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# Excessive Drinking and Its Relationship to Marriage

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THE relationship between excessive drinking and the marital association will be considered in terms of a three point thesis.<sup>1</sup> It will be shown first that excessive drinking and particularly characteristics which are usually present in the excessive drinker tend to preclude marriage; second, that married life and excessive drinking are incompatible; and third, that the destruction or disruption of the marital association frequently results in the onset of excessive drinking. Finally, some implications which may prove useful to the marriage counselor will be suggested.

We must differentiate between the ordinary moderate user of alcoholic beverages and the excessive or problem drinker. There are in the United States today approximately 65 million adult persons who are users of alcoholic beverages. The vast majority of these are moderate users, who drink because it is customary for them to do so. Whereas these moderate drinkers will, for the most part, stoutly defend their right to drink when they please, alcohol for them presents no particular problem. With the exceptions to be noted below, they control the amount which they drink and if alcohol were to be taken away from them their reaction would be resentment more than a craving for a physical or mental necessity.

Unfortunately, among these 65 million users of alcoholic beverages there are some four million who drink not in moderation but to excess, and for whom drinking constitutes a very serious problem. In speaking of excessive drinking, the intention is not to imply a specific amount which represents excess quantity, but rather that amount which for any particular individual leads to problems such as physical injury, arrest, loss of job, marital discord, or other maladjustments of a social, physiological, or psychological nature.

The four million drinkers who constitute America's problem drinking population are not all alcohol addicts, nor does their drinking stem from any single cause or type of causes but rather from a variety of etiological factors. They have been classified by Haggard<sup>2</sup> into three categories.

About 20 per cent of these problem drinkers are often

labeled symptomatic excessive drinkers because their excessive drinking is merely symptomatic of some deeper underlying disturbance such as schizophrenia, manic depressive psychosis, epilepsy, or other psychopathic or physiologic disorders.

Another 25 or 30 per cent of the excessive drinking population can be called social misfit drinkers. These persons are not ill from a medical standpoint but they are socially ill. In this category we find many of the drifters who populate our missions and jails, and others with a low level of intelligence or ambition. They are people who find themselves so limited in their sources of gratification or so alienated from the fast moving society around them that they seek a pleasant form of escape through alcoholic intoxication. These social misfit drinkers do not drink because they are compelled to do so, but rather because they want to. They are perfectly capable of stopping or limiting their consumption but they usually prefer to drink to excess, and as a result they find themselves getting into all sorts of difficulties.

The third category of excessive drinker is the true alcohol addict. He is characterized by the fact that although he may possess a variety of very fine traits which endear him to his family and friends and make him a potentially productive and respected citizen, he is suffering from a compulsion to drink. He is driven by his compulsion to repeated states of inebriation despite the fact that he is fully aware that his drinking is destroying all that he values in life. In addition he can no longer drink moderately. It is said that the alcoholic has no terminal facilities for his drinking, for one or two drinks almost invariably lead to a full-fledged bender. He is in the sad position where, despite his desire to stop, he finds that he cannot alone help himself. His position is further complicated by the fact that his drinking behavior cannot as yet be predicted and thus preventive measures are severely restricted. If it were possible to tell in advance just what characteristics predispose an individual to alcohol addiction, the field of preventive therapy would become well defined. Predisposed persons could be made aware of the impending danger before they become so victimized that they are powerless to change the course of their drinking behavior. Although such predictive factors have not yet been isolated it is possible to describe certain psychological and sociological factors which characterize persons who seem more likely than others to become alcohol addicts. The isolation of identifying physiological factors is the object of considerable research now

<sup>1</sup> Selden D. Bacon. "Excessive Drinking and the Institution of the Family" in *Alcohol, Science and Society*. New Haven: Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 1945. Lecture 16, pp. 223-238.

<sup>2</sup> Howard W. Haggard, M.D., Director of the Yale University Laboratory of Applied Physiology and founder of its Section on Alcohol Studies.

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under way. While prospects of success are promising, the existence of a physiological basis for alcohol addiction has not yet been determined.

