An Analysis of Alcoholism And Its Effects On Sexual Functioning

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ABSTRACT: Alcohol has long been held by society as rendering sexual expressions easier, and enhancing sexual activity. As people move from moderate social drinking to heavy drinking, and to the disease of alcoholism, these expressions of sexuality can become distorted and sexual behavior in many cases becomes almost impossible. Even with treatment for alcoholism or alcohol use problems, the same difficulties experienced with sexual functioning while drinking may remain or may even be exacerbated by sobriety. This article will provide a framework which will foster an understanding of the changes in sexual functioning as the disease of alcoholism progresses and as it is being treated. A clinical description of men and women in the early stages of recovery from alcoholism will be presented with specific emphasis on sexuality and sexual functioning. Sexual issues, including variable sexual activity, impotence and anxiety associated with intercourse, will be outlined, as they relate to both physical and psychological variables of recovery from alcoholism. The presentation will seek to integrate clinical information into a treatment rationale that includes specific interventions and the timing of such interventions with a focus on alcoholism and sexuality.

Society has long held the drug alcohol as a substance that renders expressions of sexuality easier and enhances sexual activity. As people move from moderate social drinking to heavy drinking and on to the disease of alcoholism, these sexual expressions can become distorted and sexual functioning, in many cases, becomes almost impossible. Even with treatment for alcoholism or alcohol use problems, the same difficulties experienced with sexual functioning while drinking may remain or may even be exacerbated by sobriety. This article has been
written to help both consumers and practitioners understand the psychological and physiological interplay of alcohol and sexual functioning. Included is a framework which will foster an understanding of the changes in sexual functioning as the disease of alcoholism progresses and as it is being treated. This will be followed by a discussion of the implications for treatment.

Prior to beginning a consideration of sexuality, sexual functioning and alcoholism, we would like to focus briefly and exclusively on alcoholism. It is our feeling that the term "alcoholism" has been and still is used much too loosely; not only in the lay press, but in the professional literature as well. It is common to find no operational definition of alcoholism in many papers, as well as to find alcoholism and alcohol abuse discussed with little or no distinction between diagnostic categories.

From our clinical experience both with alcoholism agencies and in private practice, we feel strongly that if we as care providers are to remain credible resources, we must begin to speak to one another clearly and specifically about this problem. To that end, when we talk about alcoholism in this presentation, we are referring to alcoholism as described by the National Council on Alcoholism Criteria Committee. This article describes a schema with which to differentiate alcoholism as a disease of pathological dependence on ethanol. At times, it will be necessary to distinguish between alcoholism and what the NCA criteria call alcohol use problems, often referred to as alcohol abuse. The terms alcohol use problems and alcohol abuse will be used interchangeably and both will be distinguished from alcoholism.

SEXUAL FUNCTIONING WITH NON-PROBLEM ALCOHOL USE

In our introduction we referred to society's belief that alcohol facilitates the expression of sexuality. We would like to review briefly some simple facts about alcohol, its relationship to sexual functioning and sexuality, and then dispel some myths about this relationship. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. Its first point of action is the reticular activating system in the brain stem. Consequently, we see the familiar release of inhibitions, both verbal and behavioral. It is this release of inhibitions which gives some credence to the myth about alcohol facilitating sexual behavior. The affecting of judgment centers allows the first expressions of sexual arousal to occur more easily and with less anxiety and guilt. Some of these inhibitions might be associ-