Alcoholism - A Loss of Control

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Acknowledgements</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Definitions of Alcoholism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Characteristics of the Alcoholic Personality</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Denial</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Dependency</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Depression</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Anxiety</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Effects of the Alcoholic Personality</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Conclusion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Bibliography</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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INTRODUCTION

The problems of alcoholism are rising in our society at a very fast rate. These problems are due to dependency on alcohol and affect not only one's health, but also interpersonal relationships, family relations, the career and overall lifestyle of the alcoholic. Many Americans drink socially but millions of Americans suffer daily from specific relationships with alcoholic beverages. This suffering, however, is not confined to the individual with the alcohol problem. "It engulfs those in his family circle and social environment (1:viii)." Discussing the problem in order to get help is also hard for both the alcoholic and his loved ones because society tends to view alcoholism as a taboo subject. It does not seem appropriate to discuss another person's drinking problem. Therefore many people suffer from the effects of alcoholism needlessly. It is estimated that for every person with an alcohol problem, four family members are directly affected (21:25). The alcoholic himself has reduced his life expectancy by 10 to 12 years (21:27). This contributes to the fact that alcoholism "is the third leading cause of death in the United States (21:164)."

This paper views alcoholism as a progressive disease that is based on some psychological disorder unique to every alcoholic. The focus of the research, however, is to identify and describe four basic psychological dimensions that comprise the alcoholic personality.
Definitions of Alcoholism

What is it about certain people that causes them to experience problems with alcohol use? In his book *Beyond Alcoholism*, Dan Beauchamp suggests that "problem users lack some attribute that the nonproblem drinking majority possesses. This attribute is in most cases termed an ability, capacity or control; most commonly the alcoholic has lost control over alcohol (11:19)." Determining the limits of controlling one's drinking is the common idea expressed in the many definitions of alcoholism. Such a definition has been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous which states that "an alcoholic is a person who cannot predict with accuracy what will happen when he takes a drink (21:47)." Other definitions include the health risks involved in continual or excessive alcohol consumption:

Alcoholism: this category is for patients whose alcohol intake is great enough to damage their physical health or their personal or social functioning, or when it becomes a prerequisite to normal functioning (21:46).

Perhaps the simplest definition best describes the core of this illness. "Alcoholism is a disease in which the person's use of alcohol continues despite problems it causes in any area of life (21:50)." All of these definitions are based on the sole characteristic common to every alcoholic - loss of control.

In order to understand what alcoholism involves, one must make the distinction between alcohol abuse, dependency
and addiction. All three conditions include impairment in social or occupational functioning. Alcohol abuse does not necessarily characterize an alcoholic. Many nonproblem drinkers occasionally drink to excess, thus abusing alcohol.

The presence of tolerance, however, does indicate alcohol dependency (21:49). Alcohol tolerance develops as the drinker's system continually requires more alcohol than previously consumed to achieve the same physical and mental effect on the body. In this case the drinker will consume more alcohol not because he wants to, but because his system physically requires more. At this point control is lost.

Evidence of alcohol addiction includes "the appearance of withdrawal symptoms" and the inability of the drinker to go one day without drinking (21:48). One exception to drinking everyday is the variety of alcoholism known as periodic drinking. In this instance, "an individual may go for weeks or months without drinking and then has a very severe drinking episode (25:10)." Periodic drinkers also suffer withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms may include short-term amnesia or memory blackouts, severe headaches, nausea, dizziness, shaking, sweating, confusion and talking about visions and voices that do not exist (1:77). The more chronic drinker's body will also undergo "circulatory changes with congestion and hemorrhages resulting from stagnation from slowing down of the blood vessel current (12:8)."
An alcoholic can be further classified as one of two types of drinkers. The more common habitual excessive drinkers "become intoxicated more than 12 times a year or are recognizably under the influence of alcohol more than once a week, even though not intoxicated (21:48)." The second type of drinker, the episodic excessive drinker, only drinks as often as 4 times a year to excess (21:48). Even though an episodic excessive drinker drinks much less than the habitual excessive drinker, both are alcoholics because both have lost control of their ability to consume alcohol.
Characteristics of the Alcoholic Personality

A considerable number of interacting factors must combine to explain why any particular person drinks. The problem in detecting and treating alcoholism is that no two people will have the same combination of characteristics. Dan Beauchamp adds that "alcoholics share none of the normal or healthy motives of the vast majority of social drinkers (11:40)." The social drinker drinks for pleasure, relaxation, recreation, even taste. The alcoholic, however, is dependent on alcohol so his entire attitude is reversed. Instead of drinking to complement some activity or situation, the alcoholic drinks so that he may endure the same activity or situation. Due to this dependency on alcohol, "the alcoholic personality is the result of alcoholism, not the cause (23:88)."

