

Commentary: Symptoms, consequences of and facing alcohol use disorder

June 25, 2020

It was an icy cold, winter Sunday afternoon in January 1992. We were living in New England, when my wife gave me an ultimatum: “Continue to drink, or move out!”

Proceeding to open the kitchen refrigerator door, I withdrew the last remaining bottle of beer and hurled it as hard as I could into our backyard woods. The bottle made a violent, smashing sound as it collided with an old birch tree, tiny pieces of glass splattering into the cold snow-covered ground.

Alcohol, which induced loneliness, despair and depression, had become unbearable, and I became aware of my dark thoughts of suicide. I was at my bottom. I was physically, mentally and spiritually bankrupt and realized that continuing to drink meant certain death, jail or institutionalization. As a Christian, I was ashamed of myself.

I, like many of my friends, enjoyed drinking, but how much is too much? For me, there was no such thing as one drink. How could anybody drink just one?

It is not uncommon for people to deny they have a drinking problem.

Alcoholism oftentimes is referred to as a family disease, as it frequently is passed genetically among extended family members.

I did not—and you may not—recognize the signs of alcohol abuse in

yourself or in someone else. If you have to ask, “Is my drinking a problem,” it probably is a problem.

What is alcohol use disorder?

The description of the disease of alcoholism has changed and now is referred to as alcohol use disorder, or AUD.

AUD is considered by mental health experts to be a chronic, relapsing brain disease characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational or health consequences, such as death, jail and/or institutionalization.

My experience with abusive drinking

For years, I told myself I could stop drinking any time I desired. However, I discovered at an early age there was no such thing as just one glass, shot, bottle or can of anything containing alcohol, and once I started, I could not stop. My self-discipline and ability to manage my alcohol intake essentially had evaporated.

On too many occasions to count, I promised myself and others I would have just one drink. I ignored these promises, failing miserably in my attempts to keep them each and every time.

Trying to be funny and popular among my peers, I would announce to anyone listening, “I only have a drinking problem when there is nothing around to drink.”

My drinking progressively became more important to me than my church, my job, my wife, my children and my family and friends.

My alcohol-induced behavior included attending only those events where I

could drink and socialize with others who drank like I did. I began not to trust people who did not drink.

My repeated attempts to stop drinking never lasted more than a couple of days.

Occasionally, I would drink only beer or wine, steadfast in my belief nobody could be an alcoholic if he or she drank only beer or wine.

I continued to use alcohol despite negative emotional effects, such as depression, anxiety and memory lapses. It never occurred to me alcohol itself was a depressant and that depression coincided with my alcohol abuse.

Toward the end of my drinking career, I was living to drink and drinking to live and had become sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Consequences of my abusive drinking

My abusive drinking eliminated any chance of what I believed to be well-deserved work promotions. This resulted instead in frequent job performance failures and numerous involuntary terminations.

My activity caused painful financial strife and difficulties for my family, creating seemingly unbearable stress and initiating darker and increased episodes of depression.

As my self-esteem deteriorated due to my drinking, I noticed simple things like my hands shaking and difficulty making direct eye contact with others in social and business settings.

My continued inability to show up for scheduled meetings on time and my loss of focus and concentration in social and business settings became progressively worse.

I began to isolate myself and found myself making excuses for not attending social and family gatherings, as I was spending more time self-isolating and drinking alone at home. I noticed it took me increasingly longer to capture my desired yet elusive alcohol buzz.

I constantly compared my drinking to others. I noted, with congratulatory pride that many of my Christian friends drank more than I did. I envied people who could drink without ever getting into trouble.

How things changed

I started attending local 12-step meetings and taking the advice of a former prep school classmate who suggested attending 90 12-step meetings in 90 days.

In hindsight, attending 90 12-step meetings in 90 days saved my life.

I have been sober for 28 years—or 10,220 days—and live a happy and healthy life, second to none. I like myself again.

If you, a family member or a friend can relate to any of my described symptoms and story and would like to talk, call me. You do not have to go through what I did alone.

Lawrence (Laurie) Traynor is a former national drug and alcohol treatment executive with 28 years of sobriety who now volunteers to help Christian addicts and alcoholics and their loved ones locate public and private drug and alcohol assistance resources. He can be reached by phone at (904) 553-1600 and email at RugbyTrayn5858@gmail.com. The views expressed are those solely of the author.