

## ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE

### Are you having difficulty controlling your drinking?

It is known that the level of consumption and behaviour patterns, with regard to alcohol, change when working in the field. It is one of the occupational risks incurred by the humanitarian worker who can easily increase his or her usual consumption without being aware of it. Drinking becomes then a way of escaping everyday witnessing of human distress. Increased emotional and physical stress, without doubt, is the main reason for it. Despite the picture, the worker may still feel in control of the situation.

However, he or she may sometimes have a vague feeling that things are not what they should be. For example, one realises that the work isn't up to the organisation's expectations, colleagues start making comments or one explodes for the least little thing... Somehow, everybody senses that the drinking has something to do with all this.

But the subject is taboo. And the humanitarian worker's emotional isolation doesn't help. Who can one talk to? Who can one trust? Where does one start?

In this page, the CHP provides information on what tends to be classified as a "dependency" or an "addiction".

### How does one know one is dependant?

- Behaviour cannot be changed without suffering
- One loses control over intake
- It is becoming chronic whatever effort made

Dependency is nothing to be ashamed of. It is not a vice, nor does it imply a lack of character. This is hard to believe, as those around often insinuate to the contrary.

### How can I know if I'm losing control over my drinking?

Try and answer honestly to the following statements:

#### *Psychological signs:*

- I try to hide what I drink
- I keep promising myself I'll stop
- My drinks are getting stronger, or I begin drinking earlier in the day
- I am under the influence for long periods at a time
- I drink alone
- I'm having problems at work, or taking time off
- I have long periods of amnesia or "blackout"
- My appetite is poor
- I'm becoming violent, I sometimes even hit people
- My personality is changing (jealousy, lies, suspicion...)
- I drink and drive without giving it a thought

- I take less and less care of my appearance
- My thinking is slow, I can no longer concentrate, I feel confused and forget things
- I have trouble managing my money.

There are also *physical signs*:

- Nausea and trembling in the morning
- Irregular eating patterns
- Abdominal pain, cramps, diarrhoea
- Pins and needles in the limbs
- Weakness in the legs or hands
- Red eyes, face and palms
- Unstable walking, falling
- Worsening medical problems.

### How much is too much? How do I know when to stop?

The following are considered *standard drinks*, defined by WHO:

- Beer: one 12-ounce can or one bottle
- Table wine: 4-ounce glass of wine
- Spirits: one ounce, straight or mixed

The *critical limit for men* is:

- 3 - 4 standard drinks, three to four times a week

The *critical limit for women* is:

- 2 - 3 standard drinks, two to three times a week

*Too much* is:

- For men, more than 5 standard drinks a day
- For women, more than 3 standard drinks a day

If you drink more than this, you risk no longer being able to control the situation.

Don't forget that your body can only assimilate one standard drink an hour and it takes over 8 hours to metabolise alcohol.

**Test yourself: once a week try to drink no alcohol for three days in a row**

### Suggestions on how to avoid drinking too much:

If you feel you've reached your limit but are still in control, here are a few suggestions on how to avoid drinking too much:

- If you're going to a place or event, where alcohol will be served, decide beforehand how much you will drink and stick to it. Write down the result in your notebook and evaluate your progress at the end of the week

- Avoid big parties and go out with one or two friends instead where there's less chance of getting led on.
- Between parties, have non-alcoholic drinks
- Put down your glass between each sip
- If you feel you're over-drinking, go and walk about for a while
- Never let anyone oblige you to drink, even in official ceremonies or difficult negotiations. Being strict about this will increase other people's respect for you.
- Give preference to weak alcoholic beverages rather than strong ones
- Have something to eat when you drink, but avoid salty snacks which will only increase your thirst.

#### **If it's more serious**

If possible and depending on the mission or the country you are working in, talk to a doctor about it, preferably a specialist.

If you don't know who to talk to, or you're ashamed to talk about it, or you just don't know where to start, send us an e-mail. Our team will help you see things more clearly.

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