

ALCOHOLISM AND THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

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Being a woman and a religious living in community, I am going to talk to you today from the perspective of the woman religious, though I am aware that men religious also have most, if not all, of the same issues concerning recovery as do women religious and should, therefore, be able to relate to all that I address here. Just as the disease of alcoholism is not simple, so too, the recovery process is not a simple one. It is too frequently thought that for alcoholics, the mere removal of the addictive substance constitutes recovery. However, the experience of everyone involved in the treatment of alcoholism is that this is a destructive oversimplification.

Looking at the definition of alcoholism, we see that it involves significant and progressive deterioration in a person's physical and mental health, in practically all interpersonal relationships, and in spiritual and moral values. Mere abstinence from alcohol does not correct the deterioration in these areas of living. Sobriety, therefore, does not simply consist of abstinence from alcohol but presumes a more strenuous involvement in a recovery process that affects all areas of one's life.

This process of recovery can be even harder for the woman religious just as it is for most women. Alcoholism, until just the past few years, has been considered "a man's disease" and has been treated as such. Most recovery programs — and Alcoholics Anonymous is among them — are traditionally geared toward the male. Only in recent years has there been recognition of alcoholism as an equal opportunity disease that also affects the female population as well.

If we believe that alcoholism is a disease and not a moral issue, we need to face the fact that women, and this includes women religious, being part of the human race, are subject to the same diseases as men and alcoholism is no exception. Therefore, it is necessary to include them in the recovery process.

Women's needs are different from those of men and these needs must be addressed before alcoholic women can get well. Women tend to have much more guilt and shame and, therefore, more denial. They feel that they are "bad" and society perpetuates this myth, so the woman can get extremely ill before she will reach out for help. The woman religious is no exception to this rule. In fact, she feels even more guilty and ashamed and coupled with the guilt is the denial, anger, and self-hate that characterizes every alcoholic woman.

Getting the religious woman into treatment is difficult and painful, but I find in my work with women religious that the hardest part of their recovery seems to be immediately after they have had some primary treatment. This term of approximately four to six weeks serves only to physically rid the body of the alcohol, provide some basic knowledge of the disease, and suggest alternatives to drinking. This is usually done in a very protective environment and away from the religious community. Here the religious begins to deal with her humanness and to see herself as just another alcoholic striving for a sober life. She is helped off her pedestal and is accepted by her peers. She is no longer isolated and "different."

But once the sister is back with her religious community, the hard work really begins. The adjustment is difficult for many reasons. Though she may intellectually accept the fact that she has a disease, she still has to work through her feelings of guilt and low self-esteem. For the religious who has been put on a pedestal and treated as God's "special anointed," who can forgive weakness in others but cannot forgive that same weakness in herself, accepting her disease can be a real struggle, something that will take time and will need understanding on the part of friends and the people who love her.

It is equally difficult for the community of sisters living with the recovering sister, who though loving and caring, don't quite know how to handle the situation and, therefore, usually do nothing. Many times the alcoholic sister herself will try to keep her disease a secret and won't let her community share at all. This kind of behavior helps to keep alive the old behavior pattern of denial, hiding, and guilt.

AA is a very important ongoing support system for every recovering alcoholic and the recovering religious is no exception. Therefore, she must get comfortable in this self-help group, and sometimes this is even more difficult than dealing with her sisters for she feels very different and somewhat apart and so is not

able to share openly and honestly about who she is and soon finds excuses for not going to meetings and can easily start drinking again.

It would then seem very important for the recovering sister to have a supportive environment in order to get fully well. This support should come from the community with whom she lives, but often this community is closed to her needs. The sisters are very frequently unaware of the nature of her disease and cannot honestly be the support she needs, some believing that it is better to say nothing to the recovering sister in an effort to respect her privacy or on the other hand, getting angry and upset because the sister is “taking the car so often” or “is not at home enough, going to those AA meetings,” believing that by now she should be well. After all, she has spent time and money in a program dealing with her problem. This kind of treatment of the recovering alcoholic is not unusual, but if the community isn't getting some kind of education and help for themselves through Al-Anon or a family support program, they will all remain sick and the alcoholic will usually relapse or leave the community.

While the recovering religious is trying to become comfortable in AA and still not feel guilty at home because she is not able to be part of the community at times, she also has to deal with the many issues around recovery that still need to be worked through.

As I mentioned before, getting sober is the easiest part — staying sober is difficult and requires lots of hard work on the part of the recovering sister and the people with whom she lives. The sister needs an environment to grow in; one that is loving, caring, understanding, trusting, and confrontive. She has lost much of her self-respect, she has still to struggle with her guilt and low self-esteem and these don't come back all at once. Living sober is hard work.

Some things the recovering person must deal with after treatment are:

1. Denial of her powerlessness and her need to be in control. I believe the religious has even more need to control than the lay person, for religious are expected to be “perfect.”

2. Shame and guilt because she is not the perfect person she is supposed to be. She feels “less than” her peers and is constantly thinking she is being put down, spied upon, or looked at with disdain.

3. Using the disease as an excuse for not taking responsibilities. Women religious are no different than any recovering alcoholic who seems to enjoy “ill health.” The alcoholic needs to be reminded that alcoholism doesn't stem from an inability to cope with life's problems, it just makes the problems bigger.

4. Fear of failure — women who were afraid of nothing during their drinking suddenly become very unsure of themselves. They are very afraid of taking a risk. They need to be encouraged to reach out; not to risk means not to really live.

5. Resentments — by the time alcoholics get to the point of treatment, they have accumulated a great number of resentments. These resentments don't go away immediately and some take much more time than others. The healing process for hurts, both real and imagined is slow and painful. This may be hard for the community with whom the sister is living to understand.

6. Feeling different, thinking everyone is watching them and fearfully waiting for them to start drinking again. It is hard to build up trust once it has been destroyed and this is something that must be worked through with the community. It takes time and patience on the part of all. It is important that all be convinced that alcoholism is a disease, not a moral issue or merely a lack of self-control.

I have listed only a few of the important issues for the alcoholic to work on. You could name many others I am sure. The important thing is to allow the alcoholic sister to grow and become happy in her new-found life of sobriety. She needs to be accepted, not merely tolerated. She should be encouraged to continue to take part in AA, to start getting involved in the therapy of helping other recovering alcoholics, and to do everything necessary to grow healthy once again.

With a continuous program of involvement with others, a constant reminder of her previous lifestyle, and a daily striving for spiritual growth, the recovering sister can and often does live her life of sobriety in peace and a degree of harmony not often found in many of the lives of her non-alcoholic counterparts. In this type of recovery program, life can get better and better. I know because I've been there.