According to Dr. Abram Bennet, alcoholism should be considered as a symptom to some underlying personality disorder (12:7). If this is true, then the developing alcoholic personality may have as its basis this same underlying personality disorder. The question that arises now is, "What is that underlying disorder?" A possible answer is the combination of emotional, mental and physical factors found in loneliness, fear, escape and poor emotional control (16:6). Loneliness may result from having few close friends, moving away from familiar surroundings or separation from loved ones. The shy alcoholic may also gain a false sense of self-confidence from the effects of alcohol on his body and mind.
Problems at work and with interpersonal relationships may be too great in the eyes of the alcoholic to confront without the help of alcohol. It is the belief of this author that four specific characteristics may greatly contribute to the fear, loneliness and various other problems of the alcoholic.

Denial

The first and foremost of these characteristics is denial. "All alcoholics deny their problem (14:47)." They do so because they do not perceive their drinking as a problem, much less an illness. Dr. Abraham Twerski believes that

Denial is generally unconscious; that is, the person is unaware that he is doing it. Denial is one of the defense mechanisms referred to in psychology as one of a person's unconscious mechanisms. It is present in many emotional disorders, but hardly anywhere as obviously as in the alcoholic (25:30).

By denying his problem, the alcoholic builds a defensive barrier around his emotions so that society's attitudes and the "cold, hard truth" cannot hurt him. From this theory the term hidden alcoholic has developed. This term means that "the alcoholic denies his problem and conceals himself because society stigmatizes his condition (11:49, 21:189)." Eventually, as if to prove society wrong, the drinker is "trapped in the ultimate lie: he says, 'I am not an alcoholic,' then keeps on drinking to prove he can handle liquor (17:29)." This attitude results in a
vicious circle with accusations and pressure from society resulting in more drinking by the alcoholic which again earns more disapproval from society. Until denial is in some way overcome, a sincere effort at recovery is impossible (25:32).

**Dependency**

According to Dr. Howard T. Blane, author of The Personality of the Alcoholic, "dependency, and difficulties with it, has been noted by many observers to play a crucial role in the personality of the alcoholic (14:14)." Alcoholism exists when any normal function becomes dependent on alcohol, regardless of the quantity consumed. If the dependency factor were missing, alcoholism would not exist. Therefore, dependence on alcohol not only results in alcoholism but becomes the center of the alcoholic personality as well.

Dependency on alcohol may be mental, physical, or a combination of both. Dependency may be defined in the following way:

The interaction between a living organism and a drug, characterized by behavioral and other responses that always include a compulsion to take the drug on a continuous or periodic basis in order to experience its psychic effects, and sometimes to avoid the discomfort of its absence (1:38).

Most alcoholics were social drinkers before they became alcoholics. The gradual inclination toward dependency results from a wide variety of situations. Pressure on the job may lead the drinker to believe that he must have
a drink before tackling the problem at hand or speaking with the boss. Also, as responsibilities increase, whether by marriage, a new child, or even expanding his business, the alcoholic may respond with anxiety and tension. In this situation, "a surrender of dependency can occur, the man turning increasingly to alcohol and relinquishing adult responsibilities (14:16)." Should the alcoholic come to terms with his illness, he is once again tempted by society to return to dependency. The alcoholic's decision to seek help may be "influenced by society's negative attitude toward open avowals of dependency in men and by society's tendency to equate independence and masculinity (14:33)." Alcoholism is yet to be fully accepted as a disease, and until it is accepted, society may continue to condemn the alcoholic, thus the more vulnerable drinker may return to the security of alcohol instead of seeking help.

