

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT ALCOHOLICS

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For about a year, it has been my good fortune to be on the staff of an alcoholic clinic. This has provided the opportunity for me to work closely with many individuals who have the same problem as their least common denominator. There are countless theories about alcoholism, and much popular interest is shown in the subject. The following is not intended to establish the validity of any of them; nor is it intended to establish an independent view of the problem. It is concerned with observations made in the light of the teachings of Individual Psychology.

Not every heavy drinker is an alcoholic. He is an alcoholic when he finds himself drinking more than he consciously intends! In short, when his drinking is no longer under his conscious control, he is moving along the path of his hidden purposes. He believes that alcohol is his problem, simply because he is not able to understand what goal he is pursuing by knocking out his brain with liquor. He tries to fight against the symptom, and this only blinds him further to the real issues of his life.

Stated simply, the alcoholic "doesn't live right." His mistakes in social relationships ante-date by many years the onset of his compulsive drinking. It represents the end-product of years of defective social contact - a form of social bankruptcy. He has come to a place in his social connectedness where human association (sobriety) is painful to him to such a degree that he prefers to escape.

One of the most interesting features is that "social drinking" paved the path to his present dilemma. The reason given for the social drinking is that "it is easier to talk to people if you have a few drinks." Asked why he could not have talked without the drinks, he pleads self-consciousness as the reason. He worries about what people think of him when he is sober. But with a few drinks, he feels "as big as the next fellow."

It seems that the alcoholic, from his earliest years, is a shy fellow;* he is too dependent on the opinion of other people. When he meets someone, his mind is on himself instead of being on the other person. As a result, he does not learn to make contact with them nor to understand them. He lives with the conviction that they are different and more successful than himself.

Needless to say, he is hypersensitive to a high degree and his feelings are easily hurt. He finds insults where none are intended and

*He does not always present the picture of shyness, in the common understanding of the term. Often he seems just the opposite. But in his soul, he does not feel that he is a real part of the social group.

neglect if he is not made the center of admiration. But if he is admired, it makes him uncomfortable, too, because he does not know how to respond to such "closeness." The result is that he keeps a social distance between himself and others as much as possible. But it is not this that makes him an alcoholic.

The trouble comes later in life when social demands tend to become greater, or when his progress toward "success" seems to be slowing up. Because he has lived a cut-off existence, he does not know what to expect of himself or what others can rightly expect of him. He usually aims at perfection because of his lack of human understanding. As the demands become greater or the rewards of his life become smaller, his ideal seems endangered. And because he cannot move comfortably with others for fear of their opinions, he becomes increasingly anxious and tense.

Increases in tension demand increased alcohol to relieve them. This soon becomes a vicious circle, for after drinking he is less confident of his ability to move forward. He begins to give up the limited social interests and friendships of the past, as he worries more about his future! Soon, he finds the problems of marriage, work and friendship such a "burden" that he sweats, trembles and is sleepless at night. From this point, it is not long till he loses wife, money or job. Almost any additional confronting situation can then begin what Adler described as the "advance toward the rear."

It is exactly at this point where he finds that he can't take a few drinks without going on a more or less prolonged drunk. His drinking is finally "out of control." He is convinced that he wants to stop drinking - but some "mysterious force" drives him to take the first drink which always ends in countless drinks. There is the saying among alcoholics that, "One drink is too much and a thousand is not enough!"

The above is a decidedly abbreviated and condensed review of the characteristic pattern to be found among alcoholics. But, despite many variations, it occurs with monotonous regularity. The fear of the opinion of others is always at the core of the picture. The flight from social contact is always the last stage of the dilemma. Alcoholism, like any other neurosis, is a disease of discouragement.

Adler taught us that the problems of life can only be solved under the Main-Tent of Life. Under this tent are three rings in which each must perform - association, marriage and work. When the problem of association is difficult or impossible, the individual retreats and sets up a Side-Show outside the main show! Alcoholism is definitely a Side-Show activity. The individual can say to himself and the world, "Were it not for my drinking, then you would see my wagon pass by hitched to a star." The Side-Show (alcoholism) consoles him for the sense of failure he experiences when he cannot achieve the ideal-world he seeks in his imagination. It gives him an alibi for not performing under the Main-Tent of Life. The world he seeks never existed anywhere, but he did not know this because of his habitual psychic isolation which began in his early years.

And what is the "cure" for him? It is the same as for any other person who is in psychic isolation. He must find again some interest in the world and those around him. He must become willing to be a help and not a burden in the community of mankind.