

## Getting Help

If you're worried about your drinking and you haven't been able to cut back or control it on your own, help is nearby.

Check the phone book for an alcohol information center or treatment program. The people there can tell you where and how to get help. It's never too early—or too late—to start.

If you can't find an alcohol information center in your area, phone or write either (or both) of the following:

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence  
12 West 21st Street  
New York, NY 10010  
(800) 622-2255

Alcoholics Anonymous  
P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station  
New York, NY 10163

Just do it—and do it now. There'll never be a better time to get your life back on track.

Here's looking at you, kid—and at the person you can still become. ■



This is one in a series of publications on drugs, behavior, and health published by Do It Now Foundation. Please call or write for a list of current titles, or visit our web site at [www.doitnow.org](http://www.doitnow.org).



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# PROBLEM DRINKING & ALCOHOLISM



Words to the Wise  
A Do It Now Foundation Publication by Mark Worden

## Generations

Tony never understood why his father drank so much until he “borrowed” a bottle from his dad’s liquor cabinet. He drank the whole thing with two guys he hung with after school.

The liquor burned at first, but he stopped noticing that when a fuzzy warmth crept over him. His inhibitions melted, he laughed, he felt happy for a while.

When he sobered up, the warmth and happiness were gone, but their memory lingered: euphoria, freedom, fun. That made him look forward to his next chance to drink, to be free again.



*Warningsigns. Big drinking problems can follow simple starts.*

And that’s just what he did. He began “borrowing” from his father’s stash regularly. His dad was so out of it most of the time that he didn’t notice. Tony learned to sneak money out of his mother’s purse and to shoplift “40’s”

—40-ounce bottles of malt liquor—from the store when he didn’t have money.

At first, Tony’s friends joined in. But after a while, they realized there was something wrong with the way Tony drank. He’d beg, lie, and steal for a drink. He was hooked; he was an alcoholic.

Tony is just one kind of problem drinker, but there are lots of others. They often fall between the lines in the lists we’ve all seen of symptoms of alcoholism, like this one:

- ▶ Emotional and/or physical dependence on alcohol
- ▶ Sneaking drinks, hiding bottles, drinking alone
- ▶ Loss of control over drinking
- ▶ Drinking in the morning to control shakes (or shaky emotions)
- ▶ Physical symptoms if drinking stops

The signs of a drinking problem may be fuzzier, but they’re just as real—and potentially disastrous—as alcoholism.

And they often go unrecognized.



*Silent witness. Drinking problems can touch the lives of people who never touch a drop.*

Drinking problems take many forms and usually start long before someone gets labelled an “alcoholic.”



## One in 20

Something else that often goes unrecognized is the extent of the problem.

Think of it this way: If you have twenty friends, odds are that one of them will become alcoholic, physically addicted to alcohol.

Alcohol addiction is usually slow to develop, often taking 5-10 years of heavy drinking before a person is physically hooked. This contrasts sharply with many other drugs, which can cause addiction in a matter of weeks.

And since physical addiction develops so slowly, a person can have problems for years before anyone points a finger and says, “Hey, maybe you should cut down on your drinking.”

That’s the kicker. We usually don’t consider a person to have a drinking problem until he or she has developed into a full-blown alcoholic, until they’re physically hooked, until their life is a total mess.

What we don’t seem to realize is that drinking problems take a lot of forms and usually develop long before we identify someone as an alcoholic.

And many people who never become alcoholics experience all kinds of life problems that stem directly from drinking too much.

And people whose lives they touch—family, friends, and co-workers—often get hit by the fallout.

In other words, although only one in 20 may have an alcohol problem, lots of people are affected by people who drink irresponsibly. And there are almost an infinite number of ways to do that.

The examples that follow are real, with the names changed to ensure anonymity.

## War Stories ■

■ **Diane** and **Steve**, both seniors in high school, had been dating for several months. One night they got drunk and had unprotected sex.

The result? Diane got pregnant and, even though they weren't sure they belonged together, they got married. The marriage lasted two years. Now she's raising their son alone, working at a low-paying job, and is far from happy.

■ **Paul** didn't drink very often, but when he did, he got belligerent. He mouthed off, insulted friends, and was generally surly. He called it "livin' large."

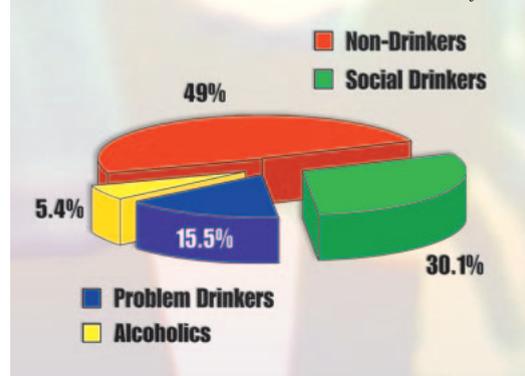
One night he made the mistake of directing a graphic sexual come-on to a woman in a bar, and tried to fondle her. She smashed him in the face, then called the police. The judge dismissed the charges against Paul, but the dentist charged \$600 to fix the teeth that had been broken when the woman hit him.

■ **Suzanne** wasn't very popular, so when she was invited to a party by a co-worker at her office, she was excited. At the party, though, she felt nervous and out of place. She threw down several margaritas back to back, hoping that would loosen her up.

It did. She started telling dirty jokes and laughing hysterically. Then she got sick. She threw up all over herself, several friends, and the furniture. Then she passed out and had to be carried home.

## ▶ Steady State

Source: National Institute of Health



**Holding unsteady.** For years, the number of problem drinkers and alcoholics has totalled about 20 percent of the adult population.

On Monday, half the office had heard about it. They don't call her Suzanne any more. Now it's "Margarita."

■ **Danny** had an agreement with his parents. He could use the car on one condition—that he would never drink and drive. One night, after drinking a six-pack, he saw an explosion of flashing blue lights behind him.

Danny tried to outrun the police, but lost control of the car on a curve and crashed into a telephone pole. He not only totaled his parent's car; he also broke both his legs.

## Careless Drinkers ■

Diane, Paul, Suzanne, and Danny aren't alcoholics, yet they all suffered problems caused by irresponsible drinking. We'll call them careless drinkers.

Careless drinkers are people who occasionally drink too much and are sometimes embarrassed or troubled by things that happen when they drink.

Their problems often result from the situations and context they drink in, not because they have deep emotional problems, or because they're alcoholics. They don't experience a lot of problems because of alcohol, and their lives aren't falling apart, but their problems are real.

Young people, especially, tend to be careless drinkers. In fact, most young people who drink do it carelessly. They may not drink daily, but when they do drink, they often do it with the sole purpose of getting drunk. They often drink fast and they drink a lot.

They also run into other problems. Women and girls report unwanted sexual experiences after drinking too much. Speeding cars end up in ditches. Every weekend, thousands of drinkers wake up with throbbing headaches and agonizing memories about what they did the night before—if they can remember it at all.

You don't have to be like Tony (or Diane, Steve, Paul, Suzanne, or Danny) to have a drinking problem.

That's because you don't have to be an alcoholic to have a drinking problem.



*Equal opportunity disease.* Women in "non-traditional" roles — unmarried or separated, childless, in male-dominated jobs — face a higher risk of drinking problems.

**i**f you usually drink until you're drunk or you often feel guilty or embarrassed about things you do when drinking, then you're **not** a social drinker.



## Sign Posts ■

Getting drunk, passing out, not remembering what you did, throwing up, and cringing in embarrassment aren't a normal part of social drinking. Neither is being arrested, getting in fights, having sex with someone you don't know or like, or wrecking your car.

If you drink, it's not too early to take a good look at the way you drink.

Because while there's a 90 percent chance that you won't become an alcoholic, odds are a lot better that you'll experience real problems if you drink irresponsibly.

Look at it this way: It doesn't matter much whether you were an alcoholic or just an unlucky "social drinker" if you end up getting scraped off a highway somewhere. You're just as dead either way. The same goes for getting pregnant, arrested, fired, humiliated in public, or your teeth punched in. Or simply losing your own self-respect.

## ■ Bouncing Back: Reasons & Resources

**p**roblem drinking touches many more lives — and destroys more families — than you might think. According to a recent study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services...

- ▶ 76 million Americans (43 percent of the adult population) report alcoholism in their families.
- ▶ 18 percent say they grew up with an alcoholic or problem drinker.
- ▶ 38 percent of U.S. adults have at least one blood relative with a drinking problem.

And the problem includes more than the physical and psychological toll that alcohol imposes on the drinker. Physical and sexual abuse are both linked to problem drinking, as are higher rates of divorce, homicide, and suicide.

That's the bad news. The good news is that there *is* a solution, and it begins with those affected taking responsibility for ending the problem.

If problem drinking is a problem for you or someone you care about, do something to stop it now. Contact the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence at 1-800-622-2255 or a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous (check the White Pages of your phone book).

And do it now. Problem drinking is a problem that's wasted too many lives for too long. ■

