

JOSEPH A. PURSCH, M.D.

Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



How You Become an Alcoholic

A common question when I'm on the speaking circuit or in my office is: How does one get alcoholism? The answer is that alcoholism, like other addictions, is a bio-psycho-social disease, i.e., it results from the interaction of biological, psychological and social factors.

The bio factor is a genetic predisposition to alcoholism or other addictions that is carried in the person's enzymes, neurotransmitters, etc. We estimate the significance of this "genetic loading" by counting the number of alcoholics in a person's family tree.

The psycho factor is a person's predisposition for acquiring certain personality characteristics, such as assertive/passive, energetic/phlegmatic, gregarious/withdrawn, fussy/sloppy and so forth. Over time, these personality traits – especially if they are extreme – create internal psychic pressures that are unique to each individual; and can be "self-medicated" with alcohol or other addictive drugs or behaviors, e.g. gambling or sex addiction.

The interplay of these three components, over time, determines the course, severity and outcome of a person's addiction. In the case of alcoholism, for example, if a man is born with heavy genetic loading, has a passive-depressive-shy personality, is raised in a hard-drinking family and spends his career in a hard-drinking military, he will probably become an alcoholic – in the same way that a person who is born with perfect pitch into a musical family and graduates from a conservatory of music will probably become a musician. By contrast, if a person is born with zero biological predisposition for alcoholism and has personality traits that are ideal for the alcohol-proscribing Moslem culture in which he lives, he will probably not become an alcoholic.

How do you recognize alcoholism in somebody you know? You observe what happens when he – let's say it's a man – drinks alcohol. In the early phase of the disease you will see that he enjoys drinking a lot, and his friends say that he is more fun to be with when he drinks – early in the disease. According to his co-dependents, he is also more fun to be with when he drinks.

Not surprisingly, the combination of heavy genetic loading, uncomfortable psychological pressures – which are relieved by drinking – and living in a booze-promoting

social environment will lead to increased drinking.

Predictably, this will cause problems. Time and again, the high blood-alcohol concentration will cause incidents of impaired judgment, impaired behavior and impaired performance. These, in turn, create family/social stress, legal/money problems and negative health/job consequences.

When people around him start to complain about his drinking because it affects him negatively, he will humor them, charm them, bully them and manipulate them with his by now finely honed avoidance skills. But as time goes on, the chronic drinking causes impaired brain function and consequent deterioration of his personal defenses: he forgets things a lot, loses his sense of humor and becomes an irritable psychological bully. In the end, the alcoholic may actually give up his denial and say "Alright, I may be an alcoholic, but there is nothing I can do about it" – and die without ever having gotten into treatment.

The bottom line is that eventually, the confluence of these bio-psycho-social forces produces alcoholism. Since alcoholism is both triggered and fueled by chronic alcohol consumption, the message is clear: If there are heavy drinkers in your genetic tree, and you really like to drink, and the people around you like you better when you drink than when you abstain – it means that you should not drink.

Alcoholics and their co-dependents in denial often say "I wish we had more knowledge about this disease, like we have about other diseases, for example what causes it and how to cure it . . ."

Actually, such questions are just more denial. Compared to other diseases, we know a lot about alcoholism. We know what starts it, what keeps it going and that we can arrest it through abstinence. Can you imagine what a world it would be if people who have cancer, heart disease or diabetes could "arrest" their disease by simply not drinking a certain beverage?

Dr. Pursch's Office
949-499-5631

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