How, then, can one recognize the beginning of dependence? Dependence can first be detected in the drinker's attitude toward alcohol. If he cannot, or thinks he cannot, go somewhere, meet someone or do something without having a drink first, he is becoming dependent on alcohol. If this attitude has already developed, the drinking pattern must be observed to confirm dependency. If, with time, the drinker takes 3 drinks when he previously took one in order to endure the same situation, his body is becoming chemically dependent. Consuming more alcohol to achieve the same effect as before with less alcohol is
the characteristic of addiction known as tolerance.

Every person's central nervous system when continually subjected to a depressant chemical, will eventually accommodate and adapt itself in such a manner that the same amount of chemical will no longer have the same effect (25:11).

However, the alcoholic, his family and friends may all deny each of these characteristics. In that case, all persons who interact with the alcoholic, as well as the alcoholic himself, may finally recognize dependency by the inconsistent behavior of the alcoholic. According to authors Jean Kinney and Gwen Leaton, the active alcoholic cannot be depended on. "Sometimes doing what is expected, and doing it beautifully, the next time he may fail completely offering later the flimsiest excuse. To add insult to injury, he or she gets furious at you for being disappointed, or annoyed, for not understanding (21:146)."

The attitude, tolerance level and inconsistent behavior may all exist with still no recognition of an alcohol problem by the alcoholic. Once again, the alcoholic must first overcome denial of a potential problem before admitting his own symptoms of this disease. It is crucial for the alcoholic to realize that admitting dependence on alcohol will not result in humiliation by family and friends. Those aware of his illness will be very supportive of the alcoholic who seeks help. He will not be less of a man for admitting his problem; he will be more of one.
Depression

Alcoholism is a form of depression. The alcoholic experiences two types of depression - that of his physical nervous system and that of his mental state. "Depression on the nervous system is the principal action of alcohol. The first mental processes affected are those dealing with self-restraint. In general, the central nervous system effects are proportional to the blood alcohol level (12:9)." This reaction occurs in all persons who drink. Alcohol is a drug and, like other drugs, it alters normal physical and mental functioning. The reference to the blood alcohol level may be misleading, however. In severe cases of alcoholism, the alcoholic's tolerance may have reached such a point that only after consuming large quantities of alcohol do his physical and mental capabilities begin to decrease.

Unlike the depression of the central nervous system, the depressed mental state of the alcoholic cannot be so easily defined. The depression experienced by the alcoholic may be better understood if compared to the characteristics of a depressed person. According to Dr. Howard T. Blane,

A seriously depressed person feels worthless and unattuned to living: he suffers from loss of appetite and is unable to sleep. Preoccupied with thoughts of self-destruction, obsessed by sinfulness to the point that he responds little to those around him (14:39).

Of course, not all alcoholics suffer from an extreme case of depression such as this. It is true, however, that
many alcoholic bouts often begin when "the alcoholic senses the imminent upsurge of depressed feelings (14: 40)." What, then, causes these feelings which convince the alcoholic to succumb to that first drink? Like the person suffering from depression, the alcoholic is especially susceptible to pressures and demands from his environment. When the pressure intensifies, the depressed person resorts to thoughts of incompetence. He does not believe in himself or his capabilities, therefore, the pressure may begin to affect his daily activities. The alcoholic, however, seeks relief from pressure through alcohol. He has the need for a feeling of power over his environment (21:11-12). By drinking, the alcoholic believes he has overcome the pressure, when in reality that first drink now requires successive drinks. It is with these successive drinks that the alcoholic loses his "power" and control and, like the depressed person, must struggle to prevent his solution to the original pressures and demands from greatly affecting his normal functioning.

Also, the depressed person and the alcoholic often blame themselves for unpleasant situations caused by others. They are unable to express anger toward another so they turn it against themselves, transforming it into depression. Basically, "the depressed person is an angry person (14:39)." The alcoholic punishes himself with guilt feelings and then turns to alcohol to rid himself of this self-inflicted pain. The alcoholic does not realize that he is harming himself mentally and physically by drinking. He only sees
alcohol as an escape route from problems and pressures. Until a problem arises that the alcoholic cannot "cure" with alcohol, he will forever remain an alcoholic.

