

Dry Drunk Syndrome

Sobriety will necessarily have its ups and downs, its good times and its bad times, if only because we live in a world which we are inseparably joined. One doesn't always sustain sobriety at the same level. There are fluctuations, shocks and setbacks which, when addressed within the context of the A.A. program, not in themselves imperil the totality of one's sobriety. The Dry Drunk Syndrome is a term that should not be used as a catch-all when one has a bad day or a bump in life throws us for a while. Those are ups and downs that everyone experiences and shouldn't be labeled to be anything more than what they truly are. The Dry Drunk is a condition far more serious than the highs and lows of our day-to-day existence.

The phrase "dry drunk" has two significant words for the alcoholic. "Dry" refers to the abstinence from drinking, whereas "drunk" signifies a deeply pathological condition resulting from the use of alcohol in the past. Taken together these words suggest intoxication without alcohol. Since intoxication comes from the Greek word for poison, "dry drunk" implies a state of mind and a mode of behavior that are poisonous to the alcoholic's well being.

Obvious Traits

Persons experiencing a full-blown DRY DRUNK are, for that period, removed from the world of sobriety; they fail, for whatever reason, to accept the necessary conditions for sober living. Their mental and emotional homes are chaotic, their approach to everyday living is unrealistic, and their behavior, both verbal and physical, is unacceptable. This lack of sober realism manifests itself in many ways.

1. Grandiosity, put very simply, is an exaggeration of one's own importance. This can be demonstrated either in terms of one's strengths or weaknesses. In either case it is blatantly self-seeking or self-serving, putting oneself at the center of attention, from the "big me" who has all the answers to the "poor me" whose cup of self-pity runneth over and wants all of our attention.
2. Judgmentalism is mutually related to grandiosity. It means that the alcoholic is prone to make value judgments -- strikingly inappropriate evaluations -- usually in terms of "goodness" or "badness".
3. Intolerance leaves no room for delaying the gratification of personal desires. This is accomplished by gross confusion of priorities with the result that a mere whim or passing fancy is mistakenly given more importance than genuine personal needs.
4. Impulsivity is the result of intolerance or the lack of ability to delay gratification of personal desires. Impulsivity describes behavior which is heedless of the

ultimate consequence for self or others.

5. Indecisiveness is related to impulsivity in the sense that while the latter takes no realistic account of the consequences of the actions, the former precludes effective action altogether. Indecisiveness stems from an unrealistic exaggeration of the negative possibilities of the action; so one wavers between two or more possible courses of action, more times than not nothing gets done.

These conditions, grandiosity, judgmentalism, intolerance, impulsivity, and indecisiveness taken separately or together can lead to the following:

- a) Mood swings, which are unrelated to the circumstances to which one tries to link them. Alcoholics zero in on what they want others to think is the cause of the mood swing, when it isn't that at all. More often than not it is something much deeper than the reason given. Inversely it can also be something totally insignificant with no substance at all (e.g., the sugar is too sweet or the donut is too round). Any excuse will do.
- b) Unable to demonstrate emotions freely, naturally and without constraint. No emotional spontaneity, no genuine spark.
- c) Introspection. A very healthy thing to do is difficult if not impossible for the "dry drunk". It means to look inward to one's examining each thought and desire, which is linked directly to one's attitude.
- d) Detachment. Become aloof, display indifference, don't care one way or the other, no special likes or dislikes, they withdraw.
- e) Self-absorption, with a tendency to call attention to whatever they have attained. Narcissism which is quite simply self-love. They become pompous asses.
- f) The inability to appreciate or enjoy themselves - nothing satisfies.
- g) Evidence of disorganization, is easily distracted, complains of boredom, and nothing seems to fit.
- h) A nostalgia sets in, a kind of wistful yearning for something of the past, such as freedom from care associated (falsely) with drinking, bars, drinking associates, and friends; the music, blue lights, and tinkle of the ice cubes in a glass in the neighborhood saloon.
- i) There can be a kind of romanticism, which includes unrealistic valuations of lifestyles and character traits which can be and usually are objectively dangerous

to one's sobriety.

- j) Escapism. Fantasizing, daydreaming, and wishful thinking are very much in evidence in the dry drunk syndrome as the individual slips farther and farther from reality.

Since the abnormality of the alcoholic's attitudes and behavior during the drinking career is generally recognized, the persistence of these character traits after stopping drinking (or the reappearance after an interlude of sobriety) is equally abnormal. The term "dry drunk" therefore denotes the absence of favorable change in the attitudes and behavior of the alcoholic who is not drinking, or the reversion of these by the alcoholic who has experienced a period of successful sobriety. From these conditions, it is to be inferred that the alcoholic is experiencing discomfort in life. The self-destructive attitudes and behavior of the dry drunk alcoholic are different in degree but not in kind. The alcoholic, when drinking, has learned to rely on a deeply inadequate, radically immature approach to solving life's problems. And this is exactly what one sees in the dry drunk.

Analysis of Dry Drunk Behavior

The alcoholic who rationalizes their own irresponsible behavior is also likely to find fault in the attitudes and behavior of others. Although not denying their own shortcomings, they attempt to escape notice by cataloging in great detail the transgressions of others. The classic maneuver of the dry drunk is over-reaction. The alcoholic may attach a seemingly disproportionate intensity of feeling to an ordinary insignificant event or mishap. Some alcoholics who experience the dry drunk seem to know all the answers, are seldom at a loss for words when it comes to self-diagnosis. Their knowledge is quite impressive, their apparent insight, as opposed to genuine insight, is convincing.

Corrective Measures

Those undergoing a dry drunk lead impoverished lives. They experience severe limitations to grow, to mature, and to benefit from the possibilities that life offers. They lack the freshness and spontaneity that genuinely sober alcoholics manifest. Their life is a closed system; attitudes and behaviors are stereotyped, repetitive, and consequently predictable. Alcoholics learn early that humility and a power greater than themselves are the bedrock for a genuine and productive sobriety. An unusual measure of self-discipline must accompany the ego deflation process. Needed is self-discipline in honesty, patience and responsibility towards the recovery process [and acceptance of their disease]. [To improve long term goals of sobriety be aware of mental stressors, get more involved in the recovery program, get active in the 12 steps, get and use a sponsor, talk things out, etc.] Hopefully, they will begin to appreciate the ironic folly of those alcoholics who think life has suddenly become manageable again; whose sanity is beyond question; who see no need of turning their lives over to a power greater than themselves; who find personal inventories unnecessary since they are seldom in the wrong and are no longer subject to the embarrassing need of repairing the wrongs they have done. When dry drunk alcoholics awaken to this irony that they, still unmanageable, still powerless, are the ones who have made this remarkable "recovery", they may feel sufficiently mortified

to want to change.