Recognizing Symptoms of Alcohol Abuse

Consider the following characteristics to assess your – or a friend or loved one’s – use of alcohol. If you recognize yourself, or an important person in your life, in any of these descriptions, consider talking to a trained counselor. Counseling often can help individuals process decisions and change behaviors that are self-defeating.

Compulsive alcohol use is when an individual continues to drink despite repeated negative consequences. It signifies loss of choice or control. This often entails a person’s inability to stop drinking once started. Compulsive control loss is evident in a person who plans to drink to intoxication on a given occasion. Or, in someone who quietly drinks after dinner until s/he falls asleep many nights. A person who plans his/her life around drinking activities most days has relinquished a great deal of control even if s/he asserts it is a lifestyle choice. Driving under the influence, having friends withdraw from the person’s company due to his/her alcohol use, or being unable to complete academic or job responsibilities are indications that the individual is not in control of his/her alcohol use.

Developing “tolerance” means needing increasing amounts of alcohol before one feels intoxicated. The person who boasts of the ability to drink others “under the table” may be physiologically dependent on alcohol. This places gradually increasing stress on body organs to process the alcohol toxins. Over time, the toxins can permanently damage organ function. If you – or someone you are close to – needs an increasing number of drinks to relax or feel “buzzed”, tolerance is slowly and insidiously developing.

“Blackouts” signify problematic alcohol use. It involves being active but having no memory of what one does or says, i.e. amnesia, because of the amount of toxic substance in the body. Blackouts can lead to many interpersonal difficulties: the alcoholic may make promises to others, or engage in sexual, physical or emotional abuse and have no memory of the events. On the other hand, the intoxicated person may become a victim of abuse when blacked out. In either of these situations, the victim, whether intoxicated or sober, frequently struggles with his/her understanding of reality as the alcohol user later denies hurtful behaviors because s/he does not remember.

Excessive or frequent alcohol use destroys personal and professional relationships. The alcoholic loses the capacity to engage in deep and reciprocal love relationships or friendships as s/he becomes increasingly self-involved and inattentive to the nuances that enrich life. S/he loses the capacity to attend to details or responsibilities on the job, or to perform in a consistent, expected, and reliable manner. Few people would disagree that an individual is an alcoholic who consistently is argumentative or violent when drinking, or who cannot maintain a job or engage family relationships because of frequent intoxication. Yet the mother, father, or sibling who quietly drinks him or herself to sleep each evening is also unavailable to partners, children, friends or siblings. This latter type of alcoholism is frequently tolerated or overlooked precisely because it is a quiet withdrawal from life and relationships. However, the impact of psychological inaccessibility on others – who gradually learn not to need or want from the alcoholic – is devastating to potentially healthy relationships. It underscores the alcoholic’s difficulty with emotional intimacy.

Alcoholics often develop particularly undermining characteristics. Problematic, projective anger is indicated when the alcohol user becomes irate with other people’s dislike of alcohol or avoidance of situations involving alcohol, and accuses those people of being controlling. Many alcoholics are moody, exhibiting emotional shifts that can turn on a dime. Some are fearful and anxious about getting involved in life; this can be manifested in either quiet
Guilt about failures characterizes dependence upon alcohol. Irresponsibility coupled with both obvious and subtle manipulative traits gradually develops. Communication skills gradually deteriorate. Impatience and impulsiveness grow as the alcoholic loses the capacity for planfulness. Although any of these traits can be characteristic of individuals who do not use alcohol excessively, psychological and/or physical dependence upon alcohol promotes such personality and behavioral changes. Once an individual stops drinking and develops insight into his or her needs and vulnerabilities, these undermining traits and behaviors often become significantly less prominent.