**Anxiety**

The final common characteristic of the alcoholic personality is anxiety. Anxiety often results if the alcoholic harbors unjustified feelings of inadequacy which convince him that he is also incapable of coping with the many stresses of everyday life. "He may feel so insecure about himself that many rather minor challenges appear to be so overwhelming that he feels compelled to escape them all, and often that escape is into the anesthesia or oblivion of alcohol (25:58)."

These feelings of inadequacy may cause much frustration for the alcoholic. He seems dissatisfied with himself, impatient and demanding of others (21:74, 17:27). The alcoholic "feels very vulnerable to the world. Nursing a drink seems an appropriate way of handling his discomforts. Alcohol is doubly attractive because it works quickly (21:74)."

Unfortunately, this frustration is suppressed by many alcoholics and eventually may be expressed as anger and aggression. According to Dr. Howard T. Blane, "anger is born of frustration - and its unrelenting persistence is due to frustration that is continual (14:35)." The alcoholic may initially express his anger by making demands that his dependent needs be satisfied. His anger may also appear as "criticism of others for what they have not done,
or what they have not given to the alcoholic (14:40-1)."

If the alcoholic feels that his demands are not met, he may become retaliatory, defensive, quick-tempered and vengeful. The result is deeply buried frustration that surfaces as hostility and violence. Open aggression is most likely to occur with those "toward whom the alcoholic feels close and toward whom he frequently turns to gratify dependent needs (14:38)." This situation may cause intense psychological problems for family members and friends of the alcoholic. Many often blame themselves for the anger that has been aroused in the alcoholic. They try to please him and he abuses them even more. In this case the alcoholic, his family and friends must all seek help. It is vitally important that those affected by alcoholism understand that "the alcoholic is powerless over alcohol; it is all-powerful over him (25:39)." The alcoholic doesn't realize what he is saying or doing and those involved must learn to accept his thoughts and actions as consequences of this disease called alcoholism.
Effects of the Alcoholic Personality

The effects of alcoholism are as many and as varied as the characteristics of the disease itself. Most importantly, alcoholism is a progressive disease. Progression means that "even after years of abstinence, if an alcoholic starts drinking again, he is immediately at the mercy of the drug...therefore, eliminating the cause does not eliminate the sickness (17:21)." Alcoholism is not a disease that can be cured with drugs because alcohol is itself a drug. It can only be treated with abstinence resulting from the alcoholic's admittance of his inability to control alcohol (21:183).

Unfortunately, however, only 5 to 10% of all alcoholics fully recover from this illness (18:22). This indicates that the overwhelming majority of alcoholics, their families and friends continually suffer from the consequences of this disease. The alcoholic experiences two very different effects of the alcohol itself. After the first few drinks the alcoholic feels tension slip away to be replaced by tranquility and pleasure. The drug relieves unpleasant mental thoughts and feelings, thus reinforcing the alcoholic's belief that alcohol is good and couldn't possibly be the origin of a disease. After consuming a certain amount of alcohol, however, the alcoholic's frame of mind changes drastically. "Alcohol... can itself produce a very depressing effect on mood and the person becomes prey to all sorts of doubts, miseries, suspicions, and general gloom (1:74)." This pain accentuates
with each drink. The alcoholic often feels depressed and guilty and as a result drinks even more which eventually may result in physical illness in addition to his mental anguish.

The family members of the alcoholic also suffer their own consequences of alcoholism. The hardest concept for those close to an alcoholic to accept is that "the alcoholic has no control over alcohol; those around him have no control over the alcoholic (25:43)." The relatives and friends of the alcoholic must realize that they have in no way caused the alcoholism of their loved one.

Could a family member cause diseases such as cancer and diabetes? If alcoholism is treated as a disease, the answer is equally simple - no. In the case of alcoholism, however, family members could easily reinforce alcoholism without realizing it. Family members often try to shield the alcoholic from excessive pressures and tension-producing situations in hopes that the drinking episodes will subside. Instead, the alcoholic becomes even more unsure of himself when he eventually does have to deal with stressful situations.

