

CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY: INTERVENING WITH CARE AND COMPASSION

By Mary McGraw, M.A., CADC

Is my loved one chemically dependent? How can I help? Am I affected? Intervening in someone's addiction does not require a scientific background nor expertise in the field of addictions. However, having some accurate information about chemical dependency can support a person getting the help he/she needs.

A simple formula for assessing the extent of a problem can include the following questions developed by the American Society of Addiction Medicine <www.asam.org>:

- Have you ever tried to CUT down on your drinking?
- Do you get ANNOYED when people talk about your drinking?
- Do you feel GUILTY about your drinking?
- Have you ever had an EYE-OPENER? (a drink first thing in the morning)

This test can be taken by an individual and then followed by a visit to a professional with experience in addictions treatment. Although we have progressed in reducing the shame and increasing awareness in our culture of the subtle progression of addiction, there often is a "silent compliance" with the disease. Those around the addicted person make excuses for the drinking or drugging, cover up for the person, support them either emotionally or financially and join in the "no talk" rule of addiction by not voicing concerns to other members of the family or to friends. If the older adult is also on prescription drugs (a common occurrence), the family or friends may unintentionally support the disease out of fear, lack of knowledge about chemical dependency and its progression, or fear of the consequences of speaking up and losing the relationship.

This fear of speaking up is a "symptom" of addiction called denial. Denial is simply sincere delusion (lying to oneself) on the part of the alcoholic/addict and the friends and family. It is an inability to see the reality of the negative impact of alcohol and drugs on the alcoholic/addict's personal, family and social life.

The scientific research has shown that addiction is a primary, progressive, chronic and fatal illness characterized by a compulsive use of alcohol (or other drugs) despite negative social, physical, familial, job, and/or legal consequences. Addiction is a "brain" disease in which a certain percentage of the population becomes addicted and scientists have identified that there may be a genetic predisposition to the disease. It often runs in families.

There is help and hope, however. All levels of care are possible. "Inpatient Treatment" is residential detoxification followed by a structured therapeutic process of care. "Intensive Outpatient Treatment" is a structured program in the evenings



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while patient maintains daily life along with abstinence. “Extended Care” is structured care in a residential sober living community, involvement in 12 step groups (AA, Al-Anon, NA), and individual counseling with an addictions specialist - or any combination of these treatments.

Compassion and concern coupled with knowledge about the disease of addiction are powerful interventions. Knowing who to call or where to get support is also a key element in the recovery process for the individual as well as the family. Speaking your truth to a friend or family member with compassion and kindness can be the deciding factor in that person seeking help. In the case of addiction, silence can kill!

Mary McGraw, M.A., CADC has provided education, prevention and treatment services in a variety of settings for over 20 years and was working at the Betty Ford Center, Rancho Mirage California, when this article was written.

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