In approaching the identification of persons who may become problem drinkers from the psychological viewpoint, it is appropriate to describe an experiment conducted by Massermann<sup>3</sup> in which a group of cats were first taught to associate the presence of food and the act of eating with an electric light and with buttons which they learned to press to produce the light. After the cats had become well conditioned to these processes, the experimenter introduced a complicating factor in the form of an electric shock or an air blast which greeted their button pushing and acted as a block to their enjoyment of food. After repeated punishment and frustration, the cats refused to push the buttons or to eat food in their cages. They even came to associate the painful air-blast so closely with food that they refused to eat under any circumstances. The cats had become what may be called neurotic; they were victims of a conflict—a conflict between a hunger drive and a drive to avoid pain. And this conflict which they could not themselves resolve acted to paralyze their entire behavior pattern. What should have meant a normal pleasant experience had become associated, instead, with a mysterious pain.

Massermann then gave the cats some alcohol by injection and found that when mildly intoxicated the cats would hop around, eat, and push light switches. When the effects of the alcohol had worn off they lapsed into their apathetic condition, refused to eat, and the effects of their conflict were again evident. Next, the cats were introduced to milk containing alcohol and they learned to value it to a point where plain milk was completely rejected. As long as they were mildly intoxicated the difficulties of their hunger pain conflict were not manifested, but when the effects of alcohol were not present they again lapsed into inactivity.

The cats had thus become dependent upon alcohol intoxication; they had become addicted to alcohol; they had come to feel that they needed the alcohol in order to go on facing life. As a final stage of the experiment, the cats were retrained so that the act of eating was no longer associated with an air blast or shock, and when this reconditioning had taken place they reverted to an earlier demonstrated dislike of the alcohol milk mixture. That is, their conflicts were resolved and they were rehabilitated from their alcohol addiction.

With certain elaboration and refinement, this is the story of why men and women become addicted to alcohol too.

Like the frustrated cats, human beings today find themselves in a highly complicated society. Life is competitive and impersonal. Mistakes are easy, and everyone makes his share. There is keen competition with respect to employment, sexual satisfaction, social position and prestige. In everyone, mistakes and wounds suffered in social living produce a certain amount of anxiety, tension, frustration, and guilt. Yet, despite these difficulties most people manage to make a fairly satisfactory working compromise with life.

Certain individuals, however, are not so fortunate. For them, these anxieties, tensions, frustrations, and guilt feelings are like the blast from the air hose or the electric shock to Massermann's cats. Whenever they try to satisfy ordinary needs, they feel pain. Some of these people suffer

<sup>3</sup> E. M. Jellinek. *Alcohol, Cats and People*. (Pamphlet) New Haven: Publications Division of the Yale Plan on Alcoholism, 1948.

from unreasonable frustrations in every sort of situation. At home, at work, in schools, in the church, these individuals are constantly suffering tension, embarrassment, and distress. Some of them try to hide their distraught condition, others are unaware that anything particular is wrong. They just know that life is one painful experience after another, and that they seem to live in constant friction with the world. These people are maladjusted; like the frustrated cats who couldn't resolve their conflicts between hunger and pain, these people are neurotic.<sup>4</sup>

To avoid the charge of oversimplification in comparing neurotic humans with cats in which a neurosis-producing conflict is conditioned by laboratory experiment, it should be pointed out that cats, of course, have no means of realizing their problem or of making an intellectual or an emotional effort to adjust their difficulties. Likewise, recourse to alcohol for the cats does not involve family, marital, employment, legal, or other difficulties.

However, just as the neurotic cats were conditioned to associate their basic need of hunger with pain, so neurotic human beings associate with pain such essential human needs as companionship, associating with others, giving and receiving affection and many more.

Since alcohol is basically a depressant and an anesthesia, its immediate effects on the human organism are to relieve anxieties, and fears, and to alleviate the pains of tension and conflict. It also acts to depress inhibitions of certain forms of socially disapproved behavior, thus allowing the individual to release his pentup aggressions or repressed desires. For the neurotic individual who fears associations with other people—who detaches himself from society—alcohol can be used as a means of either reinforcing this detachment (that is, without alcohol he is lonely and needs people, but with it he can afford to become morose and solitary) or it can help him to break through this detachment (that is, it depresses his inhibitions against associating with others and allows him to mingle freely without feeling the pains of anxiety). Alcohol may also provide temporary solutions for conflict by repressing one of the conflicting elements. For the neurotic who feels the need for self-aggrandizement, alcohol allows him to act the part of his self image. No difficulty is insurmountable for him. He makes great claims on society and on himself; he feels that he is entitled to anything he asks. It is behavior such as this which tends to make the alcoholic and his demands almost impossible for others to live with. They also make it hard for him to live with himself, for since his impossible demands cannot be met, he constantly feels that he is abused, hurt, disappointed, and indignant. He goes around with a tremendous feeling of hostility and resentment. Without alcohol he cannot express these hostilities because of his need for love and affection from

