

ALCOHOLISM

The Blame Shame Game

By JoAnne Barge Ph.D



Many of us have been drunk in our lives, and are not alcoholic. Alcoholism is powerlessness over alcohol. Not powerlessness as a person, but powerless over alcohol specifically. Despite all the studies, information, progress and help available, there still is a stigma attached to alcoholism. We are a society that places great value on control. So, being out of control brings great shame.

We all know an alcoholic, personally or — know of an alcoholic. Many of us think we know about alcoholism and most know as much they want to know. Yet, despite the progress we've made since Betty Ford came out with her very personal alcoholism admissions, I'm surprised at how many people I come across who are uninformed. No understanding at all. And, maybe worse... the conviction that they do understand, but unquestionably — have it all wrong.

What Is Alcoholism?

Who Is An Alcoholic?

It's complicated. Considerable data confirms that alcoholism is a biopsychosocial disorder, or disease. There are definite biological factors, psychological factors, if not preceding, then absolutely caused by drinking. Some people find themselves in social environments that support drinking, and find there is a pressure to drink. So, they drink more than they intend to, and they are off and running. Others drink to self-medicate, and that can be either a short-lived experience dependant on a specific occurrence in their lives, or it leads to alcoholism. Research points to the fact that the level of addiction to alcohol greatly depends on individual physiology.

Alcoholism Is Not A Drunk.

We are a society that places great value on control. So, being out of control brings great shame. And when we are full of shame, which is a horrible feeling — we tend to blame. Feeling out of control, we look for things outside of ourselves to blame for our drinking. If alcohol is affecting our spouse, parent, child — we tend to blame (them) when in actuality, we feel upset, scared and confused. Sometimes we blame ourselves. Maybe we are embarrassed and ashamed over our loved ones actions and words, and out of anger we shame them. How could you? What's the matter with you? Have you no shame? The truth is that alcoholism brings a lot of shame. And, shame brings blame — and blame brings shame!

Sometimes we drink to socialize, but alcoholics drink to make the world go away. At some level, they are self-medicating. Getting them to stop is critical, life saving in fact, but sadly not the end of the story. Underlying issues need to be dealt with. Often these issues are shame based as well. Say for instance, a person was the victim of sexual abuse or rape earlier in life; there is a lot of shame attached to that in

and of itself. Maybe they were physically or emotionally abused as a child, and have the feeling that, "I am bad!" Perhaps they experienced rejection that now causes them to feel like something is wrong with them. Maybe they grew up in an alcoholic family, and still feel shame.

Children of alcoholics decide that they definitely do not want to be alcoholic; they promise themselves that they will not be anything like their parents. Yet, 58% of alcoholics are the children of alcoholics. Children of alcoholics have a four to five times greater chance of one day becoming an alcoholic themselves due to their genetic vulnerability. Why do so many determined not to be alcoholic end up alcoholic? No child decides that when they grow up they would like to be an alcoholic! So, imagine the double shame they feel when they turn out to be just like mom or dad. When we blame and shame them, it only adds to their overlying mountain of shame and, we actually make matters worse. This is not to say that anyone should have to put up with an alcoholic, and all that can come with it. But, it does mean that if you don't want to make the situation worse, you must find a better way to deal with it. "I'm scared that I am going to lose you;" or "I'm very worried about your health;" or "I miss my husband." Think about how you truly feel when you are dealing with an alcoholic. Is it anger you feel, or is it actually fear?

Most alcoholics live within an alcoholic system where everyone is co-dependent. The meaning of this is... "a cooperative dependence on one another's unhealthy behaviors in order to maintain a relationship." This is an insidious and an often-unconscious process that everyone partakes in, and such everyone in the family needs help because everyone feels some of the shame. But, it's easier to blame than to feel shame. Blame everything that is wrong or uncomfortable on the alcoholic, or collude with him or her in blaming the stress that they are under, their work problems, or all the people who drink around him/her and put pressure on them to drink. Blaming takes us away from the reality at hand, but ultimately creates more shame. And that shame can keep someone from getting the help they need.

Do you identify with this article? It's time to seek professional help from an alcoholism specialist. Or, find a credible Interventionist who can get the family ready for a heart to heart talk with the alcoholic. Al-Anon is also an incredible place to turn. When you stop the blame, there is hope, and the shame just might go away. ■

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