

Alcohol Dependence

Alcohol dependence can be a very serious problem with very serious consequences but it is often a sensitive issue that many people find difficult to talk about. This could be because of the stigma that goes along with alcohol dependence or simply having to admit that one is having a problem. No matter the excuse, if you or someone you know has an alcohol dependence problem, help is available.

There are four major signs that indicate an alcohol dependence problem:

- Tolerance – needing to drink more alcohol to get the same “drunk” feeling.
- Loss of control – being unable to control the amount of alcohol one uses.
- Physical dependence – withdrawal symptoms such as shakes, nausea, and anxiety.
- Craving – an obsession or compulsion to drink.

If someone is experiencing one or more of these symptoms, he/she may have an alcohol dependency problem.

Having an alcohol dependence problem doesn't just mean drinking a lot; there are many feelings that often go along with the problem. One may have feelings of guilt about his/her drinking. A dependent person may become annoyed with his/her friends and/or family when questioned or criticized about drinking. The person may feel so bad about drinking that he/she falls into a cycle of self-loathing and uses the alcohol to reduce emotional distress. There are physical side effects for an alcohol dependent person as well. Drinking heavily and often may cause cirrhosis of the liver, alcohol poisoning, damage to the intestinal tract, and damage to the heart, which may increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

If your partner, friend, or other family member has a problem with alcohol dependence, you understand just how damaging an alcohol dependent person's drinking is to you, the person, and any other family involved. Often the problem affects the family just as much as it affects the drinker. First, you must understand that you cannot change the person's mind. If the person is going to get better, he/she must really want to get better. Screaming, pleading, and threatening the person will not help. This can be very hard to deal with and upsetting for you and others around the person with an alcohol problem, but you cannot change someone else's mind. Second, if you are going to deal with your own feelings about your partner's or friend's dependence, you should get as much education about the topic as possible. Resources are available through many organizations such as Al-Anon, AA, and the NCADD, online and in meetings. There are also resources available for teens of alcohol dependent parents. These resources offer counseling to family members and friends of alcohol dependent people that can help loved ones to explore their true emotions about the problem and give some perspective about what the alcohol dependent person is going through. Third, try to encourage the person as much as possible when he/she makes attempts to stop drinking. Finally, never bail the alcohol dependent person out when there are negative consequences to his/her intoxication. If the problems are fixed by someone else, he/she will never learn that drinking is hurting the person and others.

Dealing with an alcohol dependence problem is never easy, whether it is yourself or a friend or family member. It is a serious problem, though, and must be treated as such. Getting help for the person with alcohol dependence and all the people affected by the problem are equally important. Help is always available through local AA chapters, Al-Anon, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, and your EAP.