<sup>4</sup> Isidore Portnoy, M.D. *Psychology of Alcoholism*. (Lecture reprint) New York: Auxiliary Council to the Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis, 1947.

others. When under the influence, however, he need no longer repress them.

At this point it should be stressed that neurosis is itself merely a matter of degree. We live in a highly complex society in which all individuals are faced with a wide variety of conflicting situations at all times. The neurotic is the person who more than others finds it difficult to resolve these conflicts and who in his attempts to do so hits upon pseudo-solutions which in themselves serve merely to increase the neurotic anxieties and pain.

Of course, not all neurotic persons become alcoholics, but it can be said that it is very unlikely that the well-balanced, well-integrated personality will become a compulsive drinker, while it is not unlikely that the individual who suffers from deep neurotic conflict and anxiety may, upon the introduction of alcohol, find in it one of those pseudo-solutions which in the end can have no other effect than to increase his neurotic pain.

Turning now to a sociological consideration, a broad categorization which fits most alcoholics is that of undersocialization. Undersocialization can be defined<sup>5</sup> as a syndrome which includes a wide variety of atypical conditions and relationships with normal society. Usually, undersocialization is the result of a failure to adjust to normal social ways and this, in turn, is frequently the result of a deficient process of socialization. The concept, socialization, describes the conditioning of the individual to the ways of society, including expected or desirable behavior and social taboos and prohibitions—in other words, the ways of getting along with people and of sharing social experiences. Deficiently socialized persons or desocialized persons are usually deprived of the opportunity of sharing experiences with others, of belonging to social groups and participating in social activities. They are also deprived of such important personal needs as affection, prestige, the feeling of security, and the rewarding aspects of identifying with others. The satisfaction of these needs is usually achieved only through association with other people. Because they have not learned the ways of society, undersocialized persons are insecure, and acts of sharing become distasteful, difficult, and even dangerous for them. For this reason they often seek to avoid such associations as are normally found in the family, in schools, in employment situations, in church participation, and in community life.

Thus, going hand in hand with neurotic anxieties, we find that the alcoholic, either preceding or directly resulting from his alcoholic condition, is a person who is isolated from the normal channels of social intercourse. People who are deficient in their learned ways of getting along with others or who forget some of these techniques

appear more apt to become alcoholics than individuals who are well integrated in their social environment.

It should be stressed at this point that neurotic conflict and undersocialization are by no means isolated entities. As a matter of fact, one would never expect to find one condition present without some degree of the other. On the one hand, the insecurity, the fears and anxieties which accompany neurosis tend to preclude normal social relationships, thus isolating the individual from institutional participation. On the other hand, the individual who has never learned or has forgotten the techniques for sharing social experiences, getting along with others, giving and receiving affection and the like, will be faced with severe anxieties over his inadequacy for meeting social situations in ways which will be socially acceptable.

Now that we have outlined certain broad characteristics for persons who can be said to be more likely than others to become alcohol addicts, we are ready to consider these in the light of the contemporary status of the institution of marriage in America.

During the last century the function of the marital institution has undergone revolutionary change with development of a more specialized society. Economic, governmental, educational, religious, and recreational institutions have all expanded greatly with the assumption of functions formerly assigned to the family. Accompanying specialization, there has been a growing tendency toward impersonalization in all of these institutions except the family. The result has been that a primary function of the American family has come to be the satisfaction of such personality needs of the individual members as affection, prestige, self-respect, and sexual expression.<sup>6</sup> The family is also the seat of personality development and of socialization. Thus, the individual who comes from the parental family bearing characteristics of neurotic personality or social isolation which make him prone for becoming an excessive drinker is likewise ill equipped for the sharing of interpersonal relationships and the close reciprocal intimacies demanded in the marital family.

