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Alcoholic Amnesia? A “Morning After” Guessing Game

You are angry because an alcoholic has done you dirt. On the morning after, he/she claims to have no memory of something he/she did the night before. Or worse yet, you yourself are an alcoholic or a problem drinker who has memory lapses, and you wonder what is happening to your brain?

This problem, known as alcoholic blackouts or alcoholic amnesia, is actually a neuro-chemical phenomenon and a sign of alcoholism.

Here is a clinical example: This morning your alcoholic partner can't remember some of the things he said, or did, while drinking last night. To you and others who were with him last night he seemed normal: He was talking, laughing and dancing as he usually does. But he also started an argument with his boss' wife, or he made a pass at your sister – and this morning he says he doesn't remember doing it.

What's the problem?

We don't know exactly how alcoholic blackouts happen. The theory is that alcohol in the brain interferes with memory, i.e. either the process of storing information, or with the ability to later retrieve/recall the stored information. In plain English it's like you are talking into a tape recorder that has new batteries, but either contains no tape or has a broken replay button, or both, and you can't find out which it is.

Alcoholic blackouts raise serious questions not only for alcoholics but also for the people who love them or have to deal with them. For example, (1) do alcoholics really not remember, or are they using these blackouts to avoid responsibility for some of their actions? (2) Can blackouts be used as a legal defense? And finally, (3) what can you do if your alcoholic friend/spouse accuses you of making up lies when you tell them what actually happened last night?

Some people feel that alcoholic blackouts are mostly a lying phenomenon because alcoholics are inclined to not remember things that would be embarrassing or harmful to them. Others point out that blackouts are genuine because sometimes alcoholics can't remember things that they would definitely want to be able to recall. For example, on the morning after, the shaky alcoholic

desperately wants to recall where he stashed a bottle last night, but is unable to remember where it is.

The position of the legal system regarding alcoholic blackouts is clear: An alcoholic blackout is not a legal defense. Statements like “I don't remember doing that” or “I didn't know what I was doing” don't hold up. The Courts feel that you may not “remember” what you did, but it's clear that you knew what you were doing – while you were doing it, and you are help responsible for your actions. (I have known alcoholics who, while in a blackout, made successful business deals, performed surgery or drove rental cars at night in cities where they had never been in before.)

As for what you – the alcoholic and the co-dependent – can do? Here is the bottom line: If you have alcoholic blackouts, cut down on your drinking or stop drinking altogether. If you can't do that on your own, get help. If you continue to drink as you have been, you are playing alcohol roulette: One of these mornings you may be guilty of mayhem or murder – or marriage to somebody you don't even know.

If you are the spouse or partner of somebody who has alcohol-related blackouts, you'll both be fine – if he or she quits drinking. If the drinking continues, you'll both be playing memory roulette because the consequences of the “problem” affect both of you, i.e. one of these mornings, your drinker may be a fool, a criminal or a corpse; or you may be bankrupt, widowed or dead.

The real bottom line is this: The drinker will have to give up the booze – or the partner will have to give up the drinker. You may both need help to figure out who is going to give up what, or whom. Until you do, your life will be full of surprises.

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