

New Help for Alcoholics

by Dorothy Hunter

Relatives of habitual drinkers have found a novel way of dealing with their problem----

I am not an alcoholic. I don't even like to drink. Yet I, and thousands of others in my position, have an alcoholic problem as overwhelming as that of any man or woman who imbibes to excess.

I am the wife of an alcoholic, a member of that vast, unheralded company of persons whose destinies are linked inextricably with those of the intemperate.

A great deal has been written recently about alcoholism. Much of it suggests that the problem is one only for the alcoholic himself. Actually, his problem often is overshadowed by the supplementary problems it breeds among mothers and fathers, wives and children, who find themselves constantly confronted by situations demanding miracles of tact.

Guidance and help have been available increasingly of late to the alcoholic. Doctors have grown more and more concerned with his case; clinics have been established for his care; and, for companionship in trouble and possible cure, he can turn to that wonderfully understanding organization, Alcoholics Anonymous.

But where could those who suffered indirectly from his complaint go with their troubles? Until recently, they could depend only on the uncertain, frequently dangerous advice of friends. Adrift on an uncharted sea, the relatives of alcoholics would find themselves blown one way by passion and despair and the next minute blown just as erratically the other way by hope.

Now, some of them have found a new course to follow. In a number of communities they have begun to form informal organizations of their own, appropriately called Non-Alcoholics Anonymous. At meetings, the members' problems are discussed and solutions suggested. In our town, such a group is now functioning, and is gradually proving its

worth to many people who had almost given up in despair.

For the help and solace it may offer to others whose cases are similar to ours, I am giving a condensation of the thoughts and experiences of members of our particular group. Since our meetings are largely discussions of anonymously written questions handed to the chairman, I am making my report in question-and-answer form, covering some of the situations which seem to be common to all of us.

Question: Can a wife or husband "talk" an alcoholic into giving up his drinking?

Answer: No! Nagging, or even a reasonable argument, will accomplish nothing until the alcoholic has made the decision by himself, uninfluenced by another.

This fact is one of the bitterest which must be faced by the mate of an alcoholic. Love does not enter into the situation, for it has been proven innumerable times that no real and lasting reformation can be accomplished except from within the victim.

The most that a nonalcoholic can do is to maintain a detached attitude as each episode occurs, be ready to deal intelligently with each situation, *and to cooperate* with the alcoholic's first fumbling steps toward reform. This requires real strength and staying power, to be sure, but it has been rewarded in thousands of cases.

Question: Should we allow our natural fear and worry to be seen by the alcoholic when he is in the first stages of sobriety?

Answer: No. We must show only confidence, no matter how many times our hopes have been shattered in the past. This is not as dishonest as it may sound; having gone through years of lies and subterfuges forced

upon us by excessive drinking, we must now use this strength to win and hold tolerance and faith.

Question: How can the mate of an alcoholic "stop worrying"?

Answer: First, analyze the situation, putting it on paper to clarify it in your own mind. Then, think of the worst that could possibly happen; *accept the possibility that it might happen*; and then start constructive thinking about what, if anything, can be done to remedy matters. Usually, this will bring an automatic release of tension and fear.

Question: What is the best attitude to take during the difficult times when an alcoholic is sullen and morose, or just plain bad-tempered?

Answer: These periods usually occur during intervals between "bouts" and indicate the poor adjustment of the personality to daily living, which is intensified a hundredfold by the pressure of abstinence. We have found that keeping busy with our own affairs, leaving the offender *gracefully* alone and being emotionally objective about the situation are the greatest helps in "riding out the storm."

Question: Should a mate accompany the alcoholic on his rounds during drinking bouts?

Answer: No. Many of us have done this, thinking our presence would reduce his drinking, or protect him from possible disaster as a result of his inability to cope with situations while intoxicated. What we actually do is furnish a "crutch" for him to lean upon. We also supply a basis for the ever-ready comment that we don't seem to mind his drinking--we have even joined him at it. The sooner we refuse to let ourselves be so used, the quicker his recovery.

Question: Is it wise for the mate of an alcoholic to accept or serve drinks while the other is trying to "stay sober"?

Answer: This is a problem which the individual must solve for himself. In some cases, it has been possible for the mate of an

alcoholic to drink *where other people are present*, without having any harmful effect on the alcoholic. It has been the consensus of our experiences, however, that it is unwise for the non-alcoholic mate to drink *when they are alone*.

If the question arises during a social gathering where it might emphasize the alcoholic's refusal of drinks, it is better to accept a drink than to cause the alcoholic embarrassment.

Question: What is the best handling of the situation when children are involved?

Answer: Until a child is 12, it is preferable to minimize the situation. Pass over it by saying that father or mother is indisposed but will soon be better. Try to avoid contact between drinker and child until the current storm has passed. When this is not physically possible, be alert to act as a buffer between them whenever necessary.

If both parents are working, it is advisable to leave the child with some member of the family or close friend until the responsible parent has finished the day's work and returned home.

When a child has reached an age where he can absorb the knowledge, explain briefly that this father or mother is the unfortunate victim of a disease similar to diabetes; that these people drink too much because they have not yet learned that they have an ailment which can be helped.

Tell the youngster the simple facts about alcoholism--its slowly progressing pattern--and that it is the combined effect of wrong thinking plus a body chemistry which does not tolerate alcohol that makes these people act as they do.

Some readers will exclaim: "How dreadful to tell a young child that his parent does not think rightly!" Is that worse than having the child labor, through misunderstanding the problem, under the shame and disillusionment of having a "drunk" for a parent?

Today's children are wise in the ways of this world, and any mother or father who believes that she or he can conceal drunkenness is acting

like the proverbial ostrich.

These are only a few of the basic problems confronting every man or woman who has an alcoholic in the family. Many more have been discussed, each meeting bringing forward new ones or old ones with a slightly different angle. It would be impossible in one article to encompass the whole of our program.

But to the wife or husband of an excessive drinker, our recommendation is this: quietly, without preliminary talk with the alcoholic, call the organization known as Alcoholics Anonymous and learn the location of the AA group nearest you. If the organization is not listed in your telephone directory, a discreet inquiry of your family physician or clergyman will bring the information.

Ask the AA member to whom you are referred what can be done to help solve *your* problem. Perhaps the time is not yet ripe for an open facing of the problem with the mate, but in any event, the AA member will tell you whether there is a Non-Alcoholics Anonymous group, such as ours, actively functioning in your vicinity.

Some time ago, there were chapters in places as far apart as Long Beach, California; Toronto, Ontario; Edmonton, Alberta; Richmond, Virginia; Washington, D.C.;

Syracuse and Rochester, New York. Since then the number of chapters has increased, for many men and women, constantly seeking a solution to the problem of alcoholism, are adopting our method of attacking it.

We all know the powerful release from tension and worry that comes with the opportunity to unburden ourselves to an unbiased person. The very act of putting into words the sinister fears besetting us brings a soothing effect which aids constructive thinking. In our group, there has been no instance of malicious gossip or morbid dwelling upon anyone's past; in fact, names are rarely heard in talking of a particular problem.

Any person who has an alcoholic in his or her family is eligible for membership in our group. The name, Non-Alcoholics Anonymous, has at times misled prospective members into thinking they could not participate in our program unless they themselves gave up drinking entirely. This is not true, for the obvious reasons given above.

Our experience has taught us that there is definite hope for those who face the alcoholic problem--provided we are willing to work for "the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; the courage to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference."