

ALCOHOL

There is a problem in our society that few of us want to face. It is the problem of alcoholism. If we speak of it in polite conversation we speak of the drunk as a comic figure, or occasionally we look at the statistics on alcoholism. Then we shake our heads, tisk, tisk a little and go on to ignore what the National Council on Alcoholism calls the most neglected health problem in the United States today.

I don't think that as bereaved parents we CAN ignore the subject. Not only have a large number of our children died through alcohol related deaths, but a good number of us have turned to alcohol to wash away our grief.

Alcohol, because of its easy accessibility and acceptability in our society, may be the first thing we reach for. For those of us who have never drunk much, who don't care for the taste or effect of alcohol, there is little danger that alcohol could become a problem. But for those who have an already established drinking pattern, moderate though it may be, there is a strong possibility that we may seek escape or solace from our grief in the bottle.

In many ways alcohol is worse than prescribed medication. Alcohol requires no prescription and no one is controlling how much we consume. Another common problem is that no one thinks of alcohol as a drug. It is. Its name is Ethanol. It is a central nervous system depressant.

Grief itself has a debilitating effect on our bodies as well as our minds. Grief sends us into a state of depression, then to add the depressant drug ethanol, further complicates the problem.

With a loss of any kind, depression usually occurs. This is referred to as Reactive Depression. The depth of reactive depression is in direct proportion to the depth of the loss. It is normal, but with the death of a child it is usually extreme. If a pattern of drinking has been established before our grief has begun, it is almost certain our drinking will escalate.

Some of the symptoms of depression are sleeplessness, fatigue, nervousness, abdominal symptoms and the inability to concentrate. Most of these symptoms are familiar to the grieving parent. Alcohol increases the intensity of any of these symptoms.

Let us look at what alcohol actually does to us

when we use it to alleviate our grief, how it affects our families themselves are affected.

To fall asleep is difficult for most grieving parents. We reach for alcohol to help us sleep. There is no worse drug than alcohol for the relief of sleeplessness. Granted, enough alcohol may cause us to go to sleep, but as soon as the blood alcohol level is gone we wake up.

Actually, findings indicate that alcohol causes insomnia. With alcohol, as with sleeping pills, we build up a tolerance and more alcohol is needed to produce the same effect. When the alcohol can't get us to sleep we may turn to sleeping pills. Here again the tolerance is soon reached. Many times this leads to a combination of the two. Mixing alcohol and sleeping pills is extremely dangerous. People die from the combination. Not sleeping is one of the worse aspects of grief, but it is only temporary and will ease after a period of time. Addiction to alcohol will not.

In an effort to cope with the terrible reality of our child's death, not only does our brain try to shut out that reality, but our bodies as well. Even with a reasonable amount of rest and sleep we are fatigued. With the ingestion of alcohol, we don't sleep soundly. This adds to our fatigue. Also the effects of too much alcohol which is still in our system even after the blood alcohol level is down, aggravates the fatigue.

The grieving person is intensely sensitive to outside stimuli. The least little irritation sets us off in fits of anger or paroxysms of sobbing. Our nerves are shattered. Again we reach for alcohol to settle them. On the contrary, alcohol does not help our nerves. It may sedate us for a few hours but when the alcohol is gone it leaves us more jittery than before. Eventually our nervous system is in shreds.

The biggest danger in drinking for our nerves is that those of us who drink to calm our nerves are likely to take pills for our nerves also. This can be a lethal combination.

Many times bereaved parents experience physical symptoms. The most common is stomach problems. Alcohol aggravates this. Stress of any kind results in stomach disorders for many people, but add the additional strain put on the stomach by the drug ethanol and there is trouble.

Grief causes a loss of appetite in many people. This, in addition to heavy drinking by the bereaved parent can cause malnutrition. The vitamin deficiency created can itself cause an increase in many of the symptoms of grief.

Almost every bereaved parent experiences the inability to concentrate. Minor decisions

become major ones. Alcohol renders us less able to think both when we are sober or directly under the influence of alcohol. While drinking, our mind is slowed down by the depressant effect of ethanol. When we are sober we are hyperkinetic. We can't sit still. We tremble. Our heart beats fast. Everything is racing, including our minds. With this reaction alone we can't concentrate.

Our feelings of helplessness and hopelessness over the death of our child is an all consuming thing. There are many times it is overwhelming. Our very soul cries out for relief, even if it is for a short time. Alcohol is not the answer. There is no answer. There is no escape. There is no way that the drug ethanol will relieve our grief. Oh, it may for a short period. Sometimes a couple of drinks can help us to relax, but our tolerance for alcohol builds so rapidly that it is necessary to increase the number of drinks to reach that relief period each time. The price we pay for that relief is too great. There is no problem that alcohol will not make worse.

Grief work, along with emotional pain and its physical manifestations, is necessary to the constructive resolution of our grief. Any chemical we use to alter the normal process of this grief work only serves to prolong it or create other destructive problems.

There is a disagreement among professionals as to the cause of alcoholism. It is a learned response? Is it caused by our environment? Is it a physical craving that one is born with? But there is no disagreement with the fact that in almost all cases the person started drinking occasionally, slowly progressed to heavy drinking, and then to alcoholism.

The practical question is, how much alcohol makes the difference between a couple of drinks that make us comfortable for a short time and harmful drinking. There is no exact amount in ounces or frequency. We are all affected by alcohol in different ways. Body structure plays a large role in our capacity. A two hundred pound person can consume much more alcohol before he experiences the same effect that a hundred and twenty-five pound person can. Our individual metabolism is a factor, as is our emotional condition. Also, whether the alcohol is taken in conjunction with pills is important.

