

Stages of Recovery ■

Many alcoholics give lip service to their alcoholism. But lip service just isn't enough.



"Listen, I wasn't that drunk. I was tired more than anything. Doesn't it count for anything how hard I have to work? Besides, that breath test was screwed up."

"Dad, this was the second time," the son says.

The wife has been sitting silently as her children confront their father about his drinking. The session has been carefully rehearsed with the help of a counselor.

They're trying to break down dad's denial through a process called **confrontation**. Here, an alcoholic is given clear, specific examples of how his or her alcoholism has affected the whole family. The goal is to get the alcoholic into treatment.



The counselor looks at the wife, and says, "Didn't you have something you were going to say, Mary?"

Denial at work. EAP's often succeed at breaking denial in impaired workers, due to the economic leverage they have over employees.

Now Dad explodes. "I knew it was all *your* idea, I knew I shouldn't have agreed to do this!"

Daughter says, "Dad, it was *our* idea. We had to do something."

"Dad," says the son, "we're trying to save your life."

With help, Bill is on his way to recovery. The technique of confrontation often helps to break the grip of alcoholic denial and is fully described in the book **I'll Quit Tomorrow** by Vernon Johnson.

A similar kind of process occurs in *employee assistance programs* (EAP's) where an alcoholic or drug dependent employee is confronted about impaired work performance and given the choice of seeking treatment or being fired. EAP's have had some of the highest success rates in helping chemically dependent people.

helping professionals often report that many chemically-dependent people break through denial in three stages:

■ **Recognition.** The person begins by admitting the problem. Many alcoholics get to this point and go no further. They give *lip service* to their alcoholism. But lip service just isn't enough.

■ **Acceptance.** The person actively does something to change his or her behavior. It's more than lip service; but still the alcoholic has reservations: "Maybe I can drink again, like a normal person."

■ **Surrender.** At this stage the alcoholic has no reservations. He or she sincerely admits an inability to control drinking and is committed to a life of sobriety.



In understanding denial, it's important to realize that denial is not restricted to alcoholism—or even to other forms of chemical dependency. It's a common defense that protects all our egos from harsh reality. It's found in the cancer patient, the cigarette smoker, and the diabetic.

Still, nowhere is it more disabling—and potentially deadly—than in chemically dependent people.

Because when it comes to chemical dependency, denial is all that keeps us from discovering who we really are—and who we've always wanted to be. ■



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Denial



How it starts and
how to make it stop.

“I’m No Alcoholic...” ■

George is an alcoholic, but he won’t admit it, and doesn’t think he needs to change.

The thought that he might be an alcoholic has crossed his mind more than once. His first marriage ended in divorce because his wife finally got to the point where she refused to put up with his drunkenness every weekend.

She told George that she thought he needed help and suggested he find out about AA. Her suggestion just made George angry. “I’m no alcoholic,” he blustered. “I can take booze or leave it.”

“Then why don’t you leave it?”

George didn’t stay for an answer.

He stalked out of the house and spent the rest of the evening in a bar.

I can take it or leave it. True, to a point.

George seldom drinks during the week—maybe a beer or two after work, but that’s all.

He saves his real drinking for the weekends. Even then, he controls his drinking so that he can make it to work Monday morning—*most* of the time.

He often feels tired and shaky, but so does everyone else after a wild weekend. That doesn’t mean he’s an alcoholic.

In George’s mind, an alcoholic is someone who *has* to drink, a person really hooked on booze, who hides bottles and sees pink elephants and snakes, a bum who can’t hold a job. George isn’t like that at all.

He admits he does get pretty drunk at times. Nothing unusual about that—all of his friends are heavy drinkers. He’s blacked out a few times, driven home and not been able to recall how he got there. Twice, George has landed in jail on drunk driving charges.

One of the charges was reduced to reckless driving and he’d had to pay a large fine on his second DUI.

Still, he insists he always drives carefully, even after drinking. “I’ve never had an accident,” he boasts.

Alcoholics often get stuck insisting that they can drink like other people. Socially. Normally.



After his second conviction George told the judge, “I sure won’t let this happen again.”

But that’s what he said after his *first* arrest.

Denial Styles ■

What’s with George? A couple of things, both related to his most successful and most self-defeating defense: denial.

Denial takes two major forms. First, the alcoholic insists that he or she can drink like other people. Socially. *Normally*.

This means that there are always ready excuses for the exceptional times—for the fights, the arrests, the blackouts, the hangovers. It’s someone else’s fault. It’s harassment, bad luck, or just too much pressure.

Secondly, the alcoholic insists that he or she is different from “real” alcoholics. Drinking alcoholics are usually experts at picturing “real” alcoholics. They’re *different* somehow: jobless, homeless, friendless, and usually feeble-minded. Not like themselves at all.

That’s why you’ll find, if you look far enough, that the scotch and water alcoholic looks down on the beer alcoholic, who, in turn, is disgusted by the wino.

Each is convinced that he or she isn’t the “real” alcoholic.

George’s drinking pattern displays only one kind of alcoholic pattern. There are many others, and they overlap and shade into each other.

■ **The five o’clock alcoholic** doesn’t take a drink until after work—never touches the stuff before five—then drinks continuously until passing out.

■ **The periodic (or binge) alcoholic** can go for long stretches of time without touching a drop. Then comes a binge that can last days or weeks or months.

■ **The maintenance alcoholic** finds ways to sip all day long, to keep just enough alcohol in the blood.

In short, there is no “typical” alcoholic that serves as a standard by which all alcoholics are measured.

The only thing alcoholics have in common is that, sooner or later, they all have serious life problems related to their drinking.



Confronting Denial ■

“Dad,” says the son, “I came home last week and found you passed out in the garage with the car still running.”

Dad gets red in the face. “I was feeling sick. I just needed to rest for a minute.”

“No, Dad, you were drunk. And it wasn’t the first time.”

The daughter speaks up. “I was really hurt last spring. You promised to come to my graduation.”

“I did,” Dad protests. “I was late, but I made it.”

“Yes, but you were so drunk and loud afterwards that we had to leave early. It was humiliating.”

“I told a few jokes. No one’s got a sense of humor.”

“No, Dad. You were drunk. Then you left and didn’t come home and you got arrested for drunk driving.”