Several specific problems may arise in families with young children where one of the parents is alcoholic. The Royal College of Psychiatrists reports that "the disabilities which affect the children of a family in which there is a drinking problem can be devastating. The child may have to endure the perpetual rowing between his parents or be witness to scenes of physical violence (1:61)." A
child will often experience feelings of guilt. He feels that his parent drinks because he has been "bad." The innocent child's simple solution is to try his hardest to be good. If this fails, the child "may spend a lot of time trying by various behaviors to control or change the drinking pattern of their parent, and inevitably failing, often come to feel as though they are 'failures' ahead of time (21:157-8)." For a young child to feel responsible for the alcoholism must indicate the severity of this disease. A child may also experience a fear of abandonment (21:157). He may have too often waited for or been forgotten by his alcoholic parent who promised to pick him up after school, music lessons or the football game. A healthy parent-child relationship must have trust and honesty from both involved. If the child cannot trust his parent, then only his parent's alcoholism can be blamed for the abnormal and unhealthy conditions the child must live in. This situation may worsen if the child begins to feel anger and hatred in response to the actions of his drinking parent. Finally, a child and his accomplishments may have been neglected by the alcoholic parent. If the child doesn't respond with guilt, fear or anger, he may seek outside approval.

They may become obsessive overachievers, craving success at any cost to relationships of any kind...Their expectations of themselves, and consequently of others, often destroy their relationships with those around them much as alcoholism does (21:158).
Children are very sensitive to the feelings of others, especially their parents. When alcoholism has these effects on children, the consequences may deeply affect the child in the formative years as well as in the future as an adult.

Alcoholism is one of the few diseases that seriously affects the person with the disease as well as family members and friends close to the alcoholic. It is also one of the few diseases that can never be completely cured. Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive illness with many varied effects. The drinking may stop and the alcoholic may seek help, but the effects of this disease, like alcoholism itself, will never disappear. The alcoholic can only hope that he as well as those affected by his disease, will be able to cope with the fear, anger, frustration and the many other emotions involved with alcoholism.
Conclusion

Alcoholism is a disease which results when one loses control of his ability to consume alcohol. "The alcoholic cannot consistently choose whether he shall drink or not. There comes an occasion when he is powerless, when he cannot help drinking (11:28)." Alcoholism is often hard to define and distinguish from social drinking by the unknowing individual. There is "certainly no unique alcoholic personality (1:110)," but when examined more closely, alcoholism may be distinguishable by four common characteristics: denial, dependency, depression and anxiety. These characteristics are important factors in the origins of alcoholism as well as in the treatment of the disease. These characteristics combine with those unique to each alcoholic resulting in serious emotional effects on the alcoholic, his family and friends.

Those closely involved with the alcoholic must realize that there is absolutely nothing they can do to change the alcoholic (25:xiii). They can, however, seek help for themselves so that they may learn to cope with their own anger, frustration and pain. Naturally an alcoholic in the family may provoke feelings of anxiety, tension and hostility between family members and the alcoholic. To help themselves and the alcoholic, the family members must accept the fact that "the decision to drink away these or any other uncomfortable feelings is no one else's but the alcoholic's (25:ix)." The alcoholic
himself chooses to drink; he is never forced to drink by others. The root of the disease called alcoholism may be found in the answer to the question, "Why does one choose to drink at all?" Medical experts base the cause of alcoholism on some existing personality disorder. This disorder is in return based on the personality characteristics of the alcoholic. The many definitions of alcoholism and accompanying personality characteristics coupled with the complexity and uniqueness of the disease in each alcoholic results in a very confusing and often misunderstood conception of alcoholism.

The one element common to every alcoholic is the loss of control over alcohol. The only answer to alcoholism common to every alcoholic is admittance and acceptance of alcoholism as a controllable illness.

Within every person there is a nucleus of self-respect and dignity which, no matter how deeply concealed, exists obstinately. There comes a time when a person discovers that he dare not be anything less than that which he can be, and at such a time, the miracle of sobriety can occur (25:xvii).

Only when an alcoholic reaches the point in his life when even alcohol will not solve his problems will he stop drinking. Only when he openly admits and accepts his illness will he be able to seek and accept help.


