

Dear Counselor

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Spouse Finds Problem with Too Much Alcohol

Dear Suzanne: I have always considered myself to be a social drinker, but recently, my husband tells me that he thinks I have a “problem” with alcohol. I do feel that I look forward to a few drinks at the end of the day, but I don’t get “drunk”. How do I know if I have a problem or not? -- Sybil Ann

Dear Sybil Ann: Determining whether or not you might have a problem with alcohol can be rather tricky. And if you don’t habitual daily use can certainly cause one. Anyone who drinks steadily over a long period of time can become addicted. Alcohol problems are quite common in our society these days. It is estimated that one in eight to ten people in the U.S. (or 64 per square mile in Fairfield county) have a problem with alcohol. There are some loosely defined types: problem drinking, alcohol abuse, and alcoholism or alcohol dependency.

Alcoholism is a disease, and a treatable one -- with an 85 percent recovery rate with proper treatment. Untreated, it is progressive and fatal. Generally, if alcohol use interferes with any area of a person’s functioning, it is considered a problem.

Here is a brief list of problems in major areas of functioning:

- Behavior -- excessive anger or irritability, becoming more or less social, embarrassment about behavior while drinking, insomnia, decreased sexual performance, depression or anxiety. Unkept promises, verbal or physical abuse, loss of self-esteem, or the presence of any other addictions such as smoking, gambling, eating, spending, or co-dependency.
- Work -- attendance problems such as lateness or absences on Mondays, deteriorating performance, accidents, arguments with co-workers.
- Physical -- morning tremors, high blood pressure, hepatitis or cirrhosis, ulcers, DTs, nosebleeds, or gastric distress.
- Financial and legal -- DWIs, problems with collection agencies, repossessions, or domestic violence.
- Spiritual -- effects on morality or spirituality.

In your courageous attempt to assess for yourself whether or not you may be getting into a problem with alcohol, here are some of the general symptoms of alcohol dependency: daily use; preoccupation with drinking, hiding supplies; blackouts -- unable to remember behavior or events which occurred while drinking; loss of control -- unable to stop once started, unable to stick to promises to limit intake; binging periodically, I.e., getting “hammered”; sneaking drinks, pre-drinking to warm up for a social occasion; relief drinking to reduce stress or other unpleasant feelings; tolerance changes -- up in early stages, down in later stages; guilt or remorse for behavior while drinking.

Here is a simple test to help you to determine if you are at risk: Have you ever felt that you should cut down? Has a friend or relative expressed concerns about your use? Have you ever felt guilty about your use? Have you ever had to take a drink the next day to steady your nerves? Is there a history of problems with alcohol or drugs in your family?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, it would be wise to see if you could limit your drinking yourself. Just to be on the safe side, get an evaluation by a professional trained in chemical dependency. You could even attend an open AA meeting to see if you relate to the issues discussed. You would find that contrary to the common misconception that alcoholics are skid row bums or morally weak, some of the most intelligent, courageous and creative people in the world are friends of Bill W.

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