

Why Does Someone With A Drinking Problem Continue to Drink?

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Confused family members frequently ask, "Why does someone with an obvious drinking problem continue to drink?" They may be astounded that their loved one with an alcohol use disorder can't see what everyone else in the family can. They may be hoping that discovering the reason might lead to a solution and a cure for their loved one's problematic relationship with alcohol.

Family members often attribute the drinking to issues like low self-esteem, ADD, depression, underemployment, or marrying too young. So it's not hard to understand how they may think that the drinking will stop if the "underlying problem" is identified and fixed. However, it doesn't quite work that way. While the contributing factors in the development of an alcohol use disorder (especially a severe one) are essential to understand, to effect significant change, problematic drinking must stop. To try to develop recovery skills and regain control over your life while continuing to engage in the very behavior that is creating the majority of the problems and lack of control would probably be an exercise in futility.

The reasons that people drink change over time. People with an alcohol use disorder usually start drinking for the same reasons anyone else does--to be part of a group, to have fun, to feel good, or to experience euphoria. Alcohol lowers inhibitions, making the drinker feel more comfortable socially and more self-confident. As the drinker discovers that alcohol temporarily relieves discomfort or solves problems, they apply it to a broader range of situations. Over time, alcohol takes on the role of a problem-solver, now used across a spectrum of circumstances. As the frequency and volume of alcohol consumption increases, tolerance develops.

Tolerance means that increasing amounts of alcohol are necessary to achieve the same effects. Tolerance is often a symptom of a severe level of an alcohol use disorder addiction. Loss of control over drinking or its consequences is also present. Loss of control means that once a person starts drinking, they cannot predict how much they will drink or what will happen.

Research indicates that chemical dependency is a brain disorder, with prolonged use causing changes in the brain. These changes lead to cognitive and emotional distortions, including the compulsion to use alcohol despite adverse consequences. The practice and habit of alcohol use is self-reinforcing neurochemically. Drinking becomes a conditioned response to the positive effects and avoiding the unpleasant effects of withdrawal. Environmental and genetic factors also contribute to the risk of an alcohol use disorder. When someone has a high tolerance for alcohol from the beginning of their drinking, they are likely to have a higher vulnerability to addiction.

Loss of control and negative consequences go hand in hand. Negative consequences can range from arguments with a spouse, DUIs, compulsive spending, financial problems, calling in sick, irresponsible behavior, job loss, and even death. No one believes that their drinking will cause these problems. They don't intend to have these negative consequences. Someone with a moderate to severe alcohol use disorder will drink to escape the pain of these consequences, which in turn creates more negative consequences. The self-reinforcing circular pattern also involves powerless attempts to regain control over drinking, leading to a more unmanageable life.

So, why would an alcoholic keep drinking amid all that powerlessness and unmanageability? The answer lies in brain changes, compulsivity, and defense mechanisms. A person with a moderate or severe alcohol use disorder feels compelled to drink regardless of reason or rationality.

Defense mechanisms make it emotionally easier to engage in compulsive behavior while convincing oneself that it is not compulsive, that they are not out of control, and that other issues are the real problem. Defense

mechanisms assist the person who cannot envision a life without alcohol to continue to see drinking as the solution rather than the problem. Although family members often believe that their loved one's defenses are deliberate lies and manipulation, they are usually self-delusion, allowing them to avoid the pain of facing the reality of their situation.

Common defense mechanisms include blaming, minimizing, justifying, projecting, anger, compartmentalizing, and rationalizing. Defenses don't typically end with early recovery. Everyone has defense mechanisms, and for people trying to recover from addiction, it takes hard work to get a clear perception of the realities of one's life.

In recovery, layers of defenses are deliberately peeled away over time as the recovering person examines their life, gains insight into the impact of the addiction, identifies the resources they still have, and recognizes the strengths they bring to their recovery and their loved ones.

In short, someone with a drinking problem drinks because it is fun in the beginning, then because the drinking is self-perpetuated by brain changes, reinforcement, compulsiveness, and defenses. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009, titled "Why Would An Alcoholic Drink Despite All The Problems Associated With It?" The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.**



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