We can now consider the three-point thesis mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Point one of the thesis suggested that the same characteristics which make the individual prone to excessive drinking also tend to preclude marriage. Point two suggested that these characteristics are incompatible with the marriage association.

Two general characteristics of the excessive drinker, neurotic anxiety and undersocialization, have been described. To the neurotic, undersocialized individual whose psychological and sociological maladjustments may manifest themselves in a variety of emotional and behavioral instabilities and abnormalities the association of marriage with its severe demands on intimate, reciprocal

<sup>5</sup> Robert Straus. "Some Sociological Concomitants of Excessive Drinking as Revealed in the Life History of an Itinerant Inebriate." *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 9: 1-52, June 1948.

<sup>6</sup> Bacon. "Excessive Drinking and the Institution of the Family."

personal relationships and on the sharing of emotional and social needs and gratifications seems most foreboding, repulsive, and even dangerous. He is poorly equipped on both the psychological and the social level for acts of sharing and for participation in group experiences. As a result, he will carefully avoid any or all situations which demand such sharing. He will particularly avoid marriage and, if he should marry, the marital association with its uncompromising demands for giving of the self will most likely prove so intolerable to him that, consciously or unconsciously, he will seek its dissolution. Hostility toward the incompatibilities of marriage may even result in the excessive use of alcohol as an expression of aggression toward the uncomfortable state of marriage or toward the marital partner whom he probably will blame for his condition.

The considerations just suggested can now be subjected to empirical examination by considering data dealing with marital status taken from two studies<sup>7,8</sup> which have been made of particular categories of excessive drinkers and expectancy data for comparable groups of the general population.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1 indicates by percentage distribution the observed marital status of a group of 1,223 arrested inebriates and the expected distribution for comparable members of the general population.

TABLE 1. MARITAL STATUS OF 1,223 ARRESTED INEBRIATES

Observed (%)		Expectancy (%)
53.1	Single	19.6
22.9	Married	71.9
11.5	Separated	3.5
7.5	Divorced	1.2
5.0	Widowed	3.8

Here it is seen that while 80 per cent of the general population group had married, only 47 per cent of the arrested inebriates had ever entered into a marital relationship; while 72 per cent of the general population group were still married and living with their wives, only 23 per cent of the inebriates had kept their marriages intact. In Table 2 similar comparisons are made between a group of 203 homeless men, of whom 177 were excessive drinkers, and a comparable general population group.

Here the discrepancies are even sharper than those for the arrested inebriates. Fifty-five per cent of the homeless men had remained single as compared with an expectancy of 15 per cent. As might be suspected, only one man in the homeless group had a marriage which could still be

<sup>7</sup> Bacon. "Inebriety, Social Integration and Marriage." *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Straus. "Alcohol and the Homeless Man." *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 7: 360-404, December, 1946.

<sup>9</sup> In each instance census data on males from the general population were adjusted to provide control groups of comparable age distribution.

TABLE 2. MARITAL STATUS OF 203 ITINERANTS\*

Observed (%)		Expectancy (%)
55.6	Single	15.0
0.5	Married	74.9
16.8	Separated	3.9
13.8	Divorced	1.0
13.3	Widowed	5.2

\* Seven of the men were reported as non-users of alcoholic beverages, 17 as moderate users, the drinking habits of 2 were unknown, and the remaining 177 were classified as excessive drinkers.

called intact as compared with a normal expectancy of 75 per cent.

Tables 3 and 4 indicate comparative percentage distributions of marital status for only those men in each group who had ever been married.

TABLE 3. PRESENT MARITAL STATUS OF 574 ARRESTED INEBRIATES WHO HAD MARRIED

Observed (%)		Expectancy (%)
48.8	Married	89.4
24.6	Separated	4.4
16.0	Divorced	1.4
10.6	Widowed	4.8

TABLE 4. PRESENT MARITAL STATUS OF 90 HOMELESS MEN WHO HAD MARRIED

Observed (%)		Expectancy (%)
1.1	Married	88.0
37.8	Separated	4.6
31.1	Divorced	1.2
30.0	Widowed	6.2

Here the factor of marital incompatibility comes into sharper focus. It is seen that the arrested inebriates were divorced 12 times and separated 6 times as often as expected, while the homeless men were divorced 25 times and separated 8 times as often as expected.

