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## **ALCOHOL-RELATED DISORDERS: Psychotherapy's Role in Effective Treatment**

For many people, drinking alcohol is nothing more than a pleasant way to relax. People with alcohol-related disorders drink to excess, endangering both themselves and those around them. This fact explains how psychotherapy can help people recover from potentially life-threatening disorders.

**When does drinking become a problem?** For most adults, moderate alcohol use – no more than two drinks a day for men and one for women and older people, is relatively harmless. A “drink” consists of 1.5 ounces of spirits, 5 ounces of wine, or 12 ounces of beer, which contain equal amounts of alcohol. Moderate use, however, lies at one end of a continuum that moves through alcohol abuse to alcohol dependence:

- ❖ Alcohol abuse is a drinking pattern that results in adverse consequences that are both significant and recurrent. Alcohol abusers may fail to fulfill major school, work, or family obligations. They may have drinking-related legal problems, such as drunk driving arrests. They may have relationship problems related to their drinking.
- ❖ People with alcoholism – technically known as alcohol dependence – have become compulsive in their alcohol use. Although they can control their drinking at times, they are often unable to stop once they start. As their tolerance increases, they may need more and more alcohol, they may need more and more alcohol to achieve the same “high”, or they may become physically dependent on alcohol, suffering withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, sweating, restlessness, irritability, tremors, and even hallucinations and convulsions when they stop after a period of heavy drinking. It doesn't matter what kind of alcohol someone drinks or even how much: alcohol dependent people simply lack reliable control over their drinking.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), one in 13 American adults is an alcohol abuser or alcoholic at any given time. A 1997 government survey revealed that drinking problems are also common among younger Americans – despite the fact that most states outlaw drinking under age 21. Almost five million youths aged 12 to 20 engage in binge drinking, for example, with females downing at least four drinks on a single occasion, and males at least five.

**What causes alcohol-related disorders?** Problem drinking has multiple causes, with genetic, physiological, psychological and social factors, all playing a role. For some alcohol abusers, psychological traits such as impulsiveness, low self-esteem, and a need for approval prompt inappropriate drinking. Others drink as a way of coping with emotional pain. Still others use alcohol to “medicate” psychological disorders. Once people begin drinking excessively, the problem can perpetuate itself. Heavy drinking can cause physiological changes that make more drinking the only way to avoid discomfort.

Genetic factors render some people especially vulnerable to alcohol dependence. (Contrary to myth, being able to “hold your liquor” means you're probably more at risk – not less.) Yet a family history of alcoholism doesn't mean that children of alcoholics will automatically grow up to become alcoholics themselves. Environmental factors such as peer pressure and the easy availability of alcohol can also play key roles. Although alcohol-related disorders can strike anyone, poverty and physical or sexual abuse also increase the odds.

**How do alcohol-related disorders affect people?** While small amounts of alcohol may have some beneficial physical effects, heavy drinking can cause serious health problems and even death. In fact, 100,000 Americans die from alcohol-related causes each year. Short-term effects include distorted perceptions, memory loss, hangovers, and black-outs. Many problems aren't apparent until they become serious, however. Over the long term, heavy drinking can cause impotence, stomach ailments, cardiovascular problems, cancer, central nervous system damage, serious memory loss, and liver cirrhosis. It also increases the chances of dying from automobile accidents, homicide, and suicide. Although men are much more likely than women to develop alcoholism, women's health suffers more even at lower levels of consumption.

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Although moderate drinking may result in relaxation and euphoria, heavy drinking also has a very negative impact on mental health. In fact, alcohol abuse and alcoholism can worsen existing conditions, such as depression or schizophrenia, or induce new problems, such as serious memory loss, depression, or anxiety.

People with alcohol-related disorders don't just hurt themselves, however. According to NIAAA, more than half of Americans have at least one close relative with a drinking problem. The results can be devastating. Spouses are more likely to face domestic violence. Children are more likely to develop psychological problems, suffer physical and sexual abuse and neglect and – because of the combination of genetic vulnerability and social learning – grow up to be alcoholics. Women who drink during pregnancy run a serious risk of damaging their fetuses. It's not just relatives who suffer. Heavy drinkers often kill strangers through accidents or homicide.

**When should someone seek help?** Because some in our society view alcohol-related disorders as a sign of moral weakness, individuals often hide their drinking or deny they have a problem. How can you tell if you or someone you know is in trouble? Signs of a possible problem include having friends or relatives express concern, being annoyed when people criticize your drinking, feeling guilty about your drinking and thinking that you should cut down, but finding yourself unable to do so. Needing a morning drink to steady your nerves or relieve a hangover is another warning sign.

Alcoholics usually can't stop drinking through willpower alone. Most need outside help. They may need medically supervised detoxification to avoid potentially life-threatening withdrawal symptoms such as seizures, for instance. Depending on the problem's severity, treatment can take place during office visits, hospital stays, or residential treatment programs. Once people are stabilized, they need help resolving psychological issues that may be associated with problem drinking.

**How can a psychologist help?** Psychologists play a vital role in the successful treatment of alcohol-related disorders, serving as integral members of the multidisciplinary team that may be required to provide care. Be sure to choose a psychologist who is experienced in working with alcohol-related disorders. To improve the chances of recovery, seek help early.

Using individual or group psychotherapy, psychologists can help people address psychological issues involved in their drinking. They can help people boost their motivation, identify situations that trigger drinking, and learn new coping methods. They can also provide referrals to self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, a crucial part of any recovery program. The treatment process doesn't end once drinking does, however. To help prevent relapses, psychologists typically keep working with people as they begin new lives. Even after formal treatment ends, many people seek additional support through continued involvement in self-help groups.

Treatment can't occur in a vacuum. Because families influence both drinking and recovery, marital and family therapy are also key. Psychologists can help families repair relationships and navigate the complex transitions that occur as recovery begins. They can help families understand alcoholism and learn how to support family members to self-help groups such as Al-Anon and Alateen.

**Does treatment really work?** Yes. Evidence strongly suggests that many people – especially those with jobs, families, and other forms of social stability – recover after their first attempt. Not everyone is so fortunate. Some cycle between relapse and recovery several times before achieving long-term sobriety. What's important is for the person to stop drinking again and get additional support.

While alcoholism is treatable, so far no cure has been found. That means people remain susceptible to relapses even after they've been sober for a long time. Reducing alcohol consumption doesn't work. Most experts agree that the goal should be complete avoidance of alcohol.

Alcohol-related disorders can severely impair people's functioning and health, but the prospects for long-term recovery are good for people who seek help from appropriate sources. Qualified psychologists with experience in this area can help those who suffer from alcohol-related disorders stop drinking and start regaining control of their lives.

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