

Facts & Fiction About Alcoholism

by Don Jones, Former Director, Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program

Ten percent of the general population is afflicted with the disease of alcoholism. Its prevalence among lawyers is even greater. Studies indicate that anywhere from 15 to 20 percent of the legal community suffers from alcoholism. And yet, as widespread as this illness is, even more widespread are the misperceptions and misbeliefs about it. As an alcoholism counselor, lawyer, and former director of the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, I have been exposed to many of the myths surrounding alcoholism. See if any of these sound familiar:

FICTION: *I can't be an alcoholic, I don't drink every day.*

FACT: *While many alcoholics do drink every day, this is by no means true of all alcoholics. Many alcoholics do not drink every day, and some can go long periods without a drink. Rather than looking at per diem alcohol consumption, it is more helpful to examine the person's relationship with alcohol. Does the person continue to drink despite negative consequences in his or her life? Are periods of abstinence or controlled drinking punctuated by loss of control over the drinking or by "unpredictable" drinking (e.g., drinking when they said they wouldn't or drinking more than they said they would?) I've heard more than one alcoholic say, "The problem is not that I can't quit. The problem is, I can't stay quit." Many alcoholics can quit for periods of time, sometimes for years. Untreated, however, an alcoholic will either change his or her drug of choice (e.g., from alcohol to Valium) or will return to drinking.*

FICTION: *I can't be an alcoholic, alcoholics are weak-willed and immoral.*

FACT: *Alcoholism is a disease. It has nothing to do with having a weak or strong will or being moral or immoral. Indeed, most of the alcoholics I know are very strong willed people with a high sense of personal values and morals. When in the grips of their addiction, however, their behavior often betrays them, and they engage in activities contrary to everything they hold true and valuable.*

FICTION: *I am _____ (a lawyer; successful; intelligent; a professional; highly respected), so I can't possibly have a problem with alcohol.*

FACT: *Alcoholism is not a respecter of persons, position, intelligence, education or intellectual achievement. The belief that all alcoholics are homeless, losers, alone, and/or unemployed is absolutely false. Many alcoholics, especially lawyers and other professionals, are successful in their careers, extremely bright, well respected, have families, and enjoy a comfortable standard of living. Look behind the curtain, however, and the alcoholic's life inevitably begins to crumble around the edges. Alcoholism is a disease of family secrets and hidden pain.*

FICTION: *Alcoholics drink cheap wine and bad liquor. I only drink beer and an occasional good Scotch, so I am obviously not an alcoholic.*

FACT: *Alcohol is alcohol is alcohol.* Chemically it's all the same. If a person has a problem with alcohol, it doesn't matter if he drinks the finest Scotch or the cheapest Mad Dog, beer, wine, champagne, liquor. One of the most common (and futile) control attempts by alcoholics is to "get off the hard stuff" and switch to drinking only beer or wine. Sometimes this helps for awhile, but inevitably it's a set-up for failure.

MORE FICTION ABOUT ALCOHOLISM:

He never drinks at work -- it must not be a problem.

So what if I drink too much? My drinking isn't hurting anyone but me.

She's always in a good mood and is so much fun -- how could she have a problem with alcohol?

She's such a good person -- there's no way she could be an alcoholic.

MORE FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOLISM:

It isn't when or where an alcoholic drinks; it's his relationship with the bottle that defines the illness.

Alcoholism negatively affects the lives of everyone it touches.

Alcoholism strikes the gregarious as well as the withdrawn, the fun as well as the morose.

Alcoholism does not entail a lack of moral integrity, strength, or good intentions.

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACT ABOUT ALCOHOLISM:

Alcoholism is a treatable illness. Help is readily available. If you are a lawyer who needs help, or if you know a lawyer who needs help, call the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program at 800/343-8527. The confidentiality of all calls is statutorily protected.