

Section I

Spotlight on

Alcohol



shooter



Spotlight on Depiction of Health and Social Issues

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Chapter 1

Alcohol and the Brain The Great Disconnect

Depiction Suggestions

The following points for consideration regarding alcoholism and its impact on the brain were developed as a resource for entertainment development and production. They are not meant to limit the creative process.

Correcting Misconceptions:

◆ Advances in science have created a “great disconnect” or gap between the scientific facts about alcohol abuse and addiction and the public’s perception of abuse and addiction. To bridge the great disconnect, science must replace ideology as the foundation for alcohol abuse and addiction prevention, treatment, and policy strategies. Try to depict the reality that:

1. Alcohol abuse, the voluntary excessive consumption of alcohol, is a preventable behavior.
2. Alcohol addiction or alcoholism is a treatable disease.
3. Alcoholism is fundamentally a disease of the brain that is expressed in behavioral ways and influenced by the social context in which it develops.
4. In contrast to popular belief, we can get a handle on alcohol “abuse and addiction.”
5. Treatment and prevention are both necessary and can work.

6. Individually and collectively, parents, friends, committed teachers, law enforcement, health practitioners, journalists, clergy, and others can effectively address the problems of alcohol abuse and addiction.

- ◆ Bear in mind that addiction to alcohol is not just a lot of alcohol use or abuse – it is a chronic, potentially relapsing and treatable illness that begins with a preventable behavior.
- ◆ Remember that, like many other diseases, alcoholism has a generally predictable course, has recognized symptoms, and is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors that are being increasingly well defined.
- ◆ New therapies and medications are being developed to treat alcoholism successfully. The progression from abuse to addiction and these promising new therapies can be used to keep stories on the cutting edge of the science of addiction.
- ◆ Where possible, avoid using the terms “alcoholism” or “alcohol dependence” interchangeably with “alcohol abuse” or “problem drinking” as they are not the same. Alcohol abuse is characterized by clinically significant impairment or distress but does not entail physical dependence. Alcohol dependence (alcoholism) is characterized by impaired control over drinking, tolerance, withdrawal syndrome when alcohol is removed, neglect

of normal activities for drinking, and continued drinking despite recurrent related physical or psychological problems.

- ◆ Remember that alcoholism is a chronic disease with the potential for relapse. For that reason, a person is referred to as "recovering" rather than "recovered." The potential for relapse always exists and staying sober requires a continuing, life-long process of learning how to live without alcohol.
- ◆ Lines of dialogue regarding the benefits of prevention and treatment can contribute to a more accurate public perception about their effectiveness as ongoing tools in dealing with alcohol abuse and alcoholism.
- ◆ The use of educational posters in scenes in police stations, hospitals, schools, buses, subways, and work places can send a subtle message about the importance of prevention and treatment. (For more information on posters or other materials, please call the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc., at 800-783-3421.)

Spotlight on Depiction of Health and Social Issues

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Alcohol and The Brain

Fact Sheet

Overview

Alcohol can change our moods and alter our perceptions. Some people are able to consume alcohol in moderation, yet others cannot. They lose control of their drinking behavior and become addicted.

Alcohol abuse and alcoholism are entirely different phenomena: alcohol abuse is a voluntary activity, but alcoholism is a compulsion.¹

Fundamental changes can occur in the brains of alcohol abusers that propel them into alcoholism, a chronic, often progressive disease with symptoms that include: a strong need, or compulsion, to drink despite negative consequences; the inability to limit one's drinking on any given occasion; withdrawal symptoms when alcohol use is stopped after a period of heavy drinking; and the need for increasing amounts of alcohol in order to feel its effects.²

The key lies in how alcohol affects the brain and some of its networks of nerve cells. Alcohol changes the way the brain works by altering chemical neurotransmission, with a particular focus on the neurotransmitter known as dopamine. When alcohol interferes with the delicate mechanisms through which nerve cells transmit, receive, and process information, changing the way the brain works, the user loses some of the ability to control his or her own life. This is the biological basis of addiction.³

The brain stem controls basic functions such as heart rate, breathing, eating, and sleeping.

When one of these needs must be fulfilled, the brain stem directs the rest of the brain and body to work toward that end. The cerebral cortex is devoted to such functions as our senses, generating complex movements, speaking and understanding language, thinking, planning, and imagining. The limbic system connects the cerebral cortex (our link to the outside world) to the brain stem which deals with emotions and motivations that reflect our internal environment and survival needs, allowing us to experience feelings, influence those feelings through perceptions and actions, remember things, and use our cognitive abilities.⁴

The feeling of pleasure is one of the most important emotions for our survival: an entire circuit of nerve cells is devoted to producing and regulating pleasure. These nerve cells use a neurotransmitter (chemical messenger) to relay messages about pleasure to other nerve cells. Pleasure acts as a reward or reinforcement to the eliciting behaviors and is repeated again and again, unconsciously as an automatic brain function. Life's sustaining activities such as eating, sleeping, or having sex activate this pleasure circuit.⁵

Alcohol also activates the brain's pleasure circuit, much like survival activities. Alcohol has aversive effects as well as rewarding effects. People progress toward addiction when the balance between the effects is upset. The brain, responding to this activity with a feeling of pleasure, reinforces the drinking behavior. The

more often one drinks alcohol, the more often the pleasure circuit reinforces the behavior as necessary to live, teaching the brain to depend on alcohol to evoke pleasure. One obstacle in treating alcoholism is that alcoholics find that only alcohol can give them pleasure. The alcohol hijacks one of the brain's most powerful learning mechanisms.⁶

◆ People who drink on a regular basis become tolerant to many of the effects of alcohol, and are able to drink more before suffering these effects. Yet even with increased consumption, many such drinkers do not appear intoxicated. Because they continue to work and socialize reasonably well, their deteriorating physical condition may go unrecognized until severe damage develops, or until they are hospitalized for other reasons and suddenly experience alcohol withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety.⁷

◆ Alcohol is a sedative, therefore its main effect is sleepiness. It tends to reduce awareness of memory and anxiety and reduce the activity of brain, nerves, muscles, and heart tissue.

◆ Alcohol is one of the most toxic and unpredictable drugs⁸:

- Light to moderate drinkers easily consume enough alcohol to kill brain cells, numb memory, and dull judgement.
- It is very likely that drinkers who are not physically addicted are at least psychologically dependent on the changes in mood, thinking, and behavior that result from drinking.

- The additives and preservatives used in brewing may contribute to allergies, cancer, and other toxic reactions.
- Alcohol poisons the liver when a person drinks heavily over long periods of time.

◆ Alcohol blocks the messages going to the user's brain, thereby altering one's perceptions, emotions, vision, hearing, and coordination.⁹

◆ A lack of alcohol tends to make psychologically dependent drinkers anxious and, in some cases, feel panic.¹⁰

◆ Psychological dependence on alcohol may occur with regular use, even at relatively moderate daily amounts.¹¹

◆ Psychological dependence also may occur in people who consume alcohol only under certain conditions, such as before and during social occasions.¹²

Sources:

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3. J.M. Nash, "Addicted," *Time*, May 5, 1997.
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