In small doses, it reduces inhibitions and can increase sexual arousal. However, as Shakespeare said, *"Drink...provokes desire, but it takes away the performance."* Research supports this. As a depressant, more alcohol causes less physical arousal – regardless of what the person thinks. A 1981 study demonstrated that alcohol seemed to enhance a woman's feeling of *"womanliness."* At the same time, the alcohol hindered her ability to gain satisfying interactions with men. This study also showed that heavy-drinking women were more sexually active than women who drank lightly or not at all. Essentially, these women were having sex more but enjoying it less.

With any type of drug, people in certain situations or with specific personalities are *predisposed* toward addiction. The potential abuser might be unaware of his/her vulnerability. Potential alcoholics usually suffer from psychological tensions, which – if not stopped – produce a downward cycle of helplessness, depression, increased tension and further loss of self-esteem. When any drug is used, the painful feelings are reduced quickly – but only temporarily. Since the person does not deal with the original problem, it is still there when the alcohol effects wear off. To reduce the pain again, drinking is resumed. Even if the original problem might have vanished, the drinking habit is likely to be used as the *"solution"* for any new tensions. In terms of reward and punishment, the rewards of drinking are immediate, while the punishing aspects do not appear until hours, weeks or months later.

Generally speaking, the personality traits of a potential alcoholic include the following:

1. Difficulty in handling frustration, anxiety and depression,
2. An urge for immediate gratification of desires.
3. Difficulty in relating to others.
4. Low self-esteem.
5. Impulsiveness, risk taking and little regard for one's own health.
6. Resistance to authority.

Do these traits seem familiar?

* Adapted from Richard Schlaadt and Peter Shannon's *Drugs of Choice: Current Perspectives on Drug Use*, Prentice-Hall, 1986, pages 21-21, 148-151.