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How Much is Too Much?

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ON THANKSGIVING DAY, 2016 WHILE FAMILIES GATHERED AT THEIR DINING TABLES IN AMERICA TO ENJOY REUNION, LOVE, AND A TRADITIONAL REPAST – A YOUNG GIRL FROM DUMFRIES, VA COLLIDED WITH EIGHT CARS, INFLECTING DEVASTATING INJURIES UPON TWO PEOPLE WHILE IN A VIRTUAL ALCOHOLIC BLACKOUT. FOLLOWING THE SMASH UP, POLICE ARRIVED AND AFTER SHE INITIALLY REFUSED TO EXIT HER MANGLED WRECK, SHE PROCEEDED TO ALLEGEDLY ASSAULT POLICE OFFICERS WHO WERE OTHERWISE OCCUPIED TRYING TO PICK UP THE PIECES OF HER DESTRUCTION. FOR THIS DISCUSSION, “ALCOHOL WAS THE VEHICLE — DEVASTATION TO NOT ONLY OTHERS, BUT TO HERSELF WAS THE CONSEQUENCE.”

So, ask yourself, “How much is too much”? The number of driving while intoxicated incidents exceeded 300 by August of 2016 and “drunk in public” ran a close second at 291 people. While statistically men do outnumber women in these charges, women are becoming the dominate statistic in Loudoun County.

Neighborhood watering holes, bistros and bars cater to a female clientele enticing them with Lemon Martinis at Happy Hour, Monday Mojitos, and 2 for 1 double sized drinks on lady’s night.

It’s no coincidence that advertisers are targeting women – we are fast becoming the majority in a normalization process that ultimately creates an alcohol dependency within half the time of the male counterparts.

White, educated, living in the suburbs, raising children, entertaining for their husbands’ who pursue their careers – whether when working in The White House or working in the basement of their own house – women are surrounding themselves with alcohol at dangerous levels.

THE PROBLEM:

Have you been waking up with a hangover – again? Can you not seem to remember the rest of the time you spent at the after-hours gathering or ladies’ night out? Or how you got home?

What does it mean if “just one” drink turns into “I can’t remember how many.... Your honor”.

THE NUMBERS:

The most recent study of drinking behavior in the United States found that nearly 32 million adults engaged in what is considered “binge drinking” – consuming more than 4 drinks within two hours. 30% of the US population have an alcohol use disorder – that’s one in seven adults – and 60% of women in the US drink. Of those, 5.3 million women experience alcohol use disorder, otherwise known as alcoholism.

More than 99,000 people die from alcohol each year, and more than half (50,000) die from injuries and overdoses associated with high blood alcohol levels. Women who drink to excess, including binge drinking, are at a higher risk of alcohol-related emergency room visits: being involved in a traffic crash, arrested for driving under the influence or while intoxicated, or develop an alcohol use disorder.

But for women, elevated drinking levels can impact the risk of cancer, alter hormones, and affect fertility. A phenomenon known as “telescoping” occurs in women where they will rapidly accelerate from “social drinking” to “problem drinking” in a much shorter time frame than their male counterparts. Telescoping describes the accelerated progression from the beginning of social drinking to the diagnosis of dependence.

When women enter treatment for alcohol dependence, they present with advanced problems related to alcoholism, including medical, behavioral, and mental issues. This is known as “co-occurring disorders”, and creates an additional layer of complexity in the approach to healing. Often the patient and the clinical team are up against a “chicken-or-the-egg” situation trying to untangle the psychological or medical issues from the alcohol dependence. Whether you decide to “moderate” your alcohol consumption or abstain completely when out on the town is dependent on your drinking patterns.

If you find that nursing a beer for an hour isn’t possible, what then? Why tempt yourself? On the other hand, if you find that you can sip a glass of wine for the entire night and not dwell on when the next one is coming, then, moderate.

ASK YOURSELF:

The key to whether you have an issue with drinking can be found in the quiz below. Adapted from the DSM-V also known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Version V (2016) the eleven statements constitute what is the “criteria” for having a problem.

If you answer “yes” to 2 or 3 of the following questions below you might want to consider cutting down. If you answer “yes” to 4 of the questions you may have a moderate alcohol use disorder, while 6 to 7 is considered severe. Courage sometimes is hard, but reaching out for help may change your life or save the life of someone you don’t even know, and will forever regret having harmed.

- Do you consume more alcohol than you originally planned?
- Do you worry about stopping drinking or consistently fail at efforts to control your alcohol consumption?
- Do you spend a large amount of time drinking alcohol, or doing whatever is needed to obtain alcohol?

- Does your use of alcohol result in failure to “fulfill major role obligations” such as at home, work, or school?
- Do you “crave” alcohol (can’t wait until it’s Happy Hour)?
- Do you continue to use alcohol despite health problems caused or worsened by it? (Examples include psychological problems, depressed mood, sleep disturbance, anxiety, or “blackouts”).
- Do you continue the use of alcohol despite its having negative effects in relationships with others? (Examples include drinking even though it leads to fights or despite another people’s objecting to it).
- Do you use alcohol repeatedly in dangerous situations? (Examples include operating heavy machinery, or driving a car).
- Have you given up or reduced activities in your life because of alcohol use?
- Have you built up a tolerance to alcohol? (Tolerance is defined as either “needing to use noticeably larger amounts over time to get the desired effect” or “noticing more of an effect with the same or less of the normal amount”.)
- Do you experience withdrawal symptoms after stopping use? (Withdrawal symptoms typically include, “anxiety, irritability, fatigue, nausea/vomiting, or hand tremor).

THE SOLUTION:

If you find that you are drinking four to five days of the week, having more than you intended, waking up with hangovers, and can’t stop when you start – you might want to talk to a professional. This could be your regular doctor or a therapist who specializes in addiction disorders, or a psychiatrist.

- You can always go to a self-help group (think Alcoholics Anonymous), talk to your pastor, or spiritual advisor. Spiritual solace is a pathway to finding the strength to address what might be an issue in this area.
- Changing our mind-set about drinking is important. We are setting an example for those we love most when we put them in direct danger if we have them in the car after we have been drinking; if we are drinking to excess we are harming their self-esteem, their sense of security and stability. Not being “present” for a child is traumatic and may leave permanent scars.

INTO ACTION!

Above all, if you do think you have a problem – reach out; do not be afraid, and consider help. It could mean the difference between continuing a life of self-imposed torture, or beginning to “Dream your biggest dreams; reach for your highest hopes; and achieve a life beyond anything that you have ever imagined for the person you should love the most – yourself.”

Written by

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