

Alcohol and Wife Abuse: What's the Connection?

Liz was finishing a watercolor painting, when her husband Greg returned home early from a friend's house. His feigned cheerful "Hi Hon," didn't fool her. She knew he'd been drinking and that once he was settled in the house, the facade would disappear as his mood and behavior turned ugly.

Liz had learned long ago to be prepared to flee within moments after his arrival. She'd go to the mall or visit a friend for an hour or so, and when she returned, he'd most likely be asleep. This night, she'd been caught by surprise.

She was not prepared for many reasons, sensed Greg, who began to prod her with questions as to the whereabouts of dinner, a clean T-shirt, a cold six-pack, the TV remote. The ritual had begun. Looking for any excuse to blame her, he would verbally berate and antagonize her until she was incited to respond or ignore him. Either choice she made would ignite his rage.

Liz was aware of the red flags signaling fight or flight, but she'd misplaced her keys, and it was too late. Greg hurled her against a brick fireplace spraining her wrist and scraping her forearm. Greg taunted her and pushed her from his path as he headed for the refrigerator and another cold beer.

Liz seized her opportunity to call 911. But, when the police arrived, Greg changed his attitude and conned them into perceiving him as composed and truly concerned about the injuries Liz incurred when she "tripped into the wall." Liz, shaken by the familiar display of what seemed to her like camaraderie between her husband and the police, did not press charges. Be it codependency or fear of financial difficulties, many women are reluctant to press charges, or for that matter to even speak about their abusive homelife. Instead some remain cowering in a relationship that could kill them. "If only he wouldn't drink, everything would be OK," Liz

told a friend. But would it? Here's what the research says:

Wife beaters as drunks

John Stuart Mill's essay "On the Subjection of Women" in 1869 set a central tenet that wife beaters were also drunks. Dr. Murray Straus found this true when he researched the incidence of abuse. As alcohol consumption increased, so did wives' reports of abusiveness. Only when consumption was extreme, did this correlation disappear. One conjures up men so inebriated that they are rendered harmless.

In a more recent attempt to clarify the relationship between drinking and domestic violence, Ito, Miller, and Pollock in 1996 conducted a meta-analysis of 49 studies of the alcohol-aggression link. Noting that "substantial unexplained variability characterizes the relationship between alcohol and aggression" the authors reported that independent prior meta-analytic studies of pharmacological and expectancy effects for the alcohol-aggression link. These studies conducted by Hull & Bond in 1986 had each produced "significant heterogeneity among both sets of effect sizes" and individual differences in the extent to which alcohol influences cognitive processes.

One way it does so is to narrow focus in such a way as to increase the likelihood of the "fundamental attribution error" — i.e., the inability to perceive situational causes for the behavior of others, leading to a trait and blaming orientation, and hence, increased anger-arousal.

Alternately, alcohol may increase aggression by an anxiolytic effect which would inhibit aggression, or by lowering "inhibition conflict" (a response conflict that occurs when a "behavior is instigated by a set of strong cues and simultaneously inhibited by another set of strong cues."

Alcohol reduces attention to the cognitive inhibiting cues, and can increase the impact of provocation, frustration and lower self-focus. Self-focus means attention to self-regulatory standards (e.g., restraints against aggression).

In their meta-analysis of these social psychological factors, Ito and colleagues found that moderation of the alcohol-aggression link involved anxiolytic effect and reduction of conflict inhibition. Further predictability

was provided by the aforementioned social psychological factors. Aggressiveness of intoxicated persons relative to sober ones increased from frustration but decreased from provocation and self-focus.

The researchers did not consider individual factors that might make one prone to experience anxiety, high arousal, or to perceive actions of another as intentionally hurtful. All of these individual factors should increase the tendency toward aggression when intoxicated. In addition, they may also increase the tendency to drink. If this is true, then a personality explanation would link alcohol use with aggression.

In 1992, Kantor and Straus summarized 15 empirical studies of alcohol use and wife assault in which estimates of alcohol's presence in wife assault ranged from 6 percent to 85 percent depending on the sample and measure used. Worden and Pollitz found that police may be more likely to arrest drunken men if they are abusive toward police, and less likely if both perpetrator and victim have been drinking. The police reasoning is that a drunken victim will be less likely to come to court to testify and even if she does, her testimony will have little probative value. On the other hand, researchers Reed, Fischer, Kantor and Karales found in 1983 that battered women have commented on their intoxicated spouses' ability to appear sober when police arrive.

MacAndrew and Edgerton's 1969 cross-cultural analysis of drinking patterns views drunken behavior as a learned way to take time out from everyday demands and constraints. Similarly, Coleman and Straus in 1983 argued that people learn a script for drinking through observing that individuals are excused and forgiven for violent behavior that occurs while drinking. McClelland, Davis, Kalin and Wanner in 1972 found that men drink to heighten their sense of power.

I, and others have also described the power-enhancing effects of male violence toward intimates, the power motive and more specifically, feelings of powerlessness could provide a common link between alcohol use and violence. If this is so, the perceived link between alcohol and violence could reflect association more than causation. Other factors, including powerlessness, marital discord and conflict could link alcohol and violence theoretically according to Hotaling and Straus in 1980.

Abusive personalities

In 1999 I attempted to test a personality association between alcohol use and wife abuse. One hundred and fifty-four men with varying degrees of a history of violence toward their wives were assessed for alcohol and drug use and on a variety of psychological measures including assessments of anger, jealousy, borderline personality organization, attachment style and parental warmth. A “third variable” personality constellation comprised of these factors was found to be empirically related to both wife-assault frequency and substance-abuse frequency.

This constellation is comprised of high anger, insecure attachment and parental rejection. In general, it comprises what this researcher described as the “abusive personality.”

Abusive personalities experience high levels of dysphoria and anxiety. Drinking or drug use helps reduce the aversiveness of this chronic experience. This research suggests that these high levels of ambient trauma symptoms stem from the combination of insecure attachment and experiencing abuse. Rageful outbursts also dispel stored tension, leading to the “Cycle of Violence” (see page 33). Phase One is characterized by increasing tension, alcohol and substance abuse and withdrawn moodiness. Phase Two by outbursts of violence and Phase Three by contrition and promises of reform. Once the tension is gone, the batterer seems like a changed man. But it returns, since it is a byproduct of deeper crises and when it returns the man relapses into drinking and abusiveness.

Treatment considerations should focus on cycle management as much as anger or alcohol management. All three need to be addressed. The man and his partner need to be alerted to the clues that Phase One is beginning again and provided intense management and cognitive and behavioral alternatives. Pressure on this deeper tension issue, which might include bodywork and deep relaxation techniques will magically alleviate the alcohol abuse and intimate abusiveness which were symptoms of the deeper tension.

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