The frequency of drinking, whether it is every day or once a month, is not important. Individually we have to decide what effect the amount or frequency has on us. What is important is the role alcohol plays in our life and in our grief. One of the simplest test is to ask

ourselves if we feel a NEED for alcohol, not how much or how often.

Many of us were offered a drink soon after our child died. Society encourages us to drink but it does not tell us that every ounce of alcohol can lead us farther into complications in our grief. Alcohol does not help us through our grief, on the contrary, it causes us to avoid it and to bury the normal emotions that must be expressed, plus it puts us in danger of addiction.

If you are drinking now, or are having a "few drinks" to take the edge off the pain, take a good look at what you are doing and what it is doing to you. Alcoholism begins with the first drink. An occasional drink is not harmful for the average person, but we are not the "average person". We are devastated, deeply hurting bereaved parents. The tranquilizing effect of the occasional drink can lull us into wanting the soothing effect of alcohol more often. Think of alcohol as the real poison that it is for us. Tell yourself that that glass of liquid has the potential power to double the pain of your grief in a surprisingly short time. You can suffer the pain of your child's death for the period facing you now, but ask yourself if you can suffer the pain of distorted grief, PLUS fighting an addiction to alcohol for years in the future.

It is not easy to admit that our drinking is out of control. It is frightening to imagine life without that glass of numbness, but until we face up to the fact that we are trying to escape our grief in alcohol, we will get nowhere in our lives or our grief, but farther down in a pit of misery. Drinking will not make our grief easier. It will make it worse. Problem drinking will not cure itself. Continued drinking will add additional mental, emotional and physical problems to our already consuming grief.

There are those individuals who can stop their drinking without help because they realize the danger before it becomes an addiction. But for those of us who find we are already in this situation where we need to drink or feel that we cannot cope without alcohol, we must get help to stop drinking. Help is available.

First we must be honest with ourselves. Denial that we drink too much is inherent in problem drinking. If you have any doubts about whether your drinking is getting out of hand, talk with a close member of your family or a friend. Ask them to be honest with you. After we admit to ourselves that we have become dependent on alcohol, then we must be honest with our doctor. He may recommend treatment in a hospital or a self-help group such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

If you are a newly bereaved parent be aware that the use of alcohol can be very dangerous for

you. As hopeless as you feel your dependence on alcohol is, there is help. It is never too late. People do not die from grief, painfully but properly worked through. They do die from alcoholism.

It takes courage and strength to admit we have an alcohol problem. It takes faith to believe that we can overcome an addiction, just as it takes faith to believe that we can survive the death of our child. But it can be done.

Your doctor can direct you to the help that is available. You had no control over one tragedy in your life - the death of your child, but you do have control over whether you add another tragedy - alcoholism.

Another important issue involving problem drinking is that for every bereaved parent who drinks to avoid his grief, statistically, four other members of his or her family is affected. We cannot delude ourselves that our drinking is only our problem. Our behavior when we drink affects everyone in our family.

They too are grieving, each in his or her own way, for the child who has died. They too, are hurting, and they do not need the added complication to their grief that a drinking parent can cause. They had no control over the death of the child, or of the drinking of the parent, but they do have control over how they react to him or her, how they are affected and whether they unknowingly contribute to the parent's drinking.

It is important for the family to remember that the grief over the dead child is an excuse for the drinking - not a reason for it. It is simply their way to avoid facing their grief.

Too often the family contributes to the parent's drinking with the excuse that "they hurt so much," not realizing they are, in a real sense, giving the parent permission to drink. They do not realize that they are causing themselves pain as well as the drinking parent.

The family of the drinking parent is affected in many ways. The non-drinking spouse may find herself blamed for everything from the child's death to problems with the marriage. The surviving children may be accused of not caring or of adding burdens to the parent who is drinking. Frequently the family begins to believe this is true. The parent must find fault with others in order to justify his drinking. He must enlarge his excuse to drink. Those around him must be blamed. He soon controls the family.

Family members begin to experience feelings of anger, guilt, resentment, and self-pity. The family screams, cries, yells, begs, pleads, prays, threatens, or practices the silent treatment. It also covers up, protects and shields the drinking

parent from the consequences of his or her drinking. This creates a constant source of strife in the family already torn apart by grief. The family is caught in a circle of destructive behavior. All this is blamed on the death of a beloved child or brother or sister.

A family CAN be destroyed by grief. A family CAN be destroyed by a drinking parent. But put the two together and there is an almost certain guarantee that the family WILL be destroyed by the combination.

The parent will not magically quit drinking when his grief is "over." He can't get "over it" because the drinking parent is not facing his grief. His or her drinking can only get worse.

The family has two options. They can become slaves to the whims of the "poor" parent, thereby creating for themselves additional emotional conflict, or learn to defend themselves against the manipulations of the drinking parent.

To do this it is necessary to seek help outside the family itself. Just as no doctor would treat his own family, the family of the drinking parent cannot treat itself. Help is available through the National Counsel on Alcoholism, or the Alanon Family Groups. Also, some alcoholism treatment centers have special programs for the family of the alcoholic. Any of these numbers can be found in the telephone book.

If a spouse or a parent in your family is drinking, look carefully at the effects it is having on all of you. Don't let him or her make your grief worse.

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