An additional phenomenon demonstrated by these data is not related to the preclusion of marriage or incompatibility in marriage but rather to the third part of our introductory thesis (e.g., that disruption or destruction of the marital association frequently results in the onset of excessive drinking). It is seen in Tables 3 and 4 that the drinking groups exceed the expectancy in incidence of widowhood by ratios of over 2 to 1 for the arrested inebriates and of nearly 5 to 1 for the homeless men.

In seeking an explanation for this relationship, we must again consider the function of the marital association in fulfilling intimate personal needs. Life outside the family has in many instances become so impersonal that there are many marriages in which the partners, particularly those who are not too emotionally stable to begin with, become abnormally dependent upon each other for emotional security, and for stimulation and cues to be-

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a girl friend. Then the wife comes in for counseling. One of the things the counselor has to do is to lead the wife to feel that she has a friend. Here is someone on her side. She is not going to be left alone. She does not know that as counselors we do not fight her battles for her. Our role is to help her understand the battle, and why there is a battle, so that she can return to it with some hope of reaching a peaceful situation, so that the armored forces may be withdrawn from the marriage relationship.

One final word. I think we make a serious mistake in the field of marital counseling when we do not follow up those who have been divorced, because the divorce situation is a crisis experience, a broken interpersonal relationship. I find very often that wives particularly—husbands, too, but wives particularly—need the same kind of emotional support we supply a grief stricken

person, which is counseling that enables her to understand the experience, to gain some perspective on it, and to become emotionally free from it. Otherwise she will not have a chance to make a good second marriage, but will continue to be a sick person.

Until we prepare our young people for marriage better than we have in the past, they will have to learn about marriage through being married. As a result the first relationship often has to be resolved because of the wounds that have been made in the learning. In the second marriage, because they have learned from the first, they do much better. Counseling can help clear the debris and heal the wounds in a person who has gone through a bad marital situation so that he has courage and understanding enough to go into another one and not mess it up.

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avior. Such persons develop few interests outside the home and lose touch with techniques for making or gaining gratification from associational ties. Upon the sudden death of or sudden separation from the partner around whom the whole life pattern has become centered, the survivor finds himself disoriented and isolated both socially and emotionally at a time in life when there are few opportunities and incentives for forming new interpersonal relationships and group associations. Life imposes a meaningless and drab existence for such an individual, and, should he be introduced to alcohol, the chances are not remote that he would find it a gratifying form of obliteration or a helpful crutch.

In conclusion I would like to suggest an implication contained in the thesis and the characteristics which have just been described. It is an important implication not only for the marriage counselor and for all others concerned with the conservation of marriage and the family but also for the public at large, since public opinion frequently plays an important part in the eventual interpretation and disposition of such situations.

It is a human failing in approaching problem situations of all kinds to think in terms of single cause and effect relationships which lead to hasty deductions concerning etiology. In the analysis of situations in which marital discord and excessive drinking both appear, there is and has been a great tendency to concentrate attention on determining whether the excessive drinker became addicted to alcohol as a result of an unbearable marital situation or whether the marital relationship has "gone on the rocks" because of excessive drinking by one of the

partners, and to blame one situation on the other.

Excessive drinking is a spectacular factor of behavior; it is not easily concealed and it is not infrequently present along with marital discord. We have tried to show that whereas one condition may intensify the other, excessive drinking and marital incompatibility are in reality both manifestations of the same type of underlying psychological and sociological abnormality. The widower who becomes an alcoholic appears on the surface to have turned to excessive drinking as a means of burying his sorrow, when in reality his drinking is more likely to be a form of pseudo-adjustment to a situation caused by an emotional overdependence on his late wife for which he can find no substitute through available, socially accepted channels of behavior. The bachelorhood of the excessive drinker who never married may well be blamed on his drinking and the fact that "No decent girl would want him," whereas if the truth were known a good many fine girls may have longed for a chance to marry him (each thinking, of course, that she could reform him). He, on the other hand, may have avoided matrimony for the very same underlying reasons that he drinks to excess. In a similar vein the large number of divorces and separations which are attributed to excessive drinking are no more the result of this single cause than the problem drinking of many married persons is the result of incompatibility with the marital partner. In each case, one must look to refined levels of behavior and realize that the relationship of excessive drinking to problems of marital association is almost invariably one of multiple joint causation and most rarely one of direct cause and effect.