

When does drinking become a problem?

BUSINESS IS PERSONAL

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April is Alcohol Awareness Month and is intended to educate the public about the potential consequences that many face due to alcohol related problems. It is estimated that they cost the US economy alone \$185 billion per year in lost productivity and earnings due to alcohol related illness, premature death and crime. There are over 18 million individuals who suffer from alcohol-use disorders and millions (25 per cent of US children alone) who experience the devastating effects of alcoholism with someone to whom they are close. It's a serious problem that affects families, employers and communities across all demographics.

Through this column, we hope to raise awareness of the fact that alcohol is a negative influence in many lives. Most individuals don't want to admit that their drinking is a problem as it's a social activity that they enjoy. It's difficult to think about cutting back or abstaining from alcohol, especially if friends, family and co-workers all drink.

In addition to being a social activity, alcohol is often used as a crutch or coping mechanism for relieving pressure from various stresses. There are many

problems with using alcohol as a crutch as alcohol is only a short term fix. The effects of alcohol wear off quickly and the original problem usually still exists. Sometimes alcohol even becomes part of the problem, potentially even larger than the original problem itself.

So, let's take a look at drinking, which is a mindless activity. It's legal, it's socially accepted and it's often carried out as part of entertaining clients with work related activities and socially outside of work. In our society, it's socially acceptable to have a drink over a working lunch, to have a few drinks at happy hour, to have a glass of wine after work, or to have a few drinks with a round of golf.

The question that needs to be considered and addressed is, when does social drinking turn into problem drinking? Drinking becomes a problem when it interferes with one or more aspect of an individual's life, including, but not limited to, work and home. Examples include persistent complaints about drinking behaviours from one's spouse, alcohol related arguments in a relationship, decline in overall work performance, routinely calling in sick on Mondays, leaving work early on Fridays, inability to control the amount of drinks when going out, drinking excessively rather than drinking in moderation, arrest for a DUI and many more. It's important to remember that if your drinking

behaviour negatively affects any aspect of your life, your drinking is a problem.

Now, let's talk about the word denial. Nobody wants to be labelled a problem drinker and nobody wants to believe they have a problem with drinking. The stigma associated with being labelled a problem drinker or an alcoholic is substantial and often contributes to the problem of denial. Denial is embedded in addiction and is one of the most common traits associated with problem drinking and alcoholism. In fact, with most problem drinkers, the level of denial is so firmly entrenched in a problem drinker's mind that they claim with conviction that they don't have a drinking prob-

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Take the test to determine if you have a problem with alcohol.

lem and that they are in complete control of their drinking.

So, what's the solution?

1. Screening is one way of determining whether or not an individual may have a problem with drinking. For example, the CAGE, as seen below, is a screening tool that is widely used by many professionals in the field. There are four questions asked that are directly relating to an individual's behaviour around drinking. If an individual answers "yes" to one question, there is a possible problem with alcohol. If the individual answers yes to
2. more than one question, it's highly likely that a problem with drinking exists.
3. > Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
> Have people annoyed you by criticising your drinking?
> Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
> Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (eye opener)?
4. Admit there is a problem
5. Assess the level of the problem with a trained professional
6. Accept help

5. Be open to change

It's not easy to admit being a problem drinker. It takes a lot of courage and strength to admit a problem, which is half the battle when it comes to alcohol. Positive change is attainable and achievable no matter what the goals are in terms of the drinking behaviours - abstain, drink in moderation, cut back, etc.

Call Solutions Ltd. if you have any questions about the information in this column - Alcohol Awareness Month is important, especially to those who are struggling to decide whether their drinking is directly related to problems in their lives.