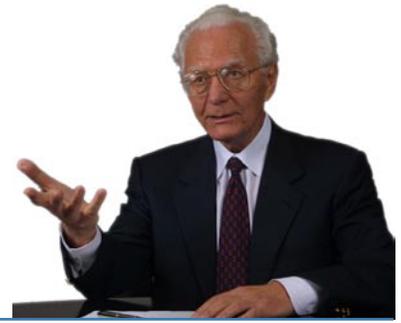


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What's the Cause of Fire Deaths?

Many people die in fires – house, hotel, trailer and apartment fires. Many such deaths are not caused by arson or accident. They are the result from alcohol or other drug abuse.

A word to the wise could save lives. Here is a typical “death by fire” scenario.

It is 3 a.m. at the Sleep-Well-Inn Motel. In Room 200 is Mary, a 45-year-old schoolteacher, sound asleep. She never drinks alcohol or uses other drugs.

In Room 202 is Jane, a 30-year-old career woman in town for a convention. She had one glass of wine with dinner but that was seven hours ago. Her husband, Seymour, asleep next to her is a chronic neurotic. He took two sleeping pills.

In Room 204 is Ray, 35, a salesman. On trips, he likes to pretend that he is a ladies’ man – but he can never get himself to act on it. Ray is also an alcoholic whose motto is “you can’t be in sales and not drink.”

Before retiring for the night, Ray flirted with several women in the hotel bar, but he had to drink five double bourbons to drown the emotional conflict between his sexual urges and his moral standards. At 1 a.m., he staggered to room and passed out on his bed.

In Room 206 is Jack, 49 an executive and a closet alcoholic. He had dinner alone in his room, watched TV and drank a fifth of Scotch. On business trips he drinks more than usual: Strange beds bother his back, and worries about the home office give him insomnia.

At 3 a.m., while smoking a cigarette, Jack passes out in bed. He was feeling no pain, as they saying goes. When the heat of the cigarette burned his fingers, he drowsily put it out on the extra pillow next to his head.

As the smoldering circle on the pillow grew larger, Jack steadily inhaled the smoke – but he smelled

nothing because of his booze-drugged brain. By 3 a.m., when flames from the bedding catch the drapes, Jack is already brain dead from smoke inhalation.

At 3 a.m. teetotaler Mary (Room 200) is awakened by a noise: Two boisterous drunks are singing in the hallway. Because her brain is clear and alert, she immediately smells smoke. She steps into the hallway and asks the drunks if they smell smoke.

They sniff and laugh. No, they can’t smell anything; but they offer to buy her a drink. Obviously, they, too, are feeling no pain, but they’re still able to stand up and sing. When she rebuffs them, they start an argument.

The commotion wakes up Jane, the designer in Room 202. Her brain is alert because her liver has cleared the glass of wine from her blood hours ago. She’s alarmed when she hears talk of fire.

She steps out into the hallway. She and Mary agree: Yes, there is definitely smoke. There must be a fore somewhere. They quickly wake up “sleeping pill” Seymour, who is dopey and puzzled, and help him down the back stairs to the parking lot.

Within minutes people are running down hallways, pounding on doors, yelling “Fire! Fire!” and smashing windows. On the street below, fire crews arrive. Bells and sirens fill with night air.

With all that racket going on, surely everybody must be out of the building by now.

Not so. In Room 204, Ray, salesman/wannabe ladies man, sleeps on, because his bourbon soaked brain hears nothing. Like Jack, the quart a night executive in Room 206. Ray dies in his bed.

The morning news reports the fire as routine. “investigators found no evidence of arson. Two people died of asphyxiation.”

So here's the bottom line. A person's ability to survive a building fire depends on how well he or she can think. Unfortunately, that depends on how much they had to drink, or how loaded on drugs they were before falling asleep.

Advice such as "take your hotel key with you," "crawl on the floor where the smoke less dense," "don't use elevators" (advice that is usually posted on hotel room doors) is useless if your brain is drunk or drugged.

If you're asleep at home - alone - there's additional danger if you are drunk or drugged. Smoke alarms have to be heard to be heeded. Seymour, the sleeping pill neurotic, might not have made it out alive without his clear-headed wife.

So, don't go to bed drunk or loaded. If you can't do that, you may have a problem, like alcoholism or drug dependency. Where there is smoke - there is fire.

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