How to Identify and Treat Alcohol Abuse

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Navigating Alcohol Addiction Treatment and Understanding the Impact of Alcoholism

Alcohol use, abuse, addiction, and dependence are widespread issues among adults and adolescents in the United States. A significant driving force alcohol issues is its frequent use. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), more than 53% of adults drank alcohol in the last month, with 26% binge drinking, and about 6.5% reporting heavy drinking.

Alcoholism affects many people directly and indirectly each year. Luckily, effective treatments for alcohol use disorders are available to those seeking recovery.

How to Identify Alcoholism or an Alcohol Use Disorder

The first step towards getting treatment for alcohol issues is to understand the line between acceptable use and problematic use. Defining this line with alcohol use is challenging, since the substance is legal, and drinking is widely accepted in a variety of social situations. Meanwhile, problematic use of other drugs like cocaine or heroin is easier to spot.

Not everyone using alcohol will abuse it, and not everyone abusing the substance will develop an addiction. Someone with an alcohol use disorder (AUD) may:

- Spend a lot of their time getting alcohol, drinking alcohol, and recovering from the previous day's use
- Fail to limit use by drinking less or less often only to drink more than intended
- Crave it when they have not had any
- Struggle to accomplish tasks and responsibilities at home, work, or school
- Fight and argue with loved ones over drinking
- Continue drinking, even when it interferes with their mental or physical health
- Feel odd, uncomfortable, or sick when the stop drinking
- Need more alcohol or stronger alcohol to create the desired level of intoxication

People with alcohol issues may also:

- Leave empty alcohol bottles around the house
- Encounter legal or financial issues due to use
- Display a decline in self-care with limited hygiene
- Appear suspicious or secretive

Someone with problematic drinking may not display all of these symptoms. In some situations, a person may only show one or two signs of an alcohol use disorder, but those will be enough to indicate a significant issue with drinking.

If you think you or a loved one has an alcohol use disorder, you would not be alone. About 15 million people in the U.S. currently have an AUD.

Finding the Best Treatment for an Alcohol Use Disorder

Of the people with an AUD, only about 10% actually receive the treatment needed to improve their symptoms and well-being. For people who use it, professional treatment options can reduce the unwanted effects of alcohol and establish a period of recovery.

Alcohol addiction treatment is split into two main groups: therapy and medications.

Therapy

Therapy, sometimes called talk therapy or psychotherapy, usually involves meeting with a psychologist, counselor, social worker, or other mental health professional to identify and limit the impact of alcohol on the person's life.

Depending on the symptoms and impact of alcohol use, the person may participate in:

- Individual therapy: A treatment that offers one-on-one meetings between the client and the therapist
- Family therapy: Treatments that invite the client and their loved ones to meet with the therapist
- Group therapy: Sessions that include one or more therapists as well as a group of clients who share similar symptoms

Styles of therapy will differ, but many will focus on:

- Learning about alcohol use, abuse, and addiction
- Building new coping skills to better manage stress
- Identifying and treating other mental health or physical health conditions that fuel alcohol use
- Increasing positive communication skills to improve relationships
- Developing a relapse prevention plan that lists triggers of use and appropriate coping skills to utilize when cravings are strong
- Noticing the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to increase more desirable feelings

Medication

Treatment for alcohol addiction can also include medications. Some helpful medications include:

- Naltrexone: A medication that helps people cut back from drinking due to blocking the effects of alcohol
- Acamprosate: A medication known to limit cravings in people after who have recently quit drinking
- Disulfiram: A drug that blocks the breakdown of alcohol in the body to create unwanted side effects like nausea when alcohol is consumed

Other times, prescribers may offer other medications for anxiety and depression with the goal of reducing the symptoms that may result in problematic drinking.

People may receive therapy and medication services in a number of settings including:

- Inpatient hospital or residential: Settings that involve the person living at the treatment center while receiving therapy
- Partial hospitalization programs and intensive outpatient programs: Treatments that typically involve multiple hours of services each week
- Outpatient: Any treatment option that allows the individual to attend services while continuing to work, go to school, and sleep in their own bed at night

Final Notes

Support groups are a great addition to professional treatment options. Support groups are managed by group members and help to establish a sense of community with others in recovery.

Recovery from alcohol abuse is a long-term process, but people who work to quickly identify their symptoms and seek professional treatments can achieve the sobriety they deserve.