

STEPS FOR RECOVERY

ALCOHOLISM and DEPRESSION

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Mental health professionals who treat Alcoholism and depression have long known that these two problems occur together more often than not. In fact, it is quite common in medical settings for people to seek treatment for either of these conditions. Not only is it true that in this setting the sensitive health care provider identifies the presence of the other problem, but it is also known that the earlier in one's life that either of these two disorders develops, the greater the chance the other will also surface.

Alcoholism and depression appear to go hand in hand. Each can lead to or reinforce the other. Depression is a common cause of Alcoholism as the depressed person seeks a way out of their problems or a relief from insomnia. Unfortunately, alcohol is itself a depressant, so the problem is only compounded. Anxiety can be temporarily relieved by alcohol, but this may lead to repeated intake and addiction. Without adequate attention to the mental health needs of a person with alcohol dependence, little progress will be made. Often Alcoholism remains unsuspected even by the doctor, and it may come to light only when medical tests are done for other reasons.

A national team of investigators led by psychiatric geneticists at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis has identified a gene that appears to be linked to both Alcoholism and depression. The study, published in the September issue of the journal Human Molecular Genetics, is the first to identify a specific gene associated with both depression and Alcoholism. Principal investigator Alison M. Goate's team found that the gene was strongly associated both with Alcoholism and depression. The association was strongest in those individuals who had both disorders. "It looks as if this might be a susceptibility gene that puts a person at risk for developing both depression and Alcoholism," she says.

Alcoholism can be defined by numerous different symptoms. Here is a list of the most common:

- # Inappropriate use of alcohol that was harmful to oneself.
- # Trouble functioning on the job or in social situations
- # Developing tolerance, which was defined as the need to drink steadily increasing quantities of alcohol in order to achieve a desired feeling - such as relaxation or a "high".
- # Experiencing withdrawal, which consisted of a range of symptoms that a person experienced when unable to drink. These symptoms typically occurred over a 24-72 hour period after a person the last drink. They included feeling 'hung over'; shakiness; increased heart rate; and sweating.
- # In more serious situations, withdrawal can lead to dangerously high blood pressure, seizures, visual hallucinations or the sensation that bugs are crawling on one's body.

Depression can also be defined by numerous different symptoms. Here is a list of the most common:

- * Weight or appetite changes - either wanting to eat more or less than usual
- * Sleep disturbance - either wanting to sleep more or less than usual
- * Decreased interest and pleasure in one's daily activities
- * Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- * Low energy, fatigue
- * Difficulty concentrating or thinking
- * Feeling slowed down physically, like 'walking through quicksand'
- * Thoughts of ending one's life

A study of the coloration between Alcoholism and depression was recently done at the Harvard School of Public Health and a Harvard affiliated hospital. The authors used data from a large survey that studied 14,480 people from 5 cities. In order to be included in the analysis, subjects could not have had a previous diagnosis of either major depression or Alcoholism.

The results of this study pertaining to Alcoholism showed that both men and women were at risk of developing alcohol dependence at one year with only a few symptoms of depression. However, there was an even more interesting finding. It appears that risk for women developing alcohol dependence is far greater. And as the number of depression symptoms increase from having only a single symptom to 3-7 symptoms, so did the risk of developing alcohol dependence. The presence of some Alcoholism symptoms increased the chances of developing major depression at one-year follow up. These findings were true for both men and women alike.

However, women who had a greater severity of alcoholic symptoms were far more likely to experience depression compared to women who had lesser degrees of Alcoholism. More important, the severity of symptoms of depression or alcohol misuse at the start of the study predicted the severity of the other, one year later.