



Alcoholic? Quitting is only the beginning.

People who drink to excess, where their drinking causes distress to others, are frequently caught in a web of denial and minimization. These persons are unable to see or unable to admit that their drinking is adversely affecting their own life and that of others. Typically, this person excuses their drinking by pointing fingers at persons who are worse than them as if that makes their drinking less consequential. They also may excuse their drinking by blaming others for contributing to their need to drink. An apology for their drinking and impact on others is out of the question. That would mean assuming some degree of responsibility.

When the pressure to stop drinking is greater than the desire to drink, or when one finally feels so poorly about their drinking, one may finally cease to consume alcohol. An understanding of the alcoholism however does not motivate their cessation. The motivation tends to be the desire to avoid further criticism or consequences, such as the loss of a relationship or job. Thus these persons may quit the drink, but their thinking about themselves and others goes unchanged. These persons are still apt to project blame onto others, deny their own issues that are contributory to distress and minimize their untoward behaviour. An apology for the impact of their drinking and behaviour on others is still out of the question.

To the spouse or partner of the drinker, their life also continues unchanged. In view of the ongoing blaming, denial and minimization, the spouse or partner may believe they are somehow the source of their mutual distress. That the drinker has ceased drinking may actually make matters worse in this regard as the alcohol cannot no longer be directly blamed for the relationship problems. The spouse or partner may be bamboozled into believing the nonsense of the drinker.

So the drinking ends, but not much else changes.

Alcoholism, while certainly about problematic drinking is also about the thinking and behaviour of the problematic drinker. Unless the associated thinking and behaviour is addressed, relationship problems continue and may in fact worsen. They may worsen because the partner is no longer able to blame the drinking directly and the alcoholic may thus project more blame on the behaviour of the partner rather than on himself or

herself. These drinkers are apt to be controlling of others, directly or indirectly abusive and they are certainly apt to put their needs ahead of others while making everyone else out to be the source of problems.

Treatment for drinkers must include addressing the associated thinking and behaviour. In addition, the partner or spouse is also advised to seek support to understand the dynamics of their relationship such that they can withstand the thinking and behaviour of the drinker, stand up for themselves, hold the drinker accountable and make decisions now in their own interest as opposed to the interest of the drinker. These matters can be addressed in couple or marital counselling as long as the counselor is trained in couple or marital counselling and has knowledge and expertise with alcoholism and addictions.

In addition to couple or marital counselling, are programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon and Alateen. The benefits of these programs are in helping the drinker understand their thinking and behaviour and the impact on others so that they may take responsibility and make changes. The benefit of Al-Anon and Alateen is to help family members also understand the thinking and behaviour they have been subject to and how to manage and cope in view of the thinking and behaviour of the drinker.

So while quitting problem drinking is a first step, without further treatment and support, the problems associated with the thinking and behaviour of the drinker may continue and may worsen.

To make a lasting and positive difference, seek help to address the underlying problems of thinking and behaviour. This is recommended for the drinker and the partner or spouse and other family members.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.