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August 2011

Alcoholism

My name is Bill and I am an alcoholic. I have tried to blame everyone and everything on my drinking. My wife and three children have left, my home is gone and I'm barely hanging onto my job. I've lost a lot of respect for myself. I want to stop drinking, but can't. What can I do?

Alcoholism is a chronic, often progressive disease in which a person craves alcohol and drinks despite repeated alcohol related problems.

Becoming addicted to alcohol is a gradual process that happens as alcohol changes the brain. As the brain chemistry changes, a person will crave alcohol to make them feel good again. There is also a physical dependence that can develop with the abuse of alcohol meaning that a person experiences withdrawal symptoms when not drinking and may need to drink a greater amount of alcohol to get the same effect. This is known as developing a tolerance.

People who use too much alcohol, or abuse alcohol, may have many of the same signs and symptoms as people who develop a more serious problem known as alcohol dependence. If a person abuses alcohol but has not yet become dependent on it, they may not feel as much of a compulsion to drink. A person abusing alcohol may not have physical withdrawal symptoms when they don't drink. But alcohol abuse can still cause serious problems. As with alcohol dependence, a person may not be able to quit drinking without help.

Common signs and symptoms of alcohol abuse and dependence include:

- Being unable to limit the amount of alcohol you drink
- Feeling a strong need or craving to drink
- Developing tolerance to alcohol so that you need increasing amounts to feel its effects
- Having legal problems or problems with relationships, employment or finances due to drinking
- Drinking alone or in secret
- Experiencing physical withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating and shaking when you don't drink
- Not remembering conversations or commitments, sometimes referred to as "blacking out"
- Making a ritual of drinking at certain times and becoming annoyed when this ritual is disturbed or questioned
- Losing interest in activities and hobbies that used to bring you pleasure
- Experiencing irritability when your usual drinking time nears, especially if alcohol isn't available
- Keeping alcohol in unlikely places at home, at work or in your car



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Alcoholism (cont'd)

Recovery begins with recognizing that there is a problem. Help to stop drinking can be received on either an inpatient or outpatient basis. If there is a serious problem with dependency, detoxification may be needed. The process of “detox,” as it is commonly called, reduces the physical symptoms of withdrawal in a controlled, supervised setting, sometimes using medication to relieve symptoms. On an outpatient basis, a person in treatment will be encouraged to participate in counseling both in a group setting and individually with a licensed addiction counselor and community peer groups.

For many alcoholics, drinking has become a lifestyle. Making lifestyle changes is never easy, and it is quite possible that there will be relapses along the way.

Fortunately, the millions of Americans who are in recovery serve as the most compelling evidence that there is hope for people struggling with addiction. Individuals in recovery not only stop using substances, they re-establish friendships and family ties, become productive and responsible citizens, and very often help other addicted people begin to walk the same path.

In 2010, 3,269 adults were admitted into publicly funded alcohol and drug treatment programs in Sedgwick County. Their primary drug of choice was alcohol, followed by marijuana. Five hundred sixty one adolescents, age 18 and younger, were also admitted into publicly funded treatment programs in Sedgwick County. The primary drug of choice for this group was marijuana followed by alcohol.

September is National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month. Recovery month promotes the message that recovery in all its forms is possible. Recovery month spreads the positive message that behavioral health is essential to overall health, that prevention works, treatment is effective, and people can and do recover.

If you would like to talk to a professional confidentially about addiction treatment, help is available by calling 316-660-7540. COMCARE is the licensed Community Mental Health and Certified Substance Use Center in Wichita and Sedgwick County serving children, adolescents and adults.