**Understanding the Insanity of Alcoholism:**

**How The Alcoholic Thinks**

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Friends and family of active alcoholics ask me to explain how the alcoholic thinks. I am happy to share what I have learned after we establish what their motives are.

**The Insanity of Alcoholism**

Sadly, well-intentioned folks try to protect the alcoholic from him/herself (enabling) or try to predict what they will do next (no crystal ball available). There are hundreds of wise sayings amongst alcoholics in recovery. Some are meant to make you think and some are meant to be taken very literally. Alcoholics Anonymous refers to, “the insanity of our disease.” This is a very literal statement. I can tell you a bit about understanding the active alcoholic but I cannot make it make sense to you because understanding the active alcoholic requires stripping away a lot of rational thought, the acknowledgement and willingness to learn from mistakes, the ability to recognize obvious patterns of behavior, and quite often, the application of common sense.

There are at least a hundred forms of alcoholism. What I am describing here is the person who is still drinking, is high functioning, and has not yet lost the things they hold dear. The disease of addiction dictates that they will lose these things in time and the rule of threes dictates a grim long-term prognosis (jail, institution, and/or death). Alcoholics think, act, believe, and feel based on distorted perceptions or themselves and the world around them. They live at the extremes of all or nothing. There is no moderation, no middle ground, no compromise, and no gray area in their worldview. To varying degrees, alcoholics live in denial of their destructiveness (self and others) and this further distorts what they are able to make sense of.

**"Probably"**

Alcoholics are the very best liars because they are able to use rationalization and justification to convince themselves that a lie is truth. This happens subconsciously. They are not aware that they are, if you’ll pardon the term – mind screwing themselves. Alcoholics adopt a language that facilitates lying in a way that sounds very well intentioned. Their favorite word is, “probably.” This word implies intention where in fact none exists. An alcoholic who tells you they will probably do something is highly unlikely to do it. Using words like these provides them a loophole – an escape hatch in which no absolutes are given and no promises made. The alcoholic relies on words and phrases like: possibly, maybe, would, could, should, I’d like to, I want to, I need to. These words mean nothing. They sound good but almost always lead to disappointment. Progressively, alcoholism blurs every line and impacts every interaction, every relationship, every part of the alcoholic’s world.

**Firehouse Management**

Putting blinders on a horse leaves it with no peripheral vision – such is the worldview of the alcoholic. They may attend to many things, but in order to do so they must turn their attention away from one thing and toward another. Multitasking for the alcoholic means making many messes at once. There is no balance for the active alcoholic. As one area of their life declines they will often focus their attention on it and take it to an extreme. As this happens, another part of their life declines and gradually their life becomes dictated by “firehouse management” – every course of action becomes based on the most pressing problem. This is an inevitably downward spiral, though some alcoholics manage to maintain it for a very long time.

**External Locus of Control**

As alcoholics tend to drink progressively more they will generally conceal the frequency and amount they

drink. They will tell you they only had three glasses of wine and this is true.

What they have not told you is that each glass was a 16-ounce tumbler. It is not only the drinking that gets hidden; it is also the negative affects alcohol produces in their lives.

Alcoholics develop what counselors call “an external locus of control.” Progressively, everything is someone else’s fault. If their job is going poorly it’s because their boss hates them. If their marriage suffers then their spouse is unreasonable. If they fail as parents they will see their children as ungrateful. Everything and everyone becomes a reason to drink. The spiraling alcoholic will often say that they don’t even want to drink but that circumstances like their horrible job/spouse/kids “force” them to.

**Self-Pity and the Sense of Entitlement**

Alcoholics often have a bizarre sense of entitlement. They reason that having such a difficult/stressful/demanding life entitles them to act in ways that are immature, irresponsible, and selfish. To observe their behavior is to conclude a belief that the world must owe them something. The active alcoholic wallows in self-pity and concludes that they are a victim of life. As they demand more from the world they expect less and less from themselves.

**Appearance over Substance**

The quickest routes to self-destruction for alcoholics are the words, “Screw it.” This is a declaration that everything is already screwed so they might as well drink. When people decide to stop drinking we encourage them to notice “It” is actually, “Me.” This is evident in, “It’s not worth it.” On some level the alcoholic always knows the truth and they are usually working hard not to know it. They pretend and demand that those close to them buy into the fantasy that all is well. Life becomes progressively less about anything substantive and progressively more about maintaining appearances. This is well explained in Pink’s song, “Family Portrait.” “In our family portrait we look pretty happy. We look pretty normal…”

**Master Manipulators**

Alcoholics are master manipulators. They may not have been con artists before they started drinking but they come to have remarkable skills. They are the folks who can sell ice to Eskimos. They will pick a fight with you because they want to leave and they will have you believing it’s your fault. They show little or no accountability. They may have had integrity before their addiction kicked in but it will be conspicuously absent from their lives as they spiral. There is often one exception to this rule for each alcoholic – one thing they do especially well and it will most generally be their sole source of self-esteem. We have known a large number of alcoholics who have incredible work ethics because being a good worker is the one thing they know they’re good at…well, they will say that and drinking.

**Alcoholism - A Unique Disease**

The disease of alcoholism gradually and insidiously strips everything away from a person. We have been asked countless times whether alcoholism is truly a disease or a choice. In truth it is both. Alcoholism is unique as a disease in that it not only hides from view – it also lies to its carrier about its presence. The person who is active in addiction has a unique choice relative to all other diseases. The alcoholic can go into remission at any time and many do. We see that alcoholics will abstain from drinking for a time to prove to themselves or others that they are not addicted, only to return later with a vengeance. ***(Editor note: Teen Challenge believes that Alcoholism is a life choice and is not a disease. Obviously, continue and abusive use of Alcohol can cause emotional, mental and physical illness.)***

**Alcoholics Anonymous (the only real recovery)**

Recovery from alcoholism involves far more than sobriety. Recovery from alcoholism involves changing every part of a person’s life. The person who only stops drinking is what we refer to as a “dry drunk” meaning that they are every bit as unhealthy they have simply stopped drinking – a small percentage of folks manage this long term.

<http://www.choosehelp.com/topics/alcoholism/how-the-alcoholic-thinks> (